

Jon Wood in  
conversation with  
Bruce McLean

## Fallen warriors and a sculpture in my soup: Bruce McLean on Henry Moore

The British artist Bruce McLean (b. 1944) has developed a rich and multifaceted practice over the last forty years that has embraced sculpture, photography, film, performance, dance, writing, architecture, design and painting. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, McLean made a series of works which were improvisations on the work of Henry Moore (1898–1986). These are arguably now some of the best-known of McLean's conceptual works, and are usually seen as demonstrating a straightforward, youthful attack on the older, established figure of Moore. This interview, conducted at the artist's house in Barnes on Sunday 24 February 2008, focuses on the intriguing relationship that McLean had with Moore's work, both before this period as a student at Glasgow School of Art and then at St Martin's and after. The interview sheds new light on the context of these works, revealing a more complicated relationship than has hitherto been acknowledged.

JW I would like to start by asking you about your student years in Glasgow and about the impact of Henry Moore's sculpture on your early stone carved work.

BM I'd been to Glasgow School of Art since the age of six at Saturday morning classes and was studying from the age of seven with Paul Zunterstein. He showed me photographs of all sorts of things, including works by Brancusi and Giacometti, and it was from him that I learned about sculpture in cement and plaster. It was my father, however (who was always extolling the work of stonemason Archie Dawson), who encouraged me to do stone carving, which I did under the guidance of a local stonemason. I did know of Moore's work at the time. I tried in Glasgow to make heads out of stone, but if you aren't really that competent, you end up making things that are actually similar to Moore's sculpture in a sense (fig. 1). There was an inflexible character to the particular stone I was using which meant that I could only carve a certain kind of shape. I couldn't make a pointed nose or anything very detailed, for example, and so ended up with quite a smooth, bland form. But I was looking at Moore and still am very keen on Moore's early stone carvings (fig. 2). I find them very inspirational.

JW Where were you getting the stone from?

BM It was from demolition. In Glasgow they tended to put a sandstone coping, that had lead insets for the railings, on top of brick walls. Since

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1. Bruce McLean with stone carving, Glasgow School of Art, 1963. Artist's collection (photo: not known)

BM

It was at Glasgow School of Art and I had taken the sculpture in to show Sinclair Thompson because he'd asked me what I'd been doing at home. It is an early example of me playing with or messing around with sculpture. I continually find that the more you play, mess around and don't take things seriously, the more you end up with something. I've never made another work like this one, but I have made parodies and live actions of other people's sculpture.

JW

the railings had been cut off for the war effort and people were building more modern walls, they were throwing away the old sandstone coping. I just asked if I could take it away. The whole garden was full of lumps of stone and my father built a retaining wall which incorporated all the carved heads.

One of the photographs of the time shows you standing behind one of your Moore-like heads holding a cigarette out in front of it, to make it seem as if the sculpture itself is smoking (fig. 3). This seems to be an early example of you performing with sculpture.

2. Henry Moore, *Mask*, 1929, concrete, h: 21.6 cm. Leeds Museums and Galleries (Leeds Art Gallery) (photo: not known)

JW

It seems to suggest an act of bringing the sculpture to life or reanimating a dead thing through a living performance. It seems to anticipate, in a sense, what is to come later in the 1960s, and beyond.

BM

I remember bringing the sculpture in, making the sculpture smoke and putting things on its head. I have made live sculptures in the past – running sculptures, standing sculptures, sitting sculptures, sculptures using myself as the medium. This relates to the thought that I was becoming a dancer: a dancer would be making a dance, not making a sculpture. I was interested in the idea that sculpture could move, like dance; really good dancing like that of Siobhan Davies, where you get people moving across the stage. It is a controlled mass of volume, moving in space and time with rhythm and beat. It's not a narrative – I'm not interested in narrative in dance or in people telling stories through it – it's simply body, shape, movement, light, space and form moving through space.

JW

What idea and image of Moore's work were you encountering in Glasgow in the 1950s and early 1960s?



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3. Bruce McLean with stone carving and cigarette, Glasgow School of Art, 1963. Artist's collection  
(photo: not known)

BM I don't think I actually saw a Henry Moore in the bronze or in the stone, as it were, until 1960 when I went to Edinburgh with my mother. We went to Inverleith House to see a sculpture exhibition (*Contemporary British Sculpture*, 1960) and there was Henry Moore's 'Falling Warrior', which I thought was a fantastic piece (fig. 4). I think that was the first time I encountered it and I was very impressed by it. The size of it, where it was positioned, the height of it, I thought it seemed to work very well . . . I knew I wanted to be a sculptor. I used to watch TV programmes like *Monitor* which was by Hugh Weldon. There was a good one on Sidney Nolan, on Elisabeth Frink, and I may have seen one on Henry Moore. In addition to this, my father was taking *Studio International*, and had been taking *Studio*, as it was once called, since he was an architect in the 1920s. He had bundles of these in the window seat in the living room and I used to

sift through them and see all sorts of marvellous things. Looking at *Studio International* was a major source of inspiration. It was how I got involved with Richard Stankiewicz's junk sculpture and Peter Startup's sculpture – good simple things that make you think 'I could have a shot at that'. It's a good sign, if you see something that makes you want to do it. Henry Moore made me want to do it: I liked the volume, the form and the fact that it looked 'modern'. He didn't try to make it look like somebody. It looked like what it was. It looked like a sculpture.

JW Following Glasgow School of Art you went to St Martin's in 1963. Do you recall how Henry Moore and his sculpture were talked about there?

BM I don't remember him being discussed at all. In fact, I think I remember being quite surprised when we were actually invited to go and see his studio. It was interesting because he was a 'modern sculptor' making 'modern sculpture' with an international reputation, but none of us were making anything which bore any resemblance to what he was doing. It felt a bit old-fashioned and it didn't look like 'modern sculpture' any more, after what I'd been accustomed to at St Martin's . . . the throbbing pink pieces by Andrew Dunlop and vibrating mesh and gauze paintings. The range and vitality of materials there was just extraordinary.

JW Can you say a bit more about your visit to Moore's studio in Perry Green?

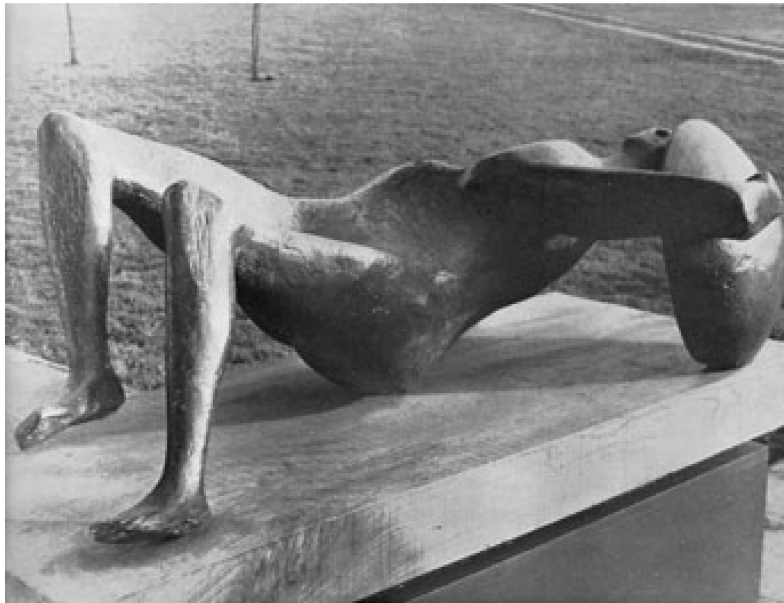
BM It turned out that all the people that were teaching at St Martin's seemed to have been assistants to Henry Moore at some point in their lives. Tony Caro had been an assistant and I think it was Frank Martin who organized a trip one day to Perry Green to visit Henry because he was looking for

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some new assistants. So we went down on a coach to visit him in the 1965–1966 academic year. When we arrived he appeared in a cardigan and trousers and said ‘Hello everybody, morning, turned out nice again hasn’t it’. And we all laughed. Anyway, we all had a good look round the studios and then he assembled us all in the yard and told us what it was all about. He said to me that he could offer work at four shillings an hour. He asked if I had a sleeping bag and said that I could sleep in the barn. I said that I’d just keep on working for William Tucker, as he was nearer and it was 7 shillings and 6 pence an hour, which was nearly twice as much as he was prepared to pay – and I didn’t have to sleep in a barn in a sleeping bag and clean the chimneys at the weekend! So I thought I’d stay with Mr Tucker. Moore seemed very charming, down to earth and very normal, but I suppose that’s what was uninteresting about the whole trip. I suppose you always imagine that people with such stature would be somewhat different. I’m not sure whether anybody actually took up the job or the offer.

JW Were you struck by the rural environment of Moore’s work and studio at Perry Green at the time?

BM Not really, but I thought that it suited what he did. He was making the work outside covered with a big polythene tent, which he built around each sculpture. That struck me as a good idea, as it saved him from building an enormous, factory-like studio. Working in the rain and the wind also affected what he did and made the sculpture look part of the landscape. The only work I have seen recently that looked anywhere as interesting as Moore in the landscape were the sculptures Tony Cragg showed at Goodwood a few years ago.



4. Henry Moore, *Falling Warrior*, 1956–57, bronze, l: 147.5 cm.  
Henry Moore Foundation Archive,  
Perry Green (LH 405)  
(photo: The Henry Moore  
Foundation)



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- JW      So from visiting Moore as a potential studio assistant in the mid-1960s, we find you making Moore-referencing pieces like 'Fallen Warrior' by the river in Barnes only a few years later in 1969. How did you get from one to the other?
- BM      At St Martin's I had been doing impersonations of Phillip King's sculpture 'Genghis Khan' and impressions of three-part rolling sculptures by rolling around the floor in the canteen and in the studio, doing sculptural impersonations. I was also working with Dirk Buwalda, a friend of mine who lived around the corner, making photographic works – pieces which could only exist because they were photographs. In 1969 I'd thrown most of my work away. I'd thrown most of the object-based stuff in the river and called it float-away pieces. I made things that blew away and that were washed away, and I thought 'let's make something which exists again . . . and maybe we could make a photograph which is a not photograph of something but the thing itself'. I was also thinking about how at St Martin's we were taught that we couldn't put sculpture on a plinth, rather it had to go on the floor. In a sense I was interested in bringing back the plinth, just to be perverse.
- So I got one of the components of a grey sculpture I had made, which didn't really look like a plinth anyway, and I took it down to the beach by the Thames. I thought I should just try to fling myself onto this plinth. It seemed to me that if the falling warrior of Moore's sculpture had fallen, he would have fallen elsewhere than on a plinth! It seemed completely fortuitous that a plinth happened to be where he'd fallen. Wounded in battle there would have been acres of landscape he could have fallen on except this bloody plinth. So it's a kind of joke: it's funny that the fallen warrior had managed to fall on a plinth.
- So I put the plinth down and I did eight or nine attempts at throwing myself down and physically falling. The photographs are of me falling, not holding that pose. I'm not lying there on the plinth posing. And after a few attempts to fall on it, we found two – a horizontal one and a vertical one – and these were the photographic works (figs 5 and 6). You have to remember that this was done in 1969, when people weren't really making photographic works. Gilbert & George had already started making photographic pieces and John Hilliard and Jan Dibbets were beginning to make pieces which were photographed as pieces. 'Fallen Warrior' piece was made through a kind of playfulness and jokiness, but at the same time it has some admiration for Moore. I mean you only poke fun at things you have actually been moved by – by things you love or hate. I have a sneaky love for Henry Moore, and I think it's quite a poignant work.
- JW      Moore's sculpture was called 'Falling Warrior' whereas your work was called 'Fallen Warrior'. Can I ask you, for the record, if you meant anything by this?
- BM      No, there's no hidden meaning there. I simply misinterpreted Moore's title. I thought his sculpture was called 'Fallen Warrior'.

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5. Bruce McLean, *Fallen Warrior*, 1969, photograph  
(photo: © Dirk Buwalda)



6. Bruce McLean, *Fallen Warrior*, 1969, photograph  
(photo: © Dirk Buwalda)



JW One of the things that struck me about this photograph is that by putting it by the Thames, at sea level, you're falling to the lowest point you can fall.

BM Well, when we were at St Martin's we were making sculpture on the ninth floor. We were making sculpture which wasn't on a plinth, and we were putting it on the floor, but as I pointed out to somebody we were actually *in a plinth*, nine floors up. So we took the same idea down to the River Thames. It all comes from the 'you can't do this and you can't do that' approach to sculpture and my response to being told what a breakthrough it is to put sculpture from the plinth onto the floor.

JW Your film piece 'Waiter, Waiter, There's a Sculpture in My Soup' [1970], in which you included a photograph of Moore's 'Locking Piece' was also, like 'Fallen Warrior', a playful statement about where sculpture should be positioned (fig. 7).

BM It was because we had a very rigorous upbringing at St Martin's, questioning everything. It made us actually think of everything and basically what I was doing was simply making propositions for what sculpture could be. So there was no reason why a sculpture couldn't be in your soup, is a fly a moving sculpture? Can it be a moving

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7. Bruce McLean, *Waiter, Waiter, There's a Sculpture in My Soup*, 1970, video still. Artist's collection (photo: © the artist)

sculpture, or is a photograph of a sculpture a sculpture, or is a photograph of a sculpture on a plate of soup that somebody's eating a sculpture, and does it matter anyway?

JW Why did you pick Moore's 'Locking Piece' for that work?

BM Well, it's a piece I actually didn't like very much. I cut it out of a book so I didn't really mind losing that particular photograph. It was just to get a sculpture that was recognizable as a sculpture in the soup. The soup was a light consommé with parsley I believe!

JW Why was it a photograph as opposed to a small model of it, for example?

BM I didn't have the time to make a small model of it. I wasn't that interested in it, it was just a proposition so I used the funds I had and made it as quickly as possible. I sometimes think that's quite a good way to work; speed is of the essence, time is of the essence.

JW By this time, were you aware of Bruce Nauman's work that also alluded to Moore?

BM No, it is quite curious how two people called Bruce were doing the same thing! 'Henry Moore Bound to Fail' is a funny piece, and then he did those drawings. I think the cocoon-like drawings that Moore made are very interesting. I think he was very influential on Bruce Nauman. So I was pleasantly surprised, if not quite astonished, when I did see 'Henry Moore Bound to Fail'. What I thought was interesting about it was that I saw it as referring to the 'Back' sculptures that Matisse made.

JW How do you understand that work by Nauman? What does it mean to you, 'Henry Moore Bound to Fail'?

BM I think 'Henry Moore Bound to Fail' is Nauman's wish that Moore is going to fail, but it's also a play on being bound, bound up, being bound to fall over... that's the sense I get.

JW Is your 'Fallen Warrior' piece 'Henry Moore Bound to Fall'?

BM No, not at all, I think that work is a celebration of the sculpture. I like the sculpture and it's obviously part of my consciousness. When I was thinking about what to do on the beach, I decided on Henry Moore's 'Falling Warrior'. I think I found that tin hat somewhere – it was an old 1914–18 war tin hat. The Doc Marten boots, black trousers and black shirt were what I always used to wear then.

JW Another well-known work from this time, 'Pose Work for Plinths' [1971–72], is often seen as being about Moore's reclining figures on plinths. Is this the case?

BM I was doing a show at Situations, a space in Horseshoe Yard in London, and changing the show every day. There was a show around that time in Leverkusen called 'Concepts, No Objects' and so I thought I'd do a show called 'Objects, No Concepts' just to reverse it, and that's what I did. I got

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forty plinths, from the Tate I think, and filled the room full of plinths. That was the first day open with the show with all these plinths, I took all the name plates off – Moore, Armitage etc. – which I was able to do, and I put a photograph of an object on top of the plinth. You couldn't actually see the object, you just had photographs of desirable objects on top of the plinths. On day one I started off by calling the show 'Objects, No Concepts'. On day two, I made some performances – 'Walking man with head missing' and 'Walking man with head one arm missing' – and then I thought I'd do a pose work for three different-sized plinths. So that's what I did: I made a sculpture for the three plinths. So the plinths were determining the sculpture, not the sculpture being the thing which determined the plinths. The plinths modified my behaviour rather than me modifying the plinth's behaviour. It seemed to me that it was a critique of the plinth, of the idea that whatever you do ends up on a plinth. In a sense it anticipates the body sculptures that Gormley did, but the plinth had gone by the time he got round to casting himself.

JW One of the critics at the time noted that this was mimicking the sculptural postures of a Henry Moore 'Reclining Figure'. Was that right?

BM No, it was just me being modified by the plinths and continually changing. It's quite interesting when you make work like that, as while I was making that stuff I had no idea that that work would be so reproduced in the future. I had no idea that any of these things would take any significance at all. They were done with such a lightness of touch and were no big deal, and I still feel that about them, but they're quite interesting to look at.

JW There is a fascinating postcard of 'Pose Work for Plinths' in your family collection (fig. 8), given to you by your wife Rosy with her drawing and writing over it, which reflects more of the personal mood and meaning of the piece perhaps?

BM Yes, absolutely. It shows that this work is more about me and my bloody attitude. I think it was for my birthday. It's a good work. I should actually get that reproduced. These are the things that are the real art . . .

JW One question I want to ask you, as we bring this interview to a close, concerns the generational artistic rivalry between sculptors, between Moore, who turned seventy in 1968, and Caro and you . . .

BM As Moore became this huge British Council phenomenon it wasn't helping him, and it wasn't helping us look at him and enjoy him and think about the work. It was Henry Moore, Henry Moore, Henry Moore . . . and although Butler, Armitage, Caro, Dalwood and other people were there, it was really just Henry Moore. He himself didn't seem to be like that: he seemed to be a gentle, relaxed kind of guy in a way, but it was this kind of huge world domination, that's what modern sculpture was. Every art cartoon in the paper was Henry Moore – a sculpture with a hole in it – and it became very tiresome. So I suppose everyone stopped looking at Henry Moore's work. They got fed up with it basically until quite recently, when people are actually beginning to look at it again because it had

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8. Postcard of *Pose Work for Plinths*, 1972, with over-drawing by Rosy McLean. Given by Rosy McLean to Bruce McLean on his 58th birthday, 2002. Artist's collection  
(photo: © the artist)

become something you didn't see. So my works were a kind of break away from previous work and from that situation. I think you have to break away from previous work by dressing it in some way, which I tried to do in the 'Fallen Warrior' piece. But then I never really did that with Caro – though I did a hopscotch dance piece with a stick once. But he was the 'modern sculptor' and his early pieces were fantastic. You can't photograph 'Prairie'. I've never seen a photograph of 'Prairie' in which the sculpture looks any good, which is a very good sign. If you can't photograph it, it must be excellent. Things that are really bad, photograph extremely well. That's why there is so much crap around now, because it's easy to photograph and that's why you see it. The good stuff is not visible.