

bernard jacobson gallery

Bruce McLean

Sculptures of Jugs and Paintings of Sculptures of Jugs

Open from 30 November 2023

Bernard Jacobson Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of new and recent works by Scottish artist Bruce McLean. The exhibition comprises ceramic sculptures of jugs, and paintings of these same sculptures, all produced between 2022 and 2023.

Bruce McLean, born in 1944 in Glasgow, set out to challenge and reshape the boundaries of sculpture. Beginning his studies at the Glasgow School of Art in 1961, McLean took an impulsive morning train to London in the spring of 1963 on the advice of a fellow undergraduate: "If he wants to be a sculptor then the only place to be is Saint Martin's School of Art, and he should go there as soon as possible." At Saint Martin's, McLean's output under tutors Anthony Caro and Phillip King bore the influence of conceptualism and minimalism, yet his interest was piqued by the dynamism and humour with which the American Pop Artists operated.

Sculpture "Pose Work for Plinths" (1971) and self-styled retrospective "King for a Day" (Tate Gallery, 1972) forged McLean's position at the forefront of contemporary art in Britain: an incisive wit, skeptical of circumscribed categories and unconcerned with the expectations of artistic institutions. McLean's conviction that "I am a sculptor" above all else, his ambitions to "develop modern sculpture through all different sorts of mediums" and "do what I want to do the way I want to do it", define his sculptural output to this day.

The exhibition's title is characteristically straight-talking, as McLean makes plain that we shall encounter the same subject matter in paint and in sculpture (indeed, in painted sculptures). The artist's ceramics are presented adjacent to, and in alternation with, their respective paintings, presented not as separate series but rather as a family of works. McLean's jugs can be gazed at against bold, sharp backgrounds and perambulated around upon their plinths.

Central to the exhibition are McLean's ceramic sculptures: jugs that vary from the functional to the whimsical, each piece a study in form, whether squat, spikily pointed or wonkily towering. These ceramics serve as both subject and object, inviting viewers into a dialogue that bridges art and its everyday subjects. The jugs, stripped to their essential shapes, become symbols on their own as well as within the paintings.

Several compositions include citrus fruits in sporadic placements, a coy homage to the Dutch seventeenth century still life tradition in which they represented the exotic and outlandish to a national audience. In "The Settled Lemon Test 1" (2023) a tangerine and a lemon have been painted separately, cut out, and pasted atop the canvas in collage, as McLean enacts his infamous 'Test': if he feels that the fruit 'looks right,' the work passes with flying colours.

These sculptures of jugs and paintings embody the complex relationship between historical and contemporary influences, tangible objects, and their aesthetic renditions, highlighting McLean's metaphysical approach to sculpture. Through this, McLean's work pulls together memory, the past and the present, the object and the image, inviting viewers to converse with the layers of his visual and sculptural language.

McLean's work has been exhibited in prestigious venues and is part of significant collections worldwide, including the Tate Gallery in London, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. His pieces have been showcased in major exhibitions such as "When Attitudes become Form" at Kunsthalle Bern, "New Spirit in Painting" at the Royal Academy of London, "Zeitgeist" in Berlin, and various Documentas, as well as the Venice Biennale.

McLean is a recipient of numerous awards, including the prestigious John Moores Painting Prize (1985) and the Pratt Bequest for Sculpture (1995). McLean was Head of Graduate Painting at The Slade School of Fine Art between 1985 and 2009 and is a member of the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

Today, McLean continues to work and reside in Barnes, West London.

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