

The Big Picture

IN JAPAN, SCOTTISH ARTIST JACK MCLEAN BRINGS WEIRD WORLDS TO LIFE—
ON SOME VERY LARGE EXPANSES OF CANVAS. BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ



Jack McLean with his *Nine salary men running with boxes on their heads while some kids play a three dimensional live game of hangman...*, 2012, oil, ink pen, and watercolor pencil on prepared canvas, 150 x 250 cm.

JACK MCLEAN FIRST traveled to Japan from his native Scotland in the early 1990s, when he was 30. He says he went “for adventure, to get as far away from Glasgow as possible and to practice karate.” Since then, McLean has become a husband and father, a black-belt expert in his favorite martial art, a master draftsman, and someone whose idea of a good time sometimes involves dressing up as a tree.

“I’ve always been interested in clichés and stereotypes, in looking for the unusual in what is most familiar,” says McLean. A down-to-earth, affable man, on the streets of Tokyo he both stands out and also—with the peculiar naturalness that typifies his drawings—blends right in. “When I was a child,” he recalls, “if I wanted to say something about a subject—bicycles or action figures, for instance—I would draw it. In elementary school, we had to bring in newspaper articles and make pictures to illustrate their stories. Once I illustrated a news item about a man who had



Jack McLean, *The blind lead the blind across the fallen tree to the command post Ex army lower leg amputees race by glum armed cops the check point staff are intoxicated...*, 2012, oil, ink pen, and watercolor pencil on prepared canvas, 150 x 250 cm.

killed his wife with a sledgehammer. The school’s administrators called my mother in for a talk, but she was used to my love of drawing and my imagination.”

McLean, who studied at the Glasgow School of Art, has also become known in the community of artists with which he is associated as the creator of some of the thematically strangest, physically largest drawings to be found anywhere. With their edgy, yet dreamy, atmosphere, they share affinities with the drawings of the American artist David Scher, and for their whimsy and sprawling, detail-packed compositions, they bring to mind something of the spirit of the eye-grabbing pictures in the British illustrator Martin Handford’s *Where’s Waldo?* books.

However, compared with such images, the mood of McLean’s is more offbeat, with an undercurrent of the unbelievable, the unsettling, or even the sinister. Into his monochromatic drawings in black ink on paper or canvas, some of which are mural-size, the artist packs countless overlapping scenes. Functioning as stand-alone “scenarios,” as McLean calls them, and as elements that are fully integrated into his expansive compositions, their protagonists include a wide range of characters. Among them: gaggles of goofy children; soldiers arriving on a beach in an amphibious landing craft, equipped not with guns but with sand pails and inflatable toys; an arena full of oddballs and familiar types, including a weary Jesus taking a break from bearing his cross; a herd of nameless Japanese “salary

men” (office workers); and a man dressed in a leaf-covered suit.

McLean’s rollicking compositions recall the vignette- and character-packed paintings of Pieter Brueghel the Elder. From which-ever detail or “scenario” a viewer’s eyes might land on, his or her gaze can meander endlessly through and around a McLean picture’s free-flowing, casts-of-thousands spectacle. In his art, buoyed by the perfectly illogical logic of Alice’s *Wonderland*, it seems completely natural that a man perched on a cherry picker would try to capture in his butterfly net a submarine careening off a waterfall, while another bystander pours himself a cup of water from a tap connected to a thicket of plumbing tubes supplied by the same, fast-moving cascade. Or that a bikini-clad, pistol-toting woman with a cowboy hat and boots should find herself riding a unicycle on a tightrope suspended high above what looks like a barbed-wire-enclosed playground for sheiks, lost soldiers, and tattooed tribesmen.

The titles of McLean’s drawings read like the summaries of the unfathomable story lines of fantasy novels. Some even predict the outcomes of some of the “scenarios” depicted within the vast compositions to which they refer, like this one, which reads in full: *Nine salary men running with boxes on their heads while some kids play a three-dimensional live game of hangman Fritz ex-Waffen SS watches a group of fatties on Gold Beach partying as British Forces No. 47 land on Normandy the hunter will die from the scorpion sting and the baby will drown oblivious of the*



From top: *Nine salary men running with boxes on their heads while some kids play a three dimensional live game of hangman...*, 2012, oil, ink pen, and watercolor pencil on prepared canvas, 150 x 250 cm; McLean pointing out a detail of the drawing.

monkey and fireman's futile attempts to rescue rub-a-dub-dub three men in a tub sailing the ocean black as sharks close in on the only known survivor of the torpedoing of the Empire Springbok the hand with the all-seeing eye drawn on the palm surfaces next to the semiconscious form of Charlie "bruiser" McLean shot down and never to fly again.

McLean's big drawings are some of his most recent creations. Their unusual character and content are related in spirit to the performance art pieces he has developed and presented live, either alone or with collaborators. In one such work, alongside a muscleman, a sex kitten, and a man in a fez, McLean dresses up as a clown—even though, as he admits, he “hates clowns.”

In another performance art work that is meant to be acted out without an audience, McLean enters a public park wearing a plain businessman's suit. There, in an out-of-the-way spot, he removes his jacket and trousers, turns them inside out, and slips them back on to reveal linings covered in green-nylon leaves (McLean did all the cutting and sewing himself). Dressed as just another plant in the park, the artist digs a hole in the ground—and that's it. The piece's combination of the bizarre and the utterly deadpan constitutes both its substance and its ethereal impact. McLean's tree man turns up next to his freshly dug hole in many of his drawings. The spirit of these creations is related to the work of the performance artists/conceptualists McLean



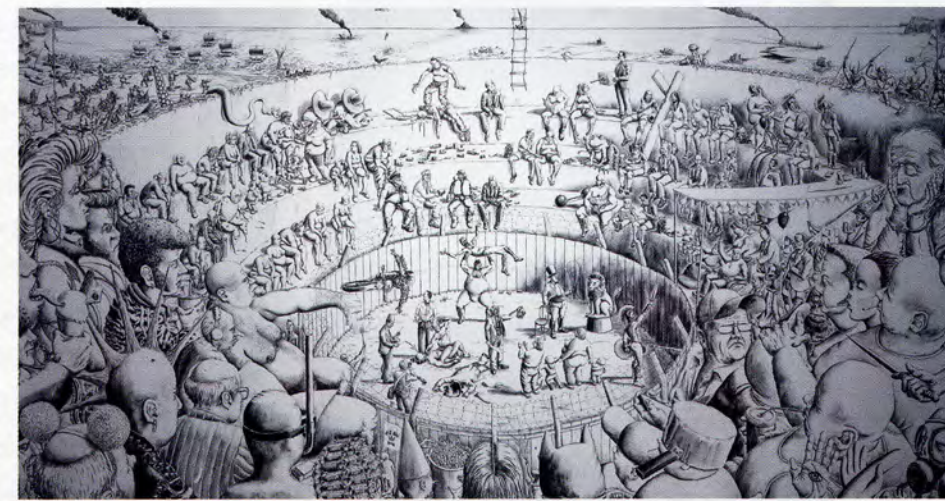
admires, including Chris Burden and Gilbert & George.

Before he began making his large pictures, McLean recalls, “I had been drawing regularly in hand-size notebooks for over 20 years. I drew—and I still draw—on trains while commuting, in coffee shops, anywhere. I wanted to try to recreate the compositions and narratives of the small drawings on an impressive scale. Technically, it wasn't too difficult, but it was more time-consuming. A drawing in my notebook takes a few hours; the large-scale drawings take three months or more.” McLean makes

drawings in his notebooks using pencils or ink pens. For his large works, he uses ink pens and watercolor pencils whose lines can be manipulated like paint with a water-filled brush.

In Tokyo, McLean shows his work at The Container, a tiny gallery in the hip Nakameguro district that is housed in a half-size metal shipping container. Its director, Shai Ohayon, is an Israeli-born conceptual-art aficionado who was educated in Toronto and London. “Although I normally do not show works like Jack's,” says Ohayon, “their unusual humor and mysterious character are strong, motivating ideas in their own right, and I think they appeal to people who like conceptual art. It's rare to come across images like these among the art that's being made today.”

Of his drawings, McLean observes, “Their scenarios are entertaining because they have humor, which usually is dark but which I think is very important in life. They represent the nonsense we're exposed to from an early age—social conditioning, religious hyste-



In the arena all the blood spilling is as usual the entertainment and brutality goes on and on the crowd are bored..., 2013, oil, ink pen, and watercolor pencil on prepared canvas, 150 x 250 cm.

ria or mass slaughter in the name of freedom.” In his pictures, he says, “There is nothing gratuitous or revolting.” He adds that, as an artist and observer of the familiar, funny or sometimes unimaginable ways in which people behave, he is simply trying to offer “a portrayal of the complexity and condition of life as I see it.”

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