

Art Review

Reveries on a shattered world

A retrospective on Michael C. McMillen in Oakland mingles humor and dread

By Christopher Knight

When Michael C. McMillen began to make art in the early 1970s, the post-World War II bloom was off the American rose.

Soldiers had shot students at Ohio's Kent State University. The Pentagon Papers had been published. Watergate was turning a cheap burglary into a national crisis. A U.S. vice president resigned in disgrace, foreshadowing the future. And a quadrupling of OPEC oil prices collided with huge Vietnam War spending to bring high unemployment from grim economic recession -- including the collapse of the first substantive American market for contemporary art.

Nowhere was the social shock of the 1970s felt more keenly than in Southern California. McMillen, born in Los Angeles in 1946, was a baby boomer in the land of postwar American sunshine. The melancholic tension between dream and reality, cheery optimism and unforgiving decay, reverberates through "Michael C. McMillen: Train of Thought," the compelling 40-year retrospective of the artist's work at the Oakland Museum of California. Intimations of personal, social and cultural mortality merge.

Organized by curator Philip E. Linhares, the exhibition is an elegy for a ruined landscape, leavened by a bittersweet, brain-twisting humor. (Think wild, nervous laughter in the dark.) It brings together 17 large-scale sculptures and installations, plus a selection of paintings, drawings, short films and more modest objects.

The title sculpture is emblematic. "Train of Thought" is a tall wooden train trestle emerging from a tunnel bored high into a white gallery wall. Instead of railroad tracks, an assembly-line conveyor belt, evocative of Industrial Age production, has deposited a mysterious mound of off-white material at a viewer's feet.

Look closely, and the large mound turns out to be composed not from inorganic ore but from shards of macaroni, especially the kind used in alphabet soup. Food for thought -- and thought for food -- is being maniacally mined and manufactured in the precinct of art.

In part, McMillen's work is a philosophical meditation on what art is and how we conceive of it, particularly in an era driven by technology and science. Like a devotee of Saturday afternoon movie serials, a fan of warped underground comics or a latter-day incarnation of the 1950s children's TV host, Mr. Wizard, he makes simple demonstrations that simultaneously charm and puzzle.



Michael C. McMillen, *Lighthouse (Hotel New Empire)*, 2010
mixed media with artist digital motion picture
104 x 132 x 144 in. (264.2 x 335.3 x 365.8 cm)



Bulls-eye's Last Voyage (Critical thinkers struggle to distance themselves from a foundering theory), 1997
oil on panel
12 x 14 3/4 in./17 1/8 x 19 5/8 in.

“The Box of All Knowledge” is a beat-up, tightly padlocked footlocker whose hidden contents suggest Pandora’s fateful curiosity. “Deliverance” is an elaborate contraption that goes to extraordinary mechanical lengths to deposit nutritious legumes, one by one, onto a dinner plate. “Dracula’s Daughter,” offspring of the living dead, is a motorized series of 21 pulleys linking a closed suitcase, a traveler’s proxy, to a dark gray sheet of paper that is continuously dipped in a mysterious vat of liquid, as if an alchemist’s (or pre-digital photographer’s) bath.

“Picasso’s Last Words” embodies the aesthetic conundrum. A 1,500-ml glass bottle atop a pedestal is presented as if in a natural history museum display. Seemingly empty, the bottle is said in a lengthy label to contain a deathbed utterance, gathered with a tube and funnel clamped over Picasso’s mouth late on the morning of April 8, 1973.

The funnel muffled the words spoken by the modern artistic genius -- obscuring them from those present in the room, while uncorking the vessel now would lose them forever. Artistic knowledge remains invisible and mute, but nonetheless sanctified and cherished.

McMillen emerges as a critical bridge between Los Angeles assemblage sculptors of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Gordon Wagner, Ed Kienholz and George Herms, and younger artists like David Wilson and Tim Hawkinson. Some works recall displays that would be at home in Wilson’s eccentric Museum of Jurassic Technology, with its dubious scientific displays, while others prefigure sculptural contraptions cobbled together by Hawkinson.

Hollywood is also an ever-present backdrop. (McMillen’s father was a television set-designer, and after graduation from UCLA art school the artist was employed building special-effects miniatures for major studio movies, often with science fiction or wartime themes.) One extraordinary McMillen film is a 29-second edit from the cheesy 1941 cliff-hanger serial “Sky Raiders,” bracketed by Vija Celmins-like shots of outer space. The sky above a pastoral landscape is clogged with an air force of silent dirigibles; cut to a shot of an old warehouse, and suddenly a falling bomb makes a direct hit, blowing the place to smithereens.

The End.

The stunning brevity of the film generates temporal punch: Here today, gone tomorrow. Wonderment is inevitably followed by ruin -- itself an unexpected occasion for awe.

The theme percolates throughout McMillen’s work, including a few infrequent examples of painting. The best, notable for its gonzo imagery, shows a turbulent green sea beneath lowering clouds in a gray sky.

Refugees in a tiny, yellow life raft row furiously, attempting to escape from a gigantic clown’s head bobbing menacingly on the waves. Titled “Bull’s-Eye’s Last Voyage (Critical thinkers struggle to distance themselves from a foundering theory),” it’s Gericault’s gruesome “The Raft of the Medusa,” a Romantic 19th-century icon of official incompetence and deadly scandal, re-conceived for a contemporary era of diminished capacities.

The Oakland show, which will not travel, is accompanied by an excellent catalog. It does suffer a bit from the installation design. The museum



Picasso's Last Words, 1995
glass, wax, metal
39 x 11 1/2 x 13 1/2 in.

doesn't have enough separate gallery space to accommodate a full retrospective, especially for an artist who often produces room-size pieces, so McMillen's work has been interspersed throughout permanent collection galleries. A chronology is hard to follow.

Still, it culminates in a tour de force. "The Pavilion of Rain" lies beyond 2010's "Lighthouse (Hotel New Empire)" -- the latter a rickety flophouse atop a pier listing badly over a swirling pool of water, which is a none-too-subtle metaphor for life in these United States today. McMillen has worked on "Pavilion" periodically over more than 20 years, and it's a marvel of poetic observation.



The Pavilion of Rain, 1987
installation
132 x 288 x 210 in. (335.3 x 731.5 x 533.4 cm)

A decrepit shack assembled from salvaged sheets of corrugated metal, aging shutters and battered window screens is decorated with old street signs, hub caps and some old California license plates. Used surfboards join a wobbly telescope up on the roof. The shack stands in the middle of a watery pool littered with overflowing buckets of every imaginable size and shape, the hovel's dank and forlorn interior reachable by a footbridge.

There's nothing much inside, except a few chairs, while benches line the darkened gallery outside. A visitor is invited to sit, look and ponder.

Intermittently it rains, a steady downpour made by overhead sprinklers of the type that might battle a blaze in a house on fire. "The Pavilion of Rain" is a shrine to resignation and lost reverie, a backyard playhouse for Dick, Jane and Sally gone rancid with age and broken dreams.

McMillen's sculpture, rather like Southern California itself, is an art composed of yearning for second chances amid casual assurances that all will come to naught. It's beautiful and soothing, while the rain just keeps on coming.

**"Michael C. McMillen: Train of Thought," Oakland Museum of California, 1000 Oak St., (510) 238-2200
Through Aug. 14. www.museumca.org**