

Fionn McCabe

THE BEAUTY OF MISTAKES

By Katya Tylevich

When McCabe tells me about the duality that he tries to achieve in his work – a conflict between something epic and some sort of quotidian sadness – I feel I know what he's talking about. Cartoon-like imagery seesaws with natural imagery. This is self-portrait, at the same time as it is self-escape; at once a depiction of a bigger meaning and resignation that there isn't one.

— *You've been in Los Angeles for almost a year now. What life were you living in Boston?* I went to Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston to study printmaking, and when I got out of there, I spent a number of years working as a commercial printer, which was terrible. I left school with this idealized version of what I would be doing – printing cool posters and creating artwork – when really, every day from 7:30am to 4:30pm, I was printing Little League numbers on the backs of shirts. It was total grunt work, really mindless, and didn't even pay very well. But what I took away from the experience is an appreciation for different visual languages. For example, if you go into a small-town diner anywhere in the United States, it will have the same checkered tablecloth and the same napkin holder, and the shirt the wait-staff wear will probably be an egg that's replaced the sun in a sunset. That's a language, a kind of formula for artwork that speaks to a specific social group. But the job was miserable. I stopped working there and began freelancing as an illustrator and graphic designer, before I moved out here.

— *People sometimes mistake your work as digital, but it's all hand done. Do you enjoy the ambiguity?* Actually, I'm very careful to make things that are not overly slick. I appreciate mistakes and the awkwardness of drawing, so if I make a drawing and it looks too complete, I'll either throw it away or try and ruin it somehow: ink drips, smudges. I feel like without those mistakes, without those human marks and screw-ups, you don't get a real sense of desperation in the image. What I like is for my work to play between epic and just kind of sad.

— *Is it a purposeful undermining of your own work?* Absolutely. I think that there's a kind of self-deception that goes into creative work: this idea that at some point you 'make it'. I feel that many artists work their entire lives thinking that they'll 'make it' next week, or after the next show, or after the next project. But no matter what stage they're at, people just work all the time, and the self-deception is in thinking that next week will be different. Really, your lifestyle is built around working; it's built around this continual process.

— *Is that cycle of 'making it' a personal weight on your shoulders?* I think that among artists, there's this totally fictional idea of success: the idea that a hand reaches down and pulls you up to the next level. And that seems to keep a lot of artists going, rather than the work itself. So in my work I address that happening within myself. In that way, all of my pieces can be considered self-portraits. Most figures are based on myself, and lots of images are of me sleeping. I like to build a world and then allow myself to interact with it in some way. I want to be very honest about the way that I approach the images, and that is from a very personal, opinionated place.

— *Are all of your works necessarily connected to each other?* There are a lot of themes that cross over from one piece to the next: desperation and loneliness contrasted against the epic quality I mentioned before. There's a lot of duality in the work. I like the idea of drawing in different styles to represent different things. So some of the works combine a cartoon-like popular imagery with some much more naturalistic drawing, where the natural drawing tends to be much more depressing and embody more self-doubt than the things that are 'simplified' and more typical of cartoon imagery.

— *Does your gallery work live a separate life from your commercial work?* I come from a fine art background and I do want that to get noticed – I want people to take their time with the gallery work. Sometimes I find I have trouble conveying that my gallery work is not illustration, although I do illustrate and look at a lot of illustrators. On the other hand, I resent the distinction that's made between illustration and fine art. Certain types of imagery get dismissed that way; they're labelled lowbrow, whatever that means. In the end, I don't care if I'm working on a project that's commercial or for a gallery. Ultimately, if you're in a gallery, you still need to be promoted – the difference is that someone else is promoting you when you do commercial work. The intent of each type of work might be different, but both are equally valid.

— *Do you like being present at your shows?* I like eavesdropping and listening to people talk about my work. Judging by the work, people expect me to be slightly insane, but then I show up and I still have both of my ears, and I just disappoint them again.

— *You're not 'artist' enough for them?* Somewhere in the back of my mind, I do wish such a thing really existed. [Laughs.] I do love the idea of what an artist should be; it's very similar to the glamorous idea of what a musician should be. But the reality of being an artist or a musician is basically a lot of practice and isolation. Unless your work is social, you're going to be spending a lot of time alone. That disparity fascinates me. It's part of this lie that we tell ourselves: I imagine myself as a rock-star artist, but really I spend 14 hours a day by myself, drawing. It's a completely, completely unreal aspiration, but that's also what I love about it. I mean, I'm an adult. I know that Santa Claus isn't real, but somehow the rock-star image of an artist still survives.



Untitled (Unambiguity), 2011, ink, acrylic and collage on paper, 55.8 x 76.3 cm

