



JOHN MCLEAN AT MADDOX ARTS, JUNE 2016

Ernest Hemingway once remarked that “Paris was a movable feast”; wherever he looked he found something to warm the heart. Precisely the same might be said of the entire oeuvre of John McLean.

It is not enough just to say that McLean is a glorious colourist. Though this is obviously true, the real achievement of these paintings is in their breath-taking instantaneity. It is to take in, all at once, the absolute and simultaneous rightness of chroma, organisation, facture and format, and certainly before the rational mind has begun to register. It’s all there: freedom without sloppiness, trenchancy without insistence, taste without tastefulness, the unexpected without contrivance. It is almost as though all the decision-making processes have been compressed into a single gesture, almost drunk with daring like birdsong in full throttle, but only after a lifetime of consideration.

The secret of continuous self-reinvention seems to be built into the artist’s psyche. He has his own vocabulary of shapes: crowns, lozenges, triangles and squares. It seems rather limited yet this quite restricted repertoire never seems to repeat itself. It is discovered afresh each time, so that each work is its own singularity.

It would be a mistake to think that the nightingale’s song could be understood by dissection of a tiny thorax, but McLean’s paintings are worth a close-focussed inspection. You begin to take in the exactness of certain overlaps, the variety of edge in the way one colour meets another, the way one colour might glow through another, in the end the care-less-ness, the take-it-or-leave-it, of the whole unself-regarding utterance. And all within the shallow pictorial space of the picture plane. It may be McLean’s Scottishness which stops this work from prettiness on the one hand, or being weighed down with portent on the other. These works will endure simply by their lack of pretension, their rational optimism, energy and muscle.

Text: Cuillin Bantock, May 2016

Image: *Portico*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 77.5x108.5 cm