

Title: *Wendy McMurdo | The Digital Mirror*

Event: Solo Exhibition

Commissioner: The National Galleries of Scotland

Venue: Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh

Dates: 30th May – 24th Oct 2026

Description: A comprehensive survey show including over 40 works.

Funders: Government Indemnity Scheme, Scottish Government /Peoples Lottery.

Creative Scotland, Royal Scottish Academy of Art and Architecture, Elizabeth Lornie Charitable Trust.

Public outreach:

A free publication was produced to mark the exhibition with commissioned essays by Professor David Hopkins and Professor Patricia Allmer and seventeen illustrations. Colour, 12 pages.

Both commissioned essays also available online: David Hopkins: '*Mediumistic Beings: Wendy McMurdo's Photographs of children*': <https://tinyurl.com/2s42vc2y> Patricia Allmer – '*Imprints Wendy McMurdo's Photographs*': <https://tinyurl.com/yvzme9b2>

An Opening talk (a Q & A with Wendy McMurdo & Susan Bright) on Fri 29th May 2026 was held at the Hawthornden Lecture Theatre and online. Sold out (350 capacity with additional capacity online). Recording available here: https://www.youtube.com/live/Y9JV_9ydTIA?si=VFbvSqwovd7EGrkK

Exhibition audio guide available here: <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/exhibition/wendy-mcmurdo-digital-mirror#audio-tour>

Learning & Outreach events relating to the exhibition: <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/exhibition/wendy-mcmurdo-digital-mirror#related-events>

A variety of tours (curator's tour, patrons tour, friends tour) were scheduled throughout the run of the exhibition. An extensive schools and education programme (workshops, lectures, talks) was developed for teachers and young people to run alongside the exhibition.

‘Working at the forefront of developments in digital photography, *Wendy McMurdo: The Digital Mirror*, charts 20-years of ground-breaking work by this pioneering photographer. McMurdo has blazed a trail in the experimental use of computers and digital tools in photography from the early days of computer-based learning in schools to the growth of the internet and networked gaming. *Wendy McMurdo: The Digital Mirror* comes at a time when the digital landscape is changing faster than ever before, with technology offering limitless possibilities and scope for imaginative learning. With children spending more and more time online, the exhibition offers a fascinating insight into the impact of technology on learning and play in childhood.

Alongside McMurdo’s work, including a newly configured moving image projection, visitors will discover a range of objects that may be familiar. Find items selected from museums including early 20th century children’s toys, an [Eduardo Paolozzi](#) sculpture and the painting [Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch](#) (The Skating Minister) by Henry Raeburn. Explore why these artworks have influenced McMurdo's work and what this has to do with how we learn and access culture.

Over the last 30 years, [Wendy McMurdo](#) has made a key contribution to Scotland’s international reputation as a centre for contemporary art. This exhibition coincides with the bicentenary year of the Royal Scottish Academy to which McMurdo was the first woman photographer to be elected.’

Retrieved: <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/exhibition/wendy-mcmurdo-digital-mirror>



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Wendy McMurdo

The Digital Mirror

Wendy McMurdo (born 1962) is an Edinburgh-based artist recognised internationally for her pioneering experimentation with photography and computers. This exhibition presents McMurdo's ground-breaking photographic work, made between 1995 and 2018, which explores the evolving role of computers in children's lives.

Working closely with children and schools, McMurdo photographed young people in learning environments and at play. The resulting images examined the ways in which the introduction of computers was not only changing children's lives, but also the nature of play itself. This work was made at a time of rapid technological development. McMurdo used the computer both as a tool and as her subject. All of the images in this exhibition were made with the permission of the children depicted and with the full co-operation and support of their teachers, parents, carers, guardians and schools.

Included alongside McMurdo's work are various historical objects from local and national collections. These have been selected by McMurdo for their lasting impact on her work and ideas, and in recognition of the importance of museums on her creative development. Marking an evolution in her use of photography, this exhibition also features three of McMurdo's moving image works. These digital animations are located in this gallery, the Library and the Upper Great Hall in response to the historical context of the Portrait gallery building.

McMurdo is a key figure in contemporary art from Scotland and the first woman photographer to be elected to the Royal Scottish Academy. Highlighting some of the historical and contemporary connections and themes in McMurdo's work, two new essays have been commissioned to accompany this exhibition. These are available next door in the Library and online, see QR code (left).



National Galleries of Scotland would like to thank the following for lending to the exhibition: Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales; Edinburgh Council Museums & Galleries; The Royal Scottish Academy of Art & Architecture.

We would like to thank the following for their support: Andy McGregor; Detail Framing; Genesis Metro; Patricia Fleming Gallery, Glasgow; Professor David Hopkins; Professor Patricia Allmer; The Royal Scottish Academy of Art & Architecture and Elizabeth Lornie's Charitable Trust; Wendy McMurdo.

Thanks to the support of Postcode Lottery players



This exhibition has been made possible with the assistance of the Government Indemnity Scheme provided by Scottish Government.

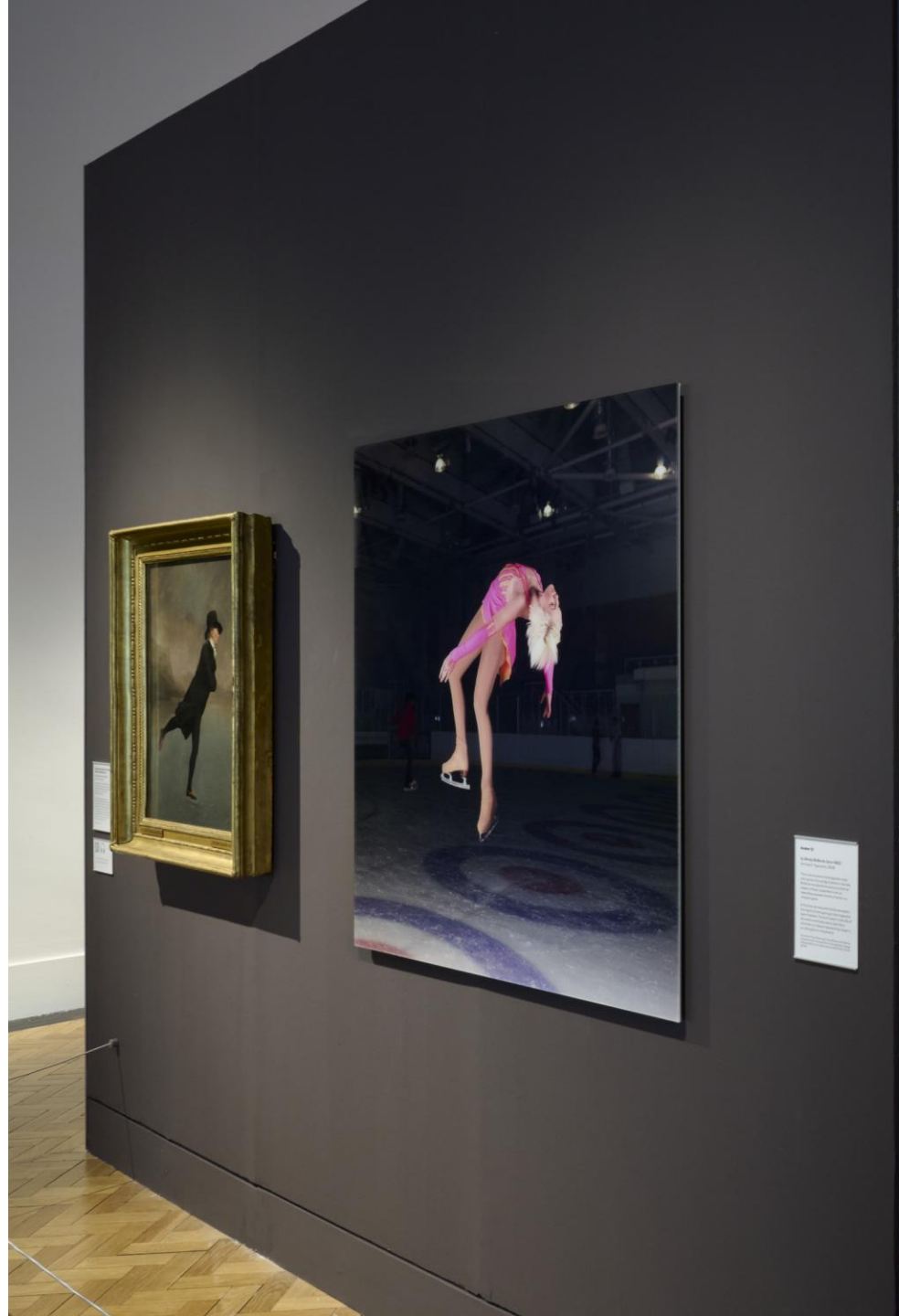
















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144
Hans-Joachim Wenzel 1971
Die Kinder im Kindergarten
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Die Kinder im Kindergarten
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Hans-Joachim Wenzel 1971
Die Kinder im Kindergarten
Hans-Joachim Wenzel 1971





Interactive Exhibit, The Science Museum, London
© 2010 The Science Museum, London



Mechanical Hand, The Science Museum, London
© 2010 The Science Museum, London







Bison, Royal Museum of Scotland
by Wendy McMurdo, 1992
Acquired: 2005

Wendy McMurdo
by Wendy McMurdo, 1992
Acquired: 2005

Wendy McMurdo
Bison, Royal Museum of Scotland
1992
Acquired: 2005



Wendy McMurdo
Bear, Royal Museum of Scotland
1992
Acquired: 2005



Wendy McMurdo
Girl in Red, 1992
Acquired: 2005



PHOTOGRAPHY GALLERY

Wendy McMurdo The Digital Mirror

Wendy McMurdo's 'The Digital Mirror' is a series of photographs that explore the relationship between the physical and the digital. The series features three young girls in school uniforms, who are seen interacting with a large, glowing red ball. The girls are shown in various poses, some looking at the ball, others looking away, creating a sense of mystery and intrigue. The photographs are presented in a gallery setting, with the girls and the ball appearing to be part of a larger, unseen narrative.















Head of a Man
by **Henry Moore**
1950
Bronze
The sculpture is a study for a larger work, 'Head of a Man', which was cast in 1950. It is a study for a larger work, 'Head of a Man', which was cast in 1950. It is a study for a larger work, 'Head of a Man', which was cast in 1950.



Two young girls in a room, wearing matching red and white striped dresses and red tights, standing on a dark wooden floor. The background shows a brick wall and a staircase.



Two young girls in a room, wearing matching yellow sweaters and colorful patterned skirts, standing on a wooden floor. The background is dark, possibly a stage or a room with low lighting.













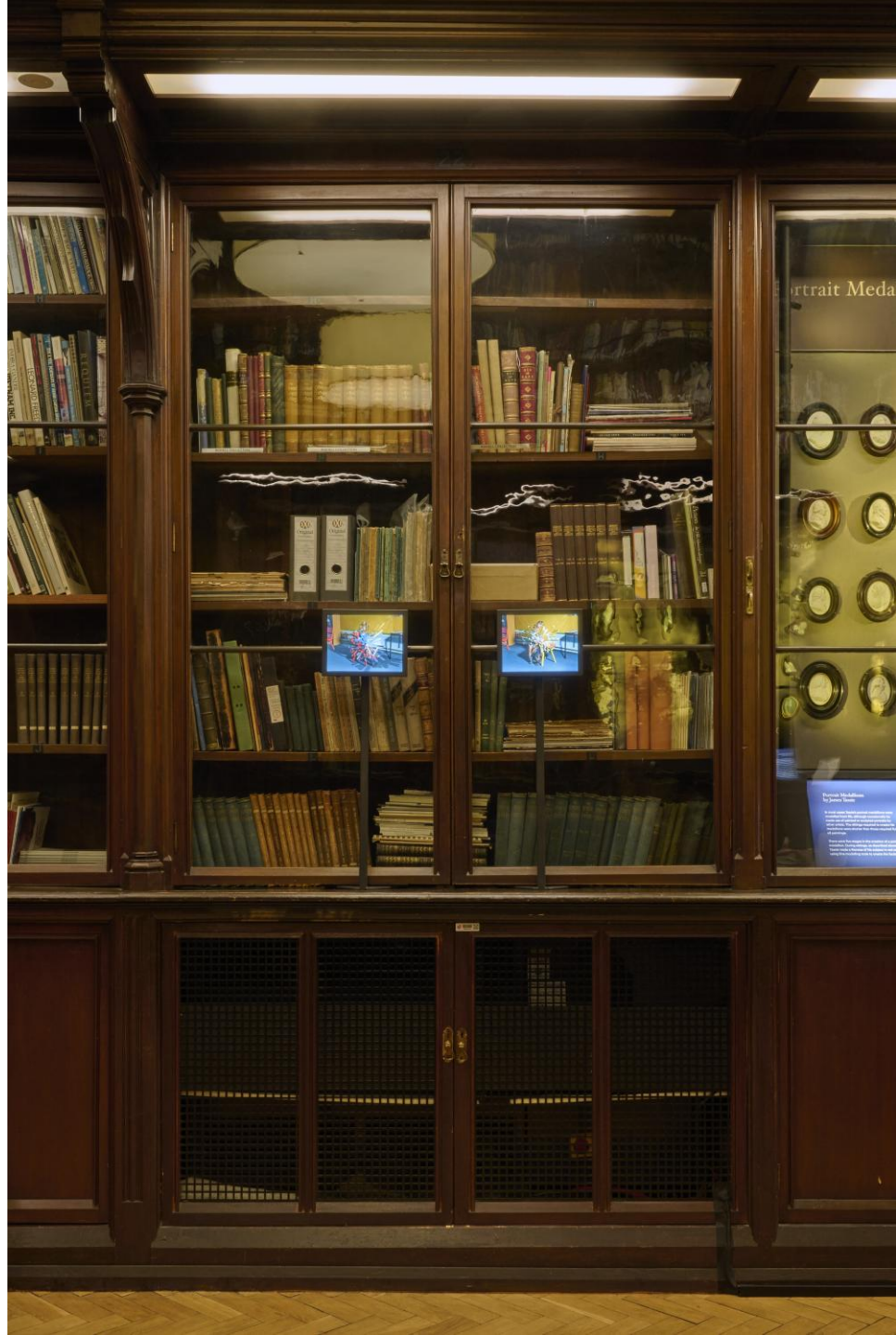
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The Museum

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HELLO

Wendy McMurdo | The Digital
Mirror



Publication



(Fig. 1) *Helen, Backstage, Merlin Theatre (The Glance)* by Wendy McMurdo. Chromogenic print, 1996. Courtesy Patricia Fleming Gallery, Glasgow
© Wendy McMurdo. All rights reserved, DACS 2026

Mediumistic Beings: Wendy McMurdo's Photographs of children

David Hopkins

In the mid-1990s, the Edinburgh-born artist Wendy McMurdo produced a sequence of large photo-works dealing, uncannily, with reduplicated images of children. Sometimes they were presented side-by-side with their doubles, sometimes they were triplicated. In one image, *Helen, Backstage, Merlin Theatre (The Glance)* (Fig. 1) a young girl curiously assesses her doppelgänger. An eerie transmission seems to pass between the two beings (the titular 'glance', perhaps) which might suggest telepathy. In *The Somnambulist* a girl, standing alongside her reversed double, seems to be sleepwalking. The airy dimension surrounding her is made palpable as she extends her arms and hands, as though encountering an obstacle. We might fleetingly perceive these images as representations of reality, but we quickly realise that they are contrived. McMurdo, who first trained as a painter before taking up photography in the post-conceptualist ethos of New York's Pratt Institute and London's Goldsmith's College, was part of a wave of photographers exploring the expressive possibilities of new digital photographic techniques. These allowed elements of photographs to be extracted and repositioned to produce apparently seamless counter-realities. In this, she was part of a significant phase in postmodernist art and photography that is best epitomised by the Canadian Jeff Wall. Like Wall, McMurdo's photoworks are large, as though to compete with the scale of paintings – the genre of large-scale nineteenth century painting in which she is particularly adept. To the point of comparison with Wall, her images, with their simplified and We will return to McMurdo's technical concerns, but it is worth dwelling on the theme of the double. It has rarely been emphasised how closely this subject was keyed to McMurdo's Scottish

cultural background. It is no coincidence that the theme of the double had occurred in the work of three Scottish writers: James Hogg's (*The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, 1824); Robert Louis Stevenson (*The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and My Hyde*, 1886); and R.D. Laing (*The Divided Self*, 1960). Furthermore, McMurdo took up the theme around the same time as another Scottish artist, the conceptualist Douglas Gordon, whose video installation *A Divided Self 1 and 11* (1996) was produced the same year as McMurdo's aforementioned *Helen, Backstage*. Gordon's Gothicism, with its frequent allusions to Hogg, has been much discussed, and, on the face of it, one might place McMurdo's child subjects in a similarly dark context. In terms of a broader history of photography and film there is a distinctly uncanny lineage for her work: the masked children and identical siblings of Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Diane Arbus's *Photographs of Ghosts, or the Living Dead*.¹ What is striking about McMurdo's children is that they are not sinister or troubled; in fact they seem surprisingly calm. The two identical 'Helens' who contemplate each other in *Helen, Backstage* might easily be seen as undergoing the process of psychological self-actualization that the psycho-analyst Otto Rank pinpoints in a quotation from the writer Otto Witte:

When I was a small boy, I woke one day with the overwhelming realization that I was an "I" (...)

*I stood before the mirror, observed myself attentively, and often repeatedly addressed my image by my first name. In doing so I evidently intended to create a bridge from the image in the external world over to me, across which I might penetrate into my unfathomable self.*¹

The psycho-analyst Jacques Lacan would later coin the concept of the 'mirror stage', to designate a moment in early child development where the child unconsciously assumes its identity by reconciling its unco-ordinated sense of self with a unified external self-image or imago.²

Following on from this, many of McMurdo's photoworks throughout her career seem to fix upon moments of inner development. Another picture featuring 'Helen', the stripy-dressed girl from

Helen, Backstage, shows her triumphantly planted on the prone body of her double, as though enacting the way the ego comes to subjugate or dominate an inferior or shadow aspect of the self. Similarly, in *The Somnambulist*, the two sleepwalking selves might be seeking out a unified sense of the self. In the same time, McMurdo's child protagonists are always disarmingly 'everyday'. They might be immersed in intense psychological states, but they still wear oversized T-shirts or jumpers knitted by their mums. And this in itself helps us to realise that, in many cases, these children are young actors, located in drama studios or schoolrooms (we might note the tables and chairs that, in certain images,



Right: (Fig. 2) *Psi Girls* by Susan Hiller. Video Installation, 1999. Installation view at Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Italy, 2011 © Estate of Susan Hiller, courtesy Fondazione Ratti

have been pushed to one side to create space.) This generates a further double-take. For the fact that these weird scenarios are, in some sense, being 'acted-out' reinforces the sense that the digitised photographic process that ostensibly 'records' them is far from transparent or 'natural'. It is no surprise that McMurdo has periodically returned to picturing children in drama classes, frozen in the middle of narratives that we cannot fathom. The frozen-ness of the actors forces us to see the space surrounding them as somehow pregnant with significance. But

this question of space will be returned to. Let us first think further about McMurdo's artistic development.

Looking back, McMurdo has frequently remarked about her affinities with the older American-born artist Susan Hiller, with whom she exhibited in the ESP exhibition at the Ikon gallery, Birmingham, in 1999. Hiller's interest in the supernatural was something of a touchstone for McMurdo, and the video installation *Psi Girls* (Fig. 2), in which Hiller projected extracts from films focusing on the psychokinetic powers of young girls (powers linked in the popular imaginary to possession by poltergeists) is singled out by McMurdo for particular praise. Hiller was deeply concerned at that time with a revision of surrealism, not just as something that explored the relation of conscious and unconscious experience, but as a largely male movement that had developed notions such as the 'femme enfant', the hysterical child-woman who was seen as a conduit for male fantasy and desire. In Hiller's *Psi Girls*, the supernaturally-attuned 'femme enfant' is reclaimed as the progeny of a female, rather than male, artist in a proto-feminist gesture. Significantly, McMurdo's entranced young

In tandem with her interest in Hiller and surrealism, McMurdo absorbed the photographic debates of the 1990s. The period was one in which the relation between surrealism and photography was understood in a new way. The American theorist Rosalind Krauss had developed a now-famous argument about the way the photographic surrealist image challenges the indexical, realist function of the medium, since darkroom operations such as the spacing, doubling and overlaying of negatives produce a kind of 'surreality' at the heart of a

medium supposedly concerned with transcribing the 'real'.³ McMurdo quickly understood this could be a springboard for her own practice: if the digitally-derived/manipulated image obviated photography's recording function, her scenarios could take place in a technologically-generated space that was 'digital' rather than of-the-world. This possibility was augmented by another development in 1990s photography: the rehabilitation of nineteenth-century 'spirit photography', which was the subject of several key exhibitions.⁴ Such photography, practiced well into the twentieth century and which ostensibly recorded the 'manifestations' that mediums conjure up in séances and produced via ectoplasm, had been discredited for its obvious trickery. With the rise of digitisation, it suddenly acquired a new relevance.

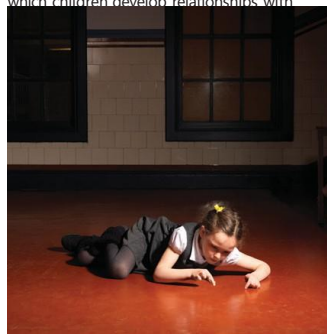
Like surrealist photography, it made use of overlaid negatives and processes such as the removal and merging of imagery. For McMurdo, with her interest in children's imaginary worlds, it was inspirational. It should be stressed, however, that it was not so much the presence of 'manifestations' in spirit photographs that seems relevant to her work as the production of an alternative spatial void: a kind of 'etheric dimension', the very domain that the Spiritualist mediums of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries claimed to inhabit. This subtext resonates, once again, with McMurdo's Scottish background. One of Spiritualism's great promoters in the early twentieth century was the Edinburgh-born Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes.⁵ In 1922, Conan Doyle defended the authenticity of the infamous 'Cottingley Fairy' photographs produced by two young Yorkshire cousins, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths. Although suspected from early on, the fakery involved in the images was not admitted by Griffiths until 1981!

Unsurprisingly, McMurdo has voiced her interest in the reclamation of the 'etheric domain' of spirit photography strikes me as fundamental for appreciating the spatial theatre in which her young protagonists act (the acting-related metaphor is again highly pertinent). The scale of her pictures and their bright, crisply-lit appearance, ensure that an eerie atmospherics prevails. This is particularly evident in her *Indeterminate Objects* installation of 2017 in which, in a strangely deserted classroom, a series of computer-generated 3-D objects twirl



(Fig. 3) *The medium Stanislaw P.: emission and reabsorption of an ectoplasmic substance through the mouth* by Albert von Schrenck-Notzing. Gelatin silver print, 1913. Courtesy Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene, Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany

magically above a desk. But if McMurdo exploits Spiritualism's heralding of a haunted digital reality, what might the implications of this be in terms of contemporary subject matter? In answering this question, one is struck by McMurdo's interest in the fact that spirit photography underwent a resurgence in the twentieth century, precisely at a time of maximum social anxiety, at the end of the First World War, when communion with the dead was a widespread obsession. Implicit in McMurdo's engagement with this history is a sense that, in our own times, digitisation might like *no time to come to McMurdo's privileged subject children*. I am left at the end of this essay with the uncanny sense that McMurdo's child protagonists – who, to think of one striking image from the *Algorithmic Children* sequence (Fig. 4), seem like the larval stirrings of a new techno-humanity – can be seen as *mediumistic beings*, not only in the sense of acting as *mediums* (in touch with hidden realities) but also as being the progeny, so speak, of a (digital) medium. Or to put this slightly differently: as digitisation and computer technology developed at breakneck speed during the 1990s and early 2000s, it was children who were widely seen as the privileged inhabitants of this new technological space, a space, one might say, into which they were born. McMurdo's photographic output from the year 2000 to the present has produced a whole catalogue of children as denizens of a new (invisible) reality. Several pictures have tracked the ways in which children develop relationships with



(Fig. 4) *Algorithmic Girl (i)* by Wendy McMurdo. Archival C-Type print, 2013. Courtesy Patricia Fleming Gallery, Glasgow © Wendy McMurdo. All rights reserved, DACS 2026

entering strange communion with their devices or into telepathic rapport with fellow users. The device is often digitally removed from the images – becoming a kind of phantom presence – while the entranced children appear to be preternaturally in communion with the resultant void (Fig. 5). These children enter into unfathomable dialogue with their contemporaries or with the avatars they have summoned up in their imaginary worlds.



(Fig. 5) *Computer Class (ii)* by Wendy McMurdo. Archival C-Type print, 1997. Courtesy Patricia Fleming Gallery, Glasgow © Wendy McMurdo. All rights reserved, DACS 2026

Removal – or extraction – is possibly McMurdo's most effective visual trope, but her images use other digital effects and props to explore aspects of childish fantasy and otherworldly identification. Certain images merge homemade toys and robots in a weird conjunction of past, present and future. This preoccupation began with a doctored photograph of the 'shoe doll' from Edinburgh's Museum of Childhood, in which a poor child's homemade doll was turned into proto-robot, and led eventually into a series of images of present-day children sporting cardboard box heads in emulation of monsters or futuristic beings (Fig. 6). Other images depict children in a hallucinatory counter-reality; in one we see a girl, enthralled by her mobile device, squatting in a school gym as a fairy-tale forest sprouts around her. Other works by McMurdo illustrate children's otherworldly aspirations more literally. Often the protagonists are the children of McMurdo's friends, and, intriguingly, she emerges as a portraitist of the progeny of contemporary middle-class Edinburgh society. In one picture a boy, posing in the corner of a room,

assumes a ghastly persona courtesy of a skeleton T-shirt and paper-plate mask. In another, a wraith-like figure sweeps into a roomy Edinburgh flat, its door flung wide open by an accomplice, on a blowy Halloween night (Fig. 7). Are these children somehow in touch with the city's lingering legacy of Gothicism and Spiritualism?



As noted, McMurdo's images of children are by no means all 'uncanny': some are humorous in tone; often they are affectionate. In nearly all cases, though, her photoworks make us flip from a child that is familiar to one that seems strangely alien or 'other'. At times these children seem to obey laws or imperatives that are beyond the ken of the adult world. As such, they might be cousins to the monstrous children of ghost literature, with a lineage going back to Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), but as already stated, they themselves never

seem traumatised. We might see them as speaking to contemporary anxieties about the actions and motivations of children in late modernity – from the killers of Jamie Bulger to the knife-carrying adolescents dominating the current news media – who seem to follow imperatives that are beyond ethical norms and, in some sense, unknowable. (This takes us back us to McMurdo's interest in the way that spirit photography reflected historical change). Yet McMurdo's child subjects seem blissfully unfazed by the societal shifts in which they participate. If they are the products of an age of anxiety about childhood and the way it is viewed (think about the controversy surrounding Sally Mann's photographs of her own children in her *Immediate Family* book of 1992) they confront us as avatars of a further historical stage – I am tempted to say a further evolutionary stage, analogous to the way digitisation has superseded analogue photography – of which children have offered themselves the most potent example, and indeed led the cultural movement to ban social media access for under-16s – one wonders whether McMurdo's children are not already far beyond us. And maybe this is the moment to return to the notion of the surreal, for surely the etheric domain that McMurdo's children inhabit is a contemporary manifestation of that territory. McMurdo's re-thinking of surrealism seems particularly compelling in that it doesn't merely recycle the stylistic trappings of visual surrealism, like so many tired efforts to revive surrealist fantasy, but to recast surreality as a virtual space in which children, as mediumistic beings, are in touch with invisible realities in a way adults can never be.

1. Otto Wittel: 'Das Ich des Kindes' in *Die sexuelle Not*, Vienna, 1909, p.109. As cited by Otto Rank: *The Double*, translated by Harry Tucker, University of North Carolina Press, 1971, p.81.
2. Jacques Lacan: 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I' in Jacques Lacan: *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Sheridan, London, 1980.
3. Rosalind Krauss: 'Photography in the Service of Surrealism', in *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism (ex cat)*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C./Abbeville Press, NY, 1985, pp.15-54.
4. For example: *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, Metropolitan Museum, New York (2005).
5. For Scottish Spiritualism see Michelle Foot: *Modern Spiritualism and Scottish Art*, Bloomsbury, London, 2023.
6. See David Hopkins: *Dark Toys: Surrealism and the Culture of Childhood*, David Hopkins is Professor of Art History at the University of Glasgow, UK.

Above left: (Fig. 7) *The Ghost* by Wendy McMurdo. Archival C-Type print, 2013. Courtesy Patricia Fleming Gallery, Glasgow © Wendy McMurdo. All rights reserved, DACS 2026

MPRINTS: Wendy McMurdo's Photographs



(Fig. 1) *The Iceberg* by Wendy McMurdo. Archival C-Type print, 2020. Courtesy Patricia Fleming Gallery, Glasgow © Wendy McMurdo.
All rights reserved, DACS 2026

Patricia
Allmer

"...nature has given the child this plasticity of brain which fits them to receive every kind of impression ..." (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or Education*, 1762).¹

"...is not your very Attention a Stretching-to?" (Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 1834).

Many of Wendy McMurdo's photographs exercise a child-centred gaze in order to capture the processes and experiences of education as forms of imprinting. Tangibility is a recurrent concern, with objects being grasped, held and caressed, and surfaces touched, poked, and felt by the children depicted. McMurdo records processes of tangible engagement by which the child encounters and learns about the world through contact. This learnt world is, in turn, an externalisation of the processes of educational experience by which children, themselves malleable subjects, interact with the objects and perceptions of their learning. In many photographs the object of this attention – screen, keyboard, iPad – has been removed, leaving the child's physical gesture and attentive pose as the subject of the image.

This interaction – its two-way influences and confluences, its affective alteration of each involved element (child, object, environment), and its ramifications outward into the effects and functions of photography itself as a specifically visual form of attention – is McMurdo's insistent theme. One photograph, *The Iceberg*, stages an encounter between a group of five children with a large, white, textured object that resembles a giant ice block. The object is a product of combined effects resulting from layers of coolant technology and metal, and the atmospheric traces of human presence in the form of frozen condensed breath.

This object, an exhibit created to be encountered within the public and educational space of the

science centre (with all the accompanying ideological functions of instruction through experience, of shared knowledge-accumulation, of learning through seeing and doing), clearly exceeds the children in size and mass. Its form looms over them as they lean backwards to encompass

it, their hands pressed forwards towards its surface in gestures suggesting the raised hand of greeting as well as the grasping or embracing motions of containment and the enquiring touch of attentive curiosity, the hands caressing the ice "so they can feel what's been there before them"². In some of McMurdo's contact sheet images the ice occupies almost the entire photograph, encroaching glacially across the frame, becoming the principal background element against which the children stand (and, in some, are partially obscured).

The photograph *The Iceberg* shows the surface of the ice block, a surface already conspicuously imprinted with the traces of several other hands. In the act of pressing his hand into the ice, the child performs a complex and iterative encounter between his own living flesh and an inanimate surface both forbidding and yielding, a form both solid and malleable, intransigent and yet subtly transformed, its solidity melting at the moment of contact into another, fluid, state. This transformation results in the depositing of a mark or imprint – the imprinted outline of the hand, several examples of which are visible across the surface of the ice block. The moment of contact is recorded in the tangibility of the melted surface of the ice, and the handprint assumes its position as a sign recording presence, latest in a historically ancient tradition of such recording signs or what Georges Didi-Huberman, in the catalogue to his 1997 Pompidou exhibition

L'Empreinte, calls "digital traces"³, a variety of contact print affirming the child's gesture as also a connection point between the present moment and the long history of tradition.

In this context, the word "digital" assumes significant ambiguity, suggesting the binary code enabling the programmes that regulate the digital photographic medium, the wider environmentally impactful implication of the 'digital footprint', and the gestural importance of the finger (digit) and hand in the generation of material (indexical) signs.

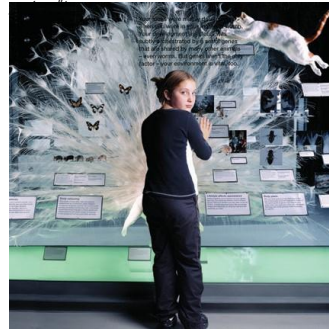
These photographed child handprints on a block of ice symbolise the wider processes of attentive learning and shared experience that McMurdo documents. Any original handprint has long gone but the current imprint, visible in her photograph, is a cumulative product of the collective imprinting of hands across time, a durational trace of the momentary presence of the social in a visible and tangible form, the handprint. McMurdo's contact sheet records several children enacting the same gestural contact, their hands fitting into the hand-imprint on the surface of the ice block.

Evoked here is not the individual identity-affirming imprint of a modernist work like Vasily Kandinsky's

watercolour *Imprints of the Artist's Hands* (Fig. 2). Included in *L'Empreinte*, this work contributed to the exhibition's argument that since Palaeolithic times the "digital trace" of the handprint or fingerprint, the transference of pigment from the hand onto a surface, has designated the momentary presence of the (often anonymous) individual. Such affirmations of presence are evident in the ochre handprints and outlines which are omnipresent in prehistoric cave art, often clearly those of children. In the twentieth century, the gesture of the handprint became a key element of the modernist work. Lee Miller's double portrait, *Georges Limbour and Jean Dubuffet, Farleys House, East Sussex, England 1955* (Fig. 4), offers a still closer model for the outstretched, imprinting child's hand – Miller's photograph records two male hands pressed against the glass pane of a door.

Unlike all these potential precursors, McMurdo records, instead, a moment in a multiple process, the production of an imprint anonymised in its implicitly social production by several hands. The serial embossment of these hands into the surface

of the ice culminates in the specific moment of contact recorded in the image, a process that speaks to a shared desire (to imprint one's presence) and a shared tradition (of other, earlier, similar, imprints) in which the touch offers a gestural moment of contact between human and non-human, an interfacing along the double surface between living organism and inanimate object. The image (itself another form of "digital trace") documents the material impact of affect as impression, echoing Didi-Huberman's suggestion that the handprint be understood as "a versatility, a power" which "allowed prehistoric humans to make a



McMurdo's photograph also casts the child's singular-plural moment of imprinting a mark of their presence on the surface of the ice as an allegory of the imprinting that characterises the photograph.

The gestural pose McMurdo captures, hand pressed into pre-existing imprint, is one that recurs in similar forms across her oeuvre in photographs that offer an extended documentation of how knowledge and experience imprints, and thus informs and educates, children through their encounters with the tangible world. A boy, eyes downcast, presses his hands against a glass display dome under which a model jet plane hangs, balanced on a rotating rod (Fig. 5).

A girl, her face and gaze turned directly towards us, presses her hand against the glass screen before a display illustrating genetic similarities across species, via a plethora of mice, butterflies, feathers, and a prominent cat hanging mid-leap, soaring but static in the fixed display (Fig. 6). A boy crouches, his body and face twisted round towards the camera (into which he gazes), before a display cabinet containing a snowy owl suspended mid-swoop (another soaring figure, an emblem of fixed dynamism), wings extended, above its oblivious prey (Fig. 7).

The boy's fingertips are likewise suspended, laid



Facing page left: (Fig. 6) *Lifestyle affects Appearance, The Science Museum, London* by Wendy McMurdo. Archival C-Type print, 2000. Courtesy Patricia Fleming Gallery, Glasgow © Wendy McMurdo. All rights reserved, DACS 2026

Above: (Fig. 4) *Georges Limbour and Jean Dubuffet, Farleys House, East Sussex, England 1955* by Lee Miller © Lee Miller Archives, England 2026. All rights reserved. leemiller.co.uk

Right: (Fig. 3) *SENSE* by Antony Gormley. Concrete, 1991. Photograph by Stephen White & Co. © the artist



Top: (Fig. 2) *Empreinte des mains de l'artiste* by Vasily Kandinsky. Watercolour on paper, 1926 © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. Grand Palais Rmn / Georges Meguerditchian

Left: (Fig. 5) *Boy with Bubble, The Science Museum, London* by Wendy McMurdo. Archival C-Type print, 2000. Courtesy Patricia Fleming Gallery, Glasgow © Wendy McMurdo. All rights reserved, DACS 2026



(Fig. 7) *Martin with Owl, Royal Museum of Scotland* by Wendy McMurdo. Archival C-Type print, 1999. Courtesy Patricia Fleming Gallery, Glasgow © Wendy McMurdo. All rights reserved, DACS 2026

gently along the ridge at the foot of the cabinet; lingering points of contact that, in this moment, replace the more conventional visual experience of the museum exhibit.

Each of these photographs records the encounter between child and exhibit via the senses of touch and sight, framed within the neutral but insistently institutional space of the museum, with its unobtrusive but ever-present painted walls and metal radiator grilles and safety barriers and information texts. Each encounter is a fixed moment, a point of visible and tangible contact between the children and the museum's exhibits in which the child's sense-experience takes centre stage, and the informational affect of the photograph works to embody in the static image a continual process of exchange between object-exhibit and child-visitor through which education (from Latin, *educare*, to nourish, and *educere*, to tease out or bring forth) takes place – a "teasing-out of thought" like the child's hand in painting. In the museum, the child's hand is not visible and not tangible between the two – ice as (temporary, artificially sustained) state of water, child as (temporary, always-developing) condition of humanity. Both are malleable, changeable forms. The apparent stasis, the 'frozen' moment, of McMurdo's photograph is replete with potential transformations of matter and mind, malleable states of being. McMurdo offers a different slant on the notion of the dynamised image in her pictures of ice skaters, girls captured mid-leap, their bodies suspended in mid-air or mid-pose, folded in shapes of dancelike elegance, soaring (like the cat in the genetics display, or the suspended snowy owl) above the ice-surface on which, on landing, their skates will inscribe (through the fleeting melting and refreezing of the ice by the friction of the blade passing over through its space and the girl's predicament of presence, hangs significantly and helpfully in her skates' contact with the ice rink momentarily suspended, her body both limp and flexed. The girl in blue *Young Skater (i)* flings her right arm back in an arch that extends her bodily curve from ankle to knee to torso, while the girl in black *Young Skater (ii)* stretches both arms backwards towards the ice. Each photograph explores the tension between control and abandon, dancer and

dance; the figures are brightly lit against slightly murky interior backgrounds, in which occasional figures are discernible, and RAF target roundels are visible under the surface of the rink (echoing those on the suspended wartime aircraft before which the boy stands in McMurdo's, *Boy with Fighter Planes*, The Science Museum, London).

These images allude to various earlier works of art and photography, for example Jacques-Henri Lartigue's photographs of winter sports (and specifically his photograph of Francis Pigeon jump-skating on Chamonix ice rink in January, 1918) and Gilbert Stuart's *The Skater* (1782), a portrait of Sir William Grant⁶. But McMurdo directly invokes the Scottish traditions embodied in Sir Henry Raeburn's famous painting *Reverend Robert Walker* (1755-1808) *Skating on Duddingston Loch* (about 1795), from the collection of the National Galleries of Scotland. Walker was a member of the Edinburgh Skating Society, the oldest of its kind in Britain. McMurdo grew up near an ice-skating rink and learnt Raeburn's painting of the minister performing a "Dutch roll or travelling step, with arms folded" against a minimally delineated, misty landscape. This spatial indeterminacy contrasts with the contextual details visible in, and integral to, McMurdo's *Skater* photographs. The ice beneath the skate is rendered as a pale, almost featureless but luminous field, a surface upon which the figure poses and against which it is outlined in almost exact profile, arms folded, right leg outstretched, his clothing an austere black over a white collar and a pale pink necktie. The figure seems almost to float amid this vaguely-defined but highly contrastive context, so that under scrutiny the image becomes



Left: (Fig. 9) *Sir Henry Raeburn 9p UK postage stamp*, July 1973

increasingly other-worldly, as if the skater were moving somehow outside of conventional physical co-ordinates, oblivious to normal rules, his static form slightly haloed by the light glowing from the ice he skates upon.

McMurdo points out that a similar strangeness can be seen in Gustave Courbet's painting *Bonjour Monsieur Courbet (The Meeting)* (1850), in which the meticulous realism of the figures generates an unnatural aura around their poses, each figure aligned slightly awry in relation to the others so that any element of "meeting" must be sought in the implied narrative of the painting rather than its formal arrangement. McMurdo elaborates on the resulting space of the figures: *The figures have clearly been transposed from three separate drawings (each figure is independently lit) and then brought together – 'staged' – on the canvas. There they form a strange triangle where none of them appears to meet the gaze of any of the others. They seem destined never really to meet at all. There appears to be a fracture in this painting. Within this work there is a struggle between different types of space – the painterly and the photographic. This conjoining of the two hitherto separate elements has resulted in the creation of this odd space – which is perhaps not unlike the conjoining of the digital to more traditional forms of image making. In McMurdo's language of transposability, the skater is a figure that does not belong to the space of the painting, but rather to the space of the photograph. This conjoining refers also to the tensions explored in her own photography, understood as engaged in or capturing the "struggle" between (traditional) painterly and (new, emergent) photographic, cinematic, and digital-image configurations of space. It relates closely to her recalibration in the *Skater* photographs of a key work evoking both a specifically Scottish painterly tradition and its extension and popularisation by the technology of imprinting (stamping, postmarking) upon which the postal system depends, a system through which images (in the form of stamps and imprints) move. Her skaters soar above their medium, embodiments of childhood as the experience of physical freedom, their physical flexibility seemingly allows them to defy gravity, and momentarily escape the freezing of flight implied by the aircraft roundels embedded in the ice. They inhabit a space dynamised by technological*

possibility, whereas Raeburn's skater inhabits a space pressing at the limits of aesthetic and, implicitly, social decorum. These limits are implied by the painting's surprisingly small size, which corresponds (Pearson notes) "to the conventional British sporting print, also meant to be displayed in a small space"⁸, and thus to its subtle pressure on generic borders, being readable as both a portrait and a sporting illustration.

McMurdo's skaters, in contrast, are both anonymous and deeply individuated by their pose and flexibility, their sporting prowess a register of the new, technologically charged representational flexibility of the photographic medium itself. Their freedoms embody both the physical agility of youth, and the liberating representational possibilities of the medium. The illuminated bodies of these suspended skaters exemplify the concern in McMurdo's work with capturing potential motion, a concern that figures the wider significance of development (with all its photographic as well as educational implications) expressed in her careful attention to the learning experiences of children. In McMurdo's photographs children touch, poke, caress, grasp, embrace and press their palms against the material forms they encounter as they learn to soar, inhabiting their images as imprints of their potential future selves, constantly-evolving touching-points or contacts between past and future.

2. Comment by Zoë Allmer-Sears (aged 13).
 3. 'Tracés digitaux' Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Empreinte* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997), p. 31.
 4. "...une polyvalence, une puissance...[E]lle aura permis à l'homme préhistorique de faire une geste..." Didi-Huberman, *L'Empreinte*, p. 31.
 5. See Vicky Coltman & Stephen Lloyd (eds.), *Henry Raeburn: Context, Reception and Reputation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 63; and Andrea G. Pearson, 'Gilbert Stuart's *The Skater* (Portrait of William Grant) and Henry Raeburn's *The Reverend Robert Walker, D. D., Skating in Duddingston Loch: A Study of Sources*,' *Rutgers Art Review* Vol. VIII 1987, 55-70. Pearson dates Raeburn's painting to 1784.
 6. Pearson, 'A Study of Sources', 55.
 7. Wendy McMurdo, 'Doppelgangers: Interview with Sheila Lawson', in David Brittain (ed.) *Creative Camera: Thirty Years of Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 254.
 8. Pearson, 'A Study of Sources', 68.
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(Fig. 8) *Avatar (i)* by Wendy McMurdo. Archival C-Type print, 2008. Courtesy Patricia Fleming Gallery, Glasgow © Wendy McMurdo. All rights reserved, DACS 2026

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Front: *Young Girl (iv)* by Wendy McMurdo. Chromogenic print, 2016.
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Reviews/Interviews/Press (selected):

Edinburgh Art Festival highlights: Wendy McMurdo's vanishing acts and Eva Rothschild at her best.

The UK's largest visual arts festival is a loose and unpredictable collection of events – this year held together by eminent female artists making riveting work in every medium'. Laura Cumming, Observer newspaper, Aug 2026

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From the early days of computers and the internet, Wendy McMurdo has let tech infuse her photography. Now, in her largest exhibition yet, she looks at its impact on the future generation'. Guardian newspaper, Aug 2026

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BBC Front Row. Interview with Kirsty Wark – 'Pioneering photographer Wendy McMurdo's exhibition The Digital Mirror opens at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh this weekend and shows a body of work which responds to how digital technology such as computers, tablets and gaming has impacted on children's lives since the mid 1990s. She joins us live in the studio.'

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