

GEORGE McLEAN



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The Living Landscape

Introduction: This Little Moment of Truth

For almost fifty years now, George McLean has been driven to create work that is true to his standards of excellence and to his quest to capture the intimacy and majesty of the natural world. Often he has been described as a wildlife artist, but that term is something of a misnomer, as it fails to recognize the true breadth and scope of his work and his artistic practice. The story of how McLean, a poor kid from Toronto's rough-and-tumble Parkdale neighbourhood, became consumed with the desire to depict the natural world is almost mythic. As a boy, he had shown an impressive talent for drawing in one so young. His mother encouraged him and would proudly tell people her son was going to be an artist. But it was something as simple and ordinary as the cover of a 1954 issue of *Field & Stream* magazine that provided the eureka moment, when McLean first realized he wanted to focus on drawing and painting wildlife. That realization powered a life of art making by this dedicated and devoted artist.

It seems extraordinary that such a small and apparently incidental event could set someone on a path that would direct the rest of his life, but often these almost overlooked moments can be the most fateful. And so it proved with McLean. He was fortunate that, while still in school, not only his mother but others as well recognized and nurtured his talent. With their support, and later through his own perseverance, McLean sought out and was mentored by artists who were leaders in the wildlife genre. Pre-eminent among them was Bob Kuhn, who recognized McLean's talent and encouraged him to continue developing his own work.

Wildlife art is one of the oldest forms of art making — think of the Lascaux cave paintings, for example — and is represented in every culture worldwide. Yet it is often regarded somewhat disparagingly within a contemporary art context, where wildlife artists are dismissed as “technicians” and “craftsmen.” George McLean's work, however, goes beyond fine craft and superb technique, defying simple categorization. McLean seeks to present essential truths about nature; truth is the underlying foundation not only of each individual work that he produces but also of his entire artistic practice.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when McLean was establishing his reputation nationally and internationally, the art world was dominated by new painting styles and materials. Artists, critics, and curators were focusing by and large on the mode and medium of expression rather than on the message being expressed. Many art taboos were challenged, and “the shock of the new” became a rallying cry within the contemporary art world. Irony, conceptualization, op art, pop art, and isms dominated the scene. With ready-mades¹ and “anti-art”² it often seemed the only things that didn't qualify as art at that time were works that evidenced traditional foundations such as draughtsmanship and excellence of technique. Qualities that were, and continue to be, of paramount importance to McLean.

Rather than succumbing to fashion and trends, McLean focused on subjects that challenged and inspired him, and created art in a manner that required great skill and commitment. McLean has said, “The way I work is my way.”³ And that way was to continue to learn from those whom he considered artistic masters, to continue to challenge and develop his own skills, and to continue to render those subjects he found meaningful — regardless of what the prevalent artistic style dictated. His uncompromising commitment to this credo has garnered him widespread recognition and acclaim.

Popular culture today is largely controlled by image over content. Reality television shows dominate our viewing options; movies are often adaptations of earlier versions; handcrafted goods and individually owned stores are rapidly being swallowed up by mass-market products and big-box enterprises. We are faced with many choices, but no real options. We've seen it all before and are left hungry, still longing

for something that will sustain and nourish us creatively and artistically. Culture blogger Giff Constable eloquently summarizes this feeling:

After one and a half centuries of innovation, with so many art taboos shattered, with so much of the field colonized and long-inhabited, the search for the new is becoming increasingly shallow and repetitive. Creating the new, purely for newness' sake, can bring academic significance but offers little long-term weight. Truth and beauty, on the other hand, have longevity — they affect the viewer and the resonance of that experience lingers for a long time. All three need to be combined to create art that has impact as well as freshness.⁴

Against this background, George McLean's work proves its long-term weight and worthiness. McLean's prowess is as an accomplished draughtsman and painter of the landscape. He finds much of his inspiration literally at his doorstep, in the fields and woods surrounding his nineteenth-century stone farmhouse, not far from the shores of Georgian Bay. Although all of his paintings include an animal or bird, McLean also takes great care to faithfully depict the dramatic light, colour, and atmosphere of these wooded escarpment sites. Working in opaque casein, akin to gouache, on prepped composition board, McLean builds painted surfaces that are both complex and evocative in their treatment. His depictions of flora and fauna are often so finely worked it is difficult to see evidence of the artist's hand in the application. Through his careful study, he captures the atmospheric beauty of all the seasons in Grey County, from the misty early spring snows to the golden heat of high summer meadows to the clarity of the woods in autumn.

“I think if my work has any veracity at all it's due to that fieldwork,” says McLean. Fieldwork in this case means work on many different levels. First is the manifold and comprehensive background research that McLean does. From his early days of visiting the Royal Ontario Museum and scouring books and magazines, research has been an integral part of his process, as he believes firmly that “you get into bad habits when you make things up too much.” He continues that research today, aided by an extensive personal library, with books depicting animals in artistic and anatomical renditions. As well, to understand the underlying structure of his subjects and depict them with true accuracy, McLean — like Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo before him — investigated beneath the skin, trapping and dissecting animals. He didn't like doing this, and discontinued it as soon as he could, but this anatomical study gives his work an authority and a sense of confidence that he could not have achieved otherwise. The primacy of first-hand experience is something that McLean relentlessly pursues. To depict the landscape that presents itself to him and has inspired him over the decades, McLean has engaged with nature head-on in all seasons and weather, at all times of the day and night, to truly know it.

That intense fieldwork: I'm there on foggy days and on rainy days and blistering hot days or frozen to death. I've worn out six pairs of snowshoes, and I really mean worn them out — you couldn't wear them. I was out there in the wintertime . . . in the woods. I saw the way the light struck the trees and what the various snow conditions were like, what the snow looks like when it comes and what it looks like as it goes away — all these various snow conditions.

McLean captures the changes of the light and the colour from his memory and depicts them in his work from the perspective of “I was there.” It is not done based on theory or ideas but is firmly rooted in the reality of experience. As a true perfectionist, he holds himself to an incredibly high standard of work,

refusing to compromise or to call finished anything he considers second best. Speaking of a work that is partially completed, he says,

Take this hawk here, for example. I've been fooling around with this thing. It's a bit muddy on the right hand side, a bit washed out. I've got to establish some distance in there. And that feather has tortured me. The top of the painting has tortured me the way those trees break up the sky. What am I going to do with the light on the trees? It's not resolved, not totally . . . It has just driven me nuts.

Some works take over a year from inception to completion. There may be dozens of preparatory sketches, detailed plans, and hundreds of photographs referenced to make sure that it is "right." And this rightness is twofold. It ensures not only that each animal, plant, and beam of sunlight is represented with truthfulness, but also that the way in which the painting is rendered is true to McLean and his particular idiom. As he says, "More than ever I know what I want to say in my paintings." And he does so in his unmistakable and inimitable way.

Part of the power of McLean's artistry is that while his work is "real," it is not literal. A sense of some essential truth within the work imbues it with a particular life and energy. Many of his depictions present us with intimate scenes, that we, the viewers, are privileged to have stumbled upon. These scenes range from panoramic life-and-death struggles, where the rawness and fleetingness of life in the animal kingdom are in play, to what may be considered "domestic" woodland scenes, unfolding, in McLean's words, on "the landscape that the Group of Seven used to step on."



Canada Warbler and Young, 2005

Canada Warbler and Young (2005) depicts an intimate scene, a warbler dealing with a hungry chick. The forest floor upon which they nest is presented in subtle browns, ochres, golds, and soft greens. McLean has rendered the scene in such a way that one is tempted to reach out, expecting to encounter not paint and board, but the downy soft, feathered head of the bird. One could even imagine pushing the delicate fern fronds aside to better reveal the chick hidden beneath. McLean accomplishes this powerful evocation, this authentic realism, adroitly and interpretively. He explains that his approach is to "indicate the fur and the feathers, but I don't go in there and paint them meticulously." It is an incredible level of artistic and technical mastery that allows for this kind of magical realism and enables the viewer to have this kind of encounter with an artwork. McLean's passion for his subject, as much as his skill, enables this to happen. He says of his animal subjects, "I love their furtive ways. I love . . . those intimate places where they stay. That's what I try to paint. I try to get some of that intimacy, that animal intimacy."

Some have criticized McLean's depictions of the predator-prey relationship as being cruel or gruesome. McLean responds that interpretations of these as being brutal images stem from misunderstanding on the viewer's part. The subjects of his work are acting on survival instincts. Hunger is a driving force in the animal kingdom, which includes us as well. Beyond the drama, and in all of his work, what excites and motivates him in depicting these scenes is the challenge of "getting it right."

I love that predator-prey theme that I often use. A lot of people think because of the way I grew up, the violent community that I grew up in instigated this—it's not that. It has nothing to do with violence. Predator-prey stuff has to do with a way of life. It's not just the way of life that interests me. It's the difficulty, the technical difficulty of trying to portray the predator-prey thing—getting the scale right, picking the right landscape to put this stuff in, a convincing landscape that has also got a little character to it that makes the thing memorable as a painting and not just to reproduce something that I may have seen or that looks real.

Great Horned Owl and Eastern Grey Squirrel (1983) is visually exciting and dramatic. Amid the branches of somewhat scrubby pine trees, a grey squirrel contorts itself, jumping downward to evade the deadly grip of a great horned owl. The way the owl is depicted renders it immense, almost larger than the trunk of the tree in the background; in the foreground, the owl grips the frail trunk of a dead tree in its talons. Its wings outstretched, the owl expands and pushes beyond the edge of the picture. The tension of the composition is captured and heightened: at any moment, the squirrel could get caught, the trunk could break—the outcome is unclear. This tension is typical of the dramatic work of the Romantic artists, who explored concepts of the sublime. However, the real roots for McLean's art stretch back to the seventeenth century with the breathtaking work of Baroque artists such as Caravaggio and Bernini. They, like McLean, combined what others saw as the disparate characteristics of naturalism and realism with the dramatic and spiritual (Caravaggio's saints with rough hands and dirty feet, modelled on Roman labourers, for example). In this painting, McLean's owl, breaking through the pictorial frame, is ready to enter our space and thus create a direct link between the viewer and what is being depicted. McLean is not trying to create a mere representation. Instead, he is creating an experience of the line between art and life vanishing, if only briefly.

Great Horned Owl
and Eastern Grey Squirrel,
1983



No one else working in Canada today can paint pictures the way George McLean can. He creates paintings filled with a million tiny details and never once loses control of the work nor does he ever allow it to descend into muddiness. Conversely, he is also capable of infusing an ostensibly empty scene with more drama than many others could manage in a scene with dozens of animals. In *Impression: Great Horned Owl and Mouse Trail* (2000), there is nothing but snow and three truncated tree trunks. The snow is rendered beautifully, with pinks, mauves, and blues — colours recognizable to any northerner who was walked in the woods on a late winter's afternoon. A beautiful and tranquil landscape — at first glance. Yet the silence and stillness that permeate this work belie what must have been an intense scene not much earlier: what we see is a remnant of a life-and-death battle. The mouse trail extends from the tree to its end, where a flurry of wings and claws demarcate the snow like a truncated version of a child's snow angel. The trees' shadows loom ominously, cutting across the composition and heightening the dramatic tension. Owl and mouse meet on a winter's day, both battling for survival — the mouse driven, no doubt by hunger, from the safety of the tree's shelter and into the clutches of the equally hungry owl. McLean's "empty" landscape is remarkably eloquent, speaking volumes through absence. He describes works such as this as being "an animal painting without the animal in it; the animal presence without the animal."



Impression: Great Horned
Owl and Mouse Trail, 2000

McLean's work is about more than *what* he paints; a core strength undoubtedly is *how* he paints. And how he paints is as exciting and compelling as the subject matter itself. McLean states,

One of the other things that I think I am is a tonalist. I think my work would fall into that group of painters known as tonalists because I like to catch those moments like those really dark, dark woods with just a little bit of light here and there that sets a mood. These are all things that I like to get and they're all based on the things that I've actually seen and that really, really fascinate me about the outdoors.

Tonalism was a phenomenon more than an artistic movement in American art, a convergence of styles occurring in the 1880s and acquiring the name in the mid-1890s. Its proponents' work was characterized by (mostly) landscape painting in muted colours and executed with a soft painterly application. Some view this insistence on tone as essentially an antimodernist defence of Western painting traditions. With its darkish palette, tonalism countered the high-keyed expression of sunlight and shade in French Impressionism.⁵ In this context, it is not surprising to find that McLean is not a follower of the Group of Seven and their approach to landscape painting:

I'm not a big fan of the Group of Seven; I know that's sacrilege but it's true. They were Impressionists and I think there were much better Impressionists than the Group of Seven. It's not that the Group of Seven never did anything that was good because obviously they did. But I can think of artists — Willard Metcalf, the American landscape painter, fabulous landscape painter who nailed it down. He really, really made summer look like summer. He got all those little nuances that I have in my head — you know from all this experience that I've had. And I know he's right. You

find that grain of truth in every painting that he did. Some very perceptive bit of truth that he was looking for in each painting.

Regardless of the subject matter, McLean's passion for rendering truthfully — to the landscape, to the subject, and to his own areas of interest — is always paramount. In *Doe and Fawns* (1978), the two dappled fawns blend into the dark undergrowth, which is broken by sunlight penetrating the forest, intermittently illuminating a deep-green leaf here and there. The doe is poised, listening carefully, ready to flee with her young the moment she senses danger. We, the intruders, have mere seconds to see her and the fawns before they are gone in an instant, deeper into the forest and lost to sight. All that will be left will be a quiet forest scene, no trace of the deer save some trampled leaves.



Doe and Fawns, 1978 and Goshawk and Blue Jay, 2002

Likewise, *Goshawk and Blue Jay* (2002) is satisfying visually and intellectually on a number of levels. The dramatic content is provided by the birds in flight: once more, prey flees from predator. The blue jay, it appears, may get away, though McLean explains otherwise: "Goshawks can travel through the woods at about sixty miles per hour. They're very, very quick. They get around all these bushes and trees with never an accident. They have terrific eyesight and great hand-eye coordination, so to speak. These hawks are bird hawks — they mostly kill birds. He would have killed that blue jay, plucked it, and then taken the thing away." The composition itself is exciting, but how it is structured and rendered is equally so. The dramatic angle of the trees, which seem to break through the pictorial frame to enter the viewer's space, adds to the



Red Fox with Starlings, 1996

sense of tension and reality. Up close, the tree trunk in the foreground is rendered in such a way that we imagine we would feel rough bark if we were to touch the canvas. McLean continues creating a realistic, but not literal, depiction of the forest through his use of a restrained palette, with colours gently descending into a richer, darker, more infused palette as our eyes are drawn to the background. The dense darkness of the forest brings the life-and-death action forward, to the front of the stage so to speak, but the overall composition is depicted with restraint and harmony. Every piece fits together naturally. Nothing is jarring despite the intensity.

In *Red Fox with Starlings* (1996), a fallen tree cuts the canvas in half, the swirls of the wood pulling the viewer forward and into this winter scene of a skinny fox routing out starlings, trying to catch one or two to ward off starvation. The browns, greens, greys, and ochres in the tree extend into the background, the forest floor, where open patches have been protected from the snowfall. The dead leaves, bird feathers, and rusty red-brown of the fox are a study in tonal mutability, creating again a natural relation between the subjects. The snow is handled in a masterly weight, also muted in tones, anchoring the action being depicted. As with many of McLean's pieces, the viewer cannot help but think about larger issues of mortality. The fox and the birds are struggling equally for survival, faced with circumstances they can't control. The once towering tree has been felled — perhaps by weather or disease — and it will rot and eventually disintegrate, reduced to a mossy ground cover. The dead leaves, too, reference the cycle of life and passage of time, as do the exposed patches of earth in the background. Winter could be coming or leaving. And in the midst of this elegiac evocation of the transiency of existence, a young sapling emerges from among the dead leaves and frozen ground, promising that life continues, will continue no matter what.

McLean does not consider himself a religious man, yet a sense of spirituality is evident in his art. Or perhaps it could best be described as a philosophy centred on the importance of being present. Within his work the reminder that life is fleeting is prominent; the essence of life and death is often found within the same image. The celebration of nature and its wonders, of capturing the frail beauties of the world around us, and doing so in a way that celebrates truth, is something that artists have done throughout the ages.

Beyond “Truth is beauty, and beauty truth,” in the world of the arts the concept of truth has had a number of hotly debated meanings. McLean produces works that address external truths, not in exact depictions of the outer world, but in his “truthful” rather than literal representations. He captures a moment in time, presenting it with bravura and artistic skill and integrity. In doing so, his works evoke a wide range of emotions — from fear to excitement to awe.

George McLean challenges and defies conventions and categorizations, creating artworks that are powerful in their integrity and individuality. That unique approach allows him to depict the natural world with respect and honour, never descending into the realm of nostalgia or sentimentality. The ability to do this with proficiency is always intricately tied to having the skill and technique to create with confidence and authority.

I can say I think art always requires skill because there is no work of art that doesn't mean to communicate something. If you are going to say what you mean so that it is universally understood, you've got to have the technical skills to be able to say exactly what you mean so that somebody else knows it.

In discussing his work McLean speaks often of his commitment to integrity and truth. And there is no false note in anything he does. He has earned the right to have his work judged and evaluated for its qualities, merits, skill, and excellence.

I try to take some quiet little truth and I try to put it down. Some little thing that I've discovered that I'd like to show somebody that I could never articulate verbally the way I can in a painting.

In creating paintings that speak of his love and respect for nature, for animals, and for Grey County, which inspires his work, McLean has developed a deeply personal body of work that nonetheless is rich and varied, offering multiple readings and interpretations. These are not simple artworks; they are indeed paintings of animals, but they are also so much more. They do not romanticize or sentimentalize or create melodramas. Timely for our contemporary civilization, with our heightened concern about the natural world being threatened by pollution and climate change, McLean's work conveys a subtle message for us to reconsider the impact that human activities have on other creatures that share the planet.

McLean paints animals and birds in their natural habitats, in scenes of action and drama that are a far cry from traditional, static wildlife art, which has more in common with still-life painting. Each of his paintings affords the subject the dignity of portrayal in movement in its home environment: a mother black bear herds her two cubs, an owl in mid-flight grasps at a squirrel, a displaying ruffed grouse defiantly unfurls its impressive plumage. His work is a defiant rebuke to those who have said that “painting is dead” or that quality and craftsmanship are irrelevant. The high esteem in which his work is widely held demonstrates that this is exactly what many people are thirsting for: intelligent, challenging art that makes us think. And makes us look, and look, and look again. George McLean has achieved this by always being true to who he is as an artist and by never letting his work be anything other than what he believed it should be.

I haven't said what I want to say yet. I never will. That's kind of the good news because I'll always have something that will keep me interested.