

# HEIDI MCFALL

The evolution of Heidi McFall's drawings and collages over the past five years reflects, in part, the artist's immersion in her subject; close-up portraits of the artist's circle of family and friends, that over time have gradually found a context. Previously moving through an amorphous space, the drawings' subjects now occupy a minimally defined landscape. McFall's portraits (from 2001-2) were nearly clinical in their precision, more intimate than most people would choose; a view inside their personal space. However, the drawings' subjects are neither self-conscious nor posed; rather these portraits are rendered with an appreciation for the spontaneous smile or the revealing head-tilt, giving the viewer a feeling of a sudden intimacy. Whether cast in shadow, slightly out of focus or drawn in sharp detail, McFall's portraits are meticulous tonal renderings based on her own photographs, and yet they often appear to be done as much from memory as from observation. By this I mean that the haziness or simplification of form in the charcoal portraits suggests a process of distancing, a means for the artist to transform the sitter through the act of drawing, a distance that can be measured between the artist's conception (choice of image and composition) and the portrait's execution. McFall is clearly selecting the fortuitous moment that best expresses the subject and the artist's sense of that individual, and how, through the drawing process, each portrait ultimately reflects the identity and vision of the artist. That the artist has over time come to see these works as autobiographical reinforces the notion that portraiture often contains the artist's internal if not external identity.

The softening of edges and the occasionally generalized features cause McFall's portraits to acquire a patina of universality. Her drawings capture an instant when an individual stands in momentarily for their generation or gender, or, with downcast eyes, experiences an emotional or self-conscious response to being closely observed familiar to us all. McFall's portraits can convey an instant of recognition, since they are based on casual photos that perhaps reflect what the artist feels most accurately describes or delineates that individual.

It can be the most casual appearing image, one out of many, that suddenly speaks volumes about that person, perhaps even as much or more than any one photograph could capture.

The mystery of McFall's drawings is that they are able to be so distinct and palpable as portraits even as they appear at their most fleeting or hidden in shadow.

Photography has played an essential role as a tool for artists since the days of Degas, and the process of using the camera obscura, comparable to being inside the camera itself, goes back to the days of Vermeer. In each case, the artist uses the medium of photography as a means of expanding the vocabulary of representation. After Warhol, the use of photographic images in painting and drawing had taken on a sense of detachment, inevitably leading to something resembling either a society commission (which was true of a number of Warhol's portraits) or as misty historical documentation, a la Gerhard Richter. However, McFall has concentrated on what she knows intimately; her immediate crowd in day-to-day interaction, and the outcome is portraits that display an intimate knowledge of her subject. It is not surprising then that McFall cites figurative painters such as Milton Avery and David Hockney as portraitists she finds particularly sympathetic, since both artists chose family and friends as subjects, and tended to favor improvisation and spontaneity over any self-imposed formal construction or theory.

In her most recent work, McFall has placed the subject in a seemingly recognizable locale, only to subvert any assumption of familiarity. McFall achieves this effect by her use of collage, a cut and paste process that, instead of enhancing the depiction of the "real", adds another layer of illusion. The collaged effect is one of dislocation, instead of recognition, taking McFall's group portraits toward images of dream or recollection. In fact, they are less portraits than gatherings, and shifts in scale and simplification of form creates an almost surreal atmosphere. Some look like film stills, fragments of home videos, with figures rendered mostly in black and white, and

backgrounds in primary colors, and the notion or any degree of realism is forsaken for a more poetic iconography.

Each image or group portrait seems like an experiment, a test by the artist to see if the images she chooses can come together in a unique fashion, for the artist and the viewer.

In a phone conversation with the artist, McFall expressed that one focus of her art is that it be an extension of her daily life, and that her sense of her work is that it should reflect an individual, human experience. At a time when a Post-Modern, ironic detachment is so in vogue in the art world, it is refreshing to hear this from an artist who finds her subject right in front of her, only to alter it to achieve more lyrical and personal ends. McFall sees her work in process a kind of journal, the coming together of different media that develops with experimentation, a merging of the photo and drawing methods that, through occasional "happy accidents", leads to advances in her work. The flora and fauna, banana leaves and red tipped photinia, add an essence, a fragrance of place to the captured moment in a life (or several lives). In *Moonbathers*, two women stand beneath a full moon, highlighted in a cool white glow, the older woman shading her eyes, the younger one just enjoying the spotlight.

The women are each, in their own way, illuminated by the experience. In her recent work, McFall has quietly stirred the viewer's imagination with images that are both accessible and otherworldly. She accomplishes this with concise draughtsmanship, simplicity of means, empathy and a dash of humor. Looking at her recent work, the thought occurs to one that familiarity through drawing breeds insight, and that Heidi McFall has the ability to reveal to us the unvarnished pleasures of the people and life around her.

Robert G. Edelman





Shimmery Self-Portrait. 2004  
Pastel and acrylic on paper 72 x 48"