

John McEwen, *Ocean of stories*

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John McEwen, *OCEAN OF STORIES*

It so happens that I've encountered the work of sculptor John McEwen several times this past year. Encountered quite suddenly for without warning they are there: in Banff, set amid trees behind the Walter Phillips Gallery, stands *Stelco's Cabin*, not immediately discernible since the silhouette of a steel wolf stands above a rocky slope looking down.

Around the animal is an open steel structure, an internal landscape that equally blends into and defines the piece within the landscape. Here one intensely experiences what McEwen refers to as a "quickenings": for a moment, especially at dusk, one is convinced that there is indeed a wolf standing amid the brush—then the steel silhouette suddenly reveals itself. Six months later, leaving the university of Lethbridge, I found myself within *Western Channel*, an earlier piece consisting of two flat metal walls, their shape echoing the coolies surrounding the city, with three canines standing outside or within the wall. The dark and solid walls stand both as a demarcation to and an introduction into the landscape beyond. And driving along the road to the McMichael, in Kleinburg, one encounters *Babylon*, seven letters in steel referencing both the limits of wilderness and human endeavor and the complexity of both. An introduction, again, into the landscape encompassed in the McMichael, a sign to precede the collection.

Having seen the work on site and in landscape it was interesting to enter the enclosed, albeit hall-like space of the Olga Korper Gallery and encounter McEwen's work indoors. This exhibition consisted of five pieces: two wolves, a small slit in each of their throats entitled *First Breath / Last Breath*, *Dark Water*, a glass beaded stainless steel bowl filled with murky red water, *Black Bear and Rope*, mounted high on a pedestal overlooking the space, *Waterline Canoe*, rusted from where it had been installed in the Lachine Canal the prior summer, and finally a

printing plate of Lauren Harris' *Deer* (above Lake Superior). Perhaps not astoundingly, the pieces took on a powerful and new force when viewed in the gallery. The might of the bear, made more forceful when contrasted with McEwen's earlier "slab" sculptures, took on a renewed prominence in the indoor setting. There was no sense of confinement, but of nobility and the possession of space. An odd play between nature and culture takes place between *Dark Water* and *Waterline Canoe*, where air is tellingly included as a component of the sculpture. The canoe, made of steel, shows rust marks where it has been submerged in the water, referencing the original site, and its purpose as a water vessel. Opposite, the thick and heavy bowl contains what appears to be the rust residue of the process the canoe has undergone. A murky pool remains opaque and mysterious, for the depths are not discernible and its colour slightly distasteful. The wolves too carry a duality, for the slit in their throats suggests that they are maimed, yet their heads are lifted in awareness or a call.

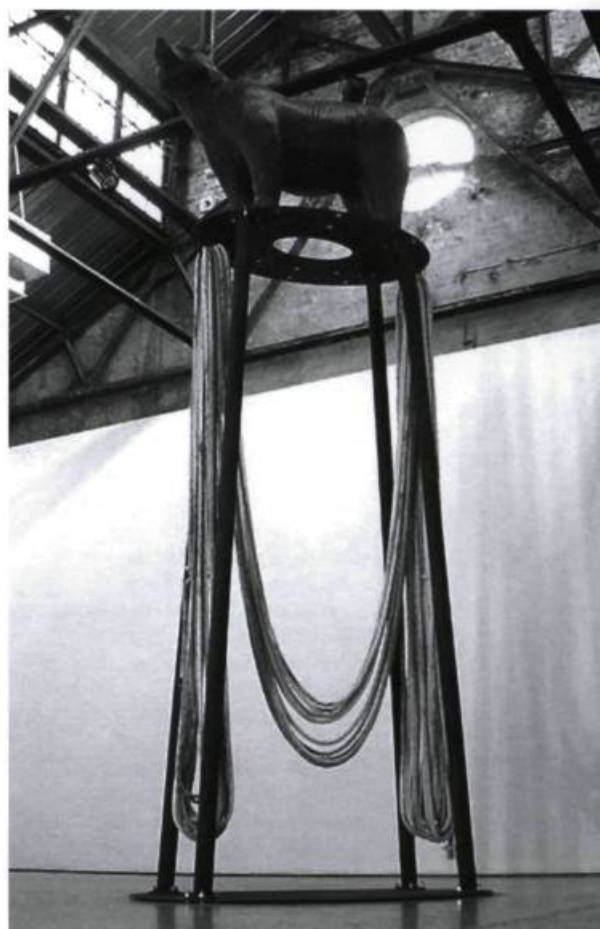
Accompanying the exhibition is an excerpt from Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, where the Water Genie tells Haroun about the Ocean of the Streams of Story: "He looked into the water and saw that it was made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different color, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breath-taking complexity; and [the Water Genie] explained that these were the Streams of Story, that each colored strand represented and contained a single tale... And because the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories..."¹

The canoe submerged in water and reappearing with rust marks in a different space carries stories; the murky water speaks of different currents and colours, all potentially narratives that flow into one another in a continual

stream of creation. The rope can be read as a thread weaving a tale. The relation of bear to wolf to canoe to water weaves meaning that peaks and shifts in a rhythmic cadence. The space between the sculptures recalls an echoing dialogue that spans and fills the distance.

Animals hold symbolic and literal significance. McEwen is interested in the staying power of animal forces and believes that we can gain a language through them, a language accessible to all. He thinks of his work as a kind of working minimalism in which the animal is a vehicle that refers to the world of sentient life outside ourselves even as it momentarily stands in for it. The recognition the viewer brings to animal images functions then as a communication system, a vehicle for making sense. This hardly means that the stories or signs are simple ones, for every viewer brings with them a personal narrative, memory, and relation to both sign and literal image. Darkness and light are addressed, for just as the rope can signify a thread it can also speak of captivity and dominance. Just as the slit in the wolves' throat shows death, it also recalls breath and life. The pool of red can remind one of blood or of rich ocean growth in vibrant colours, a wellspring of life. Although made of steel, the canoe is hollow and floats, defying expectation.

With this work, we have a constant interweaving of possibilities, and with each idea the story changes. As it does with each new site: here the physical presence of the work fills the space and yet is not claustrophobic. The figures take on larger-than-life significance, removed from a natural environment to a cultural one. Yet this is no contradiction, for the work blends the natural with the constructed, the installations placed within a landscape often functioning as internal landscapes preceding the one beyond. The associations brought to a bear or a wolf undergo a complex process as one moves through the environment, the mythology, symbolic and personal.



McEwen understands both the Lachine canal installation and the subsequent gallery exhibition as an extended exploration of the integrity of the animal vehicle and the wellspring of sentient life it represents. The inclusion of the printing plate, meant as a kind of resistant landscape, returns the viewer to the gallery and focuses on the problematic nature of story telling. The stories built here are fluid and non-linear, for the viewer interacts with each figure, the groups, and the dialogue between them. At each place and each separate time the tensions are different, creating new stories that remain both poignant and open-ended.

John McEwen, *Ocean of Stories*
Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto
November 3-28, 2001

NOTE

1. Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, London, 1990: 71-72.

JOHN MCEWEN,
Ocean of Stories, 2001.
Detail. Olga Korper
Gallery.
Photo: J. McEwen.