

Chad McCail

The work of the Scottish artist Chad McCail is nothing less than daring. It is daring for its artistic subject matter, it is daring for its artistic style and, last not least, it is daring for taking an artistic stand.

First, consider the subject matter. In *Relationships Grow Stronger*, a screenprint from 2007, the first print the artist produced in collaboration with Edinburgh Printmakers, we can witness a common farewell scene. A man and a woman send a group of teenagers on their way to plant a tree. There is nothing unusual about the scene itself. The featureless faces and generalised architecture point at the everyday quality of the action that is taking place; one generation is sending the next one on its way. The rather uncommon feature in the centre of both composition and the narrative is the tree to be planted. On its branches, we can make out male and female genitalia, a consummate metaphor of blooming sexuality. It is important to note that this sexuality is not presented in any lewd, ambiguous or titillating way.

In McCail's work, the tree symbolises budding individual independence as much as society's maturity in dealing with sexuality and gender relations. Such maturity and the way of attaining it is important in all of McCails works. In *Puberty 2*, the viewer witnesses another scene of a metaphorical coming-of-age: two groups of young adults can be made out in the landscape in front of our eyes. To the right, young man and a young woman seem to be embracing and kissing in the woods. They are surrounded by nature, seemingly alone, and unaware of any onlookers. Not too far away, however, we can make out a far less tranquil scene. Another group is standing in the woods, not embracing, but obviously engaged in an important discussion. Three figures surround a fourth one; their body language suggests a serious, but reasoned argument – signalling sympathy, but calling for calm. The calm seems needed, for the figure in the centre of the group is enraged to the point of transformation: jealously pointing at the embracing lovers in the woods, the figure has sprouted the head of a raging bear. In a way similar to the previous print, McCail uses a metaphorical break with the depicted reality to heighten the message of his work: here jealously, the green-eyed monster, has taken over the emotions of a young adult. The theme of emotional and sexual distress is well known from the

Greek plays to those of Shakespeare, but whereas the psychological didactics of renaissance drama might have led to the strangling of an unfaithful lover, McCail's interest lies in how the group, how society deals with such distress of one of its members. His wild bear of jealousy is not being kept from crying foul. Emotion is not repressed or hidden away, only to resurface in a sudden outburst at a different time. Instead, other members of the group – society – stay with the individual. Taking the hurt individual's anger into account, the group allows for its expression and responds with reasoned argument and reflective understanding.

McCail's strong belief in the power of self-reflection, mature argument and the role of society as mediator of these values can be found in many more of his works.

Puberty 3 demonstrates this. In the idealised setting of a school or an otherwise public, instructional environment, a group of three adolescents and two women are discussing a picture. The students and teachers are sitting on chairs or on the tables, the setting is relaxed, yet conducive to debate. One of the adults is holding up a pornographic image. Stylistically clearly distinguished from the surrounding print, the image serves as a negative example to McCail's ideal: the person on it is objectified, reduced to the centrefold convenience of a commercialised sexuality. The figures in the print seem to understand that. Without taking sensationalist umbrage, the group is discussing the image with untroubled gestures. McCail renders the ideal of a communal teaching situation, in which young adults are instructed to act as a responsible corrective to the problem of commodified sexuality.

Another example of such communal teaching would be **Puberty 7**. In this print, the older generation is handing over yet a different kind of responsibility to the younger one: that of violence and the power to inflict not emotional, but physical harm. In contrast to sensationalist expectations of knifecrime and random stabbings, here the young adults are shown to be trusted to find their own way to handle this metaphorical tool. In the background, recalling the symbolism of the grandmother handing over a spade to aid the planting of the tree in *Relationships grow stronger*, an old man is carefully handing over knives to a group of teenagers. Two figures stand out in the foreground. The figure on the left is tentatively cutting the hand held out by the figure on the right. Entrusted with responsibility by the previous generation and with mutual consent, the teenagers are exploring the consequences of their own actions.

In his works, Chad McCail addresses the issues of how society produces or fails to produce responsible, emotionally mature individuals. In an artworld only too often content with smug cynicism, this is indeed a daring feat.

This daring is echoed in McCail's artistic style.

In his work *Masked 1*, it is once again the way in which a society organises the handing over of responsibility that is the subject matter. The way McCail establishes meaning by artistic means is highly abstracted and yet thoroughly rooted in popular culture as well as art history.

Masked 1 is a picture story at heart. A child is sent from its family to the schooling institution of the state. The uniform norms of the institution curtail the child's individuality; the benevolent wildness of the individual is domesticised. From the beginning, the panels of the print establish a differentiation between the pink background of the family unit and the blue outside world of the state. In the narrative of the work, we encounter many narrative devices we have seen before: just like the jealous bear in *Puberty 2*, here the small child is wearing a metaphorical mask indicating its wild persona, soon to be deformed into a harmless – and powerless – bunny. Masks play an important role in McCails work. Here, the round heads of parents and children signify individuals, in contrast to the square, robotic head of the minion of a repressive educational system. In a similar vein as the mask, the snake curling around the child, which also features in other works by the artist,ⁱ is a metaphorical placeholder for its unrepressed emotional potential, keenly restricted and tied up by the robotic teacher.

McCail's style of drawing and printmaking owes as much to illustration and comicstrips as it does to art history. The proximity to comics has sometimes been related to the artist's grandfather William McCail, who had been a cartoonist for the D. C. Thompson newspaper empire in Dundee in the 1930s.ⁱⁱ Of more relevance than biographical influence seems to be the political one, though: McCail's art is illustrative in the sense that it uses the most efficient way to transmit its message. This is the basic principle of any political communication, and McCail's artworks thus reflect the political core of their subject matter in their aesthetic approach. This fusion of the formal semblance to comics with political sincerity firmly links McCail's work to another artist dealing with the criticism of society and social utopia: Öyvind Fahlström. Until his premature death in 1976, Fahlström was arguably the most

overtly politically minded of the wider Pop Art movement. His 1973 screenprint *Column no. 2 (Picasso 90)* is a polemic analysis of economic structures. Fahlström's style of choice to maximise the impact of his political message is that of the comicstrip: abstracted, diagrammatic, yet unpretentiously simple and effective. This is also the choice of Chad McCail. And while such artistic choice in itself might already be daring, this finally highlights the perhaps most important aspect of McCails work.

For Chad McCail's work owes to Fahlström not only in terms of styles and colourschemes, but even more so in artistic kinship. By putting topics such as social critique, education, and – more than anything – the responsibility of the individual at the centre of his work, McCail's work stands out for picking sides. Aesthetically and politically, his works are taking a stand. They stand for the political vision of a society in which individuals treat each other with dignity, respect, responsibility, and – dare we say it? – love.

Today, this position is nothing less than daring.

Daniel F. Herrmann, Art Historian, June 2008

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ⁱ See Chris Gilbert, Exh.-cat. *Snake*, Des Moines Art Center, 1 August-12 October 2003.

ⁱⁱ See McCail in an interview with Alice Strang, 8 April 2002. Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art accession files, GMA 4340.