

# Al McWilliams

## I/ME

### Al McWilliams: *I/Me*

BY KAREN LOVE

### Artist's Statement (2011)

AL MCWILLIAMS



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By Karen Love, 2002

Al McWilliams, born in June 1944 and raised in Vancouver, studied at the University of British Columbia and the Vancouver School of Art (now the Emily Carr College of Art and Design), where he completed his studies specializing in sculpture in 1969. The inclusion in exhibitions at four prestigious public art galleries in 1968, prior to graduation, was the auspicious beginning for a career which, so far, comprises some eighty exhibitions and four major public art commissions in thirty-three years.

The 1970s and '80s were industrious decades, which included sessional teaching of art at Douglas College, the Banff School of Fine Arts, UBC, and

Al McWilliams  
*I/Me*, 1989

beeswax, photographic prints,  
silver leaf, lead and aluminum  
(40.7 x 137 cm)  
SAG 1994.04.01

Photograph by Scott Massey

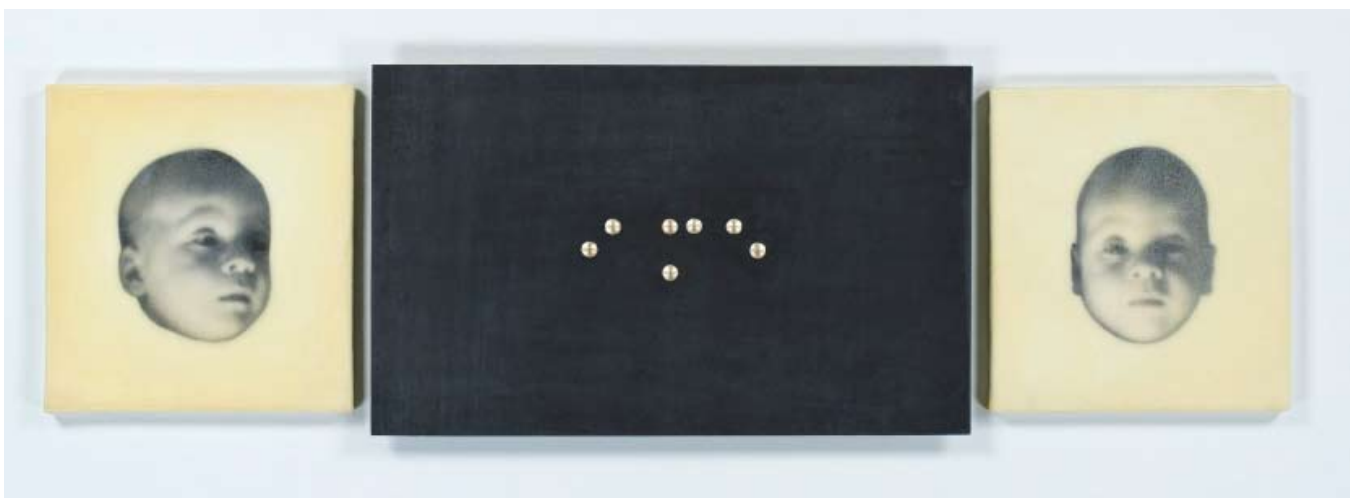
ECIAD, as well as many exhibitions. McWilliams was very much involved in his community, participating in the '70s explosion of art exploration in Vancouver. This dynamic period of cooperative and collaborative actions and events included the cross-disciplinary work of Intermedia, and the Festivals of Contemporary Art, both of which encouraged exchange between visual art, music, film, art actions, theatre, sound, poetry and a great deal more.

McWilliams' commitment became self-evident, that sense of obligation to the production of art and to working, and to the belief that he must "keep moving around the margins of what you do, change your position around the thing that you look at." This resulted in a continuing investigation of materials, scale, space and format in order to probe, primarily, the complexities of space, power and its capacity for transformation, communications systems, and gender relations.

Certain projects and their public exhibition stand out as being central to Al McWilliams' development, often due to the particular spatial or thematic opportunity, which allowed him to produce works of an exceptional scale or material, and to realize

new ideas. Among key events, for both the artist and the viewer, were *Mise en Scene* at the VAG, 1982 in which he presented *Axaxaxas Miö; Künstler aus Kanada, Raume und Installation*, at Kunstverein, Stuttgart in West Germany, 1983; *Aurora Borealis* (1985), the first major exhibition in Canada focusing on "installation art"; and a large invitational sculpture exhibition at The Utsukushi-ga-hara Open Air Museum in Hakone, Japan, 1988. The late 1980s and '90s brought numerous exhibitions, many of them solo projects including those at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge (1989) and Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver (1992), with the latter touring across Canada. Group thematic exhibitions were plentiful as well.

If Al McWilliams' art is known to a wider public, often this is a consequence of his highly successful public art installations, the most recent of which is the Landmark Mews Project, Concord Pacific in Vancouver, completed in 2000. In addition to creating art, he has also worked as a curator, organizing exhibitions for the Burnaby Art Gallery from 1972 to 1975, and curating the memorable *Creative Flight* for the Surrey Art Gallery and the Langley National



Al McWilliams, *I/Me*, 1989, beeswax, photographic prints, silver leaf, lead and aluminum (40.7 x 137 cm) SAG 1994.04.01 Photograph by Scott Massey

Exhibition Centre in 1979. And it must be said that one of the most important events in McWilliams' life was the birth of his son, Mathew, in 1973. His work has been collected by dozens of private and public organizations in Canada and internationally. Throughout all of these years, since that impressive beginning at the end of the 1960s, Al McWilliams' art has been written about by dozens of writers in reviews, articles, exhibition catalogues and books.

Al McWilliams makes sculptural objects and installations, which have a pared-down, distilled quality about them: no excess, only those elements which are essential to the composition of a set of associations. For over thirty years, he has focused on the complex business of what it is for one human being to attempt to relate to another. Relationships and all that circles around that word, including mechanisms for communication, power and transformation, gender dynamics, and the body and sexuality, constitute this artist's primary line of inquiry.

McWilliams believes that effective art is a catalyst for thinking, that it will activate the viewer who is, anyway, laden with her/his particular set of experiences, which in turn perceptually colour any reading of the art. He suggests that we need to reassess those habits of looking and thinking, to come at objects, people and ideas from different perspectives. This disassembling and re-contextualizing of information and ideas, in order to convey a plurality of viewpoints, is one of the central tenants of what we call the Post-Modernist or Post-Structuralist Age. Al McWilliams' colleagues - Vancouverites Joey Morgan and Liz Magor for example - were also actively engaging these ideas in the late '70s and '80s, and there was an earnest dialogue between them. They too were creating 'environments' in which the impact of the work was directly related to the ensemble effect of

its numerous parts. And the parts consisted always of a surprising use materials and a visceral reference to the viewer's body, as we would experience, for instance, in the work of American artists Louise Bourgeois and Ann Hamilton.

In order for the art to prompt these considerations, McWilliams begins with the tactile and other associative qualities of his working elements, what he refers to as "the connective tissue between materials, all of which have their own histories of use, of value, of meaning." He strives to give each of these elements - whether they be steel, copper, wax, fire or photography - equal weight. Early work (up to the mid 1980s) was often sculptural in a three dimensional, free standing manner, frequently consisting of numerous separate components which created a highly-charged installation, full of ambiguity and puzzling potential narrative, sometimes hinting at the alchemical. *Axaxaxas Miö* (1982), for example, was a shiny, copper ziggurat form, larger than human-size, surrounded by a labyrinth of black expanded steel fence. Ongoing was the sound of dogs barking: the tension was palpable. While the cultural and historical associations were rich (the cloister, the stepped pyramid, the power station, the prison, the Tower of Babel), the viewer responded with an uneasy sense of containment and foreboding.<sup>1</sup>

Like renowned land artists Robert Smithson and Richard Long and their use of the spiral and the circle, McWilliams was rejuvenating certain archetypal shapes (such as the chair, the circle and the ziggurat), in a way that caused a complete reconsideration of the forms. In 1985, the site-specific installation *Sans Titre*, made with copper, lead, fire, electric light and graphite, was presented in the groundbreaking exhibition *Aurora Borealis*. The work portrayed a disturbingly large, hovering or falling face illuminated

by a flame - a claustrophobic and menacing image. But who was this boy/man/woman? And was that a cry for help?<sup>22</sup> McWilliams realized later that this was the first time he had represented - if only as a 'prototype' - the image of his son Mathew.

At this time we also see a shift to wall works, which given their varying depth McWilliams refers to as 'reliefs', an apt term given also that the photographic fragments are most often derived from narrative architectural sculpture. Two 13th century relief sequences which have offered raw source material for many years are the stories from the *Book of Genesis* as represented on the façade of the Duomo at Orvieto in Central Italy (in particular, the "Creation of Eve"), and the façade of Notre Dame Cathedral



Al McWilliams, *I/Me*, detail

in Paris (especially the "Temptation", which portrays the serpent as female.) He isolates certain details - the sensuous head of Adam, asleep; the cerebral, only-just-conscious head of Eve, for instance - and juxtaposes them with luscious grey-blue panels of lead. Solid colour zones as barricade or appeasement?

As memory or absence of memory? Or as the quiet solitude which separates all individuals? It's that space in between, that "struggle to bridge the gap" which McWilliams is most interested in.

With the occasional use of Braille as a component in his wall works, McWilliams knows that most of us will comprehend that this represents a language system but will not understand its specific meaning. Its sensual and formal aspects will be at least as important as its functional intention ("a language with a body"). The appearance of Braille in the art reveals his continuing preoccupation with "the failure of language and the allusiveness of meaning." And it supports the proposition that we consider the communicative possibilities of the body; that we come to trust it albeit with some caution. His recontextualized body fragments are "the beginnings of thought."

All of these visual strategies - the representation of a fragment of the body, the sensuous use of materials, spatial distance and Braille - carry over to the work titled *I/Me* in the collection of the Surrey Art Gallery. This is one of the most successful works of art made by Al McWilliams, and perhaps one of the most compelling in the world of contemporary Canadian art.

Many years ago, Al McWilliams came across a list of what researchers were declaring the fifteen most stable words in the world's mosaic of languages. He could see that most of these words related to the body: tongue, eye, heart, tooth, toenail, tear, water, dead. And others were words having to do with concepts of identity: who, what, name, I-me, thee-thou, no and not. He was drawn particularly to the notion of 'I-me', which seems to be in part about difference, the difference between a human as subject and as object.

This related to other themes which had been present in his work: the struggle to communicate, the failure of language to do so effectively, and the result of this as a factor in power and gender dynamics present in the multitude of possible human relationships. In other words, all that messiness which happens between human beings, initiated by the very young child's discovered sense of difference or separation between her/himself and the other.

McWilliams has made three works titled *I/Me*. One is a diptych, each section with a photograph of one of his parents in the same setting and similar pose. "The same but different." Another, the work we are looking at, has a larger version utilising thick glass where here we see yellow-toned beeswax. This smaller, more intimate piece has a delicacy about it, and perhaps a more visceral connection to the body. The beeswax coating is skin-like, and we can actually smell that sweet honey.

Both portraits in the work are of the artist's infant son Mathew, at the stage when he was pre-verbal, quite literally without language but beginning to sense a world beyond his own body, peopled by other bodies to whom he might communicate. One Mathew looks across at the other, who stares straight ahead. In between, the Braille signals "I me" on an expanse of lead, a space which might be understood as a hurdle, or perhaps, a conductor. Is the child taking that first step towards knowledge of his image in another person's eye? Do we sense doubt, or is this a condition only possible from the perspective of the viewer's greater experience? This is the onset of self-awareness and that life-long, often exasperating task of communication: swapping news, exchanging information, pooling one's knowledge, the challenge always being how to say what one actually means to say.<sup>3</sup>



Al McWilliams, *I/Me*, detail

McWilliams is "trying to deal with things that are close to me - with my concerns as a father, living in a particular place and time." In this work he touches on that wondrous phenomenon of the parent's life continuing on in the body of the child. He seeks a delicate balance between distance from the subject matter and "being there, somehow, in the work," and succeeds. The child in *I/Me* is Mathew, unquestionably, but he/she is every child too, and conveys the universal commencement of connection to the world.

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#### Notes

1. *Axaxaxas Miö* was presented at the VAG in the group exhibition *Mise en Scene*, 1982.
2. *Sans Titre* (1985) appeared in the landmark exhibition *Aurora Borealis*, Centre internationale d'art contemporain de Montréal.
3. From Roget's *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*, Concise Edition, section on "Information: Converse."

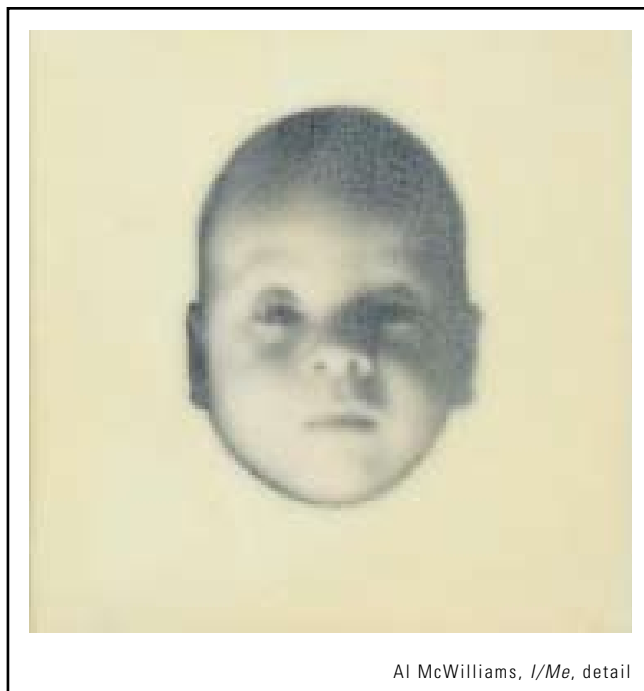
Writer's Note: All quotes are by the artist unless otherwise noted.

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When I first made this piece my son was already sixteen years old, and that removed in time from the taking of the original pictures. Now, asked to write about this work twenty-two years later, he is thirty-eight and I'm a bit perplexed.

I look at the piece today and see what we all see: an image of a very young child sheathed in a smooth, translucent and scented beeswax, staring across a lead panel embossed with silver-leafed braille at another wax covered image of himself. This second image carries a gaze that seems more implacable as he looks directly at and perhaps through us. It is this implacable gaze that I am more aware of now. This is an infant without language, only aware of body, on the cusp of differentiation between self and other, yet somehow, captured behind his gaze, there seems to be an uncanny knowingness. The force of this gaze has a larger resonance for me now.

The concerns that I have always carried regarding the historical and symbolic values of materials are quite evident in this piece — the beeswax, scented and skin like; lead, both toxic and protective and the base metal of transformation in alchemy; silver leaf, fragile and tarnishable. These materials, along with the braille (read with the body) call for a physically engaged looking, and this kind of looking can perhaps evoke within the viewer the *I/Me*, the subject/object awareness dawning in the mind of the child.



Al McWilliams, *I/Me*, detail

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