



If Not
Now,
When?

Title: *If Not Now, When?*

Christine Borland, Michele Fletcher, Wendy McMurdo

Group exhibition: 6th Nov – 21 Dec 2024

Patricia Fleming Gallery, Glasgow, UK

Commissioned essay 'Organic Intelligence' by Catriona McAra available

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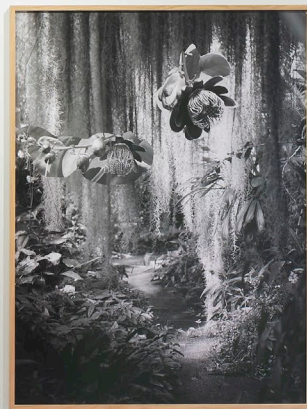
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All images included here: <https://www.patricia-fleming.com/Artists/wendy-mcmurdo>

‘If Not Now, When?’ Is an invitation to explore the work of three established women artists, Christine Borland, Michele Fletcher and Wendy McMurdo. Together they remind us of the urgency to implement alternative strategies for thinking about and shaping the world around us.

‘If Not Now, When?’ foregrounds the power of art to communicate the unseen. Perhaps things we choose to ignore because we feel they are not for us - or presented in a way that makes them too complex to engage with. The exhibition is a window into each artist's research and provides a space to reflect on the natural world, new digital tech and the use of AI. The works remind us of the importance of beauty, care, community and love. The exhibition prompts the question: ‘Do we have time to wait on the consequences of not changing course?’

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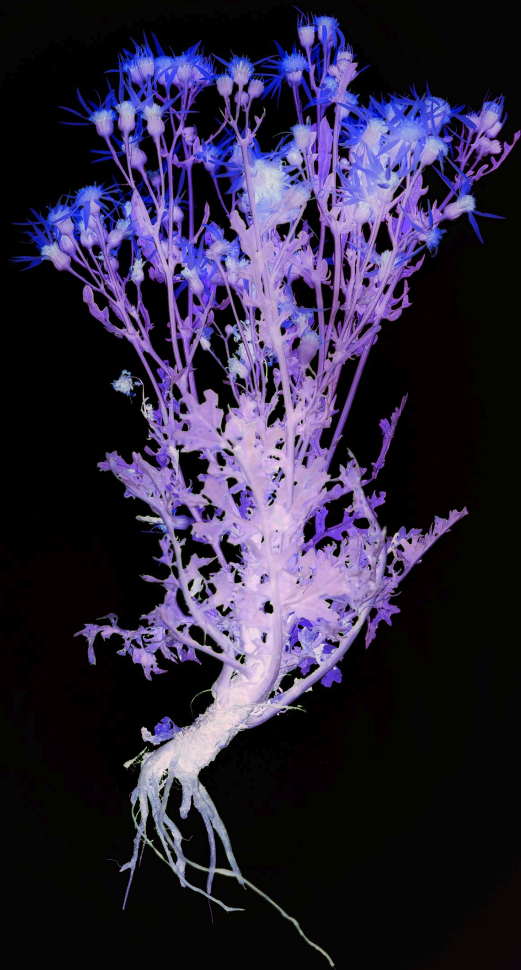
















IF NOT NOW, WHEN? : Christine Borland, Michele Fletcher, Wendy McMurdo
6 Nov - 21 Dec 2024

Gallery 1

Christine Borland

1. The Distaff Dialogues 2024;
-Flax Grower
-Flax Spinner
-Flax Weaver

Motion-captured, 3D visualization,
CGI and editing by John Butler

Details: 3 x 12 minute films, total 36 min,
looped.

Gallery 2

Michele Fletcher

1. Improv - Spring, 2023
Oil on artists ply/aluminum panels
70 x 140 cm

2. Improv - Summer, 2023
Oil on artists ply/aluminum panels
70 x 140 cm

3. Improv - Autumn, 2023
Oil on artists ply/aluminum panels
70 x 140 cm

4. Improv - Winter, 2023
Oil on artists ply/aluminum panels
70 x 140 cm

5. Low Funk Bother, 2023
Oil on linen
100 x 90 cm

Gallery 3

Wendy McMurdo

1. The Radical Road
(Campanula Rotundifolia) 2023
C-type prints on Fuji Archival paper
66.7cm x 50cm
Edition of 18 (series of 12)

2. The Radical Road
(Plantago major) 2023
C-type prints on Fuji Archival paper
66.7cm x 50cm

3. The Radical Road
(Senecio Jacobaea) 2023
C-type prints on Fuji Archival paper
66.7cm x 50cm

4. The Radical Road
(Campanula Rotundifolia) 2023
C-type prints on Fuji Archival paper
66.7cm x 50cm

5. The Radical Road
(Galium Verum) 2023
C-type prints on Fuji Archival paper
66.7cm x 50cm

6. Pollinators (xii) 2022
C-Type photographic print on Fuji
Archival Paper
11.3.3cmx85cm
Ed of 5 (series of six)

7. Pollinators (i) 2022
C-Type photographic print on Fuji
Archival Paper
11.3.3cm x 85cm

Sales /price list enquiries
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Organic Intelligence

Catriona McAra

“The future had been imagined but the weight of the present was too heavy for it.”

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Jeanette Winterson (2022)¹

“Still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars.”

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Ursula K. Le Guin (1986)²

The fact that Patricia Fleming's IF NOT NOW, WHEN? is an all-women group show probably needs claiming rather than re-explaining.³ The magic number three fulfils the focus of the solo, without falling into the trap of the monographic. Vice versa, three allows the promise of collective thinking, without it becoming too knotty. Here we have Christine Borland, Michele Fletcher, Wendy McMurdo, three artists represented across image-based media and painting. Indeed, it feels appropriate for many reasons to triangulate two leading Scottish artists, Borland and McMurdo, with the feminist elsewhere of Canadian, London-based painter, Fletcher. Fleming remarks that together this trio represents almost a century's worth of practice.⁴ Such labour and longevity are palpable in the work of all three, each with signature techniques and committed careers. Here, they showcase their latest preoccupations.

One might wonder about their convergence on this particular Venn diagram. What does this hive-mind have to offer? For three women born into an era of counterculture and responding to the legacies of a second wave (eco)feminism, I am intrigued by what a gendered environmentalism might mean for their art-making today. I also wonder what the tangible outcomes of the pandemic have been and where each artist sits on the issue of cybernetic contributions to ecocritical debate. How does each artist manifest the politics of technology through their art?

Wendy McMurdo (b.1962) has always been ahead of the curve with her interests in computation and digitality reaching back to the mid-1990s. While she is known for her focus on the child, often in school classrooms or museum dioramas, with fractals and talismanic properties, her more recent concerns relate to botanical specimens.

For this exhibition, McMurdo samples from two bodies of work: *The Pollinators* (2022) and *The Radical Road* (2023), both made in Edinburgh-based sites of natural heritage: Arthur's Seat and Royal Botanic Gardens. The nifty choice of the Victorian glasshouses for the former lends a new slant on the history of visibility. For me these crystal macrocosms offer a synecdoche for the microcosmic function of the camera, both in terms of preservation and transparency. McMurdo further describes the glasshouses "in a state of perpetual slumber" as they patiently await the completion of their restoration.⁵ McMurdo's practice is subtly site-specific in this respect with a shimmery tilt into the marvellous. The artist imagines this capricious plant kingdom transgressing its confines during lockdown. What *The Pollinators* presents us with is an infinitely textured and otherworldly domain where carnivorous blossoms are in cahoots. Such dialogic twinning is a recurrent motif across McMurdo's oeuvre. Here, the malevolent trifids of our unconscious have exceeded their horticultural taxonomies and are poised for takeover. This harks back to McMurdo's interests in the pre-surrealist paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, specifically his uncanny substitutes for a figurative presence.⁶

McMurdo's *The Radical Road* continues this pursuit into the terrain of social justice. These specimens were collected by the artist from Salisbury Crags as ambiguous mementos of the events that took place at this very location in the 1820s when unemployed weavers were given a compensatory task, a proposal by literary icon, Walter Scott, of creating a pathway to channel their labour. The healing properties of McMurdo's wildflowers present a thoughtful tribute, a commentary on restitution. The practice of pressed flora once again summons a peculiar cultural history of herbaria, preservation and knowledge production, concurrent with the discovery of photography. Anna Atkins's early botanical experiments with cyanotypes come to mind. Here, the UV colour palette suggests something nocturnal as well as documentary scrutiny. The Latin name of each flower contributes a further dimension to McMurdo's inquisitive strategy, enhancing the common weed or perennial to an exalted status.

Christine Borland (b.1965) continues this discourse on the archetypal weaver in *The Distaff Dialogues* (2024) – both her technological foundations as well as her

narrative associations. Borland's voiceover, with her daughter Grace Borland Sinclair, has a soothing lullaby effect, realigning the participatory practice of weaving with the folkloric mode of storytelling. For Scottish women's voices are the most trustworthy, so I'm often told. This journal is episodically structured around the many thresholds of textile production as a series of verbs (The Flax Grower: dig, rake, sow, water, weed, pull; The Flax Spinner: break, scutch, heckle, dress, spin, skein; The Flax Weaver: cake, warp, wind, weave, finish, wash). This strikes an intricate balance between frank, ergonomic description and the transformative potential of this medium. Such interests in collaborative processes and forensic research are typical of Borland's wider practice to date. This is further underpinned by the visual content on screen: kaleidoscopic patterns of flax seeds conjured through computer-generated imagery, care of 3D animator, John Butler. The effect is mesmerising, hallucinatory. Borland herself appears via motion capture as a ghostly spectre harvesting an eternal digital field, sowing the seeds of her virtual craft. The overall suggestion is that technological progress owes a sincere debt to analogue origins, not to mention legions of unnamed factory workers, mostly women. Jeanette Winterson reminds us how the Jacquard loom's punch card patterns (technically marks of negative spaces) informed early computer machinery.⁷ So much tacit learning is apparent across this body of work. Once again, Borland's signature blend of ethical awareness fed through aesthetic procedure speak to current debates on "alternative intelligence," as Winterson puts it.⁸ In Borland's thinking, knowledge is not something to be merely illustrated but rather to be worked through and embodied. Her work encourages a questioning of historical presumptions, quietly disrupting the status quo, unlearning in order to relearn.⁹ I am intrigued by the longevity and multidimensionality of Borland's inquiry, from a project she commenced on natural fibres in 2019, through the home-grown incentives of the 2020 pandemic, and beyond. Increasingly sibyl-like, Borland reminds us that she is "working with the seasons rather than against it."¹⁰

Seasonal considerations, layering and flux persist across the lustrous surfaces of painter Michele Fletcher (b.1963). At first sight, one might choose to see a raw bouquet of iris petals, chrome yellow sunflowers and verdant vine leaves but longer study reveals her overall effect to be distinctly non-figurative. *Improv* (2024) was

prompted by Corot's polyptych, *The Four Times of Day* (1858).¹¹ Here, the calm, stationary feel of the nineteenth-century French painter (the son of a cloth merchant, incidentally) is overturned and transposed by Fletcher into myriad veils and skeins of the seemingly infinite possibilities of abstraction. The seasons are embodied and felt through the paint, the turbulent moods influencing the very weather of the botanical lifecycle. Indeed, Fletcher's rhythmic textures propose a new learning, that the seasons as we know them have shifted during our lifetimes. *The Botanical Mind*, an exhibition which Fletcher saw in 2020, presented "an encoded intelligence inherent in the vegetal kingdom, patterns that could be thought of as blueprints for the natural world."¹² Like Borland's variegated seed formations, and McMurdo's everlasting glasshouse, Fletcher's painterly gestures wilfully beckon and grapple with sublime themes: the recklessness of the anthropocentric and the omnipotence of the planetary axis. In her prophetic and tangible *Prelude to Warmth* (2023), Fletcher seems to ask whether "the physical act of painting [might be] an antidote to AI generated images"?¹³ The artist deploys a mottler brush to massage her medium, with wet-into-wet paint flourishing, flowing and kept in motion over the course of a single sitting until the composition is satisfied if not resolved. The cascading shell-like forms which the brush provokes chime with the revival of a sensual organic phenomenon in contemporary painting. Fletcher's unique approach offers a homage to the women of mid-twentieth century abstract expressionism.¹⁴ I perceive Janet Sobel's cosmic forms, Joan Mitchell's florid palette, and Helen Frankenthaler's soak technique all at once across Fletcher's inscapes. Fletcher's paintings are each art histories in this respect.

Congregating in this space, these meditative dialogues indicate how a cross-pollination is becoming apparent across a feminist-informed aesthetic. Paring the exhibition back to its common denominators, all three artists have some form of light at the kernel of their work, be it the emanations of their medium or the chemistry of photosynthesis. Their alternative and necessarily eccentric approaches to rethinking the genre of landscape art from a woman's perspective and experience are compelling and refreshing. There is due consideration given in each to the legacy of modernity and the effects of industrialisation: what have we gained and at what cost?

In IF NOT NOW, WHEN? we witness the exquisite transience of each exhibit bound together by a lasting sense of organic intelligence.

Bio Note

Catriona McAra is an art historian and curator. She is lecturer in modern and contemporary art history at the University of Aberdeen. Catriona has published books on Dorothea Tanning (2017) and Leonora Carrington (2022) and is currently writing a third book on Scottish contemporary artist-women.

Notes

With thanks to Laurence Figgis.

¹ Jeanette Winterson, *12 Bytes: How artificial intelligence will change the way we live and love* (London: Vintage, 2022), 16.

² Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, ed. Donna Haraway (Glasgow: cosmogenesis, [1986] 2024), 35.

³ There is a tradition of tripartite art historical projects on artist-women, for instance, Anne Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women)*, 1996) and Sharyn Rohlfen Udall, *Places of Their Own* (2001) – both overlap on their inclusion of Georgia O’Keeffe, the ur-woman artist, whose modernist flower and animal skull paintings complement the current inquiries. This continues in a curatorial vein with Katrina Brown and Caroline Douglas, *Structure and Material: Claire Barclay, Becky Beasley, Karla Black* (London: Southbank Centre 2011).

⁴ Personal correspondence with the curator (24 October 2024).

⁵ Wendy McMurdo, ‘The Pollinators’ (2022): <https://wendymcmurdo.com/photography/pollinators/> Accessed 14 November 2024

⁶ Interview with the artist (6 September 2024).

⁷ Winterson, 15.

⁸ Winterson, 5.

⁹ Interview with the artist (13 May 2024).

¹⁰ Christine Borland in conversation with Alis Oldfield, ‘Carrying the Craft,’ *Makings Journal Studio*, 5:1 (4 November 2024): <https://makingsjournal.com/carrying-the-craft-podcast/> Accessed 14 November [3.20]

¹¹ Personal correspondence with the artist (24 October 2024).

¹² Gina Buenfeld, *The Botanical Mind* (London: Camden Arts Centre, 2020): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-Uy7jjOuzo&ab_channel=CamdenArtCentre Accessed 10 November 2024 [1.08]

¹³ Personal correspondence with the artist (24 October 2024).

¹⁴ Greg Thomas also notes this tendency, ‘Becoming Nature: On Michele Fletcher’s Painting’ (2023): https://www.patricia-fleming.com/files/ugd/453488_2b4da53981fe4baba51d0811179e4bd9.pdf Accessed 12 November 2024

