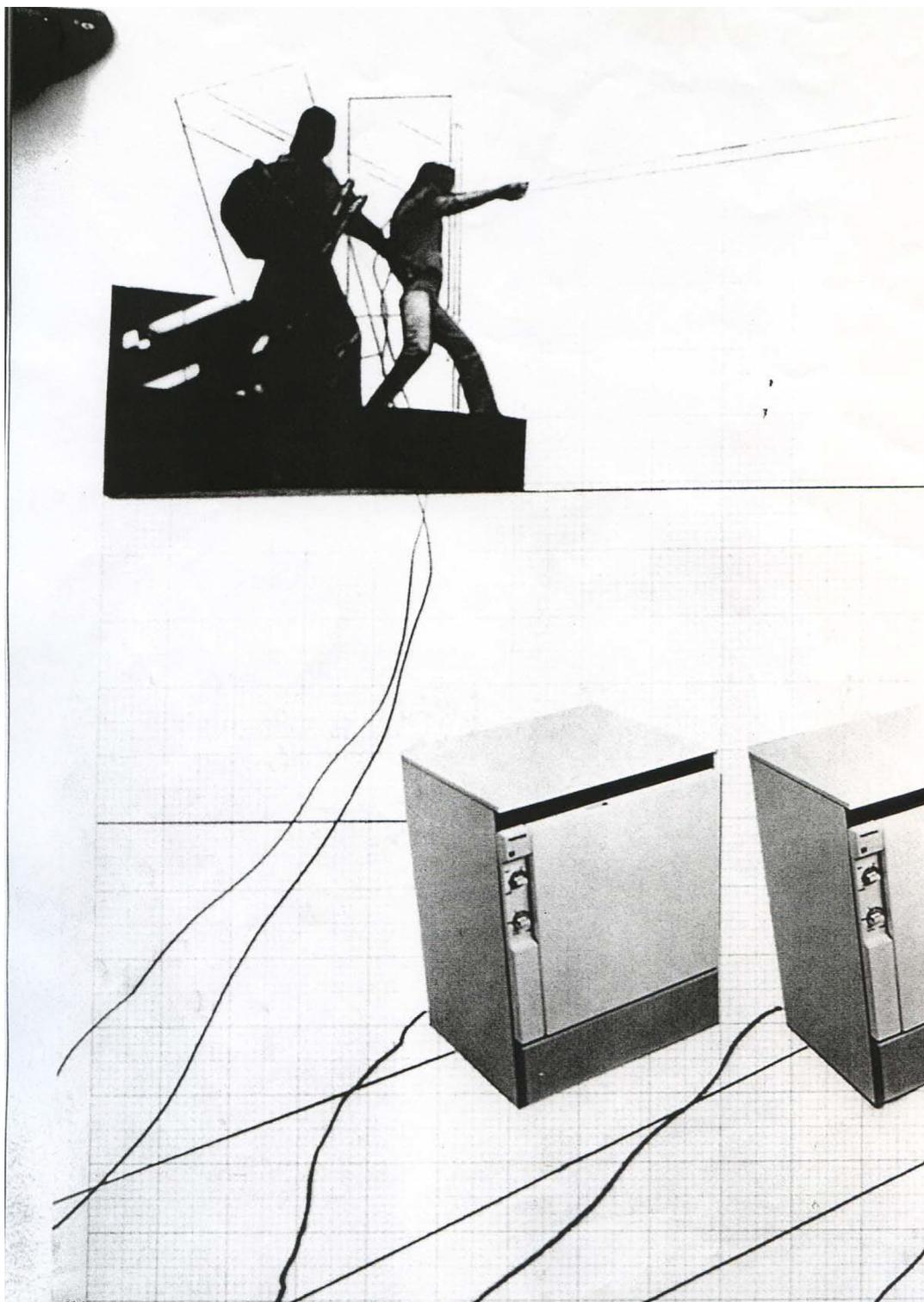


# Tanya Leighton



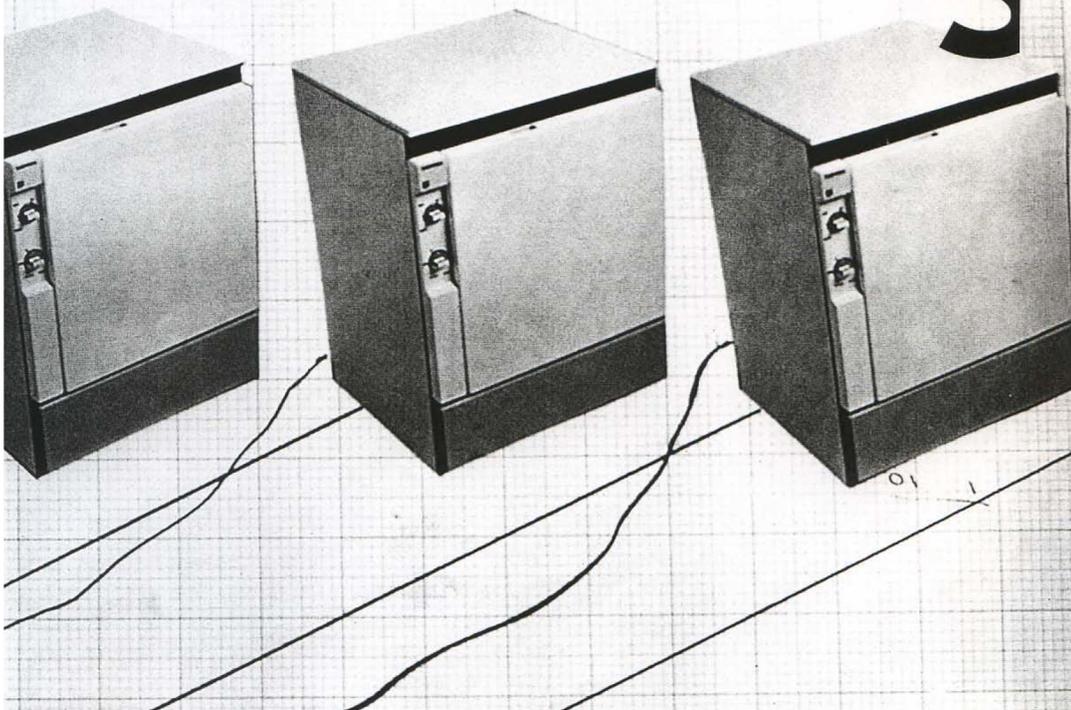
Wonderland, February 2006

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Tanya Leighton

**Bruce McLean's wide-ranging art has been influential since the 1960s. And he's still as inventive as ever, finds Nick Clarke**  
On meeting Bruce McLean for the first time, one is at once struck not by his obvious congeniality or lack of affectation, but by his complete and utter belief in his vocation. His certitude is almost overwhelming. And yet his conviction is so far-removed from arrogance that one cannot help but be drawn to him. >

# ANTI GRAVITA S



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# Tanya Leighton

***I have never followed rules. I always wanted to do my own thing, not what certain people say you should"***

> Whether that assurance, the determination to achieve his boldest ambitions, stems from his upbringing, in Glasgow, or is something that he has accrued from over 40 years at the forefront of the British contemporary art scene, is not immediately clear. However, it is not difficult to imagine that he would have imposed himself on to some part of our collective consciousness in some other way had it not been through the multitude of media with which he has expressed his artistic philosophies, and continues to do so.

"I have never followed rules. I always wanted to do my own thing, not what certain people say you should," he says. These are possibly what the rest of us may understand as that vague entity 'the establishment' - whether governments, local councils, the education system, art galleries, awards panels and even factions of the art-interested public. "When they can, everyone should always do their own thing," he adds.

McLean's career is characterised by a succession of bold moves and a number of qualities that have recurred throughout: questioning tradition and challenging conventions; tackling social and political issues with wit and intelligence; the pursuit of a unique and wholly individual language; and an apparent insistence that should one want something absolutely then absolutely anything is achievable.

These values are as dominant now as they were in his formative years studying under the tutelage Anthony Caro at St. Martin's College of Art in the early 1960s. Unceasingly questioning the prevailing attitudes to, and critical assumptions of sculpture at the College, McLean turned not to the American abstractionists to whom his contemporaries and teachers deferred, but rather began to interrogate the nature of not sculpture itself but the sculptor's pose. The semiotic function of the materials that he used, contrary to what had long been proposed by that art establishment, attained a nascent superiority over their practical usage.

In this respect, the early St. Martin's years were the embryonic stages in McLean's ongoing probing of the function and location of sculpture within time and space. Imagining and positioning the idea as separate from the object would be a deep-rooted theme for much of his career. Works such as *Pushed Over Sculpture*, *Sculpture for Wall and Pavement* and *Sculpture for Interior Space* (all 1967) were impermanent, ironic and openly challenged >

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Man of many parts  
Bruce McLean, at  
The Slade Art  
School, London.

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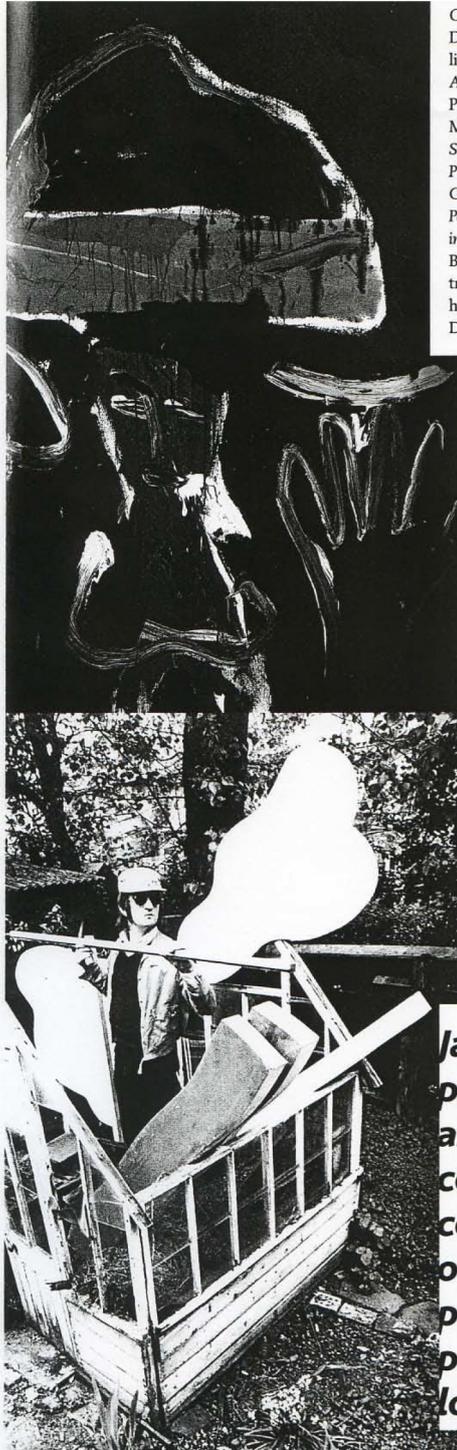
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# Tanya Leighton



Opening spread:  
Drawing collage for  
live work *Front Load  
Automatic* (1971).  
Previous page: Bruce  
McLean. Far left:  
*Simple Manners and  
Physical Violence* (Tate  
Gallery, 1986). Left:  
*People Who Make Art  
in Glass Houses* (1969).  
Below: Bruce McLean  
transforms his green-  
house into art (photo:  
Dirk Buwalda)

**Japan was a  
place of  
amazing  
contrasts and  
collisions. It's  
one of those  
places that  
people really  
love or hate."**

> what McLean perhaps regarded as outmoded notions of sculpture. Playfully riffing against such pretensions, the works existed not so overwhelmingly in the objects themselves, but in the act of their construction and their conceptual space. He audaciously proposed that sculpture should be re-thought in relation to its environment.

Through his career McLean has maintained variations on the same ideology. His performances with Nice Style, the 'World's First Pose Band', culminated in *High Up on a Baroque Palazzo* (Gayage, Covent Garden, 1974) and was a collaborative and subversive undertaking that highlighted the strictly visual aspects of rock performance. In a series of pastiches emphasising the pose and positioning of one, two or more individuals in relation to one another, he became, lampooning James Brown, the Godfather of Pose.

"It was a moment that slotted nicely between rock and punk and took bits of each. It was a lot of fun," he recalls. "But not to be taken too seriously. We developed a kind of unspoken language between us. We never rehearsed in the normal sense, but we had an understanding that comes with performance. I move my head and he moves to the left. He moves forward and someone else moves right."

There is an intriguing photograph of the members of Nice Style lifting dumbbells, climbing rope and stretching in an old-school gymnasium, clad in white short and sports vests. Did they really train for these performances? The Godfather of Pose rocks back on his chair and chuckles. It is apparent that the best theatrical intentions of the picture have been achieved. "In a gym? No. Never".

Sorry, *A Minimal Musical in Parts* (1977) stressed ideas of bureaucratic control and restriction, particularly within the art world, and contained a stanza, *Ways of Viewing Mackerels and Mandolins*, in which McLean, balancing on a ladder, attempted to hang a fish and a musical instrument from a 30-foot pole, while *The Masterwork/Award Winning Fishknife* (Riverside Studios, 1979, in collaboration with Paul Richards) combined, with typical versatility, performance, pose and a score by Michael Nyman. Years of preparation in the form of drawings, sketches, collages and paintings, concluded to again interrogate and challenge relationships between space, light, sound and objects faced with petty bureaucratic moral conformity. >

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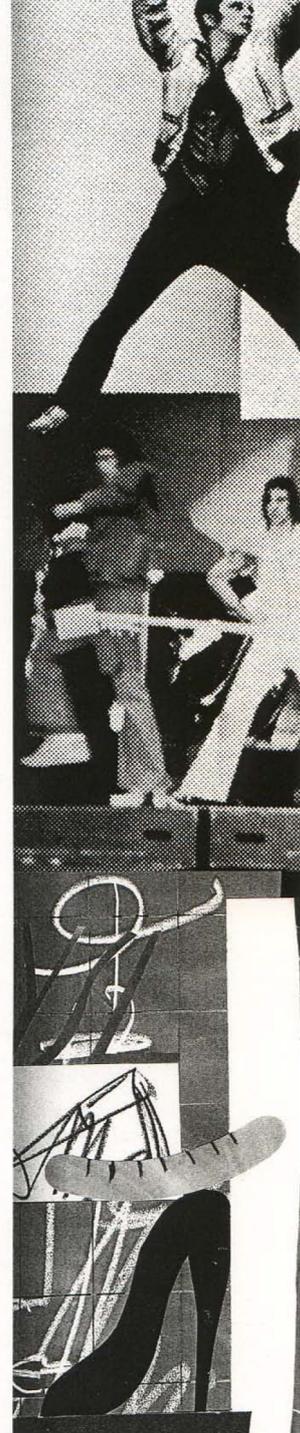
**moment that slotted nicely between rock and punk and took bits of each. It was a lot of fun, not to be taken too seriously”**

> Time spent in Berlin saw McLean tackle painting with a new vigour and, as had been the case in London, subject the German art scene to his characteristic satirical dynamism and virtuosity - focused in part around the near-nationalistic veneration with which the artistic community held Joseph Beuys, a man whose talent McLean admired but whose quasi-religious status contradicted his own values. In October 1982 a trip to Japan “exceeded all expectations” and captivated him with its juxtaposition of frantic sights, sounds, smells and ceremonies and exquisite tranquillity. His painting *Oriental Garden, Kyoto* (1982) won him first prize at the 1985 John Moores Liverpool Exhibition, a painting which Mclean himself refers to with blushing mischievousness as “a celebration of big fish in small ponds”.

“It was a really wonderful place,” McLean says. “All the amazing contrasts and collisions, and especially the smells. The smell of the food, and streets. It is like no other country. I think it’s one of those places that people really love or really hate. No half-measures. But it is definitely a place that I would love to go back to.”

Today, alongside a multitude of different projects and concepts, he takes perhaps greatest satisfaction from the challenge of working on the design and construction of a new primary school in Ayrshire, Scotland with his son Will and local architect David Watts. Due to open this August, the project is funded in part by the Scottish Lottery and Local Education Authority. All materials are locally sourced and local builders and craftsmen are being prioritised and employed. There is no mistaking the pride with which McLean describes the idea of proactively involving the community, including the local children, who will ultimately attend, in the venture.

The school itself, of course, is far from conventional, being organically designed around notions of non-structured, inter-relating disciplines, far removed from traditional concepts of learning. It is “education in the environment” - in part, in the sound, smell, touch of the building itself - and yet its unconventionality is entirely logical. Like much of McLean’s work, its beauty lies in its absolute refusal to consent to traditionally accepted norms of both language and dogma, while simultaneously challenging the spectator to contradict it. >



# Tanya Leighton



Top left: *Grab It While You Can*, part of *British Thing* (Sonja Henie Niels Onstad Foundation, Oslo, 1972). Left below: *Another Bad Night Out on Sausage Street*, 1998. This page: *Mirror Work*, Barnes

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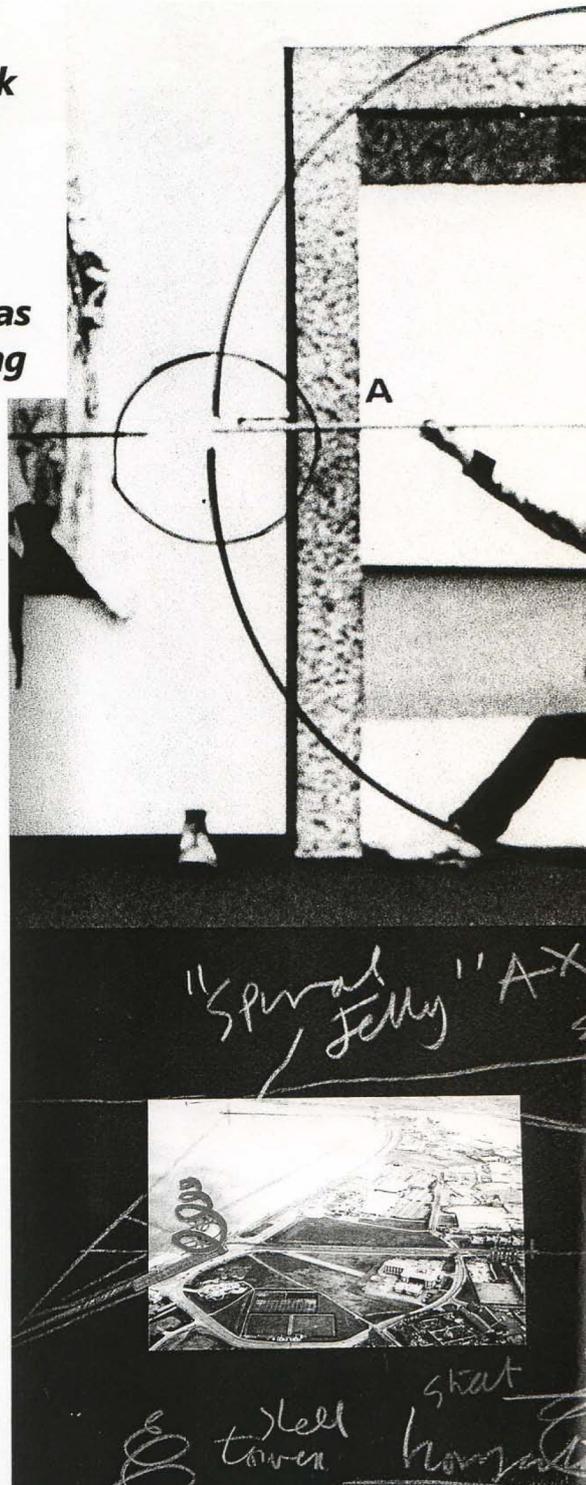
**He admits  
that to break  
notions and  
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things he  
sometimes  
makes it up as  
he goes along**

> In placing this alongside the works that he regards as his most personal and lasting - others include *Urban Turban*, *Promenade*, *Kilometre Theatre*, *Storehouse/Starehouse* and ongoing architectural concepts such as *The Arch of Art*, and *Pavilion for Parliament* - the sense of its private importance becomes apparent. Throughout his career McLean has been nothing if not prolific and diverse.

Until March 11th of this year the art gallery Chelsea Space is holding what McLean calls a "process-pective" of his work. The closing date, in an act of deliberate, distinctive playfulness, is the same on which, in 1972, the artist held his burlesque, one-day retrospective, *A King for a Day*, at the Tate, a short walk across the courtyard from the Chelsea Space. Showing is an ever shifting and changing, only loosely planned catalogue of all McLean's work, including painting, film, sculpture, photography, music, manifestos, and ceramics. Far from a statement of finality, McLean has called this display of 40 years of his work the "end as the beginning", representing both a continuing journey and, suitably, an actual work in its own right.

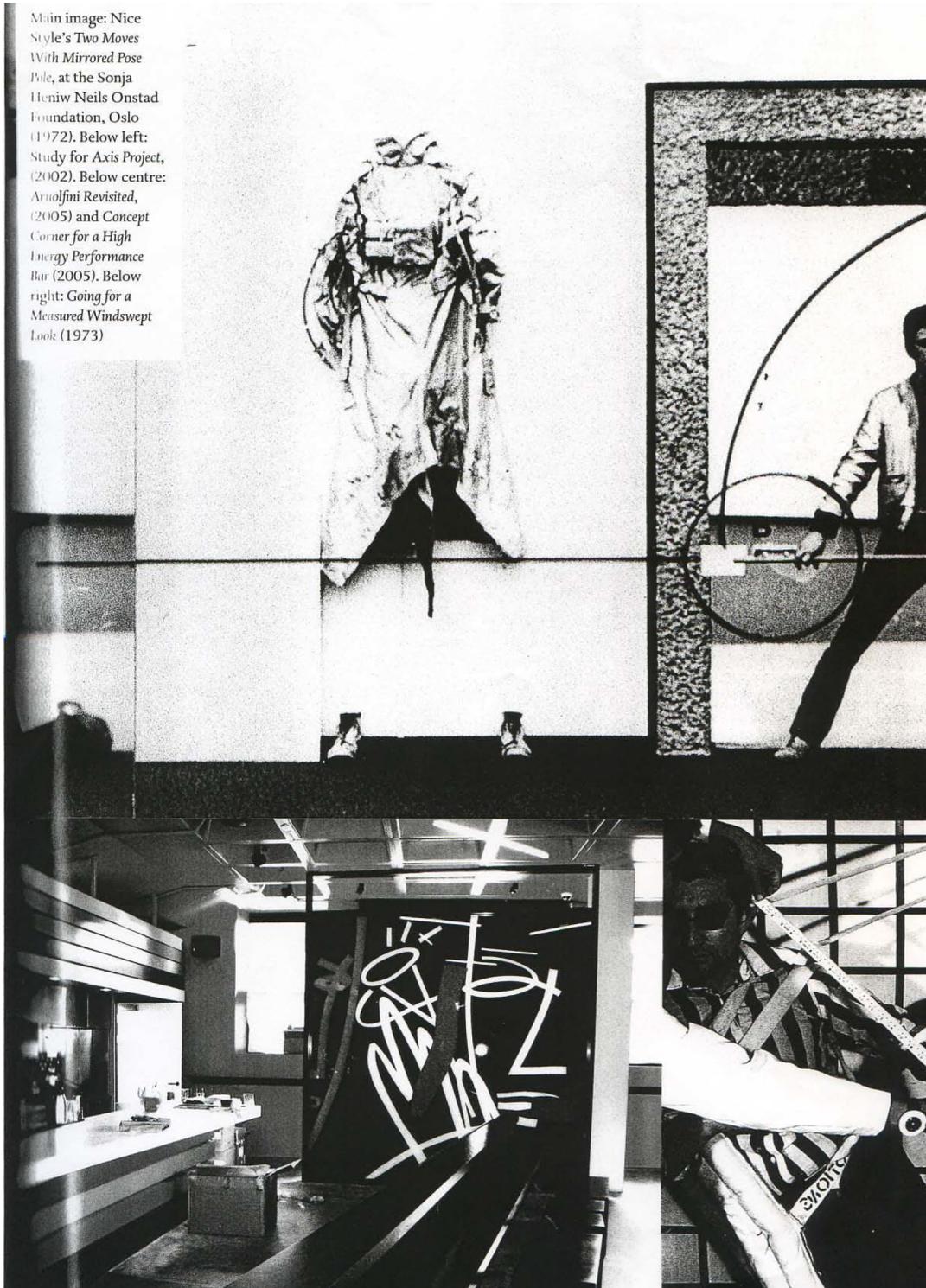
While he remarks that the "money and boutiques no-longer interest me", it confirms the impossibility in predicting in which direction McLean's career may unfold from here. He admits himself that in continuing to "break notions and question things" he sometimes "makes it up" as he goes along, but he certainly has no intention of ceasing. In a career in which he has perpetually contested the boundaries of convention and pursued his own artistic manifesto with a vitality and energy that some of today's younger artists might find exhausting, this current exhibition appears to be another milestone in an insatiable, ongoing passage of resolute purpose and poise. ●

Bruce McLean is at the Chelsea Space, Chelsea College of Art & Design, Millbank, London SW1. For more info see [chelsea.arts.ac.uk](http://chelsea.arts.ac.uk)



# Tanya Leighton

Main image: *Nice Style's Two Moves With Mirrored Pose Pole*, at the Sonja Heniw Neils Onstad Foundation, Oslo (1972). Below left: *Study for Axis Project*, (2002). Below centre: *Arnolfini Revisited*, (2005) and *Concept Corner for a High Energy Performance Bar* (2005). Below right: *Going for a Measured Windswept Look* (1973)



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