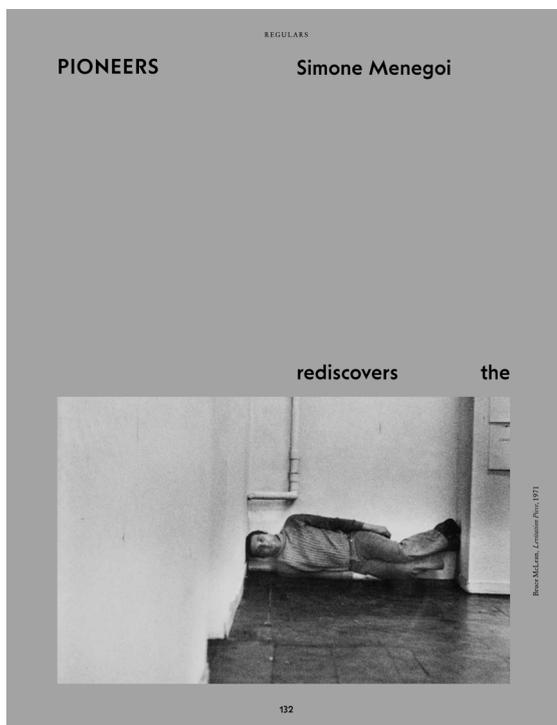


# Tanya Leighton



Bruce McLean, *After Hiroshima*, 1949

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irreverent art of BRUCE McLEAN

In the non-conformist work of this Scottish artist, the challenges posed by the artistic trends of his time were taken to a point of no return with ironic intentions and results.

PIONEERS

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REGULARS



Bruce McLean, *Mirror Work*, 1969

If there's one image from the first dazzling decade of Bruce McLean's career that comes to mind, it might be the image of him cheerfully sawing off the branch that he and dozens of artist colleagues were perched upon. In the span of time from his art debut around in the mid-'60s until 1975, the year he disbanded his performance group Nice Style, McLean came to terms with all the major artistic developments of the era (installation, Land Art, Process Art, Body Art, conceptual art), always with such an irreverent tone that whatever he touched became satire. The fact that his irony took aim not only at the art establishment, but also at those prevailing artistic trends, makes him unique. In the United Kingdom, McLean was to the visual arts what Monty Python was to the television and cinema: heirs to the great British tradition of social satire, blessed with a pronounced taste for the absurd,

ready to ridicule both true conservatives and phony progressives.

The playground where McLean, born in Glasgow, refined his critical spirit was the sculpture department of the Saint Martin's School, which in the mid-'60s was a hotbed of non-conformist talent (Barry Flanagan, Richard Long, Hamish Fulton, Gilbert Prousch and George Passmore, the future Gilbert & George) and a stage for friction between these figures and their teachers, sculptors like Anthony Caro and Phillip King. As Nena Dimitrijevi has written in her interesting essay on McLean (published in the catalogue of the artist's retrospective at the Kunsthalle Basel, 1981), the linguistic conquests of Caro and the other sculptors of the so-called New Generation—the abolition of the pedestal, for example—were already obsolete for their students, who in 1965 were twenty or twenty-five years old. For

the artists of McLean's generation, the new frontiers of sculpture (and art in general) had become humble, ephemeral materials: the urban and natural landscape, the body and the gesture, as well as all the political and social questions the previous generation had excluded from its outlook.

McLean accepted all the challenges posed by the artistic trends of his time. In 1965, while still a student, he staged a happening on the roof of Saint Martin's (*Mary Waving Goodbye To Trains*). In 1967, he began to make temporary works in the streets and parks of London, first with the materials of sculpture, like wood and metal, and then with whatever he found at the site, including ice, grass, mud. Starting in 1969, he indicted gestures and poses as forms of sculpture. ("If the position of a piece of metal or wood is a sculpture, why isn't a position of the body?"). All this was perfectly in line with the most advanced research in those years, but there was always something excessive in McLean's forays, a mischievousness that transformed practically every work into an ironic comment on the trend to which it was supposed to belong, with its explicit or implicit codes. The anonymity, rejection of traditional artistic ability, and phenomenological approach—key characteristics of the advanced art of those years—were taken to a point of no return, with intentionally comical results. *Installation for Concrete Slab* (1967) consisted of two bricks placed at a right angle (a tribute to the modernist principles of Saint Martin's?) on a found concrete pavement; *Splash Sculpture* (1969) was composed of the splashes caused by throwing rocks into a pond; *Installation for Various Parts of the Body (Nose)* (1969) called for the artist to stick a finger up his nose. The relationship between short-lived works and photography was also examined: rather than photography that documents the existence of the work, the work—insignificant and ridiculous on its own—existed because it had

been photographed and given a title with the words “installation” or “sculpture” in it. In spite of their anti-aesthetic proclamations, the black and white shots of Body Art and Land Art had become a style at this point (and one you could sell, after all). McLean mischievously pointed at them as the “real” work, for which installations or performances were a mere pretext.

If McLean applied such irony to the conformist tendencies of the neo-vanguards, it is easy to imagine the tenor of his comments on the art establishment. His favorite target, in this sense, was Henry Moore, the true sacred cow of British Modernism. McLean’s versions of the famous “lying figures” of the great master consisted in simple white pedestals on which the young artist (dressed, perhaps, as an English infantryman from World War II, as in *Fallen Warrior*, 1969) assumed contorted, unnatural poses to parody the organic twists and turns of the sculptures in bronze.

In a ferocious review of the exhibition “British Sculpture Out of the Sixties” (Institute for Contemporary Art, London 1970) published in *Studio International*, McLean made a modest proposal: “I’d like to see all this stuff, and other stuff not in the show, made available to a larger audience, people outside the tight art clique. Let them look at it, if they could bring themselves to. Let them access and criticize the misery of it all and listen to the criticism; we might get some information. Things might move a bit faster and we wouldn’t be dwelling on bad stuff from the sixties.” McLean was the first to subject himself to the drastic treatment he was recommending. In 1972, after “King for a Day,” a farcical “one-day retrospective” at the Tate (the only work shown was a booklet with a list of the mostly sarcastic or paradoxical titles of a thousand imaginary works), McLean announced his retirement from the visual arts in order to get involved in other, more adventurous scenes. Together with

Paul Richards and Ron Carr, his students at the Maidstone College of Arts, one year earlier he had formed Nice Style, “The World’s First Pose Band,” with the idea of performing off the art circuit. From 1972 to 1975, the group was his main concern. What is a “pose band?” Nice Style replied, “We deal with the problems of bad style, superficiality and acquisitiveness in a society that holds pose to be very important.” This is evidently still satire, but no longer aimed exclusively at the art world and its conventions.

The group’s first outings demonstrated how they intended to put the statement’s program into practice: dressed in bizarre costume-sculptures, somewhere between Oskar Schlemmer and the glam rock of David Bowie (1972 was the year of *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and The Spiders from Mars*), or in impeccable evening wear, Richards, Carr and McLean assumed,

one after the other, the stereotyped poses that modern gentlemen are supposed to strike in public. A director/coach seated in the audience paced and remarked on the poses, while an assistant, with the help of specially made instruments, checked the correct positioning of elbows and knees, lapels and cuffs. (The coach and assistant, played by Gary Chitty and Robin Fletcher, soon became integral parts of the group). The name “band” turned out to be prophetic. The first performances of Nice Style were as the opening act at rock concerts: McLean & Co. “opened” for Ian Dury (who did “Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll”) and even big stars like the Kinks.

As he had planned, McLean finally got out of the suffocating elitist art scene and could face an audience free of blinders. But the outcome was not what he had hoped for. The reaction of the rock audience to Nice Style’s singular mixture of

#### About the Artist

BRUCE MCLEAN (b. 1944) lives and works in London. He took part in the exhibition “When Attitudes Become Form,” curated by Harald Szeemann at the Kunsthalle Bern. Other exhibitions he has participated in are “Op Losse Schroeven,” Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 1969; “Information,” curated by Kynaston L. McShine at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970; and “The British Avant Garde,” at the New York Cultural Centre in 1970. During the 1980s he participated in exhibitions such as “A New Spirit in Painting,” Royal Academy 1981; “Zeitgeist,” The Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin 1982; and Documenta 6, 7 and 8, Kassel.

#### About the Author

SIMONE MENEGOI is a critic, independent curator and Contributing Editor of *Kaleidoscope*. He is currently working on a group show for the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco that will take place in January 2012. Among his recent writing is a text for a forthcoming catalogue of Roman Ondák’s early works.

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avant-garde theater, New Dance and social satire (all without musical accompaniment) was either chilly or furious, to the point of putting an end to further experiments of this type. In the “elitist” but less hostile setting of the Garage Gallery in London, Nice Style (now a quartet after the departure of Carr) staged their masterpiece in 1974, *High Up on a Baroque Palazzo*, whose specific subject was social climbing. During this work, the four performers, all in impeccable tuxedos, after lengthy, severe training in worldly posing and attitudes, used ropes and pulleys to reach a raised level of the stage, the set of the heights of the “Baroque Palazzo”: a very small stage where their movements were squeezed and forced. Atop the hierarchical pyramid, be it that of art or that of any other social milieu, there is no longer room for free, spontaneous gestures.

The photographs of the event convey an idea of the efficacy of the work, but cannot reproduce its impact. To that end, it is better to turn to a brilliant short 16mm film from the previous year, *Crease Crisis*, which is a kind of study for *Baroque Palazzo*. While the characters of the latter are uniform, without individuality, driven by a principle of ascent, reminding us of Bachelors deprived of the Bride (the reference, of course, is to Duchamp’s *Large Glass*), in *Crease Crisis* the Bride is a provocative girl in a corset, using a vacuum cleaner in a bourgeois interior. The bachelors are reduced to just one, played by Paul Richards. However, his attention is not focused on the woman, whom he seems to ignore, but on his raincoat, which he continues to open and close, tug and smooth, searching for the perfect aplomb. The character obsessively looks at himself in a series of small mirrors mounted on poles and suspended from pulleys, and he smoothes this or that portion of the coat with one of the many irons scattered around the set. The more he works, though, the more the wrinkles seem to multiply. In the

meantime, the Bride keeps on vacuuming, now and then casting a compassionate glance at the unfortunate Bachelor. A vivid example of what the lunatic frenzy of Nice Style must have been on stage, *Crease Crisis* is also a completely independent work of surprisingly timely freshness, not least on a linguistic level. Speeding up the pace of the film to an extreme and adding spasmodic editing, you would get something vaguely similar to the best videos of John Bock; slow it down, add a bit of perverse sophistication to the accessories and garments, and it might remind you of the enigmatic choreographies of Markus Schinwald.

Nice Style broke up in 1975 because the group had difficulties reconciling four different sensibilities and had not managed to establish itself in a specific field. They were too conceptual for the theater, but also too theatrical for the visual arts. McLean, often in collaboration with

Richards, did other, increasingly spectacular performances, the most complex of which — *The Masterwork: Award Winning Fish-Knife* in 1979, a satire on the megalomania of designers and architects — involved professional acrobats, dancers, a juggler and a musical ensemble conducted by Michael Nyman.

Toward the end of the ’70s, McLean, who had sworn he no longer wanted to have anything to do with the “tight art clique,” began to work on the most traditional of all artistic activities, painting. He began by reworking the large drawings and collages he had made as visual scores for Nice Style, before moving toward a painting of rapid gestures, influenced by Matisse and close to the Neo-Expressionism of the 1980s. The work brought him many rewards. Since the end of the 1980s, after explicitly lampooning the vanity and boundless ambitions of architects and designers, McLean

Bruce McLean,  
*Treescapes, Barnes Common, London, 1969*



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Bruce McLean,  
*In the Shadow of Your Smile Bob*, 1969

has launched a series of major collaborations with well-known names in architecture (including David Chipperfield and Alsop Architects), creating decorations and furnishings, and even contributing to the overall design of buildings. The most important job of this kind, completed in 2007 after nearly ten years of work, is the experimental elementary school of Dalry, Ayrshire (Scotland), a unique “learning machine,” with a price tag of eleven million pounds.

A textbook case of recantation? The classic arsonist turned firefighter? It would be unsporting to say so, or perhaps just wrong. Certainly there is a remarkable difference between McLean’s works of the 1960s and those of the present (and no one can prevent us from thinking that the former, not the latter, represent his greatest contribution to art history). But in the end, McLean was never really a firestarter; in the

finest British tradition, his polemical thrust was always placed at the service of a spirit of reform, not revolution. His principle has remained the same across the decades: to try to disrupt expectations, to shake off clichés before they become suffocating—including, obviously, those of the performer or the conceptual artist who is not permitted to touch a paintbrush. Moreover, the fact that he has become part of the establishment doesn’t stop him from continuing to experiment. In 2006, when asked to put together a retrospective on his work at the Chelsea Art Space in London, he came up with the “Process Progress Projects Archive,” a crowded, festively chaotic exhibition-work organized thematically rather than chronologically, making no distinctions between “warm” and “cool” media, and changing every week. In his words, “I just keep on contradicting myself. I think that the reason that I or anyone can be whatever they

are—an artist or whatever—is that they can do what they like. Not irresponsibly do what you like, but you can do what you like when you like. I mean, we’re not bank clerks.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Chrissie Iles, *Performance Magazine*, No. 37, October/November 1985.

All images courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

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