



When Worlds Collide

Robert McCauley

ROBERT McCaULEY

Few relationships have been as complex and contradictory as that of humankind and nature. From the dawn of time to the present, human beings and their environment are tied together in a fundamental and whirling dance of death and life, of mutual need and destruction, of simultaneous impulses of worship and debasement. We evoke both nature and Nature, the former reflecting our dependence on the bounty of the earth for our sustenance, the latter denoting our spiritual need to understand our place on this truly interactive planet. Robert McCauley's recent work is as sensitive and thoughtful rumination on the ironies and contradictions of our various roles vis-a-vis nature as exists anywhere in contemporary art.

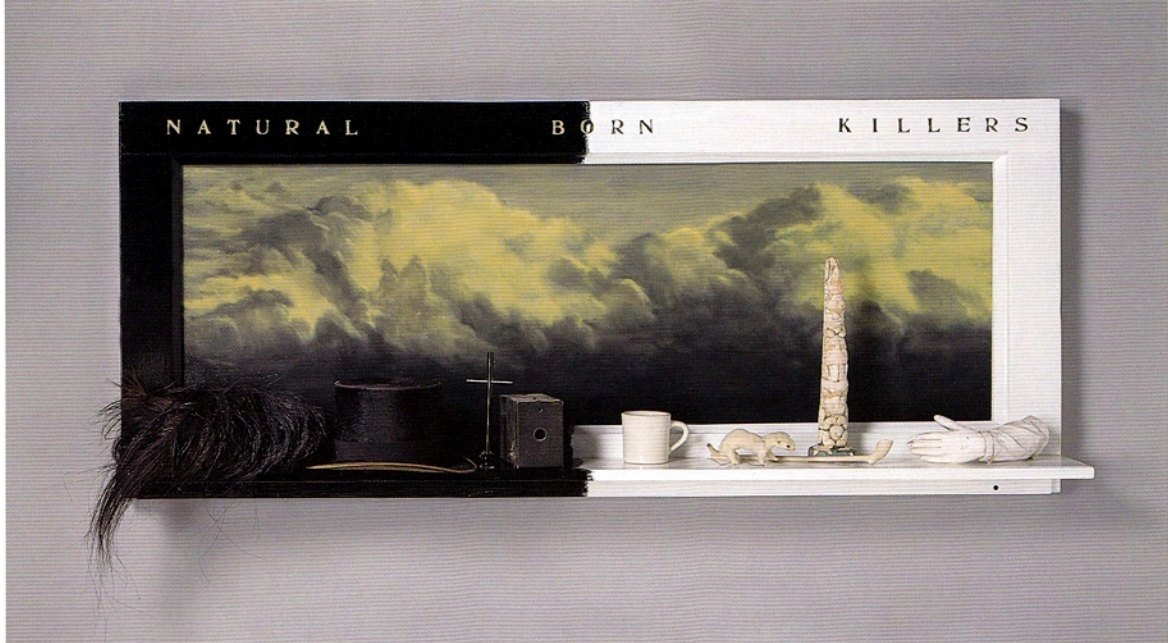
McCauley's work, however, does not take as its central focus such timely topics as the ecological assault of humans upon the land—he is no environmental activist, at least not as a primary aim. It is the construct of Nature, not nature, that seems to obsess him, the drive to understand what we have come to believe and enact about the sweep of Nature's majesty, to see in its breadth and power—and in its various physical and cultural interruptions by humans—a moral force and conflict, a contested metaphor that includes considerations of the spark of creation that animates all things. McCauley was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, and in his art he will return, sometimes specifically, and sometimes more generally, to the remnants of the frontier he witnessed, to those places in the verdant Northwest that seemed largely untouched and unmoved by human presence, while everywhere still groaning under its relentless pressure. McCauley brings us inexorably toward an intriguingly befouled Eden, and while we might find much of this tinged with regret, his work is more marked by a canny understanding of the inevitability of these processes, and by what is revealed within them.

It was during the 19th Century that America most directly confronted these pressures, as the seemingly inexhaustible frontier was met by a similarly inexhaustible ambition for profit and adventure. McCauley's painting evokes the sense of that moment, and can echo some aspects of the spirit of artists such as Frederick Church and Albert Bierstadt. He opts for broad and horizontal vistas, giving the sylvan land an open and panoramic view, and largely limits his color to a narrow range of grays, tans and cool blues, wreathing his locales in a kind of moody and historic haze. McCauley's painting, of course, is but one element in these assemblages; his treatment and employ of framing devices, texts, and his placement of found materials across the foreground of most of his works make these 'paintings' shift into objecthood. Picture, object, and word begin to mix in combinant interplay, each separate, and yet each interwoven, pulling ideas and transitions together into a somewhat somber and poetic whole.

There may be no more powerful metaphor of the majesty of nature's bounty in this hemisphere than Niagara Falls, and in *Death in the Wilderness* McCauley presents its breadth in oil on canvas, as have countless American artists before him. Its expression of the savage wonder of America's frontier gets adjusted by McCauley's placement of his canvas within a large black frame of his own construction, four bands of glossy darkness that contain and constrain the scene, with the title text embossed in gilt (guilt?) onto the top panel. McCauley builds a short shelf across the bottom of this assemblage, and places upon it a sequence of things that root the image in considering a moment of arrival and colonization. A smallish Native American totemic figure is surrounded by a retinue of elements that suggest in their accretion a riverboat gambler, with a crushed black velvet stovepipe hat, a cane, dice, and piano keys. Everywhere that humans go, death goes amongst them, and in a demonstration of historical compression, McCauley evokes the sense of the transition that took place in America a century or so ago, while the river and its Falls imperturbably run on. In *Natural Born Killers*, McCauley is even more explicit. Around a grand vista of sky McCauley presents a frame now divided into black and white halves. These shades seem selected not for racial implications, but for their tonal relation to the objects McCauley places on the shelf of the piece, and to suggest how something that appears in black and white is supposed to represent clarity and the unvarnished truth. Most of these particular objects bear residue of the many banners under which people destroy, even if unintentionally. Sometimes it happens in the name of God or gain or tourism, and sometimes it is done by men or by women, but McCauley's observation is that it is inevitable, almost a 'natural' manifestation of our exploitative urge. The earth abides, but just barely.

American Metaphor makes the circle complete. Upon his most sumptuous ebony black frame yet, McCauley embosses his title, and two additional texts as well: "Cultured Garden or Raging Wilderness," and "When You Go out in the Woods Today You're in for a Big Surprise." All this surrounds a painting depicting a pristine fir forest beginning to be consumed from within by a raging fire. It's a beautiful and wistful image of our exile from nature, of how we seem doomed to destroy what we love; raging garden or cultured wilderness might be closer to the impossible realities of what we wreak upon our environment. McCauley posits no solutions, this is an art of recognition, not redemption. His vision is to point out the parameters of the dilemma, and to root that in an openhanded understanding of history and that most chilling sounding of all things—human nature.

James Yood, Department of Art Theory and Practice,
Northwestern University, and Chicago Correspondent
to *Artforum*



ROBERT McCAULEY

Natural Born Killers

oil on canvas, found objects, wood, paint, 27" x 64" x 12"

1996



ROBERT McCAULEY

Death in the Wilderness (Niagara)

oil on canvas, found objects, wood, paint, 31" x 41" x 12"

1996

STORYTELLING

My family stories were mostly tree stories. Cutting trees, fearing trees, and paradoxically harboring a concern for the remaining old growth. Always looking toward the tops, watching for widow-makers. Reading the wind. Sometimes spotting traces of burial platforms. Dad was high school age, staying with my grandfather, a foreman for the English Logging Camp. Summers on Vancouver Island, fishing the creeks down to the salt water, and stumbling upon burial caves carved out by the waves. As one of my earliest memories, the burial platform stories burned images in my mind; images I could only imagine until 1993 when I discovered a 1914 Edward Curtis photograph of a Tsawatenok Tree Burial. There it was. Instantly I saw dad and Curtis standing in the same spot on the beach. I wanted to stand where they stood. With a Summer Research Grant from Rockford College, I went to the island. I met Edward Curtis and my father at the burial tree.

With a self-serving agenda, the timber industry on Vancouver Island proudly presents roadside billboards outlining the logging history of the adjacent forest, and announcing the date for the next harvest. Visitors are reassured that responsible management is at work, numbing the mind to the hideous clearcut areas which are thinly disguised by a narrow, roadside greenbelt reducing the forests to dioramas. One of these signs records a 1930 timber harvest. That could be my father and his father. I'm on the right track. Another sign informs that a wild fire burned through in 1967. I read the trees before seeing the sign. I saw the evidence three miles away. Second growth silver snags burned clean to expose the old growth stumps with springboard notches. The verdant reforestation inundates but doesn't deserve the classification of biodiversity. I have always been in awe of fire in the woods; I have experienced it firsthand.

Early morning at Fort Rupert, a historic and contemporary Native American village on Vancouver Island's Inside Passage. The Big House, with painted and carved images on the front, guarded by one totem, flanked by two others (with real hair) supporting a raven image. In complete silence, I gradually became aware of a sound, as if the volume had slowly been turned up as I gazed at the surrounding area. The only movement of the morning accompanied the sound. A man mowing the grass near the Big House. Spotting me, he stopped the motor, and approached. Said he could let us into the Big House if we'd like. As we walked inside, the dark space overpowered the senses. Like a church, Marlene said. Absolutely. What churches were meant to be. The smell of cedar was pungent. In the center of a moist sand floor was a circle of stones, blackened from a recent fire. In the ceiling, an opening, like a skylight, the remnant of the openings from which dancers would drop to the floor as if from the sky. Our host said that was old ceremony, since the ceiling on this house was so high as to risk life and limb if

attempted. He pointed to a cedar bleacher area where the elders sit, beating drums and singing, while dancers moved in a circle counterclockwise around the fire. I could imagine the sound: deafening. I could conjure the smoke, the smell, the dancers, the stories. He was emotional when telling us that the dancers dance to the four corners of the room as the four directions of the world, paying respect to all peoples, not just their tribe. If a dancer did not move in the prescribed manner, the potlatch debt would be on that dancer. He laughed because in the past that was a very serious matter. Life-altering. But now, though they take these issues seriously, a tribal member's life isn't affected if a mistake is made. "We now laugh at the mistakes". We talked about his culture and his religion. His mother was steadfast Christian; his father deeply-rooted in the Kwakwaka'wakw culture. The product of this collision of beliefs, he had begun to question the Christian teachings, because that god had failed him and his people. Admitting ignorance of his own native culture, he was none-the-less excited and moved by what he'd already learned, and was anticipating what was yet to come.

A foggy morning, two years later, again at Fort Rupert, a solitary figure approached. His name is Tom Wilson, a tribal elder. He told of his elderly aunt who had recently passed away. In 1914, when she was four, she was in the ceremonial wedding canoe documented by Edward Curtis in his film "From the Land of the Headhunters" (I have a copy). As the fog lifted, Tom pointed to the island featured in the film. As interested as we were in his stories, he was entranced by our story of a chance meeting with Scotty Pippin on Michigan Avenue.

Half a mile from where I lived in Washington State runs Carpenter's Creek, from which, at a very young age, I caught small native trout. I could see the fish against the gravel bottom. That was late spring. In the summer, I would hike up the mountain to fish in a beaver pond. And in the fall, biennially, I would sojourn daily to the creek to catch sight of the return of a small run of spawning dog salmon, their dorsal fins breaking the surface of the shallow stream. Their timing was exact. As the creek widens slightly and slows through farmland, small boats with outboard motors would troll the narrow channel, both gunwales brushing grassy banks. This announced the fall run of searun cutthroat.

Now the land at the creek's source has been drained, the stream is a trickle, and the much-reduced flow is overwhelmed by grass and algae. Years ago, when I last saw the salmon, a single pair swam the gauntlet. The dog salmon have vanished. The beaver pond was drained for development, and the entire mountain has been clearcut. In my lifetime, this small ecosystem has been devastated. Now people will tell a different story. R.M., 1997

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Cover Image:

Contact (Haida Village of Massett)

oil on canvas, plaster arm (swings and scratches arc in painting),
copper, wood, 75" x 64" x 6"

1996



ROBERT McCAULEY

Identity Is More Geography Than Blood

oil on canvas, lead, rope, wood, 34" x 30" x 6"
1997