

Wendy McMurdo appointed Convener of the 2024 Royal Scottish Academy Annual Exhibition





In 2023, I was appointed as Convener for the 2024 Royal Scottish Academy's 198th Annual Exhibition which took place in the RSA Galleries in Edinburgh from 11th May to 16th June 2024. Appointed as Convener, I had the responsibility to curate, shape the vision of and oversee the selection and installation of this key event. The final show was ranged across all galleries and floors of the RSA and was made up of 418 works in total, from a variety of different mediums.

The final exhibition consisted of three distinctive parts. The first element consisted of a selection from an open submission. In excess of two thousand works – national and international – were submitted with approximately 250 works finally selected. The second element was the inclusion of works from five artists specially invited by the Convener to be included in the 2024 Annual. The final element was made up of works submitted by RSA Academicians. These three elements came together in the curation of the show, under the broad theme of 'voices' (see Convener's essay for further elaboration on the theme).

A significant part of the Annual is the portfolio of awards given to selected artists and this year, there were awards given out from a wide range of sponsors. Further details of the funders and sponsors can be found in the illustrated catalogue produced for the event (full pdf provided). During the run of the exhibition, several public engagement events were scheduled to reach existing and new audiences. These events included: a Convener's Tour, a Patrons Tour, an Architecture Discussion event, a Family Art Day, a private view event for collectors and a private view event for exhibitors, all designed to give exposure and insight into the construction of the exhibition.

The **rigour** of this output can be understood as the extent to which the curatorial input demonstrated '*intellectual coherence and integrity*'. My curatorial theme was 'voices' and this was explored in several different ways; in the choice of invited artists selected for the exhibition (Helen de Main's overlooked voices in her piece '*We want the Moon*', the virtual connections and digital voices in Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead's '*The Wall*' and in Rae-Yen Song exploration of ancestral voices in her collected sculptural works). This theme was further developed in the Open Submission of the exhibition which work selected from an international submission of over 2000 works. The final selection of the open submission also included six works from artists from the Garvald Community supporting people with disabilities. The theme of a multiplicity of voices was further developed in the thematics of the architectural curation convened by Jude Barber which exploring the politics of the architectural collective. All of these strands came together with submissions from the Academicians themselves. My curatorial intention was to create points of communality across these various creative communities and to create a coherent and intelligent hang.

This was noted in the reviews for the exhibition in the national press including a 5-star review in The Scotsman:

"This year's Annual Exhibition at the RSA looks cool and coherent in spite of the huge number of works on display"  and a 4-star review in The Times: "Be prepared to be moved, inspired, entertained and challenged." 

Convenor's Essay

Wendy McMurdo RSA



We must cultivate our garden.

Voltaire

It has been my unique pleasure this year to enter the fray and take up the role of Convenor for the 198th Annual Exhibition. As this post is an elected one (all convenors must be 'voted in' by their fellow Academicians) it is an honour to join the ranks of past convenors of this ever growing and venerable event. To join the cohort of past convenors is to also to be part of a growing community of artist and architects (Royal Scottish Academicians) committed to supporting, nurturing, and showcasing creativity in Scotland, at all stages of development.



198th Annual Exhibition 2024

Convened by Wendy McMurdo RSA

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The Annual Exhibition is a unique event in the national calendar and is composed of three elements: recent work from current RSA Academicians, selected works from artists invited by the convener and a substantial open submission element. This year, we had more open submissions than ever before and as ever it's a challenging job to select down for the exhibition.

Inevitably, a wide range of works are submitted to the Open and it can often be difficult to discern themes from such a diverse submission. Looking through the open submissions this year however,

it was works exploring our natural world that particularly caught my imagination. Many artists and architects are reflecting on the urgent need to protect and repair the natural resources around us. That these ideas should be embedded in the Open submission is of course no surprise as artists and architects are - and should be - reflecting and questioning the world around them, highlighting the injustices and biases that seek to define us - and bringing joy, of course. We need beauty in our lives more than ever and that is something about which artists are only too aware.

To accompany the Open submission and the work for the studios of current Academicians, I have invited five artists to show work this year as part of the 198th Annual Exhibition. All five were trained in and/or are based in Scotland and all are making highly original work of an exceptional quality. All five are also artists who make us question the world around us, often making visible what remains largely invisible. **Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead** have produced a special Edinburgh iteration of their previous work *The Wall* which captures digital messages circulating in the digital ether. Their work provides us with a unique snapshot of the entanglement of stories circulating all around us. Sculptor **Claire Barclay** is showing a sequence of prints closely related to her sculptural

Royal Scottish Academy Press release:

‘The Annual Exhibition is the core of the RSA’s exhibition programme and represents our commitment to promoting excellence in visual art in Scotland. This year’s Convenor is Wendy McMurdo RSA, assisted by Deputy Convenor Jude Barber RSA (Elect). The RSA Annual Exhibition is the largest and longest running exhibition of contemporary art in Scotland. Having been a mainstay of the academy's calendar since its inception 198 years ago, the Annual Exhibition has evolved over the years, providing a platform for Scottish art alongside international artists, often including topical or political elements, to give an uncensored, independent voice to artists. Nearly all works in the exhibition are available to purchase. Income raised in the Annual Exhibition directly assists artists and the not-for-profit work of the RSA. The exhibition encompasses both the physical and digital, combining the exhibition of artworks on display in the galleries with those shown online, some exclusively designed as such and others as companions or in tandem to work in the galleries.’

Retrieved 12th June 2024 <https://www.rsaannualexhibition.org/about/>

Link to Convenor’s essay: <https://www.rsaannualexhibition.org/convenorsessay/> *

* PDF of exhibition publication is attached as a pdf.

The exhibition ran across the two floors of the Royal Scottish Academy for 5 weeks. The final visitor numbers for the event were:

55,151 visitors (recorded by the door counter)

62,891 page views to the website

Total value of sales made: **£156,340**

The funds raised by sales and entry fees for this year’s Annual goes back into supporting artists and the ongoing running of the organization.

Key exhibition dates:

11 May - 16 June 2024

Mon-Sat 10am-5pm, Sun 12-5pm

Free entry | Illustrated exhibition catalogue £5

RSA Upper and Lower Galleries

Royal Scottish Academy The Mound Edinburgh EH2 2EL





WE

WANT

THE

MOON





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Critic

opportunities
present
stitching
aged
planet.





















Mass appeal at the RSA

This year's Annual Exhibition at the RSA looks cool and coherent in spite of the huge number of works on display, writes Duncan Macmillan



The 198th RSA Annual Exhibition

Royal Scottish Academy,
Edinburgh
○○○○○

JD Fergusson 150

The Scottish Gallery,
Edinburgh
○○○○

If you were to suppose that a big exhibition with several hundred works by almost as many artists and which includes a substantial open submission is an irrelevance in this day and age, the RSA Annual Exhibition proves you wrong.

This year's show is the 198th – the Academy's bicentenary is approaching fast. As big as ever, the show occupies the whole of the exhibition space on both floors of the building that bears the Academy's name.

The works are in all possible media and are on the walls and on the floor. The show also includes two galleries devoted to architecture. Remarkably, thanks to very thoughtful hanging, this mass of diverse works ranging in size from the enormous to the tiny looks cool and coherent. This coherence is the work of Wendy McMurdo RSA, convenor in charge of the hanging this year. She and her team have achieved this in various ways. Where possible, for instance, several works by the same artist have been hung together. Sometimes, too, works have been grouped by a loose thematic link, or simply by a broader visual affinity. Individual juxtapositions have been carefully thought about too, and so in spite of the number of exhibits, it works. McMurdo is herself represented by a group of

photographs. Three, called *Pollinators*, suggest vividly the energy that drives the growth of plants.

As you enter through the Sculpture Court, you are greeted by Kenny Hunter's now classic *Feedback Loop*, a figure of a Japanese teenager standing pretty much in the pose of the Statue of Liberty, but raising a bunch of flowers instead of a torch. The flowers are pink against the figure's monochrome. The teenager's baggy clothes are at once conformist within her group and radically nonconformist against the world at large, hence perhaps the enigmatic title.

Also in the Sculpture Court to your right is a fantastic dragon, the work of invited artist Rae-Yen Song, that seems to have strayed from a Chinese New year celebration. Going through to the central gallery the wall

facing you is dominated by a text piece by Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead, also invited artists. It is a collection of a hundred or so texts printed in large white letters on red and on black. A mix of the trivial and the political, with a bearing on contemporary politics and living in Scotland, apparently these texts are all collected from the internet.

The end wall to the left is dominated by another piece that is also principally text. By invited artist Helen de Main, *We Want the Moon* consists of four hanging banners and a collection of campaigning slogans, cartoons, documents and ephemera mounted on screens in front of them. All are screen-printed and reflect women's struggles and campaigns, from the suffragettes to the present day. In front of this Edward Summerton's *Let's Swap Children* is an array of caricature faces somehow created to look as though they were the patterns revealed in the cross-section of a block of agate. On the wall nearby, is a splendid example of one of Robbie Bushe's thousand-figure phantasmagorias. Called *People and Money*, it shows the University of Edinburgh's Old College and the adjacent bridges from the air, the roofs and walls peeled back to reveal all the goings on within. At the other end of the gallery, Simon Page's ink drawing *End of Babel* deploys a similar Brueghel-like perspective, but to portray a once-aspiring world in ruins. On the wall nearby two beautiful screen prints of snowy hillsides by Victoria Crowe present a reflective and very different poetry. So too does a very fine large, square painting

by Leon Morrocco of a house facade in Nice.

Among sculptures arranged around the floor nearby, Deirdre Nicholls' pink lamb on a green plinth has a very positive presence and you can see why it has been adopted as a signature image for the show. Painted in Yves Klein blue, Charles Young's memorial to the Netherbow Port, an Edinburgh city gate taken down in 1764, is equally vivid in colour. On the way into the gallery beyond is a striking group of small bronze mummer figures by Tim Shaw.

Ross Sinclair's big work *Years of Real Life 1994-2024 T-Shirt Paintings* dominates the western gallery at the back. A wall of his slogan T-shirts, it is like a single-work retrospective.

In contrast, the facing wall is hung with paintings of faces, either small portraits or just studies of faces, but sympathetically hung together. On the floor, Steven Skrynka's *Cluster**** is an ingenious, three-dimensional rendering in wood of that neologism so apt to modern politics.

Dead or Alive (Conversations with Joan), a spectacular big red painting by Kate Downie, presides over the eastern gallery. Nearby Francis Convery's *Angus Flood* is equally fiery in colour. Evidently inspired by the recent catastrophic floods in Angus, the dominant red – not an obvious colour for water – seems to stand for destruction. Two works by Kate Whiteford and a figure in a red shirt by Adrian Wiszniewski continue this red theme. In *Directed* by John Ford, Henry Kondracki goes to the cinema to watch a Western, while Ian McCulloch's *Argonaut* shows that the

veteran artist has lost none of his fire.

Elsewhere are a number of straightforward landscapes, including two beautiful low-key prints of the sea and the distant Bass Rock by John McKechnie and two watercolours by Richard Elliott. It is not quite landscape, but Alex Allan has delicately painted the inside of an upended, industrial wooden pallet to create what he has called an *Urban Pastoral*. Among paintings, Rowan Paton's semi-abstract *Where the Good People Go Who Cannot Stay* is particularly lovely. Very different, but equally successful is a humble plastic chair that Fiona Goss has turned into something poetic by wreathing it with plaited palm leaves, while Sarah Robertson has cast an exquisite lily pad in bronze. Elspeth Lamb's *The Falls* is a really beautiful image using printed woodgrain for the falling water.

Some of the walls in the lower galleries have been painted black, others in various colours. Daisy Doig's *Alcoholic*, a figure drawn in blue neon, stands out against black while sinister twins holding hands in Heather Nevay's *Thicker than Water* look very spooky against bright green. Green also suits Norman McBeth's eloquent photographic prints of withered leaves. Nearby, Hugh Buchanan's print *Moonlit Window*, ingeniously but effectively done on corduroy, has all the luminous mystery of the paintings of Vilhelm Hammershøi. On the floor, Mary Bourne and Lynne Strachan have brought contrasting light and dark into sculpture by creating axe-heads in cast glass and stone, polished

Moved and inspired by the inventive, numinous and humorous

Visual art Giles Sutherland

RSA Annual Exhibition

Royal Scottish Academy

★★★★☆

Jude Barber, architecture curator of the Royal Scottish Academy's (RSA) major annual show, cites the Pakistani architect Yasmeen Lari who implores us to "seize today's exceptional opportunities for mending present imbalances and stitching the highly damaged tapestry of our planet". Lari's *Letter to a Young Architect*, while directed at a niche audience, has a wider resonance because architecture affects us all.

The many diverse projects documented here range from a health and social care centre in north Sutherland by the Edinburgh-based Open College of the Arts to Glasgow Wood, a recycling project that brings discarded timber into the circular economy. *A Fragile Correspondence* — a collaboration involving architects, writers and environmental thinkers — shown at last year's Venice architecture biennale deserves more attention, which it will hopefully receive when it opens at V&A in Dundee later this year.

Wendy McMurdo, the lead curator, is a photographer and film-maker, so it's not surprising that lens-based work has a high profile. Films include work by the visual artists Dalziel + Scullion, Anne Bevan, Ruth

MacIennan, Fraser Macbeath, Zoe Irvine, David Faithfull and Sara Stroud. Stroud's autobiographical animation is darkly humorous — a stream of consciousness smart-phone narrative by a woman walking through the aisles of a supermarket. There's some sensitive photography including John Mackechnie's seascapes and a study of sheep awaiting ritual slaughter in Tusheti, Georgia, by Annahita Brooks. Norman McBeath's series, *nature is never spent*, transforms the quotidian (drying leaves) into objects of beauty.

It's good to see RSA stalwarts such as Kate Downie, Jake Harvey, Gareth

Fisher, Jacki Parry and Sam Ainslie, whose work continues to develop and grow. There's a welcome appearance by Jock McFadyen, whose *Smoker 3*

lends a bit of atmospheric urban grit.

Members who died in 2023 — Delia Baillie, Dennis Buchan, John Byrne and Peter Collins — are remembered fondly by an obituary space for their paintings. Buchan's vibrant abstraction sings off the wall, while the catalogue pays tribute to honorary members Gilleasbuig Macmillan and Kenneth White.

Inventive sculpture is well represented by Alex Allan's reclaimed wooden pieces; the numinous glass, stone and metal objects by Mary Bourne and Lynne Strachan, and a series of found-object metaphors by the Chilean artist Francisca Prieto, collectively entitled *Denied/Woman*.

Be prepared to be moved, inspired, entertained and challenged.

Until June 16



Builders 18 (House) by John Brown, who has a series of paintings on show