the enforced migration enacted on her ancestors.

Lake Ontario is the location of the work There Are No Footprints Where I Go (2019), which is the shipping route McMaster’s Dutch ancestors would have taken when transported from the Netherlands to Canada via the US. The blindfolded figure cannot see where they are headed, or what their future holds, and relies on a raven as a guide. McMaster often uses birds, as companions, messengers and omens, which feature in First Nation and Euro-Canadian folkloric traditions. Birds have an ideal perspective, from above, transcending territories and intersecting cultures. McMaster states:

While both sides of my family lived on the Canadian prairies, their histories and cultures were often in tension – even conflict. Walking the paths of my Indigenous and European ancestors [has been] an act of absorbing time and space, sites of peace and struggle, into a new vision of personal reconciliation.

Each photograph is accompanied by a poem, written by McMaster, in the languages of Plains Cree and English. In writing, we see the artist trying to connect with the history and culture of each place, seeking those who came before, her forefathers, who were sometimes at peace, other times at war.

The exhibition is supported by Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ), Canada Council for the Arts, Entente de des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ), The exhibition is supported by Conseil sometime at peace, other times at war.

Who came before, her forefathers, who were

The artist trying to connect with the history

Each photograph is accompanied by a poem,

I have certainly always thought of paint as coloured mud. While I was involved in the first group of landscape paintings, I was painting my father’s recollections of the First World War, where mud was the theme – not only his recollection, but almost everyone’s from that war.

Yet it was Walker’s mother who introduced him to art, sourcing materials and books and taking him to local galleries. In front of John Constable’s The Glebe Farm (c. 1830) at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, she told her son of the painter’s intense concentration in accurately depicting the landscape, to the point that he found a field mouse nestled in his pocket. Aged eleven, Walker joined Moseley School of Art where he was taught draughtsmanship, however excelled at free expression on Wednesday afternoons. His teachers shared his portfolio with Meredith Hawes, Head of Birmingham College of Art, who invited Walker to join the school. Walker himself has continued to teach, which he considers equal to his artistic practice.

The exhibition is supported by the John Feeney Charitable Trust, The Grimmitt Trust and the Owen Family Trust.

John Walker
New Paintings

Second Floor Galleries

Ikon presents a major exhibition of new paintings by Birmingham-born artist John Walker (b 1939). Having studied at Moseley School of Art, and later Birmingham College of Art, Walker was the first artist to show at Ikon Gallery when it moved in 1972 to new premises in the Birmingham Shopping Centre above New Street Station. Here he presented large chalk drawings on black-boards made in situ.

Walker now lives in Maine, New England, the setting for his series of ‘anti-scenic’ paintings depicting the coastal landscape at Seal Point. Following the tradition of many painters, Walker’s landscapes evoke the feeling of a place rather than its appearance, and further, they resist a conventional sense of beauty associated with paintings of natural scenes.

It’s been an aspiration of mine to get the smell of Maine, the wetness, the dampness, the mud … In the studio you have to make up pictures for yourself; in the landscape the pictures are made for you. It took me three or four years to find my spot, a shitty place avoiding the picturesque.

The paintings include a natural repetition of forms – zig-zags, trapezoids, squares, circles and dots – which reference the landform, seascape, weather, pollution and man-made objects seen by the artist. Whilst everything on the pictorial plane is directly observed by Walker, it does not necessarily occur at the same moment or from one point of view. Rather he presents multiple perspectives in time and space. This is particularly important to the artist’s understanding of painting:

I never believed that art should be merely frontal. Why can’t it have all the attributes that Titian has, or Rembrandt has? Why can’t it have volume; why can’t it have air?

In Passage (2015), the first work in the series hung in the first gallery, the layering of paint is particularly evident, creating relief on the canvas that brings it into our viewing space.

Adjacent, the large-scale Lower Lode (2019) is a ‘canvas collage’ – a technique Walker developed in the 1970s – reminding the viewer of the material surface of the painting. A limited colour palette – of greens, blues, yellows, blacks and whites – serves to bind the series of paintings, simply comprising oil and canvas.

Walker operated between the UK and US in the 1960s-70s, laying the groundwork for over forty solo exhibitions in New York, with work acquired for collections at the Guggenheim Museum, Metropolitan Museum and MoMA. In 1979 he undertook a research fellowship in Victoria, Australia, later becoming Dean of Victoria College of the Arts in Melbourne. Here he met a group of Aboriginal artists who, having sourced a quantity of white pigment, demonstrated the bark painting technique, which inspired his own painting. For Walker, his early research into Indigenous art equipped him with “a common language” that equally applies to this new series of works, albeit subconsciously.

Memory is at play in Fishing with Tom and Les (2017), a sizeable canvas measuring almost four metres in length. This painting references the fishing trips taken by the artist with his older brothers, growing up on the outskirts of industrial Birmingham. Stripes, zig zags and collaged fish are seen throughout the work, vividly realised through the application of contrasting colours. The painting has a rhythm recalling the movement of tides, water and mud on the Maine coastline.

Mud, and its association with earthiness and indeed pigments, is another common feature in Walker’s paintings. This has a personal association, given that his father fought in the First World War at the Somme and Passchendaeae. Badly injured in the War, his father would often sit for studies:

I have certainly always thought of paint as coloured mud. While I was involved in the first group of landscape paintings, I was painting my father’s recollections of the First World War, where mud was the theme – not only his recollection, but almost everyone’s from that war.
Ikon presents the first UK solo exhibition of work by Canadian artist Meryl McMaster (b. 1988). Comprised of new and recent work, the exhibition draws from the artist’s dual heritage to examine broader questions of being, placing emphasis on the social, cultural and environmental contact zones of both her Indigenous and European ancestors.

Mcmaster is of the nêhiyawak community (Plains Cree) and a member of the Siksika First Nation (Alberta, Canada) on her father’s side, and Euro–Canadian (British and Dutch) on her mother’s. Fashioning elaborate, sculptural garments and props, her performative self-portraits – recently photographed in a variety of dramatic, outdoor settings using natural light – present journeys into the realms of her ancestors which are both actual and imaginative.

In the first gallery, we see Bring Me to This Place (2017), a digital photograph produced in Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump (a UNESCO-designated World Heritage Site in Alberta) with cultural significance to the Plains People. McMaster describes this as a breakthrough work, wherein she travelled to a landscape, guided by her reading and consultation with community knowledge keepers. She is pictured as a solitary wanderer, wearing a costume that references the animals negatively affected by colonisation, including the prairie chicken (through the repetitive motif of footprints on the coat) and beaver (whose fur was historically used for making top hats). A red ribbon is symbolic of the brutality of the hunt, as well as referencing ancestral bloodlines. These tethers are an important device for the artist:

The thread is this reminder for me not to forget where I came from. When I go out into the world, there’s always going to be part of me connected to my family and my past experiences. The thread serves as a reminder to always have this continued exploration of myself and continued learning and understanding of my cultures.

In continuing to explore her cultural identity, McMaster has visited several historic locations within Canada in the past two years. In each site, she assumes a dreamlike character drawn partly from Indigenous creation stories, often involving the transformation of human, animal and celestial bodies. For example, when she visited her father’s reserve, Red Pheasant, Saskatchewan, McMaster wore the mask of the swift fox, emulating a wesakecak trickster in Plains mythology. The fox, once a common inhabitant of the grass prairies of the region, started to disappear in the late nineteenth century as a result of industrialised farming. Hence, McMaster is highlighting at risk communities, both human and animal, as she explains:

I want to bring specific awareness to the broad consequences of colonisation and how the mentality of greed and/or lack of foresight is still impacting us today. Each of us has a complicated relationship with the past with gaps and biases, and it is important to me to expose and explore these gaps so that we may encounter our next moments better prepared.

McMaster’s theatre extends to deserts and glaciers as “landscapes of deep meaning”. The impermanence of her tracks, within the mud, sand, water and snow, is significant in relation to her countering the erasure of Indigenous histories and ecologies. In Cartography of the Unseen (2019), McMaster is dressed as a whooping crane, another endangered species, normally associated with marshlands. She displaces the bird within a different landscape, demonstrating