Drawing from life

The personal collides with the harsh realities of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in artist Jason McLean's exhibition The Sky Is Falling

BY DANIELLE EGAN, VANCOUVER

Vancouver artist Jason McLean exposes himself from the inside out — from the fantastical contents of his brain down to his intestinal tract, and right out onto the syringes- and condom-dotted streets of the city's Downtown Eastside. Taking it in, you feel slightly claustrophobic, even nauseated, navigating through his elephants, talking teardrops, amoeba-like parasites, crucifix-shaped birds, mumified-looking hockey sticks, wormy creatures, robots, and cryptic scribbles such as "you want me for a sunbeam" and "tree laughs at me." But it's also a strangely comforting world once you get used to it, like lying in bed with a fever, watching the white ceiling turn and hallucinating.

Appropriately, The Sky Is Falling, his current project at the Vancouver Art Gallery, is a set of 162 ink drawings displayed on the gallery's foyer ceiling. The 54-year-old artist finished the piece in four weeks, and the result is a riot of interconnected images that seem to echo surrealist writer André Breton's call for "pure psychic automatism."

As with all of McLean's work, The Sky Is Falling depicts an autobiographical internal landscape colliding headfirst into a morphing map of Vancouver. Alongside images of friends and family, including his 1½-year-old son, Felix, are the ghost of outgoing mayor Larry Campbell, a tearful onion lamenting, "it don't rain anymore outside," and varied ghoulish depictions of graves, mummies and bodies seemingly about to float away, all of which suggests a connection to Jean-Michel Basquiat, minus the wild drug use, mad partying and early death. But McLean's work is firmly rooted in the harsh realities of his own neighbourhood on the blurred border of the Downtown Eastside and now-gentrifying Strathcona.

"It's a living hell here sometimes, with shootings and stabbings, the drug users and the prostitutes," McLean says. "Once we called the police 21 times in one month. I keep hearing about how beautiful Vancouver is, but you forget about the mountains and the ocean and all of that when you live here."

McLean's highly personalized inks on paper, paintings on found objects, soft sculptures, mail art and handmade books also seem to occupy a different universe from the ones depicted by Vancouver world-known photo-conceptualists. That said, McLean's recent mainstream popularity here an elsewhere proves that Vancouver...
art scene is multifaceted and has strong reciprocal ties to underground zines, comics, noise bands and Fluxus-style performance art.

The capital-A art world barely registered on McLean's radar, although he graduated from Vancouver's Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in the nineties. "I'm not into art theory," McLean says. "When I hear it, I feel like I'm in the wrong field. Maybe I didn't listen enough in school, but I just don't understand the elitist system."

This is a long-familiar complaint among artists, but today's young breed understands pop-culture marketing, and McLean freely admits he gets a kick out of playing the huckster in self-promotion, which includes dressing up like a 70-year-old golfer for openings and collecting sweaters that look like they're from the set of The Cosby Show. He also continues to list a show called Bathroom Drawings under the solo exhibitions section of his résumé, even though it certainly doesn't need padding.

His work has recently attracted international curators from Edinburgh to Berlin to New York, where his piece Don't Wear Me Out was shown in a 2004 exhibit titled Important Canadian Art at Zieher-Smith Gallery. The title was a poke at the pomp and circumstance of Christie's and Sotheby's auctions, but McLean and other young artists shown there, including Shary Boyle, Drue Langlois, Germaine Koh and Scott McFarland, have all received global attention.

McLean's work is now represented by Vancouver's Tracey Lawrence Gallery and Los Angeles-based Richard Heller, who took him to the past two New York Armory shows. "It's pretty cutthroat and gross but also kind of fascinating," McLean says of the art-fair experience. He'll also be showing in New York, Scotland, Sweden and Vancouver's Contemporary Art Gallery over the next two months, and moving the homestead four blocks east, into Strathcona proper and a "brand-new heritage-style home," as he describes it.

"I sound like a yuppy and I don't know what it'll do to me," he continues. "This is a hard place to live, but when I'm not here, I crave it."

He also plans to make the jump into painting on canvas. "Sometimes I think I don't know enough for how far I've gotten," McLean says. "But I like to make art that's approachable, so it's a personal battle sometimes now. I worry about keeping the work fresh, when to keep pushing an idea and when to move on. I worry about trends and lasting power. And I worry about worrying about all those kinds of things."

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