

In Transition

By Ian Findlay-Brown

To transit from one culture to another, from one visual language to another, is an intensely complex challenge for any artist. To make it successfully requires that the artist not only rejects their preconceived notions of their new culture's art forms, but it also demands that the artist seeks a fresh and vital visual language through which to make their new art different. Such has been the reality, for the past nine years in Hong Kong, for the Australian artist John McArthur. During this time, he has increasingly embraced his Hong Kong social and cultural experiences to make art that has served as a bridge between his Western art training in Australia and his encounters with Chinese culture, as well as making a new identity for himself as an artist.

"Hong Kong has made an impact on me, personally and artistically. I left a small, quiet, seaside town to arrive in Hong Kong during the height of typhoon season. In many ways it felt like chaos. Overall there was a feeling of excitement with people in a city, who were coming and going with a sense of urgency," says McArthur. "In Australia I had limited contact with art groups. Here I have worked with a variety of other artists and socialized with other people who really talk about art. I have been exposed to more concepts and other interpretations of art. And I have been able to reflect on my work and be more critical about what I do. All this has helped me to develop and define my identity as an artist. When I began exhibiting, I really began to see myself as an artist. Gradually, I felt that I actually had a repertoire of things that I have observed and some visual narratives to share with an audience.

"Living in Hong Kong has also taught me about the differences of cultures. As I travel, I am now more able to make comparisons between places. This has enriched my understanding of people and places. It has also given me an abundance of visual references or 'vocabulary.' I enjoy using these references as a starting point for the art that I create." (1)

On many levels McArthur has succeeded very well indeed. This is clear from the content of his collages, drawings, ink-and-acrylics on paper, watercolors, and many other mixed-media works. Through these works, shown under the collective title *People Mountain, People Sea*, McArthur takes the viewer on a visual journey that embraces both the intimate portrait and the spontaneity of visual diary entries, as well as objective and subjective views of a culture under his close observation, from simple street scenes to his encounters with Chinese opera. For McArthur, who is indeed an astute observer of his adopted environment, this has clearly been a journey made up of sublimely joyous moments and periods of struggle with subjects that have surrendered their secrets slowly, even grudgingly, to his probing and understanding.

Central to McArthur's art is the Chinese opera mask, as well as other masks representing other cultures. The Chinese opera mask has become a metaphor on many levels for McArthur. Specifically it is for the artist's experience in Hong Kong during the past nine years; and generally for the intricacies of an important historical aspect of Chinese culture that is quickly disappearing. Besides Chinese opera many other traditional forms of popular culture have quietly been replaced by the uniformity of global digital culture.

Masks have had many functions in all societies and in all cultures throughout the millennia. The symbolism of the mask is rich indeed but this depends greatly on how the mask is put to use. The mask and its power to hide and to liberate is central to a great deal

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of ancient rituals carried into modern times in the theater, opera, funerals, carnivals, agricultural festivals, celebrations of gods and monsters, dance, and religious ceremonies. The symbolism of the mask, while it depends on how it is used, is universal, often in the most visceral of ways. For McArthur this has become truly fascinating both as an object for his art making and as a subject of study.

“I have studied the faces, the ritual of face painting, and how to paint masks on a face. This has helped me a great deal to understand the structure, the composition, the line, and the colors of the mask, as well as its functions. It has given me a handle on a part of Chinese culture that I like. Chinese opera has made a major impression on me and I enjoy the links it has with many other cultures. There is in the Chinese opera mask a great combination of simplicity and complexity,” says the artist.

“Masks also let people be someone that they are not and that is one reason I like Chinese opera. The masks and the costumes conceal the performer and on stage the performer is the center of attention. The background is not so important. So that is why masks are at the center of a great deal of my art. In recent work, I wanted a tactile element, so I have used mask making. It adds a sculptural element to my work. I have used it to represent a common theme in my work, which is the painted Cantonese opera mask.”

Classical Chinese opera is rich in regional varieties and as such offers the curious artist myriad opportunities to experiment with line, color, form, and character. Masks have layers to them that attract McArthur greatly. “Layers because I like the idea of masks and concealment. This is also true of paintings where things can be obscured,” he says. “In real life we obscure things. Like professionals we wear different faces in relationships. In other words we wear masks to conceal but there are also times when we use masks to reveal ourselves. In Chinese opera masks represent the character that is portrayed, but not the actor behind the mask or in the costume.”

Whether or not McArthur paints his masks as single entities or as multiples on the paper, he is striving to suggest a multitude of worlds, not merely the one world that is constructed on the paper or canvas or that which is built up through collage. Works such as *For Years and Years* (2008) and *Instinct* (2008) in which the figures -- or multiple masks -- are crowded on the paper could either be opera characters or geishas or heavily painted ladies of the night. The bold line, the highly colored cheeks, and the pouting, puckered, rouged mouths suggest a curious combination of raw sensuality and sexual delights. These are faces that cross time and cultural boundaries. The make-up and expressions on these faces remind one of the light comic opera entitled *The Mikado* (1885) by the 19th century author and humorist W. S. Gilbert (1836--1911) and the composer Arthur Sullivan (1842--1900).

One of the most impressive aspects of McArthur’s work is the power that he insinuates into his images in his smallest works. The five small mixed-media works entitled *The Dan* (2006), *Blue Graffiti* (2006), *Graffiti Journal* (2006), *A Mask That Has Not Danced* (2007), and *Faa Daan (The Young Belle)* (2008) exemplify this quality. The masks or faces are tightly drawn with his signature pouting mouth and rather threatening stare. The power of such small pieces is reinforced through the artist’s use of calligraphy. Whether he uses English or Chinese calligraphy is not important in and of itself. What is important, however, is the layering effect that it lends to his works. There are times when such layering suggests a solid three-dimensional quality.

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The use of text within a painting is a long-established convention in both Eastern and Western art traditions. In classical Chinese painting, for example, a poem within the composition was a commonplace. In modern collage, from the beginning of the 20th century, text, either hand written or from already existing printed matter, added another visual dimension that frequently lent depth to the overall image and, at times, suggested a variety of interpretations of the collaged work. McArthur employs his hand-written calligraphy in numerous works not only to layer the work or to simply create a three-dimensional quality, but also to add subtle juxtapositions of color, line, and space, as well as to suggest something about the visual narrative that would be weaker without it. His juxtaposition between his calligraphic abstraction and his faces or masks, for example, combines to add a lyrical intensity and strength to the whole work.

McArthur is a keen observer of time and place. He is constantly aware of all that is around him in the street and in the theater. The line and color of the neon signs, the calligraphy that graces shop fronts, the shapes and textures of opera masks and costumes, and the posturing of people, all of which have been absorbed as significant elements into his art practice. “I want to respond to it by making my own visual images so that my art has its own language and evokes passion in different forms so that my responses also take on different forms, drawing, writing, and painting. In this way I enjoy experimenting with materials and concepts.”

Such things inform one of his very best pieces, the medium-sized collage entitled *Fragments and Contrasts* (2006). Toward the top-right hand of the collage an almost angry face stares out at the viewer, while beneath this image a blood-red handprint with the outspread fingers pointing up to the face. The lines of calligraphy that run down the side of the face and the edge of the collage lend another mysterious element to the composition, as does the distressed edges of the paper in which the images appear.

Collage, which had its most significant use in 20th-century art, has much in common with the masks that are so appealing to McArthur’s aesthetic sensibilities. Both of these can so easily speak to time and place in fragmented ways that appeal to the notion of art as a universal language that expresses myriad views of the human condition and the disjointedness of the modern world. As McArthur says, “The challenges of collage are in getting the right balance and the juxtapositions. Making collage works is sometimes like working on a large or small jigsaw puzzle or even a mask. You know, if one piece doesn’t quite fit, then everything else is out of balance.”

The abundance of images that McArthur has dealt with in his art over the past nine years has not only been informed by figuration, calligraphy, expressionism, and even surrealism, but also by such experiences as “the temples of Wat Po, mask makers in Florence, and new scripts from calligraphy masters. The masks of Japan’s Kabuki theater, the painted faces of the ‘child goddess’ in Nepal, the masks and sculptures that adorn temples in Southeast Asia are all iconic and stylized images that I enjoy viewing and learning about.”

These influences lend an enigmatic quality to works such as *Dreams and Visions* (2008), *Tell Me The Story* (2008), and *Silent Words* (2006). Again this is reinforced visually through McArthur’s calligraphy, line, and subtle colors, which are not a direct import from those of the opera or street neon or shop signs or advertisements, but rather the artist’s singular interpretation of these. And this leads to works that have their power in the surreal. Good examples of such work are *Rhythms, Ancient Whispers* (2008) and

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Circumstances (2008) where a thick-lipped woman in profile, her intricate hair tumbling from beneath her headscarf, is face to face with three fish coming toward her. Here, worlds collide, but in the gentlest of ways.

McArthur's masks are but one aspect of his figuration. Others include female and male nudes and humorous figures exercising. The fuller figures are more stylized than his other representational art, yet they remain spare, with almost no background. The plump figure in *Tegata* ((2008) is clearly Japanese, a sumo wrestler waiting meditatively for his bout. Female and male nudes such as *Enduring, Red Star, China Girl, Red Star, China Girl II, Fable, and Gods and Men* (all 2008) are of their time. They are not meant to be alluring temptresses or gay icons or studies in human sensuality but are rather careful observations of form, color, and line that suggest possibilities. As McArthur says, "The human body and portraits are common subjects of my art. And working with models is a source of inspiration. I am trying to capture the way that a person is sitting or the expression on their face or the way they move, all of which is fascinating. My figurative art is the way I record these observations and feelings and is without any other agenda."

While McArthur is clearly an intensely serious artist who is constantly learning and experimenting, there is also humor in his art that is refreshing. The sense of fun that is taking place before the artist's eye is articulated simply. In works such as *The Performance* and *The Temple Courtyard* (both 2008) one believes the figures to be monks, but they could also be nuns because there is an androgynous quality to their faces, which their shaven heads further emphasizes. In *Without A Backdrop* (2008) the boldly drawn and colorful figure seems to be about to jump out of its collar. Here the artist suggests a jack-in-the-box.

The new works that make up *People Mountain, People Sea* show John McArthur has a new confidence in the making of his art. The imagery, drama, line, and color of his smaller works on paper and his collages have not yet transitioned onto very large canvases. When this happens, McArthur's themes and subject matter will obtain a monumental dynamic that will further enhance his universal message.

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Note:

- (1) Unless otherwise stated all quotations are from conversations with the artist in June and July 2008.