

Rob McLeod

b.1948

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In Rob McLeod's *Nasty Surprise No 1*, the young woman stands awkwardly flat-footed, her head askance, faceless and depersonalised. Comically sinister figures spiral around her. Over her head hovers a big disembodied hand, which seems about to reach down and grab her. Take a second look though, and that hand seems more like a giant pink spider, with tiny eyes peering out between the contracted fingers.

Just by her shoulder there's a familiar-looking silhouette: the head of the Disney cartoon character Mickey Mouse; but this is a scheming mouse, an outline lurking in the shadows, up to no good. *Nasty Surprise No 1* then, is a painting dealing in double takes, second looks, shape shifting. The Mickey Mouse shape is one McLeod uses a lot in his paintings. He calls this character "Mutant Mickey" and he pops up as a kind of scrawny troublemaker. In this painting, Mutant Mickey is a sniggering, sniffing creature: look closely at the big hand, you can see his rodent snout hiding there.

Nasty Surprise No 1 is not a painting that wants to sit quietly on the wall, polite and well behaved. It's loud: a riot of colours. It's active: made of dynamically contoured plywood with all the background cut away. It's also a bit rude: about bodily functions. With comic book grotesqueness, *Nasty Surprise No 1* confronts you and asks: do you get it?

Tackling you, the artist wins you over with his technical skill, his clever storytelling and his honesty. This painting depicts social embarrassment: the poor girl blushing all over; but it's offered as a symbol of the way we deny and repress aspects of our humanity, of the facts of life.

Why is she blushing a bright, reddish orange? Well, all the colours here represent emotions. She's being watched by eyes that seem to peer, peep and perve, but she has no eyes to stare back, which makes her angry. Behind her, a man's head has hatched out of a big yellow gourd; he's another watcher closely observing her. But look again at the gourd; it could be the man's body with a white flower clenched between the cheeks of his backside. Is it a blossom growing out of the pumpkin-like gourd or is it a fart blossoming out of an arse?

There's some clowning around going on here: two people have been turned into a peekaboo crowd, all legs and eyes. But they've only got one shoe between them and it's bright green, which could symbolise envy or vindictiveness. Meanwhile, the man — or is he an overgrown schoolboy to match the overgrown schoolgirl? — wears one tartan sock. With its sexual innuendo, this is a painting which may suggest a Garden of Eden scenario with dire consequences: the big hand wants to pluck forbidden fruit; the vegetable gourd resembles a phallus.

Obviously, *Nasty Surprise No 1* is a painting capable of generating lots of discussion and argument. It helps though if you've seen other McLeod paintings, because then you're aware of them building up into a parade, a carnival, a circus of surreal and absurd clowns, that tells us truths about ourselves.

David Eggleton

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