Tanya Leighton

Bruce McLean A HOT SUNSET and SHADE PAINTINGS Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London 2 December – 28 January

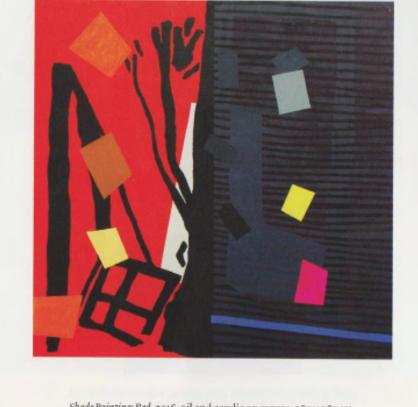
Art that makes you kugh is always in short supply, possibly because when that is its aim usually ends up as facetiousness. But Bruce McLean's comic art has always had a harsh, satirical edge that keeps it serious. In the late 1980s, he was the joker in the British conceptual art pack, a Dennis the Menace, with Brillo-pad hair and a Glaswegian bruiser's snub-nesed face, flouting his studiously carnest context. From his carly Port Works to his recent paintings and videos, a constant has been his preoccupation with sending up forms of modernist abstraction, which he, as much as others of his generation, ere set on superseding. Posing for Par Warks for Plintlu (1971, not on view), he impersonated a Henry Moore reclining nude, with fist on hip to imitate Moore's trademark sculptural holes. The blend of registers was key to the humourn poking fun at formalist orthodoxies that had been reduced to mannerism and pomposity, even while expressing nostalgia for their outmoded certainties

The six semiabstract paintings (Shade Paintings, all works 2016) and two striped aluminium reliefs (Sunor, 2016) at Bernard Jacobson Gallery may look initially like a surrender to the medernist conventions that McLean made his name by sufficient go but they turn out to be only more surrepetitions in their subversions. The works on cavas – each 26554cm – use assertments of geometric, abstract shapes to atomise silboatettes evoking trees and clouds. Their imposing scale and silboatetting recalls Patrick Caulifield's still life/ interiors of the 1980s and 900, but McLean's execution is blant and sceptical in comparison. The serialised formats court the look of an established artist charming out colourful but shoddy abstract art for a guilble market.

Because this is painting, the difference lies in the specifics of its facture: the knowingly crude stencilling, the too-clever-by-half chro matic transitions, his playing the Romantic cliché of a sunset silhouette a little fulsomely off the stylistic antithesis of freefloating geometrics, each disabusing the other of its pretensions. His diffident finish conveys a fusal to collude with the idioms he co-opts. The difference between rehash and reappraisal is as touch-specific as the some of a voice distinguishing between different meanings of the same statement. His most telling critique of the merely deconative formalism he is pastiching is that the critique comes in a form which implies that formalistic manoes need not be merely form but vital, critical content.

But it's a fine line he walks. He risks satire resolving as a failure to realise the kind of art he is satirising. His ironic relativism is most explicitly figured in the clash of the industrialised formalism of the multicoloured striped reliefs – each over six meenes wide – with the paintings' organic semiabstraction. The rigours of formalist stripe painting – from Kenneth Noland to Bridget Biley – are converted into Day-Glo decor fixtures, implying the irrelevance of the arrane aesthetics they reference to the context they occupy. In justaposition, the two idioma – glaringly incompatible, according to any proper, formalist procepts – surrender to the condition of ars-bistorical karaoloe.

A four-minute video on a backroom monitor has McLean dancing to a rock-'n'-roll soundtrack. There is a foil crown on a shelf above his head. The song's refrain is the video's title "I want my crown" - an allusion to King for a Day, the title of McLean's one-day retrospective at the Tate in 1972. Coming out of the latter part of a 40-year career, this self-referencing emphasises that McLean has always been making fun of himself as much as of his predecessors, preventing him from succumbing to the superiority of critique. While he dance he points up pathetically to the crown. His own past is now as remote as the modernise precedents from which his painterly standup routine measures its distance. Mark Pri-



Shade Painting: Red, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 265 × 265 cm. Courtesy Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London

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