

Tanya Leighton

Bruce McLean *A HOT SUNSET and SHADE PAINTINGS*

Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London 2 December – 28 January

Art that makes you laugh is always in short supply, possibly because when that is its aim it usually ends up as facetiousness. But Bruce McLean's comic art has always had a harsh, satirical edge that keeps it serious. In the late 1980s, he was the joker in the British conceptual art pack, a Dennis the Menace, with trillo-pad hair and a Glaswegian bruiser's snub-nosed face, flouting his studiously earnest context. From his early *Post Works* to his recent paintings and videos, a constant has been his preoccupation with sending up forms of modernist abstraction, which he, as much as others of his generation, were set on superseding. Posing for *Post Works for Plumb* (1977, not on view), he impersonated a Henry Moore reclining nude, with fist on hip to imitate Moore's trademark sculptural holes. The blend of registers was key to the humour poking fun at formalist orthodoxies that had been reduced to mannerism and pomposity, even while expressing nostalgia for their outmoded certainties.

The six semiabstract paintings (*Shade Paintings*, all works 2016) and two striped aluminium reliefs (*Sunset*, 2016) at Bernard Jacobson Gallery may look initially like a surrender to the modernist conventions that McLean made his name by satirising; but they turn out to be only more suspicious in their

subversions. The works on canvas – each 265x265cm – use assortments of geometric, abstract shapes to atomise silhouettes evoking trees and clouds. Their imposing scale and silhouetting recalls Patrick Caulfield's still life interiors of the 1980s and 90s, but McLean's execution is blunt and sceptical in comparison. The serialised formats court the look of an established artist churning out colourful but shoddy abstract art for a gullible market.

Because this is painting, the difference lies in the specifics of its facture: the knowingly crude stencilling, the too-clever-by-half chromatic transitions, his playing the Romantic cliché of a sunset silhouette a little fulsomely off the stylistic antithesis of freefloating geometries, each disabusing the other of its pretensions. His diffident finish conveys a refusal to collude with the idioms he co-opts. The difference between rehash and reappraisal is as touch-specific as the tone of a voice, distinguishing between different meanings of the same statement. His most telling critique of the merely decorative formalism he is pastiching is that the critique comes in a form which implies that formalist nuances need not be merely form but vital, critical content.

But it's a fine line he walks. He risks satire resolving as a failure to realise the kind of art

he is satirising. His ironic relativism is most explicitly figured in the clash of the industrialised formalism of the multicoloured striped reliefs – each over six metres wide – with the paintings' organic semiabstraction. The rigours of formalist stripe painting – from Kenneth Noland to Bridget Riley – are converted into Day-Glo deco fixtures, implying the irrelevance of the arcane aesthetics they reference to the context they occupy. In juxtaposition, the two idioms – gleefully incompatible, according to any proper, formalist precepts – surrender to the condition of art-historical karaoke.

A four-minute video on a backroom monitor has McLean dancing to a rock-'n'-roll soundtrack. There is a foil crown on a shelf above his head. The song's refrain is the video's title – "I want my crown" – an allusion to *King for a Day*, the title of McLean's one-day retrospective at the Tate in 1972. Coming out of the latter part of a 40-year career, this self-referencing emphasises that McLean has always been making fun of himself as much as of his predecessors, preventing him from succumbing to the superiority of critique. While he dances, he pines up pathetically to the crown. His own past is now as remote as the modernist precedents from which his painterly standup routine measures its distance. *Meré Poiré*



Shade Painting: Red, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 265 × 265 cm.

Courtesy Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London

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