

Diane Maclean
Lovely Weather

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Diane Maclean

VIRGINIA M. EICHHORN

Lovely Weather

Lovely Weather is the first Canadian exhibition by internationally acclaimed Scottish sculptor and environmental artist Diane Maclean. It is an innovative, multi-disciplinary exhibition featuring mechanical umbrellas, word art, large scale photography, video, and a permanent outdoor sculpture installation. In this exhibition, curated by Judith Nasby, Maclean has produced a new body of work that is described as being at once timely and timeless, inventive and serene, scientific and emotive.

Diane Maclean was born in London, England. She studied modern languages at the University College, London (1956-59) and lived abroad, mainly in Africa, between 1961 and 1976. In 1980 she entered Hertfordshire College of Art and Design to study sculpture. She exhibited in the "New Contemporaries" exhibition in 1986 and has participated in numerous shows in Britain, Europe, the Baltic countries, and Scandinavia. Her numerous public sculptures and ephemeral works have been installed in places as diverse as Stansted Airport (*Time Beam II*, 1991), the Highlands of Scotland (*Legend*, 1998, a temporary public sculpture with sound, funded by the National Lottery), and most recently Milton Keynes (*Wings*, 2000, a large-scale installation with seats for Xscape Leisure Development).

For *Lovely Weather* Maclean has created an entirely new work in collaboration with professors at the University of Guelph: poet and veterinarian David Waltner-Toews (Population Science); photographer

and meteorologist Terry Gillespie (Land Resource Science); and William M. Schertzer (Adjunct Professor, University of Guelph) and his colleagues at the National Water Research Institute (Canada).

Lovely Weather consists of a four-part gallery exhibition and an outdoor sculpture, titled *Weather Station*. As one enters the gallery, three large text panels are draped with translucence blue, black and teal cloth. The texts are a poem in three parts by David Waltner-Toews titled "Water Becomes Us" — they are meditations and celebrations of different experiences and manifestations of water. The draped material partially obscures the poems making the experience almost as if one is reading them through a window covered with rain drops. The obfuscation is fluid but illusory. As with all of the installations, weather and natural elements are implied rather than truly being present.

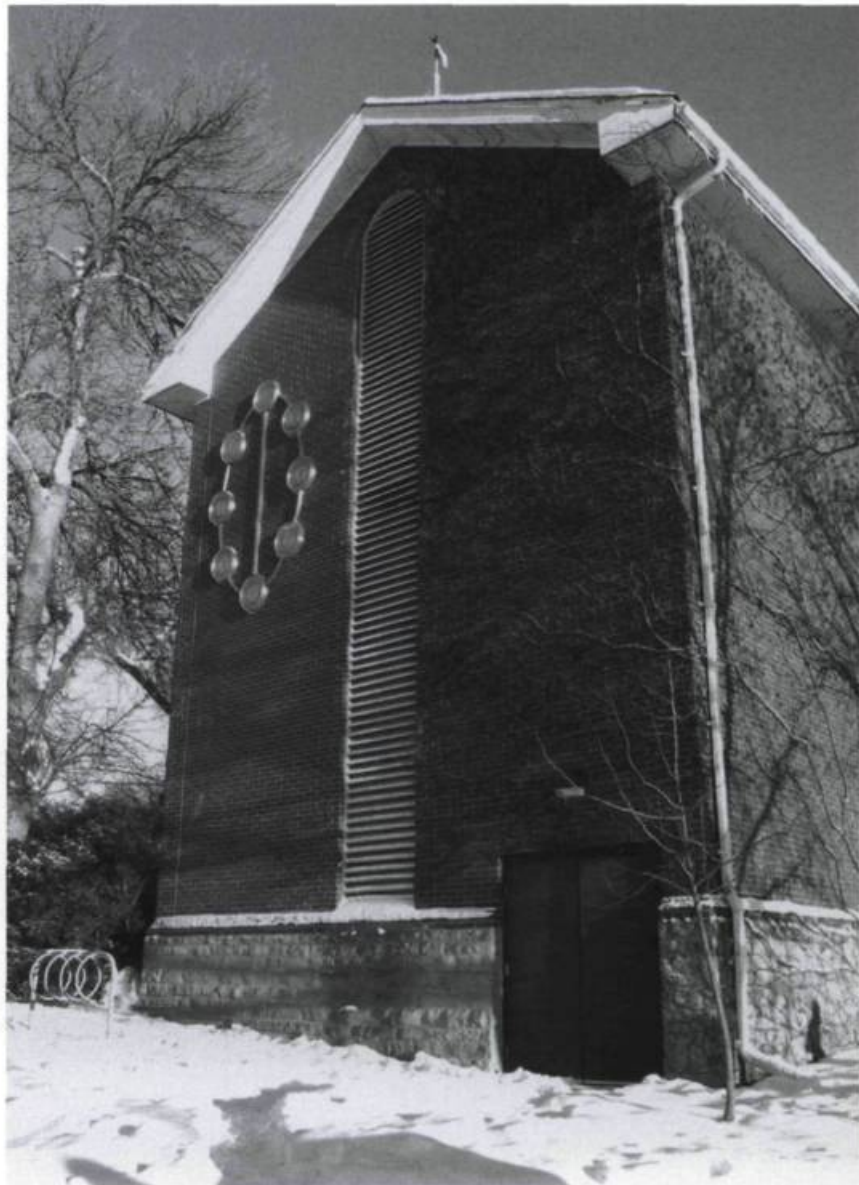
The main installation is titled *Rainfall*, a kinetic sculpture with sound element. In *Rainfall*, four skeletal umbrellas move up and down through the gallery space. They move slowly, almost meandering. The mechanical "hum" they make is elided with the background sound of rushing water. Somewhat unsettling for the viewer, however, is an intentional disjunction between the experience of hearing rain and there actually being no rain. And while the umbrellas could be used in a playful sense they are heavy and unwieldy here and vaguely threatening. That they are stripped down and effectively rendered useless through lack of any kind of covering leads one to wonder what their purpose is. Have they been destroyed through acid rain? Or is it a more subtle cautionary tale reminding the viewer of the potential and

devastating effect that would come about through loss of clean water sources. It brings to mind the old saying of "water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink."

Living Downstream occupies the main gallery space in conjunction with *Rainfall*. Three wall texts from David Walker-Toews's *Postcard Series* accompany a floor installation by Maclean. The postcards are written from Nepal, Peru and Uganda — countries where water, particularly clean water, is a rare and valuable resource. One of the texts (from Uganda) recounts how the writer was told not to drink the local water by his eleven year old

guide. The writer asks how those who live there avoid getting sick. The answer is that they believe that you cannot get sick from the waters where you live. This response is then juxtaposed with a recounting of the incident in Walkerton, Ontario, where seven people died and more than two thousand were made sick nearly two years ago when the bacteria, *E. coli*, was found in the drinking water. In this instance, being born there (in Walkerton) was no protection against these contaminants. In front of these enlarged texts, Maclean's floor sculpture consists of an irregularly shaped grey wood

DIANE MACLEAN, *Lovely Weather*, 2003. Commissioned with funds donated by Ron and Jean Higgins with support from the Florence G. Partridge Fund in consultation with the College of Biological Science and Campbell Scientific (Canada) Corporation, 2003. Macdonald Stewart Art Centre Collection. Photo: Dawn Owen.





CLAUDE LABINE (President and CEO of Campbell Scientific (Canada) Corp.), DIANE MACLEAN, and TERRY GILLESPIE (Professor, University of Guelph) wiring the Weather Station before installation. Photo: Dawn Owen.

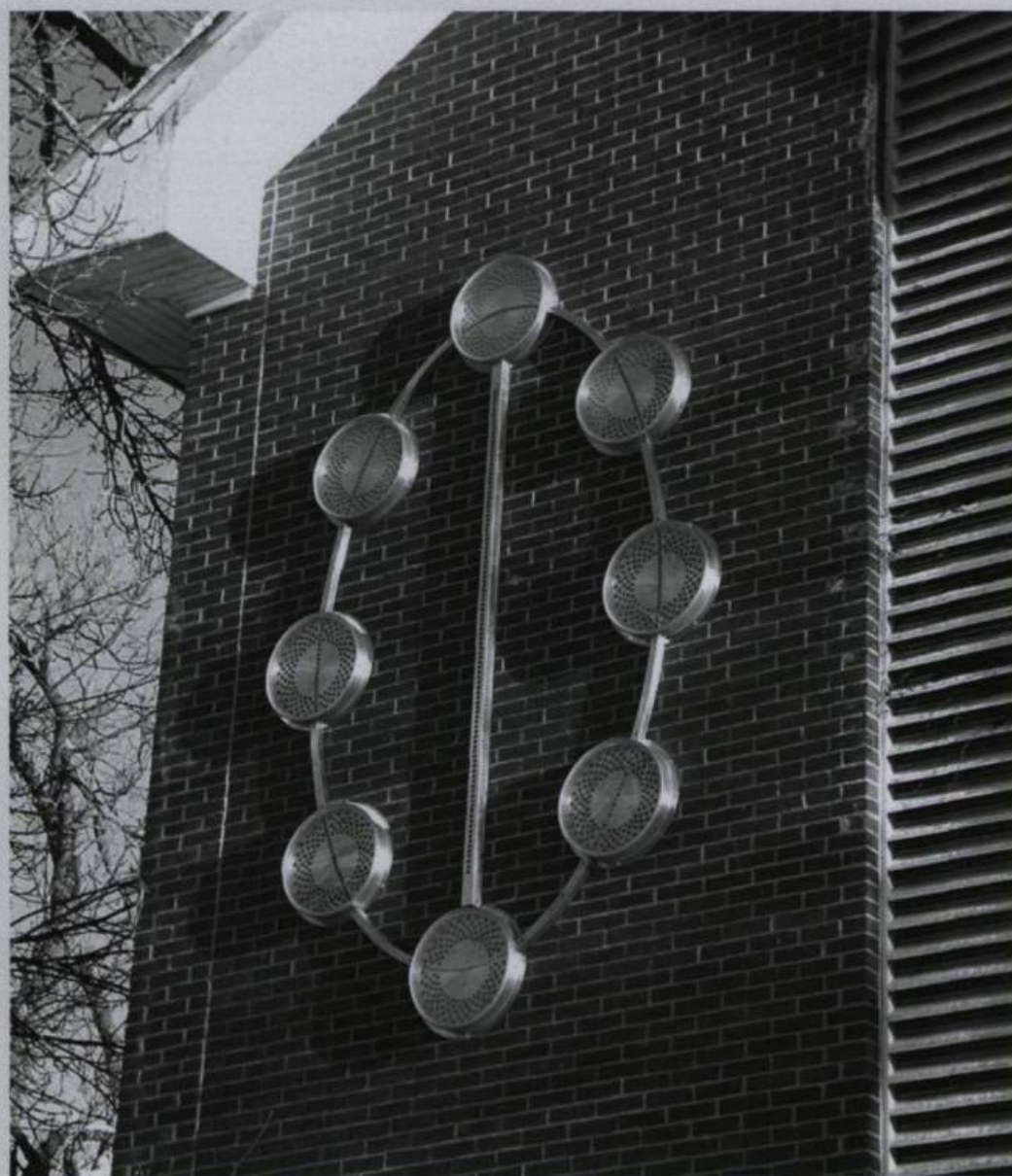
barrier around a photographic installation depicting a rotted animal carcass floating amidst debris in murky, grey water. Its intentional ambiguity provokes the viewer to question where this contaminated water is really from. Is it from a far-away place or is it actually from our own local water source? This work effectively bridges the distances between the continents polarized as

being poor and rich in natural resources. In this we see that neither of these seemingly disparate cultures can take for granted the availability of clean water sources.

The sculpture *Weather Station* is the 28th permanent outdoor installation in the Art Centre's Sculpture Park. *Weather Station* has over 1600 LEDs (light emitting diodes) and it

receives a constant live feed from a roof-mounted anemometer that measures wind speed and direction. The LEDs are mounted in an oval-shaped formation over 11 feet high on the north face of the building close to the Art Centre's main entrance. With its brilliant, ever-changing lights, *Weather Station* can be viewed day and night by gallery goers and passersby. This work is engaging and is always in flux, changing in appearance based solely on the vagaries of the weather system that influences it. Giles Askham describes this kind of sculpture as a kind of data mapping. However, in Maclean's hands it is a different kind of mapping than what we normally experience. The results aren't being recorded for a utilitarian purpose. It has no immediate empirical effect on how we experience or understand the world. Rather it becomes an almost poetic work, which allows for the unexpected and unplanned to influence and even dictate how the work appears. Askham succinctly sums up Maclean's practice as the following: In Diane Maclean's work, perception and physicality are combined, aesthetics and scientific data are connected, to provide us with a holistic understanding of these natural phenomena.

DIANE MACLEAN, *Lovely Weather*, 2003. Detail. Photo: Dawn Owen.



And this is particularly unique to Maclean's oeuvre. She has worked with many diverse "non-art" experts in order to create work which has great visual power and metaphorical resonance. Even though her concerns and ideology can perhaps most aptly be described as "environmental" she nonetheless brings about a synthesis between the artistic and the environmental with new materials and technologies. It isn't a case of either-or; rather, she allows for new connections to be developed, and for the intersection of technology and nature to give birth to something new and previously unrealized. In this we the viewers are given to understand the art in the technology, nature in the art, and are encouraged to discover how these practices can work together in a symbiotic rather than an antithetical way. And that is no small task.

Diane Maclean: *Lovely Weather* will begin its international tour in the spring at Peterborough Digital Arts (Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery), Prestigate (England), and continue to the Crawford Arts Centre, St. Andrews (Scotland) in the fall. ←

Diane Maclean: *Lovely Weather*
MacDonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph, ON
January 15 – April 18, 2004