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Richard McLean: Painting to Exactitude

By Jennifer Wake



Kahlua Lark, 1979, Oil on canvas, 44 x 54 inches, Collection of Marco DeAndrea, Liv DeAndrea, and Ariel DeAndrea Photos courtesy of SMC Museum of Art

The soft sheen of sweat, the tense muscles and popping veins of the horse in Richard McLean's 44 x 54 inch oil painting *Kahlua Lark* (1979) evokes a sense of wonder. You can almost smell the strands of hay intermingled in the soft packed dirt, feel the heat of the mid-day sun as it beats against the red barn wall. True to the roots of photorealism, the composition is so exact many people might wonder if it's a painting at all.

McLean, renowned photorealist painter of large format equine images, will be honored as the ninth Master Artist by the Saint Mary's College Museum of Art as part of the Museum's Master Artist Tribute series beginning April 22. The exhibition will be McLean's first retrospective, featuring his incredibly detailed oil paintings, watercolors, landscapes, and portraits from throughout his 40-plus-year career.

As a young painter in the late 1950s, McLean cut his teeth on abstract expressionism, but says the switch to realism was more subtle than he thought it would be. "It was about getting back in touch with painting using strong guideposts and the demands it made on you," McLean said. "I was reconnecting with the early roots of painting in its simplest form."

Saint Mary's Art Museum curator Jim Whiteaker pointed to a small fence post in the background of McLean's

painting, *Incident in Galt* (1999-2000), and said, "Look closely, and you can see elements of Vermeer."

McLean says he began to look out the studio window, rather than inside the studio wall. "I found things that were terribly complex and interesting. I had a desire for exactitude: very tight and detailed painting committed to a very exacting rendition of the physical world."

While he paints from photographs he takes during his travels, McLean notes that he is still dealing with the fundamentals of a composition: line, color, light. "While you see the realistic elements of the painting, other more abstract elements are there as well," he said. "You see wheels, yet they are one of many things: they are a circular element that plays off of other kinds of shapes."

So why horses? A simple matter of interest meeting opportunity. "I saw few if any animals in contemporary art and thought it was an area that could be explored," he said.

As with most budding artists in the late-1950s, teaching was McLean's bread and butter. "Teaching gave me an intellectual home ground to meet other artist-teachers," he said. "It also helped my ego to be with young people who thought I knew more than they did."

For more than three decades, McLean taught drawing and painting, beginning at the California College of the Arts in Oakland before accepting a full-time position at San Francisco State University. His favorite class to teach was beginning drawing because "that's where the language of art begins."

McLean "officially" retired from teaching in 1989, but continued to teach occasionally for six more years. He says teaching allowed him to be the person he was a long time ago as a young child.

"One tends to move towards something you're praised for early in life," he said. "Your presence counts. You get approval from peers." Even as a young man, McLean felt most alive and most himself when making images of some kind.

"My foster father always told me if it wasn't for drawing pictures, I'd starve," McLean said. "I've never regretted choosing what I do. I never wanted to do anything else."



In Conversation: Richard McLean and Paul Karlstrom Richard McLean will be in conversation with Paul Karlstrom at 2 p.m. Sunday, April 22 in the Soda Activity Center, Moraga Room, at Saint Mary's College. A public reception will follow in the Museum Patio. Art historian and catalog essayist Karlstrom is the former Regional Director of the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art based at the de Young Museum and the Huntington Library. The Master Artist Tribute IX exhibition, which will feature works from all nine Master Artists, runs through June 17. For information, visit stmarys-ca.edu/museum. Self Portrait, 1982, Watercolor and gouache, 30 x 22 inches, Collection of the Artist



Incident in Galt, 1999-2000, Oil on canvas, 42 x 72 inches, Private Collection

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