



# McLean Edwards

# Everything Once

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MCLEAN EDWARDS' PAINTINGS ARE A FORM OF PORTRAITURE HE CALLS 'EMOTIONAL LARCENY'. HE USES 'ARCHAIC' DEVICES – THE THREE-QUARTER FORMAT, OIL PAINT – TO DRAW VIEWERS IN THROUGH THEIR FAMILIARITY. BUT IT'S A TRICK, THE PORTRAITS REFUSE THESE CONVENTIONS. INSTEAD THEY USE DARK HUMOUR, COMIC BOOK AESTHETICS, HINTED-AT AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS, AND PAINT STRIPPED OF ANY 'OPPORTUNITY FOR FLOURISH'.



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We meet in McLean Edwards' studio in Chippendale. I catch the lift to the top floor of a large warehouse building, now converted to expensive apartments. He tells me it used to be full of artists but he is the last one remaining. Off a silent, grey-carpeted hallway his door opens onto a cluttered studio, a TV screen playing 24-hour news, a sagging sofa. Edwards tells me he's been up all night making changes to a painting of Derek Parker he'll enter in this year's Archibald Prize. And it's not a good day, I soon find out. Just that morning he signed his divorce papers. I say I'm sorry to impose on such a day, that we can be quick. But he assures me it's okay. He's gracious about this and willing to talk.

His most recent body of work, 'Everything Once', showing at Olsen Gallery until 16 June 2019, had just been removed from the studio in preparation for the exhibition. We look at a few remaining paintings; dozens of others lean in piles against the wall, faces turned in. I ask him about one of the new paintings in the exhibition.

*The Boy* (2019) has quite a different air to the other figures. Edwards' work is unswervingly figurative, a form of portraiture that often uses a classic three-quarter format (showing head and

torso of the subject). At the same time it resists realism, verging instead towards caricature, the cartoonesque. This is especially evident in paintings that feature dogs, such as *The Keeper of the Keys* (2007), where two dogs with their mustard-yellow, rounded and simplified physiognomies resemble Pluto or Goofy. Some of the human figures, too, have exaggerated and clownish features and gestures – something of the buffoon and a tone that art critic Andrew Frost describes as 'sour comedy'.

Edwards doesn't hesitate to acknowledge comics as an influence on his work. He has spoken in the past of his fondness for Hergé's *Tintin* and its capacity to be funny but beautiful. 'I've got no problems whatsoever in making that connection between looking at paintings and looking at a comic,' he told Steve Lopes.

*The Boy* retains some of this art-comic hybridity – jug ears, a slight pout, a red-tipped nose – but it pulls back from more overt caricature. It is reminiscent of Soutine's *The Pastry Cook of Cagnes* (1922), but when I ask Edwards whether this is a reference

02 *The Self Objective*, 2019, oil on linen, 122 x 198 cm  
03 *Women with Rope*, 2019, oil on linen, 138 x 122 cm



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04 *Children in the Rain*, 2019, oil on linen, 194 x 130 cm  
 05 *The Keeper of the Keys*, 2007, oil on canvas, 153 x 153 cm  
 06 *The Boy*, 2018, oil on linen, 173 x 92 cm



point he says no. Nevertheless, it has the same ability to hover in disconcerting ways between genres, between the intent to convey an individual through their most idiosyncratic features (a kind of 'earnest' portraiture) and the more schematised or stylised.

What Edwards says about *The Boy*, though, is unexpected. His first girlfriend after he broke up with his wife was Jewish. Her grandfather was imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau and the painting is derived from the infamous striped uniform he was forced to wear. Ever since the war, he'd kept the uniform stored in his wardrobe. There's a pause in our conversation as we contemplate this. 'I couldn't bear to refer to those events directly,' Edwards says, just as so many have said of the Holocaust before him, 'so it all revolves around the stripes, the particular shade of pale blue. Any concerns and problems of your own are placed in context by this.' Loosely painted darker stripes sit like fretwork over under-painting of light blues and greys, some of which is also linear. *The Boy* is painted with paint and turps only, 'no juicy stuff' like linseed oil. The canvas is unprimed and close to hessian in texture, meaning it was highly absorbent, the paint soaking straight in as Edwards worked, and he had to work fast.

'Everything Once' is Edwards' first solo exhibition in Sydney since moving from Martin Browne Contemporary (where he exhibited for twelve years until 2014) to Olsen Gallery. In the interim his

exhibition 'Marsupials' sold out at Olsen Gruin in New York in 2017. *The Boy*, he tells me, was the first painting he completed for his new body of work, after a hiatus he describes as a horrible year. It was the starting point. 'But it's also a dead end,' Edwards says. 'If you based a whole show on this, it would become fatuous.'

His paint technique that omits the usual binding ingredient of linseed oil is true of the whole body of new work. 'It reduces my opportunities for flourish,' he says. 'At a certain point I forsook enamel as well. I used to love enamel, its shininess.' The talk here is about stripping the seductive qualities out of the paintwork.

During our conversation he refers a couple of times to Rembrandt, how his paintings are filled with sly humour with their props and improbable ahistorical outfits and costumes. Edwards' father was a diplomat and, as a child and teenager, Edwards lived in Vienna and The Hague, four years in each city.

'Did you look at paintings?' I ask. His answer is a vehement yes. 'Rembrandt was in a frenzy when he painted. He was in charge. He was a real painter. I'm not. I wilfully neglect depth of paint. Some of my paintings show an alarming disregard for anything resembling technical superiority. But I want to make something of not falling into the precipice of "alarmed" or angry painting.'



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“The characters know they are in a painting.”



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This tendency to work fast and to refuse depth in his paintwork has drawn mixed responses. In a review of the 2016 Salon des Refusés, John McDonald referred to Edwards' portrait of *Saturday Paper* editor Erik Jensen as a 'slapped-together, full frontal hairy-chested portrayal ... an image to frighten the children, and perhaps the horses.' In describing the experience of posing for *The Journalist (Portrait of Erik Jensen)* (2016), Jensen counters this claim, noting that the 'paint on the canvas makes no effort to be anything but paint. The absence of complexity is ruthless. It provokes and then refuses to argue.' Edwards has referred to the painting of this portrait as a brave process, with Jensen exposed ('McLean has painted male insecurity,' Jensen writes) but also providing commentary and feedback on work produced during various sittings. Edwards absorbed this commentary, starting again or reworking depending on its nature, in a process that was at heart collaborative and based on exchange between artist and sitter.

Despite Edwards' claims about discarding depth of paint and eschewing 'technical mastery', his work is painterly. Throughout our discussion, a portrait of a young man wearing some kind of turban (surely a nod to Rembrandt) against a creamy green background has been tilted towards us as if joining the conversation. The pale green cuts skilfully around the figure's head, neck and shoulders, etching out careful lines. His expression is serious, almost wistful, self-contained, and eyeing the viewer. The paintwork is deft and in charge. 'I could have chosen pale pistachio green but it's institutional green. It hasn't been a year for pistachio green.'

'Do you get people to sit for you?' I ask, meaning for works that are not portraits of known figures. In the latter category, he has painted Jensen, Cate Blanchett, Tim Storrier, among others. 'Not usually,' he replies. The figures populating his work fall into two broad categories: the purely imagined and a recurrent figure Edwards refers to as 'my guy' and a 'stand-in', an amalgam of physical features from people he knows but freighted with autobiographical associations.

As with many of his previous exhibitions, 'my guy' features extensively in 'Everything Once'. Sometimes Edwards holds a strange object, a piece of sawn-off tree impaled with nails, bearing a bright orange nose and cartoon eyes (*The Self Objective*, 2019), perhaps an object of penance or some kind of burden to be borne; sometimes sporting a beret or turban that make him difficult to locate in time and place.

In earlier exhibitions 'Non-Fiction' (Martin Browne Contemporary, 2006) and 'Bad Habits' (Martin Browne Contemporary, 2010), which Edwards singles out as two of his strongest shows, he appears airborne in an improbably small propeller plane or as a cast of characters (sheriffs, cowboys, fops) thronging together as if, in *Red Pot Disco* (2010), at a dark, almost sinister carnival or

07 *Green Portrait*, 2019, oil on linen, 112 x 110 cm  
 08 *Stripey Arms*, 2018, oil on linen, 138 x 122 cm  
 09 *Blue Cowboy*, 2010, oil on canvas, 183 x 153 cm





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masked ball. In some works such as *The Last Tycoon* (2013) and *Favours for Friends* (2014) the figures seem to be the subject of an ironic aggrandising that is more a critique or parody of old school tie networks and social nepotism.

In Edwards' recent New York exhibition, 'Marsupials', a couple appears repeatedly – a male figure in the foreground with a blonde woman looking out from behind his shoulder. Enigmatically in *Nocturne* (2017) the front figure is almost indiscernible, reduced to dark shadows and the green glint of his eyes, his companion a flare of yellow hair and red lips behind him.

'It's a form of emotional larceny,' Edwards says of his distinctive mode of portraiture. The paintings play to a European tradition of the three-quarter portrait, which people are used to reading. 'It's archaic,' Edwards says, 'it draws people in. It sucks them in because it's familiar and it's nostalgic, but it's a trick. The paintings are designed not to engage. The characters know they're in a painting.' He talks of the influence of Ken Burns's 1990 documentary, *The Civil War*, and its redeployment of Mathew Brady's nineteenth-century American Civil War photographs of posed characters fully cognisant they are being photographed. He mentions too the influence of American painter Alice Neel's early portraits (1900–1984).

I ask Edwards whether there are overt autobiographical elements in his work. They are certainly implicit. We discuss *Children in the Rain* (2019), which depicts his two children aged four and eight. Since his divorce, he sees them only a couple of days per month. He challenged himself to paint the children standing in ankle-deep water – and to complete the water in precisely twenty brushstrokes. This challenge was a way to ensure the painting isn't mawkish, to ensure it has some formal constraints and scaffolding, to ensure he didn't become too emotional or melodramatic. 'I wanted the painting to be about my children, not about my melancholia. The children in the painting are happy,' he says, perhaps with irony.

Later I view this painting again. The youngest child's face is drawn, the eldest not exactly jubilant. Their clothing cuts simplified triangular shapes against darkness. It's evident that part of the background comes from an older painting that's been painted over. The ghosting of a cartoon dog, its texture shows through. Edwards has let its eyes remain, cut around by a black background that redacts the rest of the dog, just the eyes peer out over the children's nocturnal wandering with a benevolent but anxious gaze.

Earlier we had talked a little of grandmothers and how Edwards had missed the opportunity to know his better. 'My dad is landed gentry, squattocracy,' he quips. His mother comes from a Russian-Ukrainian background. 'My maternal grandmother was cauterised by war and the Russian Revolution.' Edwards painted *Blue Cowboy* (2010) after a farewell visit to her in Orange. 'These are important stories. I didn't spend enough time with her. It raises the questions, Why do you tell your stories? Where do your stories come from?' He pauses then adds, humorously, 'We should be fearsome, us artists and writers. People should tremble when we enter the room.' ■



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@mcleanedwards

#### EXHIBITION

McLean Edwards: 'Everything Once'  
22 May to 16 June 2019  
Olsen Gallery, Sydney

- 10 *The Last Tycoon*, 2013, oil on canvas, 183 x 152 cm
- 11 *Favours for Friends*, 2014, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 121.5 cm
- 13 *Down Hill Racer*, 2010, oil on canvas, 183 x 153 cm
- 14 *Red Pot Disco*, 2010, oil on canvas, 150 x 160 cm

Courtesy the artist and Olsen Gallery, Sydney