

Head — Into the Black: McLean Edwards

ANDREW FROST

AND SO IT CAME TO PASS that I was driving McLean Edwards in my wife's car to an opening of his work at Goulburn Regional Gallery. It was September 2010 and the long, white concrete road stretched out before us albedo brilliant under a blue, cloud-flecked springtime sky.

We'd paused along the way, parking the car in a rest stop named for a Victoria Cross recipient, and smoked our cigarettes. We'd gazed out over that odd green hinterland that is not quite country nor really still city; distant airliners climbing, fences, cows. McLean ashed on the grass with some apparent distaste saying he'd considered moving out that way, perhaps buying a property for his family where he might paint in a shed, but admitted he'd abandoned the idea as impractical. And he was right. It wouldn't really make sense for McLean to live in the country anyway. As a non-driver all the pubs and shops are too spread out for walking and as an artist he still loves the vibe and hustle of the Sydney art world. He is an outsider of the inside, ruefully considering the world from the windows of his Chippendale studio-slash-apartment, smoking cigarettes, reading art magazines and only going out for openings and functions where he might wear a new suit, shiny shoes and maybe make friends with the artists he admires.

But, anyway, the drive to Goulburn. We were chatting about nothing really when he asked me what I was going to write about for this article. I had to admit I hadn't started writing it, nor really had thought about it much, but the truth of it was I had thought of it *quite a lot* and wasn't entirely sure how to get started. The problem with his painting is that it's so singular that any plan to compare him meaningfully to any other living Australian artist is a rum job. David Bromley? John Brack? No.

The other problem was that my own research in the arts has lately taken something of a bizarre turn into American painters of the early 19th century. As we drove I asked McLean what he thought of Thomas Cole (1801-1848), and after explaining who he was (eccentric, English-born historical curiosity, painter of colossal, cinematic destruction), he replied frankly: 'Why should I care about Thomas Cole?' Good point.

Writing and thinking about art demands a concentration of the facts at hand and then speculating on the possible outcomes of meaning and implication. You know – *art writing*. I have no time for it, frankly, but the job always draws you back to the work of living artists making art now, and you have to account for it. My own history with McLean's work began with a chance encounter with a painting hanging in a restaurant in Bondi. This was around 1998 and I was working for an art market magazine and was on the lookout for interesting new artists to cover. Sitting in the restaurant eating my pasta I gazed at the image of a young man in cricket whites wearing a lady's sun hat. It was painted in oils, the figure centre of frame, a light green void for the background. Then a few weeks later a gallery invitation



arrived and I realised the painting was one of McLean's. I interviewed him for the magazine and discovered someone unafraid of citing some fairly dusty artists: Rembrandt, Goya and Nolan. His admiration for the artists turned out to be more a sense of kinship with their dedication to their work, and the higher ideals of figurative painting.

Some years later while reading a glossy English art magazine – the kind of magazine so confident they don't need any cover text, just big pictures of attractive looking things – I read a curious statement by a writer whose name I have long forgotten. In a review on an abstract painter the writer claimed that the work an artist produces is akin to a worldview, which is to say that their work is testament to a bigger idea about the world and the artist's place within it. The work discussed was gestural abstraction, and thinking about this notion of a 'worldview' I immediately thought of the now comedic cliché of the masculine abstractionist, that hard-drinking ethos of he-man, can-do and will-to-conquer utopianism. Instead, the writer had a completely opposite view, that abstraction was a kind of muddle-headed plea by the artist asking to be loved.

One of the key elements of McLean's work is the figure. The evolution of his work over the past ten years has seen the development of a painterly practice that can render a figure from a baseline of impressive skill. A notable feature is the restless and oftentimes odd-seeming placement of McLean's figures. *Disco Boat* (2010) from the recent show is one of these inimitable compositions that cascades its images from right to left: a figure on the right stretching from top to bottom, then a crowded collection of figures and objects including a bottle, a sailing boat, a kettle, another smaller boat under pink clouds, all going leftwards in triangular fashion, and then a blackness that is both solid



and porous, signalled by two blue shapes rather like think-bubbles – one showing a palm tree on a desert island and the other blue and irregularly shaped – that pop in and out of the blackness; windows to the other side, but portioned from this reality by the oozy black. *Red Pot Twirler* and *Munch Money – Time and Money* (both 2010) have the same playful rendering of space: *Red Pot* slides left to right through figures into a night-time suburban scene bottom right; *Munch Money* features a group of figures surrounding a central figure festooned with watches. The figure group is placed over what might be a purple, star-dotted sky.

Thinking back on that claim that a painting presents a worldview, what might one conclude from McLean's pictures? Certainly, the autobiographical content and association of the pictures comes pretty close to the personality of the artist, and has the same kind of sour comedy as Philip Guston. The Brack comparison isn't way off the mark since both artists have an idiosyncratic approach to the illustrative and slightly schematic rendering of character and setting.

The autobiographical impulse and the rendering of the figure asserts the primacy of the artist as author but also of the viewer. That the narrative of McLean's pictures remains tantalisingly ambiguous insofar as a definitive meaning is always obscured (no matter how many suggestions are laid out before the viewer) means we're allowed into the picture in a way that abstraction denies. There are many contemporary Australian painters whose figuration is the opposite – a range of artists that would include, at one end of the scale Adam Cullen, and at the other, Robert Hannaford. Of those that come close to McLean's sensibility is Noel McKenna and, perhaps not such an obvious comparison, Del Kathryn Barton. Like McLean's painting, their work has warmth and expresses a somewhat eccentric worldview.

Of course this doesn't really account for the other major factor of McLean Edwards's painting, that is, the suggestion of the *negative dialectic*, the thing that is *not present*. Thinking about pictorial space in historical painting such as that found in the works of Thomas Cole, or for that matter in any of the pre-Modernists, is the suggestion of infinite space. While the sublime spectacle in these pictures is as simulated as that found in cinema or photography, a consideration of its depiction is to also admit that, in the era post-Modernity, pictorial space is plastic, a skein through which it's impossible to pass. It seems to me that once a gesture is apparent, the plasticity of the surface is apparent too. Counter intuitively, the simulation of space and the figurative relations within it are circumscribed by the gesture. Let me put that another way – you know it's a picture of something but it's not real.

Those backgrounds in McLean's paintings have the same conviction as stage sets; this is a stage on which the characters play but, conceptually at least, we also know that if we're going to trust in the literal truth of these metaphors, then beyond the stage set is the rest of the universe. In the odd picture, McLean plays with this queasy sensation of blocking the crushing awesomeness of infinitude. *Art Student #1* (2010) (see p.10) is the most obvious example, with its double-figure set against what one might think is some marine ply, but is some line work over yellow. *Down Hill Racer* (2010) ditches the simulation for painterly affect, the yellow suited figure blending with the background. In these pictures it's as though the artist is admitting to a secret past as an abstract painter, the figures – man in the middle again, kangaroo-sock puppets around, and a collection of faces at his shoulder – falling into the stuff of creation.

The blackness at the back of McLean's paintings is a foreboding thing that is probably best left alone – yet it's a surface that holds the viewer's eye and won't let go. There's a fantastic vintage Warner Bros. cartoon called *Duck Amuck* (1953) where Daffy Duck gets stuck in a hellish scenario where the cartoon world around him keeps changing at the whim of an unseen animator: from a medieval fantasy, to a farm yard, to a snowfield with igloo, until finally Daffy is trapped under a heavy black curtain that comes down on him, an awful and enveloping blackness that he has to literally tear apart to survive. In McLean's paintings that blackness can move forward and back, capture the figure, release it, and then show the cast of characters the stars. If McLean's work really does have a worldview, it's one that says that there are vast infinities beyond, all at play under the unseen hand of the artist.

And so it came to pass that I was driving McLean Edwards in my wife's car to an opening of his work at Goulburn Regional Gallery. We'd get there, do the opening, then hit the town for a night of beer and gambling at the Goulburn Soldier's Club, fill an ice bucket with our winnings and then live to regret a late-night Chinese meal heavy on the garlic. But we'd have to get there first, along the road that goes over the horizon, along those white highways that head south. ➡

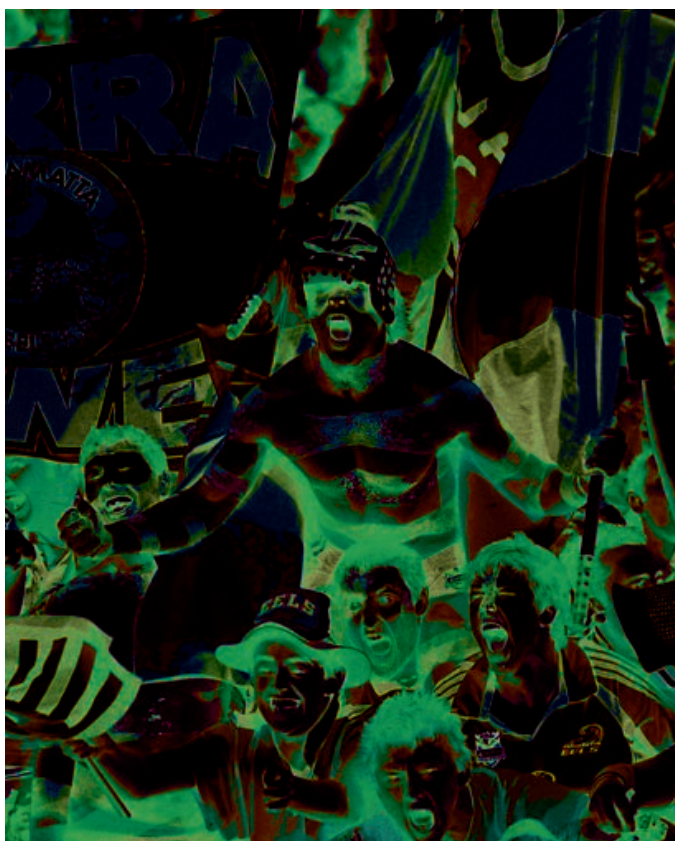
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McLean Edwards: Bad Habits was exhibited at Goulburn Regional Gallery, Goulburn, 25 August to 2 October 2010. McLean Edwards is represented by Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney, and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne. His next show at Martin Browne Fine Art will take place 25 August to September 19 2011.

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Andrew Frost is an art critic, writer and broadcaster. His articles have been published in a wide variety of Australian and international art magazines and he is a regular contributor to *The Sydney Morning Herald*. In 2007 ABC1 screened the three-part series *The Art Life*, and a second series in 2009, which Frost both wrote and presented. He is the author of the monograph *The Boys* (Currency Press) and is a Ph.D candidate at the College of Fine Arts, University of NSW.

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P23: *Disco Boat*, 2010, oil on canvas, 153 x 153cm.

P24: 1/ *Downhill racer*, 2010, oil on canvas, 183 x 153cm.
2/ *Munch Money - Time and Money*, 2010, oil on canvas 183 x 153cm.
3/ *Red Pot Twirler*, 2010, oil on canvas 183 x 153cm.

All images of work by McLean Edwards, courtesy the artist and Martin Brown Fine Art, Sydney.



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