

ROBERT MCCAULEY



ALONE IN THE WILDERNESS

ROBERT MCCAULEY



A Retrospective



October 28, 2005—January 22, 2006



Rockford Art Museum

ALONE IN THE WILDERNESS

Robert McCauley has created a mode of realism that is haunting and full of ambiguity. His distinctive animals manage to seem literal and symbolic at the same time. The lucky viewer is suspended pleasureably between these realms.

BILLY COLLINS

U.S. Poet Laureate, 2001–2003

On the days that he does not teach, you will find my dad heading out to the studio early in the morning, cup of coffee in hand, Sparky following close behind.

His belief in a fervent studio ritual has proven the most valuable point both in theory and practice that is evident in the stunning body of work that has emerged from his studio over the past 30 years (he's been in the studio longer, I just haven't been around that long to recapitulate).

The form of my dad's work has assumed many guises: very early paintings and drawings that were raw and frenetic; quiet sculpture with perhaps a nod to minimalism; assemblages that threatened to take over a room (perhaps a loud response to the quiet sculpture); the marriage of painting and assemblage; the marriage of painting and literature. That brings us to the present and, in my opinion, the best work he has ever done: Painting. His current work is the most commanding visually and yet the most unambiguous work he has achieved. This time, there is no object or phrase to upstage the work. It is what it is.

Unlike the form of my dad's work, the content of his work has remained consistent through the years. With untold studio hours logged, he has figured out how to say it better visually.

ROBIN K. MCCAULEY

Artist, Art Instructor

California State University, Northridge

Geez. Has it been that long? I have always mused whether I too would be a statistic of post graduate art student attrition. So many migrate away from art for so many reasons, some of their own making, but often because of the misalignment of their planets. Would there be an external event, an instant, incident or even a slow atrophy of my art brains? Cobwebs. The windows of my studio dark. The studio gradually morphing back into a garage, full of boxes marked "garage sale items". Lawn mower and snow blower. Bird seed and field mice.

I can probably breath a little easier now, after nearly four decades of making art. But I'm still on guard, still protective of the ritual, and yes, quite a bit defensive (still) against a world that is relentless in its pressure to stop the silliness. My mechanic friend comments that while he has to maintain the engines of his customers, all I have to do is fine-tune myself, day in and day out. Maybe I've survived this long because early on, I purged the guilt feelings about my self-indulgence. I am exercising free will. I'm livin' the dream, baby! I have lived the dream. I will continue to live the dream. All the tenses.

This retrospective will make chronological sense of the evolution of the work. That's more than I can say about my brain's ability to organize and edit. All those pieces of art are with me every day. They've not left me for an instant. I truly would like to get them out of my head, but they won't go. Once stuff is in your head, there's no way to remove it. I need a *delete* key. So this exhibition is for the viewer. Not memory lane for me. Rather, a sensory overload. I wonder if the viewer will discover what I already know: that the work has hardly changed over all these years. It's actually just one big, drawn-out piece that seems to take forever to finish.

ROBERT MCCAULEY

Professor and Chairman

Art Department, Rockford College

INTRODUCTION

Pick out the painting inside this painting, framed in black, and see the artifice of harmony: A single mountain top, parallel clouds and a rise of tree tops below. Deny the truck, the road, the ruin, this painting tells us, and you can enjoy the frame.

McCauley has spent more than 30 years articulating his position, and it's a slippery one.

No one can return to nature, and no one can avoid it, either. We create constructs within constructs that shape and fail to shape the world. Like Mark Tansey, McCauley is absorbed in art history, which is another kind of nature.

Both painters work by feints and starts, alluding to other art and slipping in and out of various philosophies, the way the fashionable try on shoes in stores. If reality cannot be accounted for, then it can, at the very least, be toyed with.

There the similarities end. Tansey has a light, nervous style, tending to monochromes and leaving the impression (undoubtedly false) that he works quickly and makes no claims to permanence. His line is so light, the ground that bears it might almost be an Etch-A-Sketch: here one moment and gone the next.

McCauley paints with a slow hand, articulating rich form in ripe light, creating peak moments of being. Then he undercuts them. As David Hockney once wrote in the sky of an early drawing as a monster launched itself to attack a vulnerable stick figure, "Don't worry. This is a still."

With his insistence upon the stage set, McCauley insists on painting as a pause, acknowledging the frozen moment, and yet, his bears seem to be holding still only momentarily, bristling with buffoonish intensity.

A McCauley bear illustrates the cover of Billy Collins's latest book of verse, "The Trouble with Poetry," (Random House, 2005). There's gold light around the edges of its big, half-cocked ears, a Fragonard sky behind him and a Rembrandt light slanting across one side of his long snout.

OUT THERE ON THE CLEARCUT II, 2003



While Collins is a wonderful poet, beloved by many, including me, I'd like to see McCauley's bear linked with other verse. If he's going to illustrate a text, with titles tattooed in white across his black chest, then it should be Theodore Roethke's, especially "Four for Sir John Davies," Part One:

"Is that dance slowing in the mind of man / That made him think the universe could hum? / The great wheel turns its axle when it can; / I need a place to sing, and dancing-room, / And I have made a promise to my ears / I'll sing and whistle romping with the bears. / For they are all my friends: I saw one slide / Down a steep hillside on a cake of ice,— / Or was that in a book? I think with pride: / A caged bear rarely does the same thing twice / In the same way: / O watch his body sway! / This animal remembering to be gay."

McCauley's bear does not illustrate the poem, just as the poem does not explain the painted bear. They are equal experiences, vibrations humming along the same frequency and tending to fuse.

McCauley was born and raised in Mt. Vernon, Washington, graduating from Western Washington University in 1969 and from Washington State University in 1972 with a Master of Fine Arts degree.

As long-time professor in the art department at Rockford College in Illinois, he has been living outside the Northwest



TRAVELERS III, 2005

for a long time, and still there is about his work a distinctly Northwest sensibility, of nature flowing up the streets into stores, classrooms and theaters to assert itself amid human culture.

Out of our hats we pull real rabbits, and our real gardens are full of imaginary toads.

In "Smallpox Drawings," McCauley drew Northwest Coast Native American totem poles, lines of them in oil pastel and pencil. He painted them lightly, as emblems for the people whose world views shook as they collided in contact with less subtle others.

That shape echoes through his work, the original form line fleshed out into the animal alluded to through carved and painted abstractions. McCauley's totems become his version of Hick's "Peaceable Kingdoms," verticals instead of horizontals.

Bears climb all over each other, embracing rabbits. Turtles ride on each other's backs, stacked with stubby limbs extended, as if swimming through the air.

Art history is never far from his mind. The roots of abstraction can be found in a zebra, and a brief history of monochromatic painting can be surveyed on a polar bear's shaggy person. The fur is a tangle of whites with blues buried beneath, like glacial ice.

Is there hope for us? Yes indeed, if we dance with our animal nature, like "G. Catlin and Friends," allowing the bear to rest its shaggy paw on our shoulder as stage lights hit the scenery and we prepare to take a bow.



SURVEYING THE MINIMALIST LANDSCAPE, 2002