

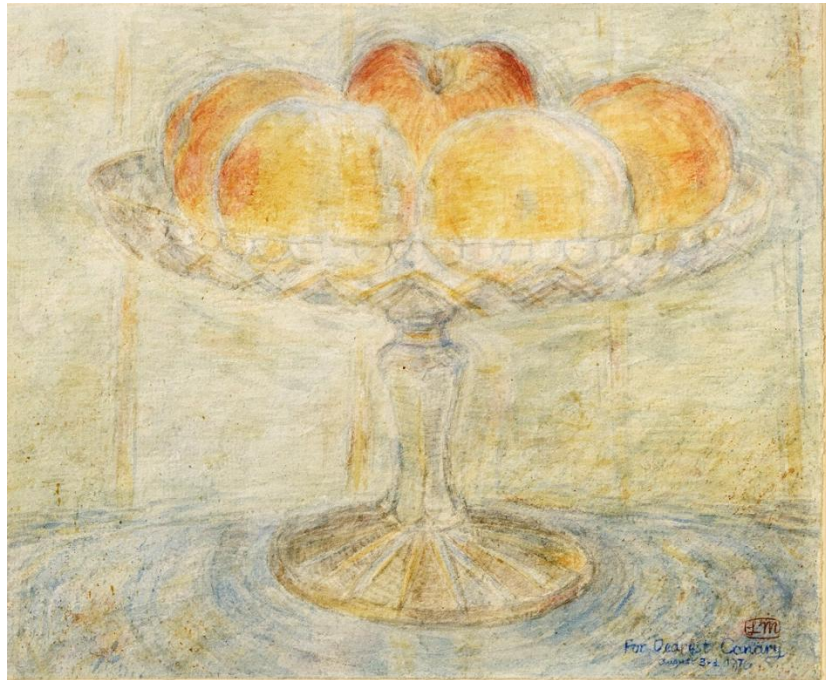
P R E S S R E L E A S E

LEONARD McCOMB

An Inner Light

Watercolours and Drawings

12 June - 31 July 2026

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Apples 'For Dearest Canary'
watercolour; August 3rd 1976; 9½" x 11"

Art Space Gallery is delighted to take this opportunity on behalf of the Estate of Leonard McComb to bring out into the light for the first time in over forty years Leonard McComb's watercolours that were first seen in his ground breaking Serpentine exhibition of 1983. The selection will also reach back to 1976, the year of McComb's inclusion in the Arts Council exhibition *The Human Clay* that secured his reputation as a major figure in British Art. He had been selected by the painter R. B. Kitaj who wrote in the catalogue introduction:

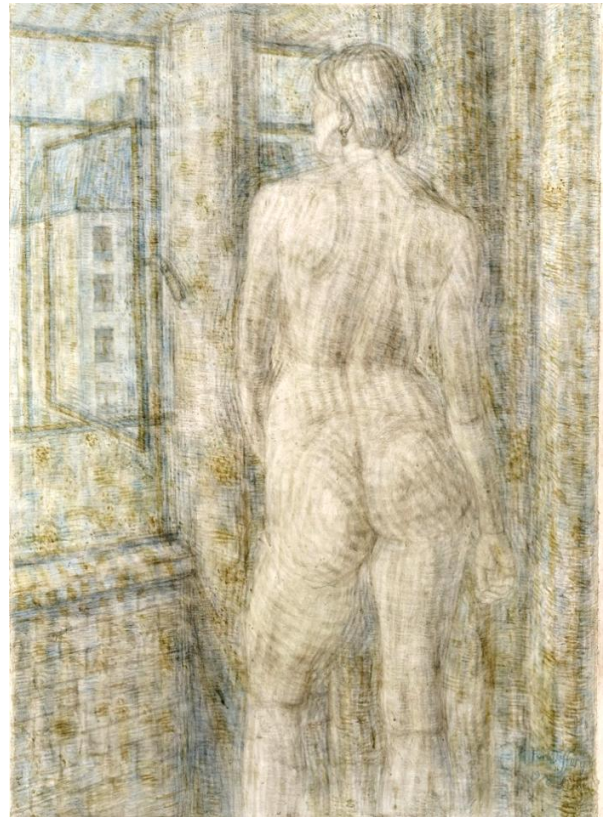
Many artists unknown to me before are shown because I was told I ought to see their work. The most exciting instance of this during the year was when Carel Weight showed me the astonishing drawings by Leonard McComb.¹

'Mysterious and arresting'² is how Richard Morphet has described them and very unlike the traditional quick application of watercolour used to record the experience of landscape, or still-life or a human presence in conditions of rapidly changing light. Indeed McComb's technique was stunningly different and had taken twenty years of innovation and experiment to develop.

They were large, some very large on multiple sheets of paper bonded together. They had been painted in front of the motif and like a sculpture they were built up slowly over many months using layers of light washes with the aim of creating solid permanent forms that in turn emanate their own light and energy. Using sable brushes to apply the watercolour a myriad of tiny marks were meticulously applied to produce a weave of repeated vibrations that energized the whole picture surface.

McComb's tendency was to paint in series and he made watercolours of portraits, nudes, flowers, still life and landscapes. On first viewing his colours might seem low keyed with little contrast, but after a short while the tonal contrasts suddenly seem to increase. Then these quiet and contemplative works start to pulsate while at the same time hint at the transience of life: the sense that life is temporary and fleeting. He wrote: 'I can never see nature except in terms of complex movements. The tree for example is real – apparently permanent – yet every second it grows and changes ... I try to incorporate that in my work.'

In the dual role of sculptor and a painter McComb had drawn constantly and studied the work of European artists, ancient and modern. It was in 1973 that an interest in watercolour took hold and he made detailed studies of English watercolourists. He copied amongst others the *Three Mackerel* watercolour by Turner which he described as being 'alive in light' and that idea awakened in his own work an interest in releasing light from within the forms, not the transient light of impressionist pictures, but an inner radiant light.



Leonard McComb (1930 to 2018) was born of Irish parents in Glasgow before moving to County Antrim, Northern Ireland and then Manchester, where he attended Manchester School of Art (1954-56) followed by the Slade School of Fine Art (1956-59). Along with his inclusion in *The Human Clay* and his solo show at the Serpentine he was included 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 Royal Academy Schools 1995-1998. He also taught at the Slade, Goldsmiths College, Canterbury and Winchester Colleges, Sir John Cass College and he founded the Sunningwell School of Art Oxford. His work is held in the collections of Tate, British Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum, National Portrait Gallery along with many regional collections and private collections worldwide.

[view full CV](#)

Notes:

- ¹. R. B. Kitaj *The School of London*, catalogue essay, *The Human Clay*, South Bank Centre, 1976,
- ². Richard Morphet, catalogue essay, *Body & Spirit*, Art Space Gallery. 2025

Image above: *Standing Nude by Window, for Jeffery (Camp)* watercolour; 1978; 32" x 23"

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

A 40-page Catalogue of the Exhibition with essay by Charles Saumarez Smith

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