

**THE OBJECT IN THE LIMIT, 2008**  
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*This essay by Stacy Switzer, Curator and Director of Grand Arts in Kansas City, first appeared in the catalog "Michael Jones McKean: Selected Projects 2003-2008" in spring of 2008.*

*"By a knight of ghosts and shadows  
I summoned am to tourney  
Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end—  
Methinks it is no journey.i"*

*"Being more X than K  
'Feet don't fail me miaow'  
Carved above the grave  
'Curved above the groove'ii"*

**The Meta, The Mercy**

Choose a place to enter into Michael Jones McKean's mysterious, poetic and complex work. To do so, you will have to let go of beginnings, middles, endings: for linear narrative is of little consequence in this artist's constructed parallel worlds. McKean's elegant assemblages and ambitious installations are places-out-of-place within times-out-of-time. They can be hallucinatory, elliptical, and vexing despite their insistent materiality in the here-now. But even without endings, there are ends in these works, plenty of them. Consider some of McKean's sources and subjects: Albert Ayler, the legendary jazz saxophonist whose body was found floating in New York City's East River (an apparent, though unconfirmed suicide); Donald Crowhurst, the amateur seafarer who set sail to circle the globe, but ended up adrift in the Atlantic, beaconing the water to swallow him up, which it did;iii Radio Raheem, the Boom Box-toting character in Spike Lee's now classic film *Do the Right Thing*, whose murder ignited a race riot; and Hall and Oates (a.k.a. H2O) the soft-rocking duo whose creepy indelible love/loss songs could be soundtracks for suicide at sea. There is enough death in this work to go 'round. And yet, it is also clear through McKean's work that the final limit is never the last note in a song or a story; it, like anywhere else, is a fine place to begin, as good a place as rainbowsiv (their inherent placelessness notwithstanding), and eerie glowsv, as sperm whales, as colonial expeditionsvi, and as a 1967 McCullough chainsawvii, as gold chainsviii, as Mississippi River siltix, and modern furniture design, as *Fitzcarraldox* and Home Depot, and as an Argentinian meteoritexi (its unfathomable origin totally withstanding) whose calculated place happens to be right here, in the gallery, displacing space with you and I. We could begin here, but we won't. We'll begin somewhere else. *Above the groove.xii*

**The Micro**

Begin with object lust. The 1987 J1 Super Jumbo Promax Boom Box. McKean wanted it. Badly. According to everything it meant and could mean: one of the largest boom boxes ever made, it played a starring role in Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, blasting out Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" on the arm of Radio Raheem. Lee's movie made the Promax into an icon—a symbol of resistance, racial conflict, and slick product design that's since achieved a near-mythic status among certain collectors of 1980's gear.

McKean found one on eBay, and it became an art object.  
But then his landlord stole it.  
He got it back.

The End.

Though not quite.

He sculpted an exact copy of the Box out of wood. An effigy.xiii

## Between

Certain works of visual art seem to have their analog in writing, rather than objects or images, and McKean's work is often striking in this regard. Like a poem rendered in three dimensions, McKean's sculpture affects us through the things it collects (bits of history, popular culture, arcane knowledge, artifacts) and the accumulation of meaning outside its own breadth, it lives between consonants (e.g. lines, textures, edges) and dissonance (the friction of objects, the rawness of being) in the irreconcilable space between the thing (say, an expedition to an unknown land) and the representation of the thing (a handmade replica of the helmet worn by Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto, for example.) Here, the distances between things (whether problems of representation, geography, or psychic disconnect) are always considered, if not resolved—they are like breaths between words, a wind on the skin; listen closely, McKean seems to say, and you will hear the hum of the Earth turning; be still, and you will feel it on your face.xiv

## The Possible

"I'm trying to understand things I can barely see," McKean has said, "but [which I] still believe are palpable and real."xv McKean's adventuring spirit situates him among the explorers and dreamers whose stories are threaded into his work. In 2006, the artist employed a team of university researchers to help him find the longest navigable route around the Earth. The project involved a complex computer algorithm that tested the elevation of more than a billion points on the Earth's surface to arrive at what McKean titled *The Great Circuit*. *The Great Circuit* is a conceptual artwork and a counterintuitive test of limits based on a hypothetical journey that may or may not be physically possible. As the catalyst for an extraordinary body of information—one born of hard science but which hovers unfixed to the realm of common utility—McKean performs a kind of radical, interdisciplinary sleight-of-hand. *The Great Circuit* project remains profoundly elusive even as it directly engages realms as diverse as phenomenology, mathematics, economics, ecology and spirituality. Why, *The Great Circuit* asks, do we so insistently privilege certain modes of being are methods of inquiry over others? What hierarchies are in place? What journeys are worth undertaking? Here as elsewhere in McKean's work, what seems like an imaginative dalliance deftly slices to the core of what we value and how we choose to live our days on the planet.

## The Impossible

The late sculptor Jason Rhoades described the impossible this way: juggling it, he said "was always an issue throughout my work – to take three objects, like a rubber ball, a chain saw and a live African elephant and try to juggle."xvi McKean's affinity for risk and surreal convergence can be understood in a similar way, although it is crucial to note that McKean's selection of objects and events is never random. Both artists, though, seem to have a vital appreciation for spectacular failure, and the generative possibilities that courting such risk can open up.xvii "I've begun to understand failure and success as living in close proximity to one another," McKean said in a 2007 interview. "With two opposing forces occupying nearly the same psychic space, the small gap between them becomes an extreme location. I like to imagine the work trying to negotiate this charged space, where it has to strain to keep everything together."xviii In two grand-scale installations of 2006 and 2007 (*Riverboat Lovesongs for the Ghost Whale Regatta* at Grand Arts, and *The Possibility of Men and the River Shallows*, at DiverseWorks) McKean clearly drew inspiration from the well of creative and physical strain, as he fashioned a forty-foot long riverboat of MDF and foam which referenced, among other things, Werner Herzog's Sisyphean attempt to drag an actual riverboat up the side of a mountain in the Amazon jungle for the movie *Fitzcarraldo*. Smaller and more recent works, such

as *The Freeing of Cosmonaut Volynov and Pitcher Gooden's Song* (2007) likewise meditate upon the extremes of ambition, folly, and worse. In 1969, the Russian cosmonaut Boris Volynov came close to being incinerated in mid-air when the space module he was traveling in failed to disengage from its companion craft. Like the once-celebrated, later-shamed American pitcher Dwight Gooden, Volynov survived one calamitous encounter only to find himself on the brink of seemingly inevitable destruction again a few years later. In McKean's work, Volynov and Gooden's contemporary mythologies converge as materials in a stark white assemblage; an elegy, perhaps, for the kind of dream that transcends space, time, materials, and cultural bounds. At the same time, the glint of humor in McKean's homespun reproductions of Radio Raheem's oversized Love and Hate rings alerts us to be cautious in any reading that would view the work as a sober paean to that most spectacular failure (or triumph) of all: Modernism.

McKean's juggling at the limits of representation and experience, both within the work and as its maker, have led him to be characterized as a romantic optimist,<sup>xix</sup> a modernist in ship's clothing,<sup>xx</sup> and a savvy self-saboteur.<sup>xxi</sup> At stake in these readings is the deeply anxious question of whether any artist can escape modernism's (or -isms') impossibly strong gravitational pull. Perhaps it is more useful (and amusing) to consider Rhoades' impossibility echoed in McKean's 1967 McCullough chainsaw, in *The Allegory of Rule and The Geometry of Wind* (2007.) Liquid gold puddles and drips like fresh oil around the chainsaw's base. "And would you save or live your life?" it goads the gentle viewer. "The beauty is in the failure."<sup>xxii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Anonymous, "Tom O'Bedlam," in Kenneth Patchen, *The Journal of Albion Moonlight* (New York: New Directions, 1961), thirteenth printing.

<sup>ii</sup> David Bromige, "Occ. Haz.," in *A Cast of Tens*, (Penn Grove, CA: Avec Books), p.11.

<sup>iii</sup> Donald Crowhurst's failed circumnavigation of the globe is chronicled in Nicholas Tomalin and Ron Hall's book, *The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst*. One of the final entries in Crowhurst's log book was a single haunting line: "IT IS THE MERCY."

<sup>iv</sup> For more on McKean's ongoing experiments with rainbows, see the artist's website, <[http://www.michaeljonesmckean.com/ongoing\\_rainbows.html](http://www.michaeljonesmckean.com/ongoing_rainbows.html)>.

<sup>v</sup> McKean explores the optical effects of diffuse light created by Plexiglas, fluorescents, and theatrical effects in works such as *The Astronomers Ecstasy As They See Solidarity Between Forms* (2007), and *Riverboat Lovesongs for the Ghost Whale Regatta* (2006).

<sup>vi</sup> Both works in the note above also include handmade replicas of items worn by the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto.

<sup>vii</sup> See McKean's work titled *The Allegory of Rule and the Geometry of Wind*, 2007.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> See McKean's *The Ancients*, 2007.

<sup>x</sup> Werner Herzog's 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo*, and Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams* (also 1982) about the making of *Fitzcarraldo*, are both critical touch points for McKean's grand-scale installations of 2006 and 2007, *Riverboats Lovesongs for the Ghost Whale Regatta* and *The Possibility of Men and the River Shallows*.

Xi See *The Astronomer's Ecstasy As They See Solidarity Between Forms*, 2007.

Xii Bromige, p.11.

Xiii McKean's wood replica of the Promax Boom Box is a sculptural element of *Our Age of Brass and Ghosts* (2007), a work exhibited at Sunday L.E.S., New York, in 2007.

Xiv In *Riverboat Lovesongs for the Ghost Whale Regatta* at Grand Arts in 2006, McKean installed a six-foot tall computer-controlled industrial fan in a balcony of the gallery. The fan blew a gentle breeze throughout the run of the exhibition. In speaking about this installation, McKean has often remarked on his enchantment with the unique properties of wind; especially, its ability to link disparate objects as it blows over and through them, without regard to changes in shape, surface, use-value or meaning.

Xv Michael Jones McKean, "Dissolving Logic in H2O" Interview of the artist by Chris Cook in *Michael Jones McKean: The Possibility of Men and the River Shallows* (Houston: Diverseworks) Spring 2007.

Xvi Jerry Saltz, "Obituary: Jason Rhoades," *Guardian Unlimited*. August 12, 2006. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/obituaries/story/0,,1842870,00.html>.

Xvii McKean's response to Rhoades' metaphor is further illuminating. Says McKean, "Rhoades' 'three object juggling' [...] for me speaks of failure in that it might have something more to do with the limits of the frontal lobes of our brains—the part that controls organizing, short term memory, creating meaning etc. We can, with practice, triangulate the meaning of three things [...], but add a fourth and we must displace one of the original things inside a queue or risk the implosion of the whole precarious system... [My] work presents itself as series of these scenarios." Michael Jones McKean, e-mail correspondence with the author, December 23, 2007.

Xviii Michael Jones McKean, interview with Chris Cook, "The Possibility of Men and the River Shallows," 2007.

Xix Alison de Lima Greene, *Michael Jones McKean: Riverboat Lovesongs for the Ghost Whale Regatta*, (Kansas City: Grand Arts) August, 2006.

XX Ibid, p.2. *Riverboat Lovesongs for the Ghost Whale Regatta*, writes Greene, "can be understood as an act of ventriloquism, with historic [e.g., ship captain Donald Crowhurst], literary, and mythic protagonists ghosting for the artist."

XXi Michelle White, "Metanarratives and Marginalia: Michael Jones McKean's Quixotic Compilation." *Art Papers*, July/August 2007, p. 34.

XXii I have taken these lines from David Bromige's poem, "Occ. Haz." rather out of context in order to suit the needs of this essay. Given the "speculative and specular nature" of Bromige's writing, I do not think he would object.