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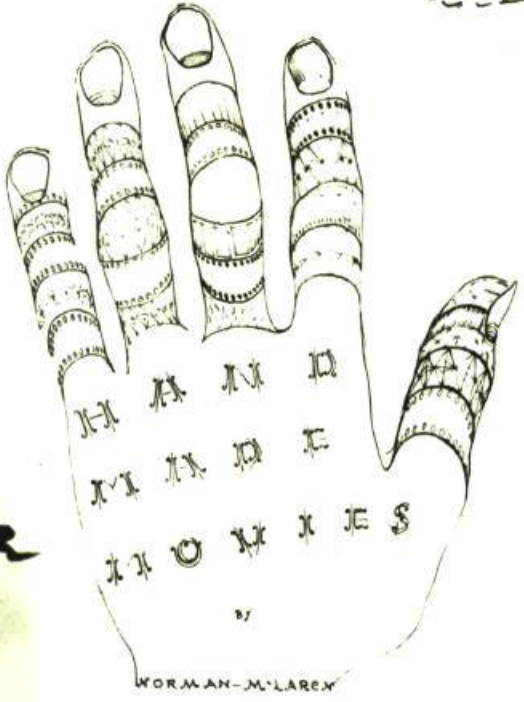
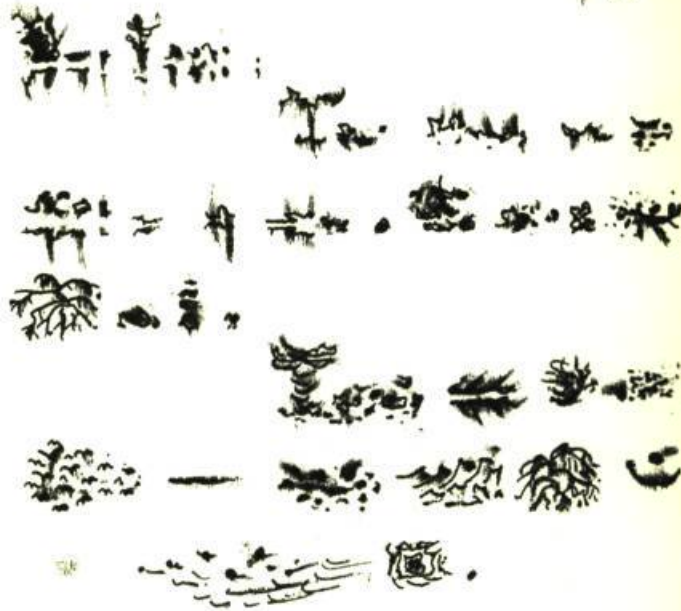
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NORMAN McLAREN

Artist with film...

by Anne MacDERMOT

«To make with a brush on canvas is a simple and direct delight... to make with a movie should be the same». — Norman McLaren.

URING the twenty years that have passed since making this statement as an art student in Glasgow, Norman McLaren has proved the validity of his early contention with a series of short film masterpieces, unequalled in production technique and audience impact. Movie-goers in more than 50 countries find McLaren's films exciting, bewildering, sometimes startling. One group, however, is unanimous in its opinion of his work. To all creative artists working with the frustrations inherent in the complex film industry, Norman McLaren re-

presents the film producer who has succeeded in bringing the medium of film back under the control of the individual. His most famous films, *Fiddle De Dee*, *Be-gone Dull Care*, *Blinkity Blank*, *Rhythmic*, *Le Merle* and most recently, *Short and Suite* were produced almost single-handedly.

It is natural that McLaren should have achieved this. Despite his wide reputation as creator of some of the world's most original abstract films, he is first and foremost a painter. Born in Scotland, he took his early training at the Glasgow School of Art. He has never given up painting and sketching and over the years has accumulated a portfolio of exquisite watercolours and etchings, some of which are reproduced here for the first time.

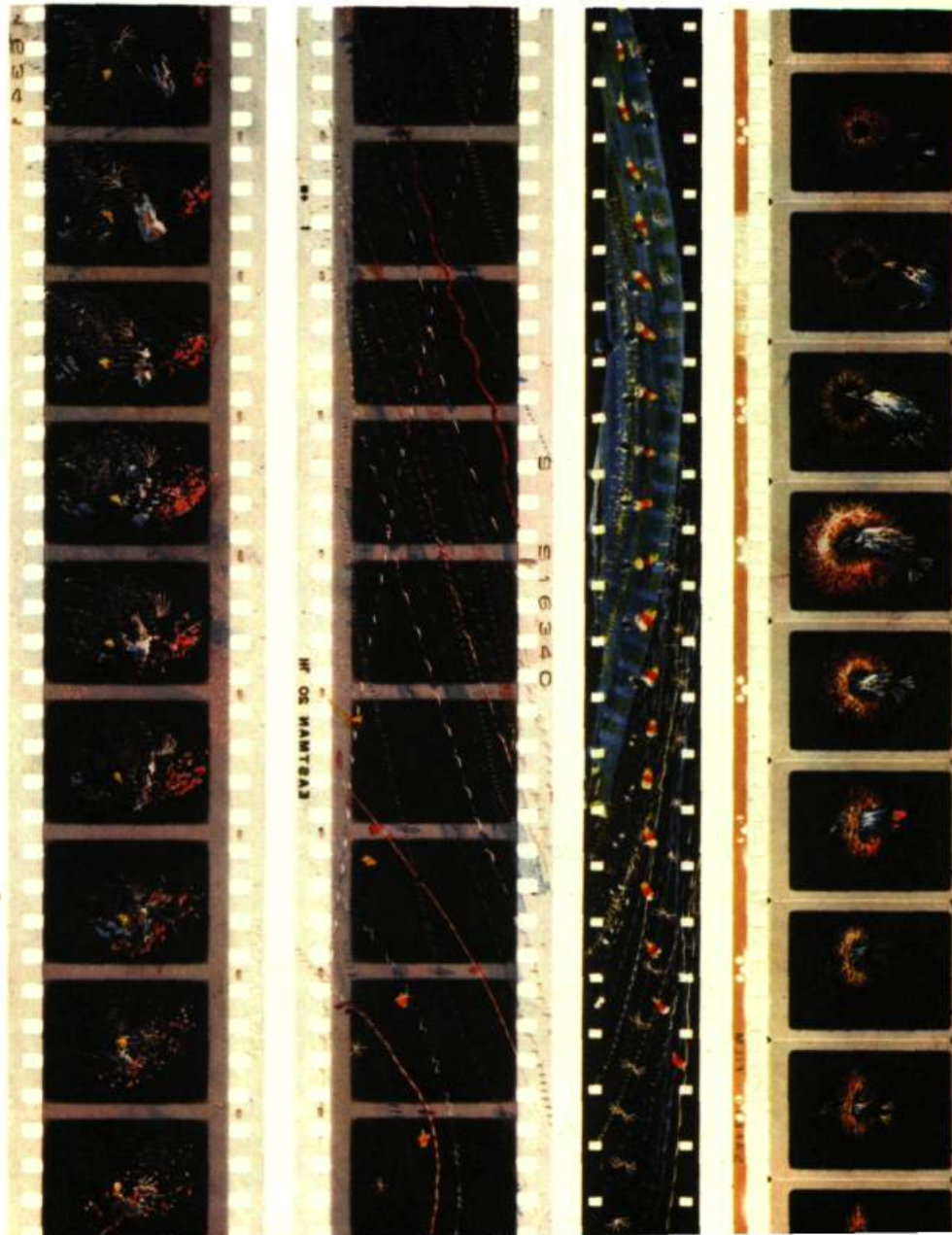
In the early 30's, while at Art School, he watched the development of film and was interested in its potential. Not owning a camera, however, he had to wait for a chance to break in without one. In 1934 he got hold of a

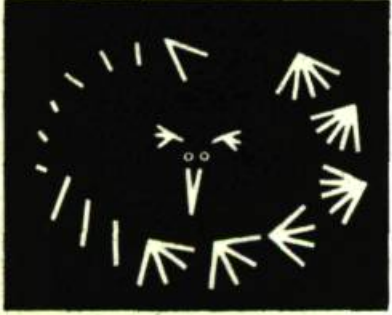
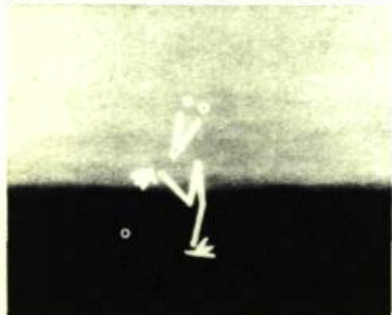
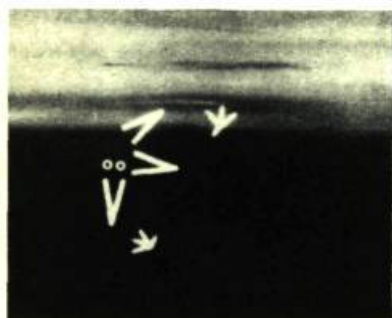
A typical sample of engraving and colouring on black leader. This is not for any special film.

Typical of visuals to accompany a Trinidad Folk tune called "Serenal" with flute, guitar and percussion.

Film specially prepared for this article. Section from film in progress at present to a piece of Trinidad Folk music.

Sample from a color print of Blinkity Blank.



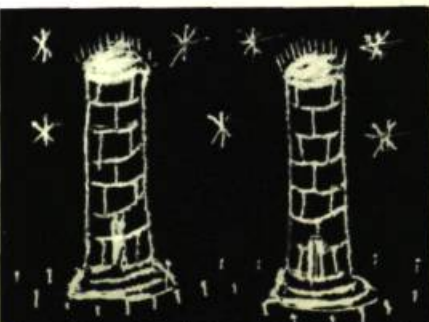


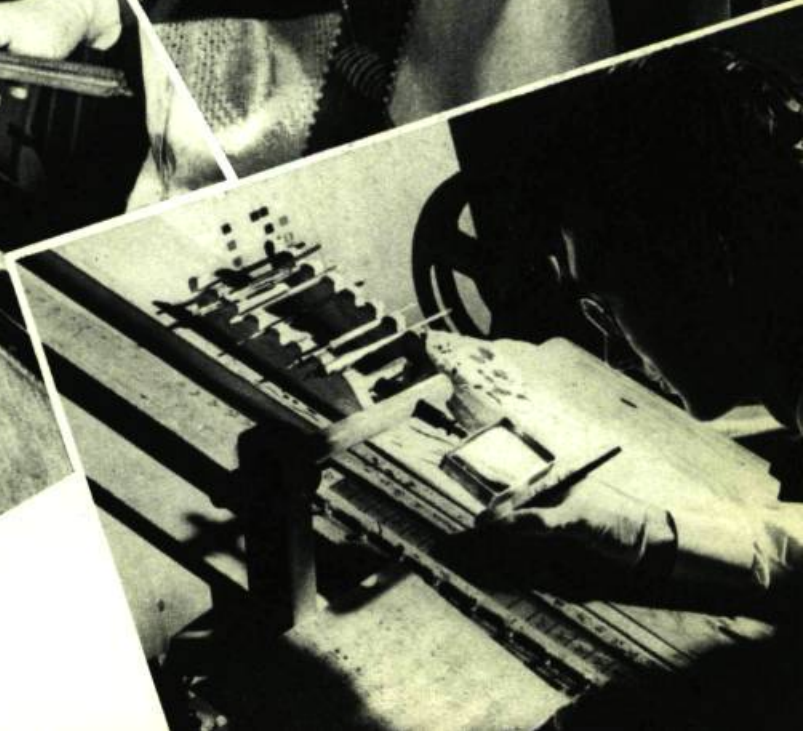
print of an old commercial movie, washed off the emulsion and by working on the clear celluloid with brushes and colored inks created a 2-minute length of film. When run through the projector, a series of tiny abstract figures in gradually evolving shapes and colours leapt into the now-familiar McLaren jive steps, in close synchronization with a jazz soundtrack.

Over the next two years McLaren perfected his revolutionary technique and in 1936 submitted *Colour Cocktail* to Glasgow's Third Amateur Film Festival. The film won a prize. It also attracted the attention of the man who was to be responsible for many of the turning-points in McLaren's career. John Grierson, acknowledged doyen of British documentary films, was one of the judges at the Festival. Impressed by McLaren's experiment, he made arrangements for him to work with the General Post Office Film Unit in London, joining what Grierson considered the most exciting hive of film experiment in Europe. From this point on, McLaren was sidetracked into a career of filmmaking. Painting and sketching became for him a form of relaxation.

In 1939 John Grierson stepped into Norman McLaren's life for a second time. By then McLaren was in New York, resisting lush offers from Hollywood in order to continue his one-man experiments in abstract cartoons. Grierson, with rare genius, was organizing in Ottawa what was to become the National Film Board of Canada. He contacted McLaren and asked him to head up the Animation Department. McLaren accepted and Grierson said of him: «He had enormous influence on the new group in Canada. He added that element of craziness all young

Left: Isolated frames from LE MERLE, showing use of cut-outs in forming whimsical blackbird of the old French song. Right: Sequence from BLINKITY BLANK illustrating power of movement and comedy in McLaren's hand-painted cartoon films. Lower picture is from BEGONE DULL CARE, and shows similar hand-etched technique.







"Bouquet of Flowers in the Wild", a water-colour from McLaren's collection of flower sketches.

artists have to take hold of, to get something from if they are going to develop and it was in Canada that McLaren became I think almost the most Chinese of all the experimenters with film ».

For McLaren it was the beginning of a happy and unbroken association. For one thing the Scottish immigrant settled happily into his adopted country, Canada. For another he found plenty of scope with the Film Board where he says he is « chained by a loving leash ». His experiments continued to win prizes at international film festivals, annually. McLaren the artist had mastered a film technique that cut out scripting, drawing, animating, shooting, developing negative, positive cutting and negative cutting. He had also, by working within a space $\frac{3}{4}$ '' x $\frac{3}{8}$ '' , imposed a discipline of hand and eye that few have ever been able to imitate.

Music has always been closely interwoven with McLaren's dancing abstracts. *Fiddle De Dee*, for instance, one of his best-loved films, was based on a tune used by an old-time fiddler, « Listen to the Mocking Bird ». The strident notes inspire lively red, yellow and blue bands of colour to dance madly through a 5-minute film. In *Begone Dull Care* the Canadian pianist Oscar Petersen plays a slow blues, not as background music but as part of a phantasy of falling leaves and silver icicles. A later film, *Blinkity Blank*, contains music written to order by a Film Board composer, Maurice Blackburn. In some cases, McLaren composes his own soundtrack. In *Le Merle*, a recent film, geometric designs romp intricately through the verses of an old French round.

McLaren made these abstract cartoons as pure entertainment, their purpose — « to give the intellect a rest ». Artistically, their secret lies in skilful use of movement. At a recent interview, McLaren illustrated the importance of movement. He threw two pencils and a roll of tape to the floor. Leaning over he moved first the yellow pencil, then the red



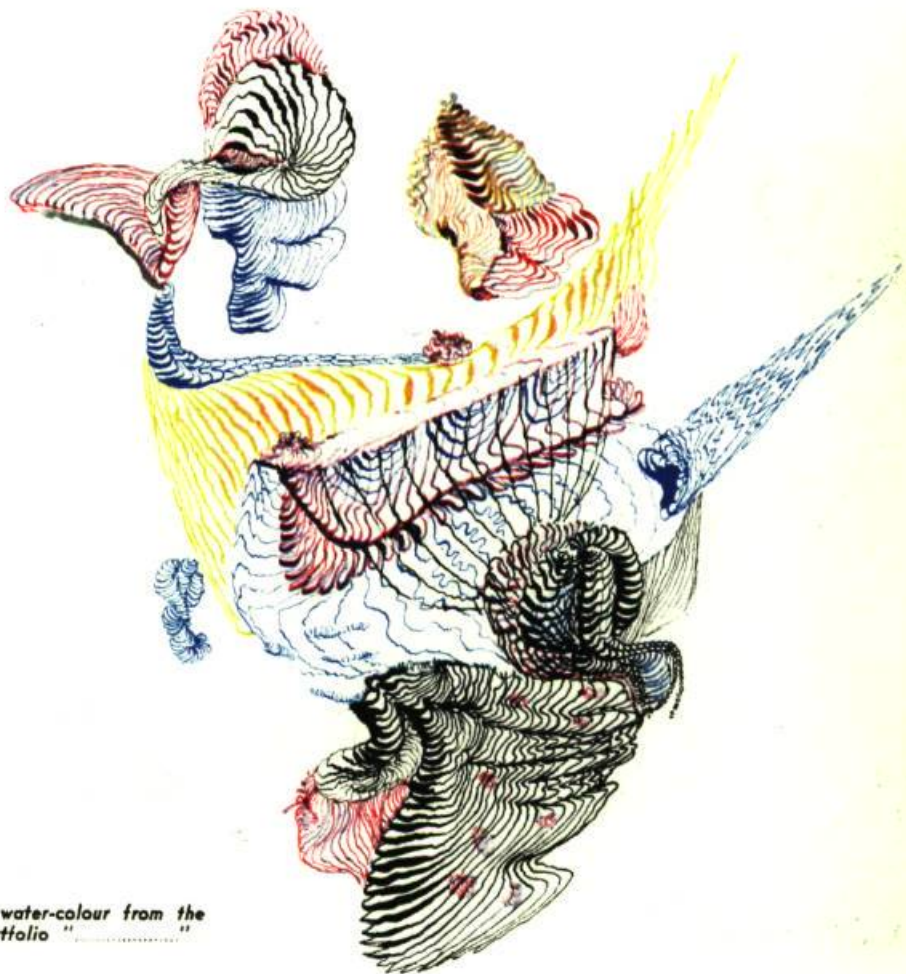
Lower left, 22, and upper right, 23: colour transparencies from one of McLaren's best-loved films *LA POULETTE GRISE*. Made during early days with the National Film Board, it forms part of a series illustrating French Canadian folksongs and including *C'EST L'AVIRON*.



one, closer to and away from the roll of tape. In some uncanny way he gave each pencil a personality of its own. The yellow became sulky, awkward, the red the friendly one. Their characteristics emerged vividly simply by the way they reacted to the immobile roll of tape. His film characters come to life in the same way.

Though best-known for his cameraless method, McLaren resorted to the camera for a beautiful series of films illustrating French Canadian folk songs. As a painter he was interested in photographing the stages of a painting. Using pastels he created a series of images which when photographed merged to form flowing images; *C'est l'aviron* shows a canoe gliding downstream; *La poulette grise* is another charming film in the series. Of these films Grierson said: «Over a period of years McLaren provided for Canada one of the most exquisite collections of French songs and dances, basing his visual side on the normal visual themes of Canada, e.g. the trees, the lakes, the rivers... somehow or other you get the spirit of Canada by this Scotsman in his little films».

McLaren produces a film in what he calls «one concentrated binge». When making a film he is burnt up with restless energy. Dreamy and whimsical anyway, at



A water-colour from the portfolio "....."



Above: Photo still from the film *BEGONE DULL CARE*, showing intricate pattern etched and hand-painted on raw film base. Each frame is synchronized to a jazz soundtrack. Music by Oscar Peterson.

Below: Detail from large-scale mural from *BEGONE DULL CARE* used at 1958 Brussels World Fair. McLaren enlivened early drawing with a fresh set of characteristic motifs superimposed on original film pattern. These are the small "doodles" seen here.



these times he is apt to wear mismatched socks, drive the wrong way down a one-way street. But this other-worldly artist, «one of the film world's gentlest people» is also one of the best-loved by those who work with him. Never forgetting his own early interest in film, McLaren will always take time to examine experimental films brought to him, and is relied upon for an unfailing supply of original ideas and suggestions. His most valued assistant at the Film Board is Miss Evelyn Lambart. Herself an artist, she has worked with him for some ten years and is able to second-guess some of his ideas, as well as add many of her own.

McLaren is a boyish 43. He looks much younger, moves quickly and gracefully, is tall and slight. A quiet voice, with slight Scots accent, speaks of his native Scotland. He has dark merry eyes, a quick smile and a satiric sense of humour kept well under control.



Upper: Drawing in coloured inks from one of McLaren's portfolios.

Lower: Close-up of a typical McLaren caricature, this one from *BEGONE DULL CARE*. By working directly on the film he has full control of movement, colour, speed, etc., unlike the cartoonist involved in production-line methods.

A film like *A Chairy Tale*, in which the animation camera is run through a whole gamut of shooting speeds to play tricks with puppet-like actions of live actors, reveals McLaren's sense of the comic. In contrast, *Neighbours*, made the same way, is his most serious film. Produced following a trip he made to China and India for UNESCO, *Neighbours* was made to show the horror of war. McLaren achieved a dramatic pantomime in an 8-minute film (his longest) which builds up into the powerful comment on war that its producer intended. *Neighbours* has collected more than its share of international ribbons, as well as more controversy than all other McLaren pictures.

When asked what he was planning to do next, McLaren expressed an interest in composing more music for his films, also in the possibilities of ballet. His ideas for specific films, however, come unexpectedly, and not always conveniently. While still finishing *Short and Suite*, for example, he was inspired to do a short film based on a calypso, and couldn't rest until he had produced it.

He has more specific plans, however, regarding his painting and drawing, and hopes to work on these, perhaps with a view to exhibiting them in the near future. The pen sketches show his preoccupation with detail and his sensitive handling of it, particularly in the flower detail and portrait sketches. Many of his human figures reveal his irrepressible cartoonist approach. Now well established as an artist with film, Norman McLaren may be entering upon a new phase of his career, as an artist with brush and canvas. If so, the world will share some of the delight McLaren spoke of as a young art student, and given in the quotation at the beginning of this article.

