

# Mathew McConnell Self, Theft and Inspiration



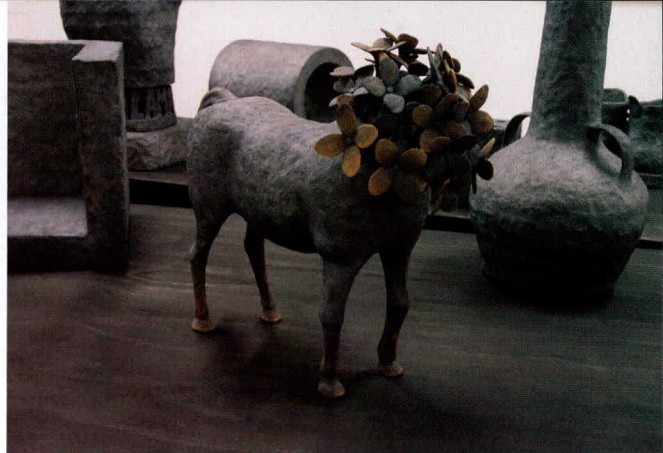
*Article by Glen R Brown*

**I**N A MOMENT OF WRY CANDOUR THE ROYAL ACADEMICIAN Henry Fuseli is said to have remarked that fellow Romantic William Blake was “damned good to steal from”. This terse assertion was not likely a confession of guilt. After all, academic training in the late-Georgian era consisted of close copying of the ancients and Old Masters and taste was epitomised in academic circles by the judicious borrowing of figures, compositions and even stylistic traits from paragons of art. Only later in the 19th century, with the advent of modernism and its philosophy of the avant-garde, would an obsession with originality burgeon in the art of the western world and cast Fuseli’s utterance in an unflattering light. The matter would not rest there, however, since the modernist concept of originality was destined to take a deconstructive beating in the Postmodern era. In the 1980s Fuseli’s statement might have aptly emblazoned the banners of appropriationists, coordinating neatly with the Neo-Expressionist David Salle’s recasting of originality as a matter of “what you choose and how you choose it”. Today, when this Postmodern attitude coexists oddly with revived aspects of the modernist concept of originality it is difficult to reflect on Fuseli’s famous admission without wondering what it might mean for artists to steal from artists. Is such theft deplorable or admirable? Is it something to be

shunned or cultivated? Can it be circumvented or is it simply inevitable?

For ceramist Mathew McConnell such questions are plaguing, particularly as they are rendered uniquely urgent by contemporary technologies for information dissemination and acquisition, most importantly the World Wide Web with its vast and proliferating store of images. Historical art – what painter Sandro Chia characterised as the incessant murmurings of “the dead fathers” – has always impinged on the artist, providing both exemplars to be emulated and obstacles to be overcome. Likewise, though generally in a more clandestine manner, the art of one’s contemporaries has long figured into the thorny issue of influence and originality. In the past (with the exception of sporadic candid confessions such as Fuseli’s) discourse tended to glide over this issue, but today the ubiquity of the Internet has radically enflamed it. As McConnell points out, the contemporary has never before been privileged with a means of continuous and near-instantaneous self-observation, and artists have never before enjoyed (or been cursed by) such immediate access to one another’s works. “The Internet came along when I was in high school,” McConnell recalls, “but now I am dealing with students who have always known it. They see the world a little differently. There isn’t the search,





Facing page and above: *Many Things New and More of The Same*. 2010. Raku-fired red earthenware, plywood displays dyed with india ink. Approximately 10 x 6 x 22 ft.

the struggle. Everything is there at their fingertips all the time. I am trying to understand that place where it doesn't take much effort to find more and more and more. I am trying to work through the ramifications of that for the visual artist."

In the early phase of his exploration of instant Internet inspiration McConnell appropriated with abandon. For his 2009 MFA-thesis exhibition at the University of Colorado, Boulder, for example, he assembled a bright array of playful forms that unabashedly imitated sources encountered online and evaded the issue of his own artistic identity in favour of "holding a mirror to contemporary art". Soon realising that the self-erasure in his appropriationist works was in fact illusory – that selection was in the end a form of originality that kept the artist in the picture – he adopted a strategy made familiar by conceptualists such as Chuck Close. De-emphasising the importance of subject matter, interpretation and expression, McConnell asserted himself by setting technical parameters for the 2010 multipart sculpture *Many Things New and More of the Same*. In this work his point of departure was a new set of questions: "If I don't allow myself any tools or any materials except one; if I keep the surface simple; if I boil it down to one process, can I show through in a different way? Will I be present in the work in a way that I haven't in the previous few bodies of work? That was the crux. In remaking these other objects, these tokens of what is happening in contemporary art, in a controlled way with the same material again and again, will I become present?"

To test these questions McConnell deliberately reduced the variables in his practice. *Many Things New* eschews colour and gravitates to the dark pole of the tonal spectrum, arraying roughly 40 blackened raku-fired forms across plywood tabletops stained to velvety appearance though the application of India ink. The forms – mostly drawn from a Fischli and Weiss exhibition titled *Clay and Rubber* but also referring to works by Dan Colen, Michaela Meise, Ken Price and Rebecca Warren – were rendered without the aid of tools. If McConnell's previous work had seemed determinedly antihumanistic through its aggressive appropriation and simulation, *Many Things New* took a decidedly humanistic turn by emphasising the role of the hand in making. "This body of work

was all about touch," McConnell confirms. "There is something a little bit expressive in that. It was about saying I am not going to use any tools; I am not going to use anything but my hands and clay and, as I go about feeling my way through these works and literally touching them into existence, can I impart something of myself to these things?"

The things are, of course, not simply things but rather objects presented as art that bear inherent connections to other previously existing objects presented as art. Key to these connections is an immaterial intermediary: digitised information disseminated through Internet technology in a process that McConnell describes as if it were a form of naturalisation. Imparting a givenness to the constantly changing and proliferating corpus of information available on the World Wide Web, he employs the term landscape, implying that our information technologies have become so pervasive and so dynamic that artists today turn to the Internet for confirmation of nature as readily as their counterparts in the past took to the Forest of Fontainebleau, the Hudson River Valley, or the Lake District. McConnell tests the waters of an Internet nature, immersing himself in a flood of digitally acquired images of art. "These things for me are the trees, the rocks and the rivers," he explains. "As I work each day I print out images. I keep an entire studio wall covered with images. Then I can glance around and just start reproducing something or find a kernel of something, even if it is as simple as colour. In this particular body of work a lot of the objects were one-to-one with the sources, but often images that are next to each other combine in other things."

In at least one instance, the 2011 installation *Bas Jan, You're Not So Pretty*, McConnell's reflections on influence took inspiration from an exhibition that was itself a reflection on influence: the 2010 Pitzer College Art Galleries' *Bas Jan Ader: Suspended Between Laughter and Tears*. This exhibition consisted partly of works by the charismatic conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader, whose career pierced the boundaries of legend in 1975 when, during the second part of his





Top left: *Bas Jan, You're Not So Pretty Anymore*. 2011. Kodak Ektagraphics III AT projector, 80 sunsets on 35mm slides, cinder blocks, light strand, earthenware with acrylic paint and other mixed media. Approx. 14 ft/w.

Above and right images: *Closings: March 19-27, 2011 (New York, Berlin, Los Angeles, London, Tokyo, Munich, Paris, Madrid)*. 2011. Kodak Ektagraphics III ATS projectors, 320 unique 35mm slides. Approx. 30 x 50 x 34 in.

trilogy "In Search of the Miraculous" he tragically disappeared at sea. Along with Ader's works the show included the homage of 10 other artists in the form of sculptures, photographs and slide shows. These were to be McConnell's starting points, but as he began to develop his ideas he realised that the inspired could not be so easily separated from their inspiration. "I thought that maybe I could make a piece that was a response to the group exhibition that was a response to Ader," McConnell recalls. "It was something of an experiment. I was trying to distil a group exhibition into one piece, but it became hard as I was making it to not engage with Ader's work. It became more of a memorial to Ader, which I didn't mean for it to be. Usually I try to keep my references contemporary, but with this I kept coming back to his story: this romantic semi-ridiculous tale of a guy who tried to sail across the Atlantic alone in a 13 foot sailboat but never arrived at the other side."

McConnell's experiment makes explicit reference to its source material. The text – proclaiming in



dripping beige capitals (YOU'RE NOT SO PRETTY ANYMORE) appropriates a style of pseudo-nonchalant lettering used in the Pitzer College exhibition. A concrete block refers bluntly to one that Ader hurls in a video; the string of lights tangled around McConnell's block recalls lights strung on the Pitzer gallery wall; a scale-model slipcast sailboat conjures Ader's ill-fated 13 foot pocket cruiser Ocean Wave; and a slide projector, continuously showing a carousel of sunset images that McConnell describes as "ugly and charming at the same time" imitates Ader homage from the Pitzer show. Of all the objects in McConnell's installation the projector was perhaps most significant because it marked a departure from the narrowness of artistic theft. "I was interested in slide projectors in general," McConnell recalls, "and 2010 was the year of the slide projector. There were a lot of them being shown at art fairs. I think there was a nostalgia as the technology disappeared. To me that was a marker or indicator of a particular moment in time and I was trying to find a way to incorporate that."

In the next of his multipart works, *Closings: March*





*Between One and The Same—Part 1. 2011. Raku-fired earthenware, mixed media on paper, frames, dyed plywood and steel. 110 in/ftw.*

19-27, 2011 (New York, Berlin, Los Angeles, London, Tokyo, Munich, Paris, Madrid) McConnell again employed projectors, emphasised a moment in time and focused, more pointedly than ever, on the issue of art's filching from art. Spawned by the notion of 'extending the world's exhibitions by a week', the installation consisted of images of objects made in imitation of images of objects gleaned from virtual versions of gallery exhibitions that closed between 19 March and 27 March of 2011. McConnell captured the online images in screenshots and used them as source material for small sculptures modelled in orange plasticine. These sculptures, derived from digital images of actual objects, were themselves converted into images through the analog technology of slides. *Closings* consisted of four projectors displaying on their preview screens McConnell's slides of his plasticine sculptures interspersed with slides of the digital screenshots of artworks that he encountered online. Perhaps the most intriguing of these originated in an exhibition of work by Gavin Turk, whose own practice of convoluted pilfering from art has included the portrayal of himself as Sid Vicious in the gunfighter pose of Elvis Presley as portrayed by Andy Warhol.

Exploring another angle on the issue of art's following of art, McConnell's 2011 *Between One and the Same – Part 1* began with his customary imitation of other artists' work but ended as a permutation of his own method of making. Consisting of framed and matted gouache paintings and black, raku-fired earthenware vessels arranged in two closely similar sets on white shelves supported by thin steel trusses, the work drew inspiration from, among other sources, the ceramic vessels and sculptures of Ian McDonald and Arlene Shechet and the paintings of Richard Tuttle. McConnell says, "In this piece I was trying to go one generation further: to take my reference

and make another version and maybe concentrate on things that were a bit more abstract, that didn't so clearly belong in the realm of someone else's work. If I could take the products and make other versions of them myself – so that I had two versions of every object – then maybe the space between the version I made and the next version I made could tell me something about the space between objects in a way that making someone else's objects failed to tell me. I thought that it might be different if I were remaking my own works. In a sense I was trying to see the gap between one version and another."

The gap to which McConnell refers is, of course, the gap that softens the starkness of artistic theft and converts that theft to the widely acceptable process of influence. Perhaps it is natural for artists to navigate this gap more often than they openly acknowledge their source material in previous works of art. Even McConnell, who has tendentiously acknowledged his debt to the work of other artists, confesses to a desire for "breathing room" in a space where there is greater nuance to the idea of how artists go about conceiving their art. In the 2013 installation *What it Means to Move*, he deliberately distanced himself from close copying. "Instead of printing images and hanging them," he explains, "I made quick sketches as I browsed blogs, books and exhibitions. Then, some weeks later, I went back through the sketches and re-drew a portion as simplified line drawings. A few weeks later, I converted those line drawing to even more simplified drawings. In the end, the sketches that made their way to my wall were simple black felt-tip-marker drawings on four by six inch sheets of paper. The drawings now had an aesthetic and conceptual distance from the work that started them, but they still provided a clear plan for objects that could be built using them as a guide. In most









instances, it was impossible to recall whose work I was sampling or what it looked like to begin with just by looking at these final drawings. I was now free to make works that felt entirely under my control."

Were the forms produced for *What it Means to Move* (handbuilt earthenware objects burnished with bone charcoal and graphite) truly the products of free will, or had the moment of theft simply become so diffuse and submerged that it could be forgotten as easily as in nearly all other acts of making art? Through successive stages of drawing, memories of the initial inspiration had dimmed and, in that dimness, creativity seemed to flicker into being and give rise to physical objects where previously there had been none. McConnell asserts: "What I wanted for these pieces, given their flippant, meandering genesis and construction, was a sense of undeniable fixedness in their completion. So, the work moved at a swift pace in its development and making, but when it arrived it did so with an exaggerated sense of permanence. The final objects are fixed in a way that is quite antithetical to their own creation, bringing a seriousness of purpose to each object that undermines the provisional nature of its making."

In *What it Means to Move* McConnell approaches the opposite shore of a gulf of nuances separating artistic theft and inspiration. The objects do, indeed, convey a sense of inevitability and *gravitas* that seems to confirm their wholly original inception, and the idea of theft, if not for its incessant underscoring in Mathew McConnell's previous works, would be as far from the viewer's thoughts as when confronting any other art that seems to assert unequivocally the human capacity for originality.



Top and above: *What it Means to Move*. 2013. Earthenware with bone char and graphite. Approx. 6.5 x 6 x 37 ft.  
Facing page: *Many Things New and More of The Same (Detail)*.

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