

bernard jacobson gallery

Bruce McLean

5 Decades of Sculpture

26th April – 29th June 2019

Part One

Bernard Jacobson Gallery is delighted to announce a special season of exhibitions, publications, film and performance, celebrating half a century of the creative output of Bruce McLean; one of the most important figures in British contemporary art. The season will include a two-part retrospective at Bernard Jacobson Gallery, the publication of a new book with essay by Mel Gooding and commentary by McLean and the premiere of a film by McLean and long-time 'Nice Style' collaborator, Gary Chitty, titled *The Decorative Potential of Blazing Factories*.

With characteristic subversive wit, in the early days of his career McLean created his own self-styled retrospective, with *King for a Day* at the Tate Gallery (1972). The genesis of *King for a day* was a seemingly contrary decision to stop being an artist, McLean explains, 'I had heard that if you have a retrospective at the Tate, that's the end of your life as an artist, so the obvious thing to do was to create a retrospective.'

Luckily for audiences and collectors across the intervening decades, this prophecy proved to be very far from the case. McLean has gone on to exhibit widely across the globe, including one-man exhibitions at The Modern Art Gallery, Vienna, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, MOMA, Oxford, Arnolfini, Bristol and GOMA, Brisbane and numerous important group exhibitions, including The Tate's *Conceptual Art in Britain 1964 – 1979*.

This special season also marks the long working association with Bernard Jacobson Gallery, forged in 1984 with his first one-man exhibition at the gallery. *Five Decades of Sculpture* presents some of McLean's key works, including painting, sculpture, photography and printmaking – a range of work which might seem surprising and contradictory given the title chosen by McLean, *Five Decades of Sculpture*. Mel Gooding in his opening essay for the book which accompanies these exhibitions attempts to outline some of the seemingly simple guiding principles at the heart of McLean's irreverence.

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'What is a sculpture? To place some thing some where. A thing can be any thing. So can a sculpture.

Any one is a sculptor. Any one is a sculpture. Any where. Any time.

***Bruce McLean is a sculptor. Bruce McLean has been a sculptor for a long time, in many places. Some times he has been a sculpture.'** Mel Gooding*

McLean was often described as a conceptual artist during the earlier part of his career and featured in some of the most important exhibitions of the genre, including *When Attitudes Become Form*, at Kunsthalle Bern (1969), alongside artists such as Carl Andre and Joseph Beuys. McLean brought his own particular sensibility to the often arid and esoteric practice of conceptual art, framing his work within the kind of quintessential English wordplay beloved by poets from Edward Lear to John Cooper Clark. In *Fallen Warrior* (1969) McLean uses his own body to mimic the post-war heroism of Henry Moore's bronze sculpture, *Falling Warrior*. Mel Gooding commented on McLean's parody of Moore, that he *'is still quite capable of making vicious fun of the art establishment and society in general, and also get away with it. ...I am quite sure that the giant sculptor was fully aware of Bruce's photograph of himself lounging in a dozen Moore-like poses. It is utterly brilliant and hilarious'*

McLean describes himself as an 'action sculptor' and certainly, the twinned activities of comedy and performance run through McLean's work, the latter making full use of McLean's self-professed aptitude and love for dance. It can be seen in the live performance work, *High Up on a Baroque Palazzo 2* (1979) or in the twisting supine forms thrown by McLean in *Pose Work for Plinths* (1971). Even in the seemingly formal, 2-dimensional appearance of his paintings such as *Red Wine Sea*. The sculptural properties of gesture and movement required in the making of all art are fundamental for McLean. He says, *'I don't think of what I do as art. I think of it as sculpture. Even if it's a painting, it's a painting I made as a sculptor'*

The 'consistently inconsistent' approach of McLean and his resistance to existing within the confines of what is usually considered high art, has given him freedom to create across an incredible span of work; from the glam- rock personas of the 'world's first pose band' – *Nice Style*, to collaborations with architects including Will Alsop and David Chipperfield. His painting has consistently won critical acclaim across the decades, from winning the John Moores Painting Prize in 1985, to inclusion in the seminal exhibition, *A New Spirit In Painting* at the Royal Academy (1981).

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This is a mercurial 50-year career which sees McLean in his 75th year as energized, puckish and inventive as ever and this retrospective season is notable for also including completely new work. Specially commissioned by the newly relaunched Coronet Theatre, *The Decorative Potential of Blazing Factories* is described by collaborators, Bruce McLean and Gary Chitty, as a 'cardboard motion picture – about ambition and the desire for infamy of an artist who wants to create the greatest landscape painting of all time'.

Part Two

Bernard Jacobson Gallery is delighted to announce the second exhibition in a special season of exhibitions, publications, film and performance, celebrating half a century of the creative output of Bruce Mclean; one of the most important figures in British contemporary art. With a working relationship with the gallery dating back to the 1970s, McLean he has also exhibited widely across the globe, including major one-man exhibitions at public institutions including the Tate Gallery, London, The Modern Art Gallery, Vienna, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, MOMA, Oxford, Arnolfini, Bristol and GOMA, Brisbane.

The second part of this retrospective includes work from 1995 to the present day and in true mischievous McLean fashion given the title of the exhibition, focusses on his critically acclaimed work as a painter, performance artist and film-maker. The key for McLean is his self-designation as an 'action sculptor'; he says, '*I don't think of what I do as art. I think of it as sculpture. Even if it's a painting, it's a painting I made as a sculptor*'

In the early years, McLean was often described as a conceptual artist and it's perhaps surprising that he has gone on to have such a successful career as a film maker, ceramicist and painter. In 1981 he was included alongside artists such as Anselm Kiefer and Gerhard Richter in Norman Rosenthal's seminal painting exhibition at the R.A - *A New Spirit in Painting*. In 1985 he won the John Moores Painting prize with *Oriental Garden, Kyoto*, a painting which McLean has described as his favourite artwork because, '*I did it in one hit. I like to hit it in one [when making work]. It's recorded that moment and there's nothing else you could put in or take away that would add to or subtract from it. It's magic, alchemy. It's like dancing—you do it in one hit and that's it.*'

Deceptively simple and sometimes distilled to the point of almost abstraction, the sculptural is always fundamental to McLean's art but it's not the only consistent 'ingredient'; parody and the humorous referencing of art and social context are also key. Take the series of paintings

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which return to a subject frequently drawn and painted from McLean's childhood - the humble potato. *A Carefully Peeled Golden Wonder Against a Dark Background* (2014) draws an immediate comparison to the painterly tradition of artists such as Euan Uglow but it does so with wry humour; this time the subject is a common potato more usually used to fill cheap packets of crisps – but elevated to a gleaming golden prize.

The *Shade* and *Sunset Paintings* created in the 2010s appear to reference the hot colours and bold cut-out shapes of Matisse - but with the 'sacrosanct' artistic act of laying colour to canvas deconstructed and subverted. These are back to front paintings, based on prints which were based on drawings and before that – sculptural explorations of light and shadow. McLean says that these are 'paintings towards a new kind of sculpture' and this is an evolution taken one step further in his monumental striped, 3 dimensional paintings such as *Sunset (Blue)* 2018. This is a painting which fords the spaces between hot sun and deep shade whilst also casting its own silhouette upon the wall.

Film offered another opportunity for McLean to '*push what sculpture is at the same time as having fun*', whilst creating the potential for the 'viewer' to become part of the work. McLean's recalls the film '*I want My Crown*' featuring the artist dancing to the titular song, '*It was shown at an arts festival in Spain and I was projected life-size. People walked in front of the projection, so they were in the work. The more people that 'did this, the better it got; their shadows [combined] with me dancing*'.

Dance and theatre are also fundamental to McLean – although to him, there is no distinction between 'art' and these forms. He says "*art*" is another problem, isn't it? *Fred Astaire is probably one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century—he's as good as Matisse.*' This refusal to be pigeon-holed and the shapeshifting it has allowed him has served McLean well over more than 5 decades. It has spanned architectural projects and collaboration with the likes of Will Alsop and David Chipperfield, to ceramics - including the series collectively titled *Garden ware*, created in partnership with the V&A in 2017.

This special McLean season also includes completely new work, although brought to completion more than 30 years on from its original conception. Specially commissioned by the Coronet Theatre, *The Decorative Potential of Blazing Factories* is described by collaborators, Bruce Mclean and Gary Chitty, as a '*cardboard motion picture – about ambition and the desire for infamy of an artist who wants to create the greatest landscape painting of all time*' The film will premiere at The Coronet Theatre from 18th – 21st June and will be

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complemented by an exhibition at the venue of drawings, prints and models associated with the project.

McLean explains: *"You have to challenge things all the time to keep yourself alive, to keep the spirit going, to keep amusing yourself."* Certainly, these are also markers which apply equally to the long-term audience of McLean's mercurial and engaging output as an artist; we might never quite know what to expect but it's sure to charm and raise a fond smile, or outright belly-laugh, along the way.

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