**Medal of Honour Presentation and Dinner, Wednesday 17 May 2023**

**Medallist: Russell Meehan Presenter: Professor John McAuliffe**

Distinguished Guests,

On May 22nd, 2017, almost 6 years ago, the Manchester Arena was bombed as fans and their families left an Ariana Grande concert. It was a terrible, defining night for the city, leaving families and communities bereft. As the city responded to the trauma of the night, our cultural life suddenly surfaced as one of the places where people could grieve together, and where our sense of belonging, together, became a resource and a help.

That day, the city’s cultural diversity and good health would have been clear to any visitor: alongside the Ariana Grande concert, the Town Hall was hosting a function for our colleague Maria Balshaw to celebrate her work in the city; Dame Hilary Mantel had returned to deliver one of the BBC Reith lectures at Halle St Peter’s in Ancoats, and there were as usual, dozens of other concerts, live literature events, theatre performances and galleries open across the city. In the weeks that followed, we leaned into that cultural infrastructure: spontaneous memorials emerged on St Ann’s Street; crowds gathered to hear Tony Walsh read his poem This is the Place and, out of the city’s cultural ferment, one image emerged, the Manchester bee, painted 22 times, on the side of a café in the Northern Quarter.

Tonight we honour the artist responsible for that image, an image which took just two days to make, but which drew on a lifetime’s experience as an artist, an image which has travelled the world as an ambassador for how art in civic spaces matters to people and places. Owner of Mural life MCR and the face behind the well-known pseudonym Qubek, Russell Meehan studied advanced Fine Art and Design at Stockport College in 1996/7. Using spray paint as a medium, he spent many years honing his self-taught skills and, from 2006, as a community-based Arts youth worker, he inspired, built confidence and encouraged knowledge and creativity through murals. With an increase in private commissions he went freelance in 2012 and, progressing to commercial clients, he was enabled to make more social and cultural significant pieces, drawing on Manchester’s rich social and political history. This informed practice, his renovation of the worker bee as a symbol of the city, is clear in 22 bees, but that piece’s remarkable impact allowed another development in his practice as a catalyst that inspired changes in his community and the use of his art to raise money and awareness, to date over £250k for Manchester based charities.

We recognise Russ, not just for this image, but also for how his practice has enabled us to see Manchester’s vibrant artistic culture as manifested across the city, not only in galleries, but on the streets. My colleague Dr Luke Uglow, who nominated Russ for this honour, now teaches Art History and Visual Studies students about graffiti, urban art and murals, and he shows how Russ, the city’s most important contemporary street artist, has helped to shape the modern image of Manchester, forging a communal visual identity for Mancunians. Using techniques inherited from New York graffiti, and executed in a hyper-realistic style, his work has helped perpetuate a sense of community belonging that recognises the city’s past while embracing its future.

Another of Russell Meehan’s projects, made at the invitation of Old Trafford residents Hannah Paterson and Jess Lishak (the University’s Communications and Engagement Officer), celebrates the rich diversity of the area. The mural includes a collection of different birds, suggested by residents, standing for the different cultures and countries of origin in the community, with Manchester bees alongside them. That painting also incorporates a poem by Lemn Sissay, former Chancellor of the University, a poem which has a potent, nursery rhyme simplicity: “Said the sun to the moon / Said the head to the heart / ‘We have more in common / Than sets us apart’”. It is the same, unifying, civic imagination that has animated Russell’s exceptional work, and why he is so thoroughly deserving of recognition and the University’s Medal of Honour.

It’s my great pleasure to present you to the Medal of Honour. Congratulations!