

MICHAEL C. MCMILLEN  
**MATRIX 171**



**SIDESHOW**

JANUARY 31 - MAY 3, 2015

WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

# SIDESHOW

MCMILLEN WITH THE TRAVELING  
MYSTERY MUSEUM (1973),  
INSTALLED AT THE SAN  
FRANCISCO ART INSTITUTE, 1975  
PHOTO CREDIT: SHARON GOLDEN



*In the summer of 1957 my dad took me to visit his old haunts in Manhattan and the Village. I was an 11 year old at the time and the indelible images of that trip have stayed with me this past half century, particularly taking the train out to Coney Island where we visited the crumbling Steeplechase Park. There, somewhere within the complex of worn rides and faded attractions, I recall visiting a walk through display tunnel of life size tableaus depicting famous murders and other social malfunctions.*

*Growing up in Santa Monica, California, the old Ocean Park Pier held a powerful draw for me, made even more attractive by my grandmother's admonitions to STAY AWAY! The carnival façade was a thin cover for the faded dreams and gross depravity that one would read about in the local tabloids.*

*There was something about this unexpected encounter with the sinister side of human nature and the crudely sensational way it was depicted that was simultaneously riveting, repellent and haunting. Years later as a young artist thinking about how to engage an audience, I recalled and recognized the power of the immersive environment.*

—M. C. MCMILLEN

## Believe It Or Not

One week of thrills and chills in New York with his father left an indelible impression on the young Michael C. McMillen. The jam-packed schedule included much more than Coney Island's sad and decaying Steeplechase Park and the World in Wax Musee, which featured the violent murder dioramas he recalls. Father and son also shopped for toy soldiers at FAO Schwartz and visited Ripley's Believe-It-Or-Not Museum. From the top of the Empire State Building, he saw the *Mayflower II* in the East River, dwarfed from the staggering height of the skyscraper. They then toured the ship. The highlights of their trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art were the Egyptian antiquities and the suits of armor. (A guard yelled at him when he touched the armor.) They had dinner in the Latin Quarter where topless showgirls performed. Almost fifty years later the vivid memories still linger.<sup>1</sup> The enduring impact of that incredible adventure remains a primary source informing McMillen's art over the past four decades, beginning with *The Traveling Mystery Museum* (1973).

Considered his first fully realized artwork, *The Traveling Mystery Museum* was McMillen's graduate thesis project for his MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles. It established him as an artist of the immersive environment. The "museum" comprised an assemblage of strange exhibits, including the fully clothed *Mystery Mummy*, apparently discovered on a rusting lounge chair in the Mojave Desert of California; an artifact from the *Titanic*—a bottle of water from the melted deadly iceberg containing a chip of paint from the ship's hull; and *Spy Fly I*, a mechanical remote-controlled drone with surveillance capabilities, fully detailed in its top-secret blueprints. It was not presented in the university gallery, as the artist explains:

"I deliberately showed it in Venice, [California] and not at the gallery at UCLA—the context was important—so that people wouldn't know it was art, they would have to take it at face value. It was a study of observation. I presented evidence of things, but then in the fine print, I had stuff that had nothing to do with what the thing was, so that if you looked closely enough, you'd see the disconnect. But most people don't look that closely. They read quickly and assume a lot."<sup>2</sup>

McMillen worked as the ticket taker at the shoddy storefront "museum"<sup>3</sup> that was clearly a synthesis of a number of the shows and attractions he had experienced on his New York trip sixteen years earlier. *The Traveling Mystery Museum* established him as an early proponent of installation art, a relatively new genre in visual art at the time. It subsequently traveled to the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art and the San Francisco Art Institute. Several objects from that 1973 exhibition, along with more recent and new work are presented in his MATRIX project *SIDESHOW*. McMillen's experiential, three-room installation runs concurrently with the Wadsworth



Atheneum's major traveling exhibition *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861-2008*.

*SIDESHOW* welcomes the visitor with two objects at the entrance. The first is *Randsburg*, a round painting with alternating black and white pie wedges. Aged-looking with cracked and chipped paint, it resembles a time wheel with a slight "Op art" visual effect. *Randsburg* is named for a small ghost town, formerly known as Rand Camp, in the upper Mojave Desert that McMillen visited many years ago. Fittingly, the painting comes from his series "Spanish Creek," a group of circular paintings named for different mysterious desert towns and sites.<sup>4</sup> The second object is a hand-painted, slightly battered *Enter* sign. The artist took a class in sign painting at a local vocational school years ago and is a master of the craft. In fact, every detail in the paintings, signs, sculptures, and constructions is intentional and should not be overlooked.

Through a cheap, red velvet curtain, the curious visitor will find *The Traveling Mystery Museum* artifacts room. The original *Mystery Museum* sign features the tabloid paper announcing the discovery of the *Mystery Mummy*, "proof" of its authenticity. After forty years, all that remains is a fragment—the ghoulish head, with its mouth agape and hollowed-out eyes and nose—handsomely presented on a pedestal under a bell jar resting on a bed of rich blue silk. A table holds paper souvenirs from the early days of

STOREFRONT INSTALLATION FROM  
*THE TRAVELING MYSTERY MUSEUM*,  
VENICE, CALIFORNIA, 1973



EXTERIOR SIGNAGE FOR *THE TRAVELING MYSTERY MUSEUM*, 1973



FRAGMENT OF *THE MYSTERY MUMMY*, 1973



PAPER EPHEMERA FROM *THE TRAVELING MYSTERY MUSEUM*, 1973



the Museum in the form of vintage admission tickets and a set of *Mystery Mummy* postcards, which document the mummy's discovery in the desert.

In the same room, the diminutive, disheveled scene of the accidental death of *Hannah the Fortune Telling Mouse* is presented in a traditional painted wood arcade cabinet. According to the interior sign, the tragedy occurred more than one hundred years ago:

“This Extraordinary Rodent was trained by the late Doctor H. Chalmers Smith of Huntington, in the occult practice of numerologically reading fortunes through the use of miniature Tarot Cards. This rare exhibit enjoyed great fame and popularity in the early 1900s as part of a touring medicine show. Alas, as FATE would decree, in Toledo, Ohio on July 12, 1906, a stray shot from an arcade air rifle shattered the glass window behind which Hannah was working. Although not injured by either the glass nor bullet, her tiny heart could not take the shock and she collapsed and died in the prenatal position.”

Sadly, the desiccated corpse of Hannah lies motionless on the floor of the cabinet. Having fallen from her chair, her violet turban was thrown from her head and Tarot cards strewn everywhere. Her crystal ball remains in place on the lace tablecloth.

The darkened, central chamber holds *Transmitter*, a new work created for this exhibition. According to McMillen, “Upon



HANNAH THE FORTUNE TELLING MOUSE,  
1969/2014 (DETAIL)



entering the room, the viewer will find before them the structure ‘floating’ in space at eye level and slowly rotating. It appears as though the pier/building/tower has been wrenched from some unseen seascape.... [Light is cast] upon the turning building and thus projects a dynamic and dramatically moving shadow on the two adjacent gallery walls,...a moving and beautiful image that will take the viewer into unexpected realms. This curious object echoes works in the two opposite galleries and thus serves as a conceptual and metaphoric bridge, linking and uniting the three chambers.”<sup>5</sup> In the first chamber, the wall sculpture *Ocean Park* is a highly detailed, architectural relief inspired by McMillen’s early memories of the derelict, old Ocean Park Pier in Santa Monica. And the third chamber holds the imposing installation *Lighthouse (Hotel New Empire)*, which emphasizes the “recurrent reference to the sea (time) and entropy (marine architecture),”<sup>6</sup> expressed by the artist throughout *SIDESHOW*.

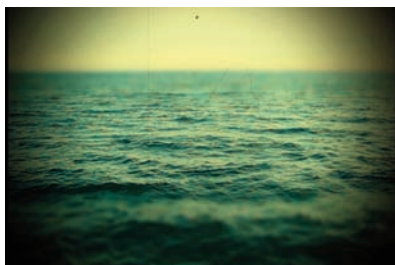
*Lighthouse (Hotel New Empire)* includes a dilapidated three-story hotel building listing precariously on a sinking pier. It stands more than six feet high, seemingly rising from and sinking into an ominous, dark pool of moving water. A full moon hangs over the night scene. With its roof half missing and dangling staircases, the tilting hotel seems unsalvageable. But inside, lights are visible, revealing details. “Classical and Victorian



ornamentation join with industrial elements such as ladders, pipes, cargo boxes and barrels, and eaves cluttered with vent pipes, old TV antennae and clotheslines, resulting in an unlikely amalgam of style and function.”<sup>7</sup> McMillen comments, “It seems to be well past the tipping point of imagined history.”<sup>8</sup> The illusionistic perfection betrays the artist’s years creating props and miniatures for films such as the (now) cult classics *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *Bladerunner* (1982). A billboard tops the building and is active with moving images from the artist’s enigmatic video titled *The Quotidian Man*.

Although McMillen is more than forty years into his career, he has only been making videos since 2002. His singular videos strike the same nostalgic tone and surreal notes as his paintings, sculpture, and installations. *The Quotidian Man* combines seemingly random old movie clips and documentary film footage sourced from the Internet, including educational films relating to hygiene and atomic bomb preparedness.<sup>9</sup> To these the artist seamlessly adds his own black and white (and sometimes color) footage and doctored clips—filming himself in old aviator glasses, moving small models of buildings with his comparatively huge hands, placing flying saucers into existing scenes, and adding texts and pointers to old films. Film noir, sci-fi, B movies, and war films are logical sources for this artist who grew up in the 1950s. But the newly mixed clips now come to life, laced with the artist’s unique sense of humor.





In *SIDESHOW*, McMillen looks from Ocean Park Pier on the West Coast to Coney Island on the East Coast and also provides bookends of his artistic work to date (from 1973 to 2014). He creates an installation that exposes and celebrates his earliest influences and inspirations, including his boyhood trip to New York in 1957 and his graduate project, *The Traveling Mystery Museum* in Los Angeles in 1973. Simultaneously, the artist perfectly incorporates newer work in the moody *Lighthouse (Hotel New Empire)*, its beautifully eccentric video *The Quotidian Man*, and the poignant *Transmitter*. McMillen possesses an ever-youthful soul filled with wit, fascination, and dread that finds its perfect expression in endlessly inventive artistic production.

**PATRICIA HICKSON**

Emily Hall Tremain Curator of Contemporary Art

# MICHAEL C. McMILLEN

## EDUCATION

- 1969 Bachelor of Arts, San Fernando Valley State College, San Fernando, CA  
1972 Master of Arts, University of California, Los Angeles, CA

- 1973 Master of Fine Arts, University of California, Los Angeles, CA

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2015 *Michael C. McMillen / MATRIX 171: SIDESHOW*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT  
2011 *Michael C. McMillen: Train of Thought, A Retrospective*, Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, CA  
2007 *Speed's Place*, UnMuseum, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH  
2004-05 *Dr. Crump's Mobile Field Lab*, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA  
2003-04 *Pump House: An Installation: Michael C. McMillen*, Palm Springs Desert Museum, Palm Springs, CA

- 2003 *Michael C. McMillen: Red Trailer Motel*, University of Wyoming Art Museum, Laramie, WY; Reed College, Portland, OR; Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA; and de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA  
2002 *Motel (Under the World)*, Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, CA  
2000 *House of Water (Theater of Salt)*, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, NV  
1998 *I Dream of Your Eye*, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica, CA  
1991-92 *Michael C. McMillen: Habitats - Installations and Constructions*, Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, CA

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *All That Falls*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France  
2011-2012 *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art, 1974-81*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA  
2010 *Real and Hyperreal*, San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA  
*Art Shack*, Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA

- 2006 *Los Angeles 1955-1985, Birth of an Art Capitol*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France  
2002 *Model World*, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT  
2000 *Made in California: Art, Image and Identity, 1900-2000*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA

## PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia  
California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA  
The Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow, Scotland

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA  
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia  
San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA  
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY

Born 1946, Los Angeles, California  
Lives and works in Los Angeles, California

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works courtesy of the artist.

*Hannah the Fortune Telling Mouse*, 1969,  
restored 2014

Cabinet, mouse, turban, Tarot cards, furniture  
24 3/4 x 13 x 12 1/2 in.

*Fragment of The Mystery Mummy*, 1973  
Mixed media, glass display dome  
13 x 9 x 9 in.

Original external signage from the Venice,  
California, installation of *The Traveling Mystery  
Museum*, 1973

Lettering and tabloid page on wood panel  
48 x 18 in.

Paper ephemera from *The Traveling Mystery  
Museum*, 1973

Printed tickets and souvenir postcards

*Ocean Park*, 1988

Painted wood and metal construction  
36 x 64 x 7 in.

*Randsburg*, 1995

Oil on panel  
18 3/4 in. diam.

*The Quotidian Man*, 2009

Video transferred to DVD

Running time: 12:38 min.

Courtesy of the artist and L.A. Louver, Venice,  
California

*Lighthouse (Hotel New Empire)*, 2010

Mixed media with digital motion picture

97 x 132 x 144 in.

Courtesy of the artist and L.A. Louver, Venice,  
California

*Enter*, 2014

Oil on panel  
10 5/8 x 48 in.

*Transmitter*, 2014

Painted wood, metal construction, motor,  
LED beacon

60 1/2 x 17 x 22 in.

<sup>1</sup> The events of the 1957 New York trip are recounted from two different sources: Philip E. Linhares, "The Early Years: Just the Facts," in *Michael C. McMillen: Train of Thought* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel Verlag and Oakland Museum of California, 2011), pp. 13-14 and Paul Karlstrom, "Oral History Interview with Michael C. McMillen," *Archives of American Art*, April 15, 1997. See [www.aaa.si.edu](http://www.aaa.si.edu).

<sup>2</sup> Michael C. McMillen quoted in Jeremy Strick, "Assembled City," *Michael C. McMillen: Train of Thought*, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, McMillen's *Traveling Mystery Museum* (1973) with its bizarre, fake exhibits predates David Wilson's conceptually similar *Museum of Jurassic Technology* (1988), also in Los Angeles. However, Clay Spohn's related *Museum of Unknown and Little Known Objects* (1949) at San Francisco's California School of Fine Arts (later named San Francisco Art Institute) predates even McMillen's project. See *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> Email correspondence from the artist to the author, 5 January 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Email correspondence from the artist to the author, 11 December 2014.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Press Release for *Michael C. McMillen: Lighthouse*, September 15 - October 30, 2010, at L.A. Louver, Venice, California, August 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Michael C. McMillen quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Paul Young, "The Associative Path: Collage, Time, and Memory in the Films of Michael C. McMillen," *Michael C. McMillen: Train of Thought*, p. 107.

## ARTIST TALK

Michael C. McMillen  
Saturday, January 31  
12 pm

Michael C. McMillen will discuss his MATRIX project *SIDESHOW* in the Eleanor H. Bunce Gallery.

## GALLERY TALK

Patricia Hickson  
Friday, April 17  
12 pm

Patricia Hickson, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art, will address Michael C. McMillen's MATRIX project in the Eleanor H. Bunce Gallery.



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