

## Bruce McLean

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View of “Bruce McLean: Sculpture, Painting, Photography, Film,” 2014.

*Long based in London, the Scottish artist Bruce McLean is well known for his humorous conceptual works, such as his “retrospective” at the Tate Gallery in 1972, which was a one-day show titled “King for a Day” that consisted entirely of texts—a thousand propositions—on a wall. That work has been re-created in his current survey, “Bruce McLean: Sculpture, Painting, Photography, Film,” which is on view at *firstsite* in Colchester, England, through September 21, 2014. Here he discusses the show and Opera Bouffant, a new project that will debut next year.*

**I WAS A STUDENT AT ST. MARTIN'S** at the same time as Gilbert & George and Barry Flanagan; Tim Head and Richard Long came along the year after. There, we were all invited to investigate the nature of sculpture, and we were pushed and pulled along until we decided that sculpture could be something in your pocket, in the landscape, or in the street—it could be transitional. Our teachers pushed us so hard that we started making ephemeral stuff before we actually investigated for ourselves some of the more formal concerns that were important in early 1960s. But a lot was being questioned then. It was an interesting time.

I am mostly interested in quick actions and gestures. For example, I am fascinated by the actions of Jackson Pollock—not the paintings. I am attracted to the actions of the American crooner Johnnie Ray—

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# Tanya Leighton

he was the first action singer. I have recently thought that I am an action sculptor. The action *is* the thing, and everything else is just there. Everything I do is determined by the fact that I was trained as a sculptor. If I make a dance piece, it's coming from a sculptural background, not a dance background or a painting background.

Currently I am developing *Opera Bouffant* in collaboration with Luke Haines who is writing the music and Paul Tickell who will direct, which is about Ray. He wasn't a great singer, but he had the power to make a myth around himself. Elvis was obviously better—his songs from the '50s and '60s are still good, whereas Ray's aren't. But I'm interested in the idea of Ray being an action singer instead of an icon. He's been a great influence on all sorts of people, like Iggy Pop and me. *Opera Bouffant* is based on the idea of bringing together the ideas of opera and bouffant, and it won't be like an opera and it won't be like a rock concert. It'll be something else. It will be a sound work, but it'll also be visual. When I left the artworld in the '70s, I formed a Pose group. It wasn't theater and it wasn't dance, and I'd like to make something for now—the beginning of the twenty-first century. It won't be something like anything that's been seen before. There will be a lot of impersonations in it. Impersonations also interest me. You can impersonate a person, but you can also impersonate an object. You should find a good sculpture and impersonate it immediately.

Using what is available—a wall, a piece of wood, a shadow, a remark, a door—is important to me, and I take that as a jumping-off point continually to make propositions for my work. I never think I'm "solving problems." In fact, I am probably making them. Sometimes the problems are just visual quips. For example, at the Tate in 1972, I wrote quips as pieces. I went to a party around that time with Lucy Lippard and Seth Siegelau, and we decided that it was just very boring. It was full of Conceptual artists—British ones—so we took a bottle of vodka and left. That night I decided to remove myself from the art world and, at that time, the best way to do it was to have a retrospective. When you have one of those, they bury you and that's the end of it. I thought that the catalogue could be the show and the show could be the catalogue, because people at the time were obsessed with catalogues. So I made a thousand catalogues, put them on the floor like a big Carl Andre work, and then people came for this one-day exhibition, "King for a Day."

They bought the catalogues and then the show disappeared the next day. And me with it! I dropped out for a while, but the call of sculpture sucked me back in. I sort of wish I had done something else after. The piece was written over three weeks in 1969 with a view to be published as a catalogue or show in major gallery. I wrote it straight off, no changes, no corrections. It's interesting to see again on a wall, as it looks quite fresh and still relevant. But I think its time for a new text piece about text pieces.

The survey at firstsite does a good job of representing what I've been doing over the past fifty years. There are several big architectural projects that aren't in the show, as they don't fit an art-survey context. My father was an architect, and he wouldn't let me pursue that career. Now my son is an architect, and I think I'm finally one too. I've been engaged with so many fields—painting, music, poetry, etc.—but I wouldn't say "Art." That gets up my nose.

— As told to Sherman Sam