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Widower breathes life into wife's work

Glasgow artist to complete series of unfinished paintings

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IT WILL be a labour of love by a committed husband for the wife he has just lost.

Glasgow artist Alasdair Wallace is to complete a series of paintings started by his wife Abigail McLellan, also an accomplished artist, who died last month after a ten-year battle against multiple sclerosis.

The first work he finished while she was still alive but no longer able to paint - *White Sea Fan* - went on public show last week in the annual exhibition of the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts (RGI).

But Wallace has revealed in the first interview since his wife's death on 11 October at the age of 40 that he now plans to complete at least six more of her works in time for a retrospective exhibition at a London gallery next year.

"Abigail probably didn't physically touch it [*White Sea Fan*]," said Wallace. "She didn't do the actual painting. She was the brains behind it, and she oversaw every stage of it."

"There are a few paintings in her studio not quite finished yet," he added. "Having previously been instructed on how they



Painterly partnership: Alasdair Wallace sits on the bed of his late wife Abigail McLellan in the studio space they shared in Glasgow. Below: the couple, who were married at home in August. Photograph: Robert Perry

were to be done, I intend to finish them for her, for my own satisfaction if nothing else. It's been quite a comforting thing to do.

"The actual image of the sea fan was an obsession of Abby's for years."

Wallace described how McLellan, with his help, fought stubbornly to keep her artistry alive as her condition worsened.

Over the past three years in par-

ticular, she had used various devices, from climbing gear and imported folding crutches to propping her arms on giant cubes of foam rubber, to keep mobile and continue painting.

This year, the artist known for her laborious and finely painted canvases - as well as her witty and stubborn courage in confronting her illness - finally lost the ability to paint with a brush in her hand.

Wallace, and her assistant Jen Sykes, continued painting for her, working from vinyl stencils, based on the sea fan or star-like allium plant designs, under her directions.

The stencils were made on a

commercial cutting machine McLellan found.

Sea fans became a feature of McLellan's colourful paintings after she first saw the coral in the National Museum of Scotland. She carefully picked the painting to submit to the RGI exhibition.

The RGI's convener, Simon Laurie, praised the "subtle, fragile, complex" canvas in the show. "It's to do with the fragility of nature; a lot of her pieces are about that," he said. "She was well respected by her peers. She was innovative in the way the images were translated on to the canvas and the style of painting."

As her illness worsened McLellan chose the bright over-

laid colours - what she called "strawberry red" or "raspberry red" for example - and closely oversaw the work, often from the bed in her studio.

"We would mix up half a dozen types of paint and which order they were to go in and things like that," he said.

Wallace and Middlesbrough-born McLellan met at Glasgow School of Art and started going out in their last year. They developed parallel careers as painters.

After Wallace, known in particular for his quirky, imaginative bird paintings, began selling through the prestigious London gallery, Rebecca Hos-

sack, McLellan followed suit. He won the Noble Grossart painting prize in Scotland; her work was shown in National Portrait Gallery exhibitions in London, and she won travelling scholarships to Paris and America. The Fleming Collection of Scottish art in London bought her *Pink Sea Fan* and his *Flock Of Birds*.

This August they got married at home. "It wasn't that she knew she was going to die or something," said Wallace. "It was just an excuse for a party, really."

The multiple sclerosis was diagnosed about ten years ago after McLellan suffered several

falls. Early on it was clear that "as long as she could paint, she would" said Wallace. "Her work kept her going."

The submission deadline for the Glasgow exhibition was the day she went into hospital, four days before her death. McLellan was determined her painting would be submitted.

"She was vehement," he recalls. "Get down there, hand it in for me! She wanted it in the show."

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