



A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL C. McMILLEN

The acclaimed installation artist discusses his passion for creating transformative and engrossing experiences

When *Michael C. McMillen: Train of Thought* opens in the Gallery of California Art this April, it will be a major milestone in the longtime collaboration between the artist, Michael C. McMillen, and curator, Philip Linhares. McMillen, a visual artist known for his profoundly evocative installations, and Linhares, OMCA's chief curator of art, met more than three decades ago—and have partnered on many exhibitions and adventures ever since. Their latest joint effort, *Train of Thought* (parts of which will be on view as early as January), is a retrospective survey of forty years of McMillen's work, featuring installations, sculptures, paintings, drawings, miniatures, and films. Here, Linhares asks McMillen about the traditions that inform his extraordinary creations.

PL: In this issue, we are exploring cultural traditions, and it seems that your work has been influenced by the tradition of the Hollywood film industry.

MM: Absolutely. I grew up in Santa Monica, and my father was a scenic artist in Hollywood. I learned how to construct things by watching him. Later, I got into film work, too, as a model maker. I made props and miniature sets for various films, including *Blade Runner* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

PL: How did you get interested in creating installations?

MM: As a kid, one of my favorite things was to find old radios and other discarded equipment. I'd deconstruct them and build fantasy machines to play with. I always felt that given the right context forgotten things have a whole new life waiting for them. I guess you could say I was a recycler before it was fashionable.

I also had a really powerful experience in 1957, when I was 11. My grandmother, my father, and I took the train cross-country. I had never traveled before, and it opened my eyes. To this day, I still draw inspirations from that trip. At the end of the trip, we went to Coney Island, and



From left: Artist Michael C. McMillen, *Lighthouse (Hotel New Empire)*, 2010. Below: *Train of Thought*, 1990.

between the larger pieces, you've worked on smaller sculptures, paintings, even miniature tableaux.

MM: Full-scale installations are very labor intensive. They take a lot of time and space and are hard to place, so I couldn't do them all the time. Thus, I started playing with those wide-angle lenses you put into doors, and I realized that I could create the illusion of a whole room in a tiny space. By changing the optics, I could subvert the viewer's sense of scale. I was condensing the space, but viewers still felt they could enter into the piece.

PL: We met in 1975, when I invited you to show at the San Francisco Art Institute. I believe our third show together was in 1991, when we installed *Pavilion of Rain* and other works right here at OMCA.

MM: That was one of my favorite shows. It came together very harmoniously. In room after room, there were different things to encounter and think about.

PL: And now we will be reinstalling *Pavilion of Rain* at OMCA as part of this retrospective survey of your career. I'm hoping that the children who came to see it in 1991 will be parents now, and they'll bring their kids to see it.

MM: And I'm hoping these kids will drag their parents back to see it again, so they can keep reexperiencing it.

I remember seeing sensational tableaux, outrageous depictions of famous murders, with red enamel paint for blood. I was fascinated by the power of these strange and disturbing displays. Years later, I tapped into that source as a legitimate way of conveying feelings to an audience.

PL: What attracts you to the tableau format?

MM: I love the way it immerses viewers with all their senses. My goal has always been to create an altered sense of reality. I want viewers to come away from the experience seeing the world in a slightly different way.

PL: Could you describe your first big piece, *The Traveling Mystery Museum*?

MM: I wanted to make a piece that was like one of those absurd, homemade roadside museums, a place way off the radar. So, I included things like a bottle of water from the *Titanic's* iceberg. I showed evidence of a Japanese invasion of Oregon. I had a fortune-telling mouse who read tarot cards for a nickel. Actually, it was the mummified remains of a mouse in an antique-looking gumball machine, and it was labeled "Out of Order." Another absurd display.

PL: That piece was the beginning of a series of large-scale installations—*Inner City*, *Central Meridian*, *Aristotle's Cage*—all the way up to your latest one, *Lighthouse*, in which a derelict building, like a faded old hotel you might find in Brighton, hovers over a pool of water, with films projected on a billboard. And in

