

Infinite Perspectives

Prints by Bruce McCombs

Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art
November 21, 2009—January 10, 2010



Self-Portrait, 1988

Bruce McCombs (American, born 1943) captures the indulgences and exuberance of capitalism on a grand scale. From eclectic urban architecture to frenzied foot traffic, the artist expresses nostalgia for the consumer culture of 1920s America. Yet, McCombs says that he tries to be more eccentric than nostalgic. “The nostalgia of my work is a dangerous thing because there is such a thin line that separates nostalgia from schmaltz. It’s something I have to worry about constantly. After all, I don’t want to become another Norman Rockwell.”¹ The combination of extraordinary detail, extreme perspective, and immense scale gives his body of work a topographical quality. McCombs records the minutiae of daily life with a rigor that turns the mundane into a spectacle.

McCombs' Technique

McCombs utilizes a variety of techniques to create visual interest in his compositions. His prints are sharp and display technical prowess that belies a longtime interest in photo-realism. Employing oblique perspectives, for example, is a habit that grew out of his reliance on photography. McCombs's etchings are inspired by snap-shots of the places he has traveled. Indeed, his subjects seem to be frozen in time by the camera. He says he began taking pictures as a retreat from the studio. "I had been interested in street photography in art school in Cleveland, when photographers such as Garry Winogrand, Diane Arbus, and Robert Frank were in vogue."² McCombs usually shoots with a 28mm (wide angle) lens, which distorts the image. The photographs are commercially printed as 5x7 inch pictures, which he cuts apart and reassembles into a new composition. This image is then reworked onto a zinc plate.

In the etching process, a metal plate typically made of copper, zinc, or steel is coated with a waxy ground that is resistant to acid. Once a hard or a soft ground has been applied to a plate, an artist may use an etching-needle to draw on the plate. After the drawing is finished, the entire plate is submerged in acid, which will eat away at areas of the plate exposed by the etching-needle. This process is called biting. The longer a plate remains in the acid, the deeper the line becomes and the more ink it will hold. During the etching process, the artist must sweep bubbles away from the surface of the plate, which could interfere with the biting process. An artist may choose to stop the etching process in certain areas of a plate in order to vary the tone. To do this, the plate is pulled from its bath and ground is selectively reapplied. The artist is thus able to control effects such as light and distance. Once the etching process is complete, the plate is cleaned and inked. Excess ink is wiped off the surface using newsprint or cloth. The plate is then put through a high-pressure printing press. The paper used in this process is damp and will absorb the ink. Zinc plates can usually be printed more than 200 times before showing signs of wear.

Parade

Parade (1985) was likely inspired by Disney World's 30th Anniversary parade through downtown Chicago in 1985. The print shows five-story tall cartoon characters from Disney's classic films ambling past the Paradise Theater, which was a staple of Chicago's Westside amusement scene in 1928. In the lower left hand corner is the Palmolive Building, an art deco edifice located on Michigan Avenue. From 1965-1989 it was home to Playboy Magazine, which makes McCombs's placement of the White Rabbit balloon all the more provocative.

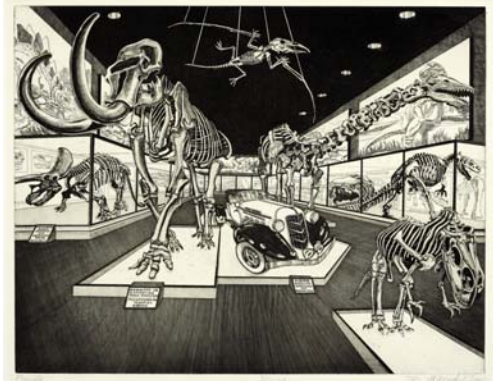


Self-Portrait

Although McCombs claims that his work is without social commentary, many of his prints highlight the whimsy and leisure associated with middle-class America.³ For example, *Self-Portrait* (1988, front cover) shows McCombs himself, outfitted in dark sunglasses, reclining on a roof-top terrace while watching television. He occupies a desirable place within this representation of stratified wealth and class in urban America. Figuratively speaking, he is on top of the world. McCombs's tenacity and expertise as a printmaker is also the subject of this work. McCombs spent the first twenty-five years of his career as an etcher. His trademark realism was influenced by the Iowa School of Printmaking and its longtime director, Mauricio Lasansky. Lasansky believed in the completely trained printmaker, one who is skilled in a wide range of techniques. This philosophy of printmaking led McCombs to adopt a "very methodical, lengthy working and reworking of the print, often for several months."⁴

Fossils

One subject McCombs explores again and again in his prints is the relationship between technology and aesthetics in American culture. He portrays a range of subjects and settings such as automobiles, billboards, movie theatres, shopping centers, drive-ins, soda fountains and arcades; but he combines them in unlikely ways. In *Fossils* (1987), for example, McCombs uses the Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History as a backdrop to compare a Siberian Woolly Mammoth to a 1933 Auburn Speedster. Although his beloved classic car is effectively extinct, the artist believes it has comparative aesthetic qualities and, as a relic, should be preserved. He says, "When I was a kid, everybody knew everybody's cars and you knew people by their cars. Do you remember looking through old photo albums? Everybody had pictures of themselves and their cars."⁵ Achieving the American Dream for many middle class Americans meant acquiring luxury items. The car was integral to the rise of material culture, a concept that McCombs acknowledges in his mock museum display.



Movie Palace

Beginning in the 1920s there was a concerted effort to glamorize the consumer experience. This was particularly true of Movie Palaces, which were designed to make the average patron feel like royalty. They were a huge commercial success, and between 1914 and 1922, over 4000 new motion picture theatres opened in the United States.⁶ *Movie Palace* (1983), with its eclectic and luxurious architecture, is typical of theatres built in the tradition of vaudeville houses. The interior of McCombs's movie palace has an Italianate flair, as characterized by the relief carvings on the ceiling and marble statues flanking the stage. In general, interiors were ornamented in a range of styles, including Art Deco, Gothic, Moroccan, Orientalist, Italian Renaissance and Egyptian Revival. The goal was to attract an audience both through the program and amenities. For example, it was not unheard of for a vaudeville house to have a rooftop restaurant, library, barber shop, and Turkish bath.⁷ Warner Brothers, whose emblem is at the center of this print, was one of the five largest motion picture corporations in the 1920s and 30s.



Arcade

Public centers of consumption, such as department stores, began to rival smaller independently operated businesses in the late 1920s. Stores like Macy's and Marshall Field became household names. Technological advancements, such as the introduction of cast iron as a building material, made it possible to design buildings that had higher ceilings and more retail space.⁸ *Arcade* (1984) pays tribute to these new design elements, with its spacious glass ceiling and undulating balconies. The introduction of large plate glass for the purposes of window display also revolutionized consumption because it encouraged impulsive spending and allowed stores to market goods outside of business hours. Pulitzer Prize winning author Edna Ferber called these new window displays "a work of art... a breeder of anarchism, a destroyer of contentment, a second feast of Tantalus."⁹ This print, completed in 1985, is a technical triumph. It is so visually saturated and employs such a curious perspective that a viewer is nearly unable to distinguish between gratuitous detail and the iconic subject matter. This work is also among the artist's last prints.



McCombs Today

Although McCombs found success as a printmaker and has exhibited his work both nationally and internationally, he felt burdened by the complexity of etching and the time it took to complete a plate. "It involved a lot of mental pressure," says the artist, "there is no immediate gratification with etching. You can work on a plate for several months and not know exactly how it is going to turn out. You have a lot of eggs in one basket."¹⁰ McCombs has taught at Hope College in Holland, Michigan since 1969. He was primarily a printmaker until a sabbatical in 1982, after which he turned to illustration and watercolor. He hasn't looked back since. The prints represented in the Albrecht-Kemper Museum Collection reflect McCombs's oeuvre through the mid-1980s.

—Amy M. Fowler, Ph.D.

Endnotes

¹Eileen Beyer, "Bruce McCombs Printmaker," *News from Hope College*, Dec. 1983, passim. Quoted in James M. Ray, forward to *Bruce McCombs* (St. Joseph, MO: Albrecht Art Museum, 1986) np.

²John A. Parks, "Visual Delights," *Watercolor*, Spring 2008, 26.

³Eileen Beyer, "Bruce McCombs Printmaker," *News from Hope College*, Dec. 1983, passim. Quoted in James M. Ray, forward to *Bruce McCombs* (St. Joseph, MO: Albrecht Art Museum, 1986) np.

⁴Bruce McCombs, "Artist's Statement," in *Bruce McCombs* (St. Joseph, MO: Albrecht Art Museum, 1986) np.

⁵Eileen Beyer, "Bruce McCombs Printmaker," *News from Hope College*, Dec. 1983, passim. Quoted in James M. Ray, forward to *Bruce McCombs* (St. Joseph, MO: Albrecht Art Museum, 1986) np.

⁶Preston J. Kaufmann, *Fox: The Last Word... Story of the World's Finest Theatre* (New Jersey: Showcase Publications, 1979) 6. Quoted in "From Nickelodeon to Palace," in *Some Enchanted Evenings: American Picture Palaces* [database on-line] maintained by the University of Virginia, Dept. of American Studies; available from <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/PALACE/early1.html>, accessed 12 October, 2009.

⁷"From Nickelodeon to Palace," in *Some Enchanted Evenings: American Picture Palaces* [database on-line] maintained by the University of Virginia, Dept. of American Studies; available from <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/PALACE/early1.html>, accessed 12 October, 2009.

⁸Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (United Kingdom: Vintage, 1974) 116. Quoted in "The Rise of Consumer Culture," in *Some Enchanted Evenings: American Picture Palaces* [database on-line] maintained by the University of Virginia, Dept. of American Studies; available from <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/PALACE/consumer.html>, accessed 12 October, 2009.

⁹William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of New American Culture* (United Kingdom: Vintage, 1994), 7. Quoted in "The Rise of Consumer Culture," in *Some Enchanted Evenings: American Picture Palaces* [database on-line] maintained by the University of Virginia, Dept. of American Studies; available from <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/PALACE/consumer.html>, accessed 12 Oct., 2009.

¹⁰John A. Parks, "Visual Delights," *Watercolor*, Spring 2008, 26.



Marathon, 1981

Photography by Phillip Geller

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