

Conor McFeely

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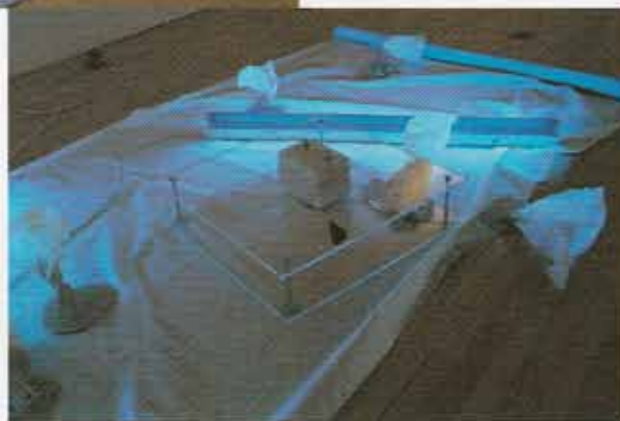
An artist who titles a major solo exhibition in his native city 'Disclaimer' might be seen to be hedging his bets just a little. For the title speaks of disowning and disentitlement. In 1997 a show thus titled Conor McFeely appeared to be designating his installation as a simultaneous act of requisition and of rejection. Patiently fabricated, if designedly crude, and then rhetorically and strategically dismissed, the downbeat assortment of abject and inscrutable objects which made up that exhibition obliquely addressed the subject of dissemblance, concealment and covert activity. Much of McFeely's work since then has located itself at an odd nexus where questions of subjectivity and ownership butt up against one another. The formal language in which these questions are posed is an expressive but utterly idiosyncratic argot which is entirely his own.

The base materiality of this far from transparent formal language is consistently foregrounded by the work itself and in the artist's commentary on it. This sometimes takes the form of a blunt listing of its disparate constituent elements. The publication accompanying McFeely's 1999 solo exhibition, for example, concludes with the statement: "Materials used in 'Popular Mechanics' include thermoplastic, tin foil, wood, exhaust pipes and text". The recalcitrant materiality





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- 1 POPULAR MECHANICS 1999
- 2 INK MATHEMATICS 2000
- 3 INK MATHEMATICS 2000
- 4 SMALL STEPS [2] 2000
- INK MATHEMATICS 2000

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of McFeely's wide range of sculptural objects persistently asserts itself in the teeth of the transformative process of art-making, fiercely resisting any alchemical aspirations inherent in that process. They consistently give the impression, not of formal completion, but of momentary arrest in an entropic movement toward dissolution or abandonment.

'Popular Mechanics' involved the appropriation of materials associated with roadmaking, including reflective white roadline marking resin, to ends fundamentally inimical to those toward which they are normally employed. These materials' associations with infrastructural organisation, physical labour and social control persisted, but any sense of constructiveness, linearity and progress was thwarted in an installation which more obviously resembled a disused work-site filled with discarded and distressed objects, a place where productive labour has been stalled and stymied. In a note on the use of luminous white resin in this installation McFeely invokes the Suprematist dream of ripping through the traditional constraints of colour and breaking into new territory, in order, as Kasimir Malevich put it, to 'come out into the white'. This rough suturing of a tarnished metaphysics to a debased but obdurate materialism is an indication the contradictions at the heart of McFeely's vision, the stresses and strains to which his work bears witness.

McFeely's art is one in which the opposing impulses toward integration and disintegration are held in precarious tension. It is an art in which form and content have an awkward and strained working relationship with each other. In an oblique and excursive commentary on his own work which accompanied an exhibition in 2000 McFeely quoted a ['an imagined?'] Rolling Stone interview between R.D. Laing and Captain Beefheart which includes the following exchange: R.D. LAING: "Well, would psychic disintegration and tangential communication be acceptable to you as an accurate description of your work?" CAPTAIN BEEFHEART: "Mmmm.....interesting, not just interesting but tapered and also bulbous." As this ['invented?'] quotation suggests, there is a perverse humour at the heart of McFeely's work based on notions of distortion, fracture and excess. McFeely has, for example, faulted classic Minimalism for, as he puts it, "trading on one of the more questionable equations developed in the latter half of the [twentieth] century, i.e. less form equals more thought." His art-historical antecedents belong more properly to that eccentric or heterodox strain of minimalism or postminimalism represented by such figures as Robert Morris, Eva Hesse or Bruce Nauman. More generally, his work might reasonably be situated within that space in the history of modern and contemporary art opened up in recent years by Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss under the category of the "formless". This is a redeployment of Georges Bataille's term *informe*, which, according to Bois and Krauss, constitutes a third term which stands outside the opposition of form and content, and also outside the practice of binary thinking which is itself formal.

McFeely's exhibition also borrowed its title, "Ink Mathematics", from a song by Captain Beefheart. Any hope offered by the second word of this title of a rational, closed system was, as the viewer quickly realised, unfounded. For the inky stain of the abstruse and the anti-rational is clearly of much greater interest to McFeely, as it is to Beefheart. The works in this show employed a range of materials including ultraviolet blacklight tubes, smaller versions of which, as the artist has helpfully noted, "are sometimes used to scan and authenticate banknotes", as well as invisible ink, "sometimes used to mark possessions and prove ownership in the event of theft." The use of both these materials relates to McFeely's coating of certain other sculptural works in black burglar paint, a sticky non-drying paint designed to render objects and surfaces effectively untouchable. Household firelighters also played a key role in the body of work exhibited in "Ink Mathematics". The aberrant behaviour and social dysfunctionality of the thief and the arsonist were thus indirectly invoked in a decidedly hermetic installation.



These are figures supposedly beyond the pale of moral or rational discourse and subject to social exclusion and sanction. Yet the deliberately enigmatic nature of the installation gestured, toward an obscuring or eradication of borders of various types. McFeely's work as a whole works slowly and incrementally. By an agglomeration of formal inklings and analogies, it continually suggests the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of a clearly and cleanly constituted objectivity, or for that matter subjectivity, whether these be cast primarily in aesthetic, psychological ethical or sociological terms.

Caoimhin Macgiolla Leith

CONOR MCFEELY is an artist and lecturer based in Derry. His work was selected for the British Arts Show 5 2000-2001 a Hayward Gallery exhibition touring Edinburgh, Southampton, Cardiff and Birmingham. He has also exhibited at the Mappin Gallery, Sheffield; Context Gallery, Derry; Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast; Orchard Gallery, Derry; Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast; Ellipse Gallery, Washington; the Old Leadworks, Bristol and The Model Arts Centre, Sligo.

Publications and catalogues include The Guardian, The Observer, The Times, Die Tageszeitung, Popular Mechanics. In Context, Perspective 98, Circa Magazine, Disclaimer. Catalogue, The Irish Times, Frieze, Still. Catalogue, North-West 95, catalogue, Orchard Gallery, the Belfast Telegraph and Irish Artists, A photographic documentation by Salvatore Mazza.

He has been the recipient of awards from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.