

PRESS RELEASE

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Tessa Campbell Fraser

Whales – A Deeper Dialogue

Messums West, 6 October 2024 – 13 January 2025

Winchester Cathedral, 22 January – 26 February 2025



CGI Image of whale installation in the tithe barn at Messums West

Whales – A Deeper Dialogue is an immersive installation by British sculptor and advocate for the awareness of climate change, Tessa Campbell Fraser, that links language and art with our instinctive sense of connection to each other as partners within ecosystems. The inaugural presentation comprising of three monumental sculptures of sperm whales (5.2m, 4.6m and 3m respectively) will be unveiled at Messums West as the centrepiece installation and exhibition suspended within the wooden ribs of the largest thatched building in the country from 5 October 2024 until 13 January 2025.

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Subsequently, the installation will tour to Winchester Cathedral where it will be shown in the nave from 22 January until 26 February 2025 to launch their season on 'The Word' and the celebration of the 250th year anniversary of Jane Austen's birth. These venues will offer dramatic presentations of the work in uniquely different but individually atmospheric environments. On 5 October, the Whales will form a powerful introduction and backdrop to a day symposium entitled 'Oh! Is for Oceans', a symposium in partnership with Ocean Rising dedicated to the understanding of our oceans with leading scientists and experts giving a series of presentations on a range of topics and latest discoveries. A particular focus will be on art as interlocutor, visualising complex research and refining our understanding of beauty.

Campbell Fraser comments: "Both venues bring their own special magic to my subjects: the awe-inspiring oak roof timbers of Messums West resemble the inside rib cage of a vast whale. The barn itself was built by female abbesses using fossilised stone that was once beneath the sea. I couldn't ask for a more appropriate or associative setting for my three resting female whales to sleep in. The magnificent Winchester Cathedral, on the other hand, reminds us of The Biblical parable of Jonah and the Whale, a story of redemption: the whale ultimately saving Jonah from the error of his ways, delivering him from a storm onto dry land to serve God's will."

Campbell Fraser deliberately seeks out and aims to employ sustainable, natural, recycled or repurposed materials. In this exhibition she is using recycled ghost netting, silk chiffon, latex, and synthetic (recycled) paper, made with almost no water. Using haptic techniques with these materials, she creates fluid, protean pieces in two-and three-dimensional forms to explain the dialogue between herself and nature.

The presentation at Winchester Cathedral enables the direct alignment between art, making and spirituality and is one of a series of exhibitions which will run between Messums West and Winchester Cathedral that will offer ways to see and experience art in different contexts and to a broader audience.

The Very Reverend Catherine Ogle, Dean of Winchester comments: "Bringing Tessa Campbell Fraser's *Whales* to Winchester Cathedral will connect the awe and wonder of God's creation with a building expressing human longing for connection, human and divine. We will inevitably be led to reflect on our connection with creation and all God's creatures and the call to live in harmony and justice. Whales

are familiar yet mysterious and wonderfully 'other'. The Whales at Winchester Cathedral will create a richly evocative and unforgettable experience for us all.'

Campbell Fraser comments: "To have been given the nave of the cathedral for exhibiting them is an honour and a fitting context to contemplate the whale's message: the very word 'nave' comes from the Latin 'navis', meaning ship. Suspended, as if sleeping, within this vast vessel, the whales invite us to commune with them in a language that mankind is on the very brink of understanding. And, perhaps through that understanding we will learn to live more symbiotically on this beautiful planet, mending our ways and the errors that have caused global warming."

"The inspiration behind the sculpture is multi-faceted: I imagined the whale as a possible scapegoat, or sacrifice, and this suggested the idea of the symbolic connection with the representation of Christ crucified alongside two others, and the accompanying narrative of salvation. The whales become poignant and powerful symbols of possibility, redemption and hope, albeit fragile ("hanging by a thread")."

In-depth exploration of sperm whales led to Campbell Fraser's research into Project Ceti and the incorporation of the science of communication into her art. Over five years, the science-based experiment in Domenica has gathered vast amounts of sperm whale data, using underwater hydrophones to capture and record their distinctive 'coda clicks'. Along with studying their behaviour and methodologies to interpret the whales' sounds, they have already discovered that whales have varying dialects and twenty-three different patterns of 'coda clicks'. A.I. has already been used to translate two unknown human languages without the need of a 'Rosetta Stone'. Scientists are hopeful that it may be able to do the same with whale coda. Campbell Fraser's exhibition is inspired by both the exploration of interspecies communication through decoding together with her own immersive experience swimming with the whales in Domenica.

She describes, "I didn't quite know what to expect being face-to-face with these giant creatures in their environment. I hoped I would hear them coda click, and indeed I did, but it wasn't these sounds that gave me the intense feeling of an inter-species communication, it was more the fact that I was one female in a group of other females, and I felt part of their clan. I had no sensation that I didn't belong in the underwater world or that we were alien to each other or that I was in any way in danger. It was almost as if we'd come from the same beginnings. Perhaps we have; after all they have finger

like digits in the pectoral fin, left over from 15 million years ago when they were walking land animals with a skin-like texture on their bodies.”

“In sculpting the whales as I have – transparently, using ghost netting – I want to convey the need for mankind to realise that these great beasts will not be around in our world if we don’t act now to prevent catastrophic global warming. Rising sea temperatures will disrupt the entire ecological balance, causing these sea creatures to become mere ghosts to us, transparent in the extreme. And yet even within the whale’s story we can learn from nature. When a whale dies, its carcass, which has accumulated carbon during its long life, sinks to the bottom of the ocean, locking away 33 tons of co2.”

Campbell Fraser is fascinated by the potential of communication across artistic languages. In her response to the science, she has devised her own form of a Victorian Eidophone. Using the vibrations of whales’ coda clicks, charismatic and swirling bands of sound are interpreted into lines and printed as banners which feel almost Heraldic in intent and content, declaiming the way of the whale to all senses and sounds.



Tessa Campbell Fraser swimming with the whales in Domenica

Further Information:

Oh! Is for Ocean Symposium, 5 October 2024, Messums West

This project has at its heart, the relationship between art and the environment and forms part of the Active Environmentalism programme integral to Messums ethos which is founded on the principle that action begins with knowledge. In line with this, the symposium ‘Oh! Is for Oceans’ taking place at Messums West on 5 October 2024 in partnership *with Ocean Rising* is dedicated to the understanding of our oceans with leading scientists and experts giving a series of presentations on a range of topics

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and the latest discoveries. Speakers will include Oliver Steeds (Founder and CEO of Nekton); Professor Heather Koldewey (lead of the Bertarelli Foundation's Marine Science Programme); Dr Alex Rogers (eminent marine biologist); Dr Helen Scales (writer, broadcaster, oceanographer); Dr Carlie Wiener (SOI's Director of Communications and Director of the Artist at Sea programme on art and the ocean); Taiji Terasaki (artist based in Hawaii, alumni of the Artist at Sea programme); Mella Shaw (ceramic artist with work focused on the overuse of marine sonar) Julia Lohmann (sculptor constructing work from seaweed) and David Mearns (marine archaeologist and shipwreck expert).

For more details: <https://www.messums.org/exhibitions/oh-is-for-ocean/>



Hydroid. Image credit: Schmidt Institute

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Notes to editors

ABOUT TESSA CAMPBELL FRASER

Tessa Campbell Fraser F.R.S.S. (born 1967) is a British painter and sculptor based in Oxfordshire. Born in Edinburgh, she studied at Chelsea School of Art and afterwards established herself as one of the

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country's leading animal artists. She has completed several major life-size, and larger than life, sculptures and paintings for clients including the late Queen Elizabeth II, the King of Bahrain, Knuthenborg Safari Park Denmark, William Grant & Son, the Household Cavalry and Sir Jackie Stewart. She has work in private collections around the world including Australia, South Africa, Monaco, and the USA, and has exhibited widely including at the Royal Academy Summer Shows, Sculpture at Goodwood, the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford and the Natural History Museum in London where she had a major solo show in 2004.

In 2001, Campbell Fraser was elected an Associate Member of the Royal Society of Sculptors and became a Fellow of the Society in 2004. Her work is informed by her interaction with nature and travels, notably Greenland and recently Domenica, inspiring a series of paintings and allegorical sculptures exploring the interspecies relationship between man and animal. Initially she Portrayed this in a group of sculptures for her *Bishop and Bear* series and laterally, her work has involved the interspecies communication with Whales.

She has been concerned with the effects of Climate Change for over twenty years and her sculptures offer a poignant and beautiful reflection on the symbiosis between man and animal, and how precarious this balance is for both as man encroaches more and more into the wild spaces. She is constantly in awe of how much we can learn from the natural world.

ABOUT OCEAN RISING

Ocean Rising, an initiative by the Schmidt Institute and Nekton, interweaves the Ocean into arts, sport, music, fashion and gaming to create a community of Ocean lovers. We work with all cultural sectors on products, events and experiences to integrate the Ocean seamlessly into the fabric of everyday life – the music we listen to, the clothes we wear, the books we read, the games we play – igniting curiosity for the protection of our undersea world. Bringing the Ocean into cultural areas that resonate deeply, Ocean Rising cultivates a global community dedicated to the celebration of our Ocean.

We work with collaborators from all cultural spheres who lead and inspire Ocean awareness-raising interventions in their area of expertise in creative and innovative ways. Each activity increases Ocean awareness in that cultural sector and seeds more interventions.

Ocean Rising offers partners access to some of the world's best marine scientists, incredible underwater imagery, brand exposure, introductions to supporters and, where appropriate, experiences at sea aboard cutting-edge science expeditions. By working together, ripples of Ocean awareness turn into waves. Each action inspires more collaborators to get involved.

Partners include high end fashion designer Jenny Packham, global fashion chain Uniqlo, international theatre director Cederling Fox, Vogue China, Sport TV production company Sunset+Vine, LA hotel Casa del Mar, WORDTheatre and more.

About Ocean Rising

Ocean Rising is an initiative that encourages the public to engage with the ocean through cultural initiatives and innovative events. Established by Schmidt Ocean Institute and Nekton, it aims to integrate the ocean seamlessly into the fabric of everyday life - igniting curiosity for our undersea world and cultivating a global community dedicated to the celebration and protection of our ocean.

About Schmidt Ocean Institute

Schmidt Ocean Institute was established in 2009 by philanthropists Eric and Wendy Schmidt to catalyze the discoveries needed to understand our ocean, sustain life, and ensure the health of our planet. Schmidt Ocean Institute pursues impactful scientific research and intelligent observation, technological advancement, open sharing of information, and public engagement at the highest levels of international excellence. For more information, visit www.schmidtocean.org

About Nekton

Nekton works to accelerate the scientific exploration and conservation of the ocean for people and the planet. Nekton is an independent, not-for-profit research institute and is a UK registered charity. www.nektonmission.org

ABOUT MESSUMS – MESSUMS WEST, MESSUMS LONDON AND MESSUMS ORG

MESSUMS WEST: Established as Messums Wiltshire in 2016 by Johnny Messum, Messums West is a leading multi-purpose gallery and arts centre set inside a restored thirteenth-century tithe barn with surrounding buildings, exhibition space, sculpture garden and restaurant.

MESSUMS LONDON is a 2,000 sq ft exhibition space on Cork Street behind the Royal Academy. It hosts a rolling programmed of exhibitions for our contemporary artists.

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Under the umbrella MESSUMS ORG, the business continues to evolve the role of the gallery from presentational space to one that offers multiple ways to access, experience, understand and engage with the creative process and its outcomes. This has included establishing a network of venues and arts communities in the West and East of England – as well as connecting with our historic London gallery space, MESSUMS LONDON.

Our core specialisms are represented in the breadth of the arts we engage in as part of the programme of exhibitions and events at our venues. This encompasses painting, sculpture, ceramic, photography, and performance as well as film, architecture, textiles and more. Together with our exhibitions and events, we offer international artist residencies, contemporary dance premiers, symposia, and workshops. Underpinning all of this is an appreciation and respect for nature to which most artists and individuals would readily identify, and a belief that innovation like creativity itself runs at the vanguard of our thoughts.