

Art in America INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW EXHIBITION REVIEWS

June/July 2011



Bruce McLean: *Mirror Work*, 1969, black-and-white photograph, approx. 8 inches square; at Tanya Leighton.

BRUCE MCLEAN TANYA LEIGHTON

Even when the defining characteristic of art is its currentness, it eventually becomes a part of the past. Bruce McLean was originally known for his ability to improvise positions on the fly, but his early performances now survive in the form of photographic relics. For *Early Works* (1965-71), an old-fashioned slide carousel projected documentary images onto a wall. McLean assumed the exotic stance of a live sculpture against the shabby backdrop of London. He might merely be standing there, looking bored or baffled, but the resulting photograph hardens the conceit into enduring form. The cars look ancient; even the trees into which McLean releases a bird (no, it's just a paper cut-out) seem to belong to another age, a more innocent one in which the art world was manageable enough to be effectively sent up by his irreverent gestures.

One of the slides showed a sign stating "NO MORE CONVENIENT THOUGHTS/ ACTIONS," the didactic formulation and capitalized print an abrupt call out of nostalgia into historical context—a reminder that this is early Conceptual art, and the British version, which was still entrenched in the British obsession with landscape. Hence the many images of provisional sculptural arrangements of found junk

in parks, on beaches and amid building site rubble. Also on view were framed photographs of McLean running in a park (*Running Sculpture*, 1969); lying on a pallet surrounded by shingle (*Fallen Warrior*, 1969); or standing in the shadow of an oak tree with a mirror (*Mirror Work*, 1969). The reflected leaves seem to come rampantly to life, whereas all around him, unmirrored, they are obscured by shadow. It is an allegory for the pictorial transformation of raw reality into the sheerer realm of artifice. Holding the mirror under his arm like a shield which both claims and effaces him, it is as though McLean were acting out the role of the picture rather than the customary sculpture, and, fittingly, the piece is less overt, more elliptical.

The film clip *High Up on a Baroque Palazzo* (1974) presents a performance by Nice Style, "The World's First Pose Band." Three guys in tuxedos strike exaggerated postures, while McLean, offstage, shouts directions in his gruff Glaswegian drawl. This burlesque is an alternative, theatrical response to the same conditions which led his contemporaries to attempt to dematerialize the art object, as though to restart the art game from scratch. The line "Objects, no Concepts"—penciled on an early invitation card—is McLean's reminder to himself to retain *thingness* in a climate in which objects were ceding to ideas. Consequently, *Pose Work for Plinths*

(1971), a grid of 15 photographs, shows him draping himself over plinths of various heights, parodying the clichés of a played-out figurative sculptural tradition, exemplified by Henry Moore. The poses are absurd, awkward, even brutal. And yet McLean's flippancy was always tinged by melancholy, like the dark side of a mirror. In a color photograph from 1972, he sits on a park bench looking out over a pond. The title, printed over the picture, reads "KING FOR THE DAY." McLean looks forlorn enough, but he is wearing a paper crown balanced precariously on his head, as though he believes that even such a bathetic performance can transfigure a gray day.

—Mark Prince

Art in America, June/July 2011