

LEONARD McCOMB

Body and Spirit

Paintings and Drawings

9 May -4 July 2025

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Still Life with Persian Rug, 1998, watercolour on paper, 73 x 104cm

Art Space Gallery is delighted to announce representation of the Estate of **Leonard McComb** and to present this first exhibition of his work in London for 20 years. Sculptor, painter, printmaker, draughtsman and teacher this inaugural exhibition of landscape, still-life and portrait paintings highlights McComb's place in a distinguished generation of post-war artists who revitalized the figurative tradition fit for a modern world.

Born in Glasgow (1930) to Irish parents McComb grew up in Manchester and studied there as a mature student before winning a scholarship to the Slade School of Fine Art, London (1956). His Celtic roots and the industrial north's *dark satanic mills* contributed towards an early love of the poetic and spiritual insights of William Blake that nurtured his visionary character and his personal and distinctive voice as an artist. And when he was selected as one of an emerging group of significant figurative artists by R. B. Kitaj for inclusion in his seminal *Human Clay* exhibition at the Hayward Gallery (1976) his place in the history of British art was secured.

McComb's art is essentially an art of the human figure and the world of living forms. He celebrates the familiar and the everyday: cliffs, the sea, flowers, bowls of fruit, plates of fish, trees, unremarkable landscapes and ordinary people which he transforms through his radiant use of line and colour into extraordinary encounters. Unlike many of his contemporaries he had little interest in trying to pin down the precise appearance of things nor of gestural responses to the visual experience of things. What mattered was the 'spirit' of things: "Blake's feeling for the interlocking of the spiritual and

physical ... ". A need "... to give the image a sense of inner life that vibrates the air and space around it ... to make it a work with a heartbeat."

Although regarded as a *visionary* McComb work is rooted in observation, not his imagination. And after initially developing his ideas as a sculptor he turned to painting and slowly evolved a way of working first in pencil and then in watercolour on paper; a unique and idiosyncratic process of slowly accumulating finely modulated marks of light and colour that radiated "the sense of an inner, pulsating image with light emanating from within". An energy often reinforced with wave like marks, or ripples, around the outer contours suggestive of an energy moving outwards.

And if his choice of materials and technique suggests faint images and a modest scale, McComb regularly produced enormous paintings, bold in colour and conception. Their technical ingenuity is undeniable and his touch is masterly. The range of mark making resonates with an attention to detail: flowers, fruit, fish, sitters, landscapes or woven tapestries all suggest a concern, less about obsessions, anxieties and ambitions, than of finding fulfilment in the thrill of the natural world as a visually rich, elaborate and meaningful place.



Auribeau church and village Alpes Maritime, 1991, oil on canvas, 130 x 163 cm

Leonard McComb's selection for the important *Human Clay* exhibition at the Hayward Gallery. Was followed by his Inclusion in many of the major public exhibitions that followed including: *The Hard-Won Image*, Tate, 1984; Hayward Annual, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford & Serpentine Gallery, 1983; Venice Biennale, 1980; *British Painting*, Royal Academy, 1977. He was elected an RA in 1990 and Keeper of the RA in (1995-98). His work is held in the collections of Tate, British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum along with many regional collections and private collections worldwide.

48-page catalogue with text by Richard Morphet and Christopher Lloyd is available.

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Gallery Hours: Tuesday - Saturday, 11 am – 6 pm during exhibitions