



**John McLean**

Ian Collins

Lund Humphries



15. Red Lichtie, 2006  
Acrylic on paper, 28 × 37 cm (11 × 14½ in)  
Author's collection

Red Lichtie is an inhabitant of Arbroath. In a note for his 2007 show at London's Chelsea & Westminster Hospital, to celebrate the first element in a triptych of huge paintings (165 × 218.5 cm / 65 × 86 in) entitled *Hill o' Saughs, Inchgrundle* and *Invermark*, McLean explained the naming of his pictures. (He was recalling those teenage stints on Glen Esk while also politely conversing in an atrium with three bravura Patrick Heron banners suggesting the Mediterranean intensity of the Cornish coast at Zennor). 'The titles are as abstract as the paintings themselves', he said. 'I think of them as vocables as well as labels. If they trigger visual responses, well and good. And if they don't, it doesn't matter: the work can look after itself.'

John was given a studio in the grounds and a plaster cast from the antique by warden William Reid, also head of his school art department. Artist-in-residence James McIntosh Patrick then praised a resulting study in gouache. He suggested that, like his father, the teenager should apply to the art school in Dundee where Patrick was now a tutor. John was wary. And for his parents the priority of making a living was reinforced because Talbert's long-dwindling earnings from commercial drawings had now ceased entirely.

Otherwise, the pride of Arbroath has been its 1898 Library and Art Gallery. Here the teenage John kept up to date with *Studio* magazine and saw revelatory Arts Council-aided exhibitions in the 1950s of work by Matthew Smith, Ben Nicholson, Graham Sutherland, Keith Vaughan and Francis Bacon. Here, too, he first saw the abstracted art of fellow Scot Alan Davie – who, having graduated from Edinburgh College of Art, had become a jazz musician and then toured Europe on a scholarship, after which symbols drawn from Byzantine mosaics and early Christian art joined his jazzy imagery. Yet to register was the name of Fife-raised William Gear, who had lately lived in Paris and exhibited with avant-garde groups including Cobra. His was anyway to be a creative journey with which John would feel no affinity. But Arbroath's first glimpse of a Cézanne – from Glasgow's Burrell Collection – brought delight. Angus council also bought pictures and so the civic collection came to include a 1962 oil *Dead Sea Salt Pans*, a pioneering piece of austere Scottish abstraction, based on war-time memories of Egypt, by Talbert McLean.

John exhibited in the Arbroath Art Society annual shows in the town's art gallery only twice. His more telling painting was *Dominator* (1961), a large and brooding work influenced by the *Situation* catalogue. A reviewer from Dundee's *Courier* snidely regretted that it lived up to its title. John shrugged off such scorn, his confidence having been boosted when Sydney Goodsir Smith, poet and art critic of the *Scotsman*, picked out a social realist painting in a prestigious mixed Dundee Art Society show of 1962. Grey-toned *Street Corner* was praised as 'subtle, beautifully composed, a most satisfactory and, indeed, touching work that has the quality of permanence'. For good measure he then admired one of the few featured abstracts – Talbert's *Dead Sea Salt Pans*.<sup>2</sup>

A frequent visitor to Linton Road was Richard Hunter who, with William Littlejohn and Kenneth Roberts, fellow Talbert pupils turned Dundee art students, valued the friendship of the old master who had taught terms such as aesthetics, taste, vulgarity and philistinism with a patient egalitarianism balanced

by candour. The former art room where Talbert – along with fellow teacher, poster designer Victor Lemaitre – had made a refuge of light, progressive thinking and knowledge of contemporary creativity was fondly recalled. Now they enjoyed Sunday social evenings with free-ranging discussions. John, being younger, and with that private family veto on art studies, was mostly absent. But a surviving Euston Road-style portrait shows a pensive 15-year-old – John as he appeared to the perceptive Richard Hunter.

Between the ages of 15 and 20, John secured his love of outdoor Scotland with a summer job on Invermark, highest and most rugged of the Earl of Dalhousie's Glen Esk shooting estates. Each July he would mend roads and build hides, then return home for a week until grouse shooting began on 12 August. He graduated from beater to loader and then, when the birds were bagged, stalked deer until late September. Here, too, he learned to eviscerate (*gralloch*) dead stags on the mountainside.

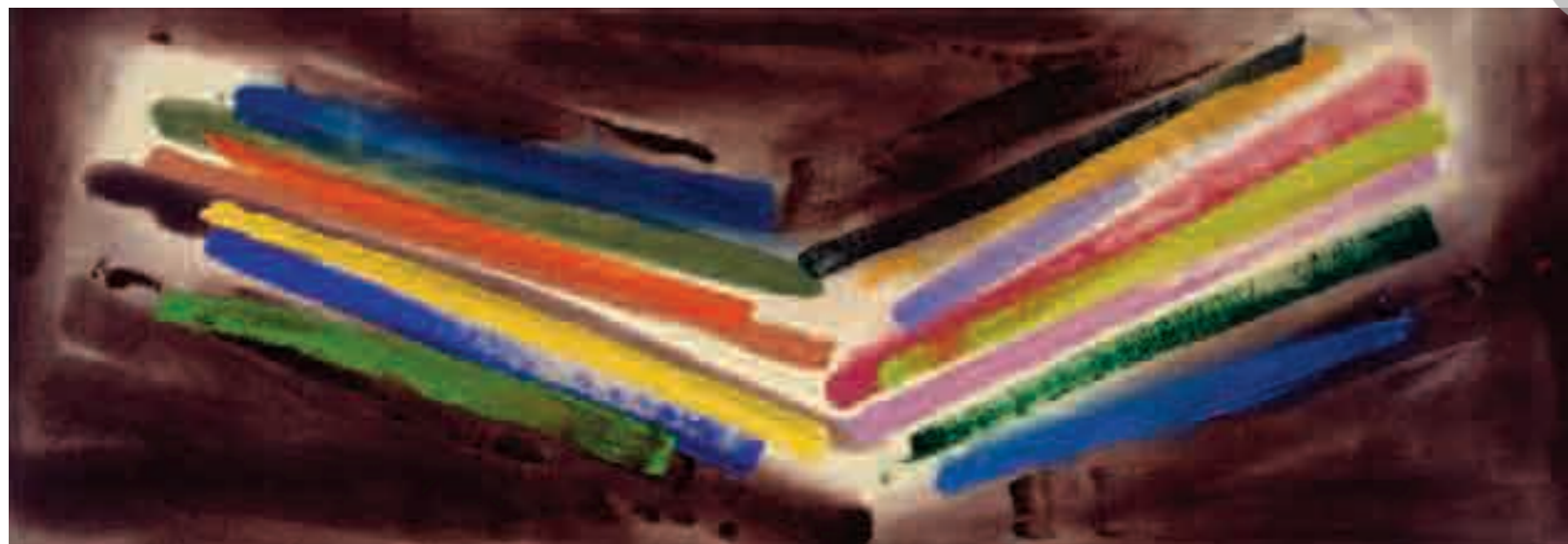
In Glen Esk John lived on venison – minced in sandwiches for lunch, stewed for supper and breakfast. He watched golden eagles and ravens and saw a wild cat corpse, shot and left on a woodstore. He learned that the high mountains have no silence: when the wind isn't raging there's always the roar of falling water. Three Glen Esk paintings and drawings survive, one owned by Matthew Collings.

Back at home, the war against an artistic vocation was hardened by the many defeats of his father. As he pursued his own path of pared-down representational painting, en route to abstraction, Talbert often submitted pictures to the Royal Scottish Academy. Most were rejected by the conservative selectors. John felt hurt and angry on his father's behalf. When, having secured his school art and English prizes, he was steered towards studying the latter at St Andrews University, the decision against art history was made easy. For there was no such course at the time.

[www.lundhumpries.com](http://www.lundhumpries.com)



55. **Scarp**, 1988  
Acrylic on canvas, 79 × 229 cm (31 × 90 in)  
Private collection



56. **John Deere 4650**, 1988  
Acrylic on canvas, 80 × 226 cm (31½ × 89 in)  
Lord and Lady Renfrew collection

'You can't find brighter light anywhere in the world', the artist says. Slabs of colour began to shimmer against golden grounds like a mirage in a harvested cornfield so vast it mimicked a desert – a vision of building blocks striding towards a towering future. 'In my studio one day Dorothy Knowles joked that coming to Canada had been my undoing', John McLean adds. 'What it really did was help me on the road to using saturated colour.' More immediately, a visit to the Big Dipper dance hall saw a formerly foot-tied artist learning to polka, to the delight of Jan. Henceforth their dancing would enliven any party.

Autumn 1983 brought a semester's teaching at Boston Museum of Fine Arts School. Renting a room from the painter Sandi Slone in the leafy suburb of Brookline, John painted and painted. Friedel Dzubas praised an 'oddball' picture which heralded the shapes of future work.

Walking to the art school along a Muddy River bank John saw red cardinals, blue jays, golden oriole and, once, a dozen cedar waxwings sunbathing on a branch. He became a passionate painter and observer of birds – sketching flamingos and pelicans when visiting a cousin in Chile and, from 1995, crows and blackbirds on his Barbican balcony in London. When their flat became a viewing platform for peregrines fledging from the top of a nearby tower, the McLeans hosted a hawk-watching party. Guests arrived to find a peregrine perched on the landing. Closer inspection revealed a painted falcon stuck on a stick. He also watches peregrines on Tate Modern while mudlarking in the Thames for shards of antique pottery. There, too, he once saw a heron swallow a crow.

In summer 1987 the McLeans moved to New York and stayed for two years – John working in a huge Soho loft. Jan had secured a job teaching in the exclusive Spence School on the Upper East Side (whose windows overlooked the bird haven of Central Park). Even so, money was tight and John became a skilful maker of soups and stews using vegetables fallen from Canal Street market stalls. Picture sales drifted between scarce and non-existent. Commercial work was finally secured through an agent – notably circular designs on paper, with motifs based on Della Robbia pottery, for an Italian restaurant chain. That tondo format proved useful practice for later acrylics and prints.

The New York move ultimately led to a big breakthrough – back in London. A 1988 debut at the Francis Graham-Dixon Gallery in Clerkenwell comprised a selection of American paintings. Tim Hilton asked in the *Guardian*: 'Surely there is no other British artist with a comparable desire to produce paintings of sheer and utter beauty?' Then again beauty –



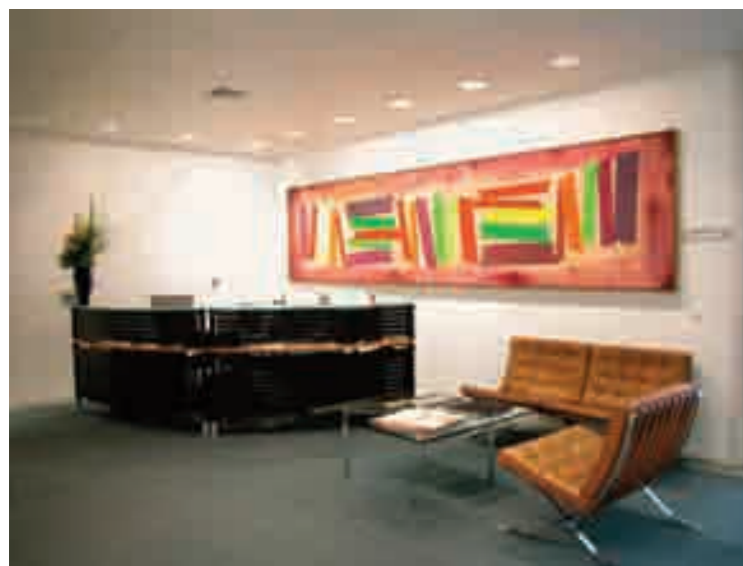
57. **Sundance**, 1988  
Acrylic on canvas, 170.5 × 75 cm (67 × 29½ in)  
Private collection

Part IV  
**Reception**

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66. *Capercaillie* (unstretched in street) 1990, carried by the artist and Robert Christie. Now at Stockley Park, near Heathrow Airport



67. *Sword Dance*, 1993  
Acrylic on canvas, 488 × 91.5 cm (192 × 36 in)  
Broadgate Centre, London

This has fed the unabashed romanticism of his pictures ... that natural lifting of the spirit, of the expression, in something that has nothing to do with painting: song. Of these pictures we can truly use the overworked word lyrical'.

Hilton continued:

A single mark in a McLean painting will evidently have been made by a single gesture, the tender primal touch of painting on canvas. Consider how complete and meaningful such a single mark can be: in its perfectly judged size; in its direction; in its viscosity, or dryness, or comparative dryness; in the way it can, elegantly or boldly, turn upon itself like a flourish or stand squarely. There is something newly-born about this, just as there is great sophistication in it. But it is sometimes the case in art that it takes such sophistication to make us see simply. And McLean is simply a master of touch.

*Batoche (Homage to MM and GR)* was selected for the 1989 *John Moores Exhibition* in Liverpool. The artist wrote in the catalogue:

*Batoche* is a small town in Saskatchewan. The most important of the reasons why I used its name for a title is that the bright light of the prairies is galvanic for me in the way, for example, that the French side of the Channel must have been for painters like Matthew Smith and Roderick O'Connor. Beautiful though our light is, it is subtle. So the colours we use tend to relate tonally. But I enjoy sheer hue ... The rest of the title came from my wistfulness, as I worked on the painting in Saskatoon, wondering what my painter friends Mali Morris and Geoff Rigden were up to in their studios thousands of miles away in London.

In 1990 John McLean painted the huge *Capercaillie* – 168 × 617 cm (66 × 243 in) – on the floor of the knocked-through sitting room of his Victorian terrace house in Clapham. To view the work he had to stand on the outside window ledge, before it went to Ian Ritchie's immense B8 building at the new Stockley Park industrial park near Heathrow Airport. Stanhope Properties developer Stuart Lipton and design director Vincent Wang put art at the start of the project. The painting was secured when the glass-walled and grey-stone-floored block was still a shell and the future tenant unknown. Borrowed for a week on the evidence of a small transparency, the picture was immediately approved on site by Wang, Ritchie and



68. *Batoche (Homage to MM and GR)*, 1989  
Acrylic on canvas, 198 × 244 cm (78 × 96 in)  
Artist's collection



69. *Steeked*, 1990  
Acrylic on canvas, 63.5 × 106.5 cm (25 × 42 in)  
Linklaters, London



72. Strathspey, 1993  
Acrylic on canvas, 224.5 × 157.5 cm (88½ × 62 in)  
Glasgow Museums: Gallery of Modern Art

The huge 1992 Matisse retrospective in New York was very moving. So was the Miró show in Barcelona soon afterwards. But for the previous decade I had also been looking at the painting of Bill Pehudoff, the Canadian abstract artist, whose colour intrigued me. I longed to use absolutely saturated hues as he did and by the time I painted *Strathspey* I could.

The upper circle is the white ground, in a sense a hole in the more brushy black field. But some of the bright colours overlap the black, so the hole seems to move forward on to the same plane as the black. White will always come forward, no matter what, but my ground here is a flat white and would be in a sense obviously behind the slightly translucent black brushed on top. Spatial tension is central to my work.

J.M.

## 14 Master Printer

In 1981 a John McLean exhibition toured Scotland and prompted a new creative departure on opening in Aberdeen. Peacock Printmakers, based in the old church hall of St Andrew's Cathedral, suggested a screenprint. McLean began as he would continue: testing each new medium to its limits. A second screenprint, fully 183 × 152.5 cm (72 × 60 in), added the delicate innovation of ink diluted to bleed like watercolour.

Two further Scottish printmaking sessions followed. A 1995 collaboration with Glasgow Print Workshop produced two screenprints – one, *Roundy Hill*, is now in the Pallant House Gallery collection in Chichester. Elizabeth Blackadder, working with the Glasgow enterprise at the same time, thought McLean's use of colour 'terrific'. And a final screenprinting venture with Peacock Printmakers resulted in *Granite Suite*, one set of which is now in Dundee Art Gallery.

The late 1980s saw a return to printmaking after an approach from Advanced Graphics. Founded in London in 1967 by Chris Betambeau, and later a partnership with Bob Saich, this operation had begun with a Bert Irvin screenprint. During an Irvin show in New York, John took Bert, Bob and Chris on a tour of Manhattan's Irish bars. A plan was hatched

for a screenprinting project back in London, from which two images emerged.

A third advance into printmaking came via London's Hope Sufferance print studio. Here, at the instigation of Marion Stone, head of prints at Flowers East, and in collaboration with Pete Kosowicz, John created his first etching with aquatint, *Mamelon*, in 1999. Next came six combined etchings with aquatints and chine-collée – where tissue paper interposed between plate and printing paper makes the image more tactile and sculptural.

But the main partnership in the McLean career as a printmaker dates from a meeting with Kip Gresham in the early 1980s, during a merry evening in a Clapham pub with artist John Bellany. Gresham, then Chilford Hall Press director and later to co-direct Curwen Chilford Prints, had been struck at once by the McLean 'depth of knowledge about all things visual and by his sense of fun. Invariably a serious observation was qualified by a joke which carried with it further insights'.

Still, those further insights had to wait until 1995 for detailed exploration – when Lord Renfrew commissioned Kip's Gresham Studio to produce a Jesus College Cambridge Quincentennial Portfolio of prints by John Bellany, Barry

Flanagan, John Hoyland, Bert Irvin, Kim Lim, Richard Long, David Mach, Eduardo Paolozzi, William Turnbull and John McLean. The last's contribution, *Cuthbert Cockalorum*, led to *Mountjoy Suite*, a group of five screenprints named after the Barbican block where the McLeans had lived since 1995.

Says Kip Gresham:

Few artists I worked with had made work that simultaneously asked so much of the studio as collaborators and so much of the viewer. They were technically difficult to make, formally graceful yet apparently quite casual in their assembly. In this paradoxical collision between the struggle of work and the joy of a well-conceived visual statement lies the magic of John's printmaking. His work, while light in touch, strong in structure, challenging in the defiance of gravity and chromatically extraordinary, shows little evidence of the effort that went into its making. John's prints emerge into the world looking as if they have always existed and confident of an athletic future. He often uses the word 'funny' to describe this intangible assertiveness; not meaning amusing or light-hearted but rather joyous and inspiring. The experience of working alongside him is genuinely funny.

*Mountjoy Suite* began as a series of colourist collages laid out in McLean's studio in London's Oval area (where he worked for a decade from 1989 before moving to the APT Studios

in Deptford) with the elements then Blu-Tacked together like jigsaws, which Gresham could dismantle in Cambridge for the various stages of the screenprint. So simple a conception produced a nightmare of construction on the printing press, but with the dream result of five aptly titled images loaded with that paradoxical weight of the serious thing said lightly. Sadly, soon afterwards, in 2000, Gresham fell ill and their joint labours fell into the hands of the receivers.

Gresham says: 'Things got better. I got better and, in 2002, The Print Studio, Cambridge came into being.' In fact, a veteran printmaker who has now collaborated with more than 120 artists, including Patrick Caulfield, Terry Frost and Claes Oldenburg, got better than ever. John McLean is now among Gresham's principal collaborators – and one he rates among the very best.

A 2003 *Southbridge* screenprint for Paintings in Hospitals (Scotland) had slices of rich colour floating over a black ground. Scheme founder Matilda Mitchell recalls 'an extraordinarily vibrant print which sold out'. That gave way to a flood of images from 2004, starting with four screenprints for Flowers East and 20 muscular monotypes. Several of the latter derived from circular plaques John had been painting and in the process discovering the importance of an edge moving neither upwards nor across. Many monotypes were made through a circular aperture and then overprinted with a separate circular window. Gresham and McLean listened to John Lee Hooker as they worked, the blues star's tracks featuring among the disc-shaped image titles.



94. Colour samples



95. The artist working on a monotype



96. Monotype ready for printing



97. Woodcuts drying