

Galleries

A FITTING END TO ABIGAIL'S PARTY

A lovingly made book
and major retrospective
pay tribute to an artistic
life cut short, writes
Jan Patience



When I met Abigail McLellan in 2009, six months before her death at the age of 40, I was struck by the sheer life-force she exuded from her very core. Even though she was in a wheelchair and her speech had been badly affected by the multiple sclerosis (MS) which eventually claimed her, there was an inner fire to this very singular artist – just like the surrounding artworks she had created in the intimate Wasps studio in Dennistoun, Glasgow, an adjoining space she shared with her long-term partner, the painter Alasdair Wallace.

I remember being struck by the complexity of McLellan's painting and sculptural work – a relatively recent addition to her output – which belied its appearance. The colour was almost flat and saturated, the forms simplified. It was clear the effort required to make

the work was monumental, and I suspected that even before she began to be affected by MS, this had been the case. McLellan's positive approach was a reminder of the power of art to make you see with fresh eyes.

A new book on McLellan is published this month, ahead of a major retrospective of her work in London. Using a series of recorded interviews made in the mid-2000s by the British Library's Artists' Lives series, author Matthew Sturgis paints a vivid picture of an astute artist constantly searching for ways to present a personal vision.

Looking over her life and career, McLellan explains her reasons for adopting a complex method of painting natural forms and, in particular, sea fans: "For some reason I thought I've got to make this as difficult as possible for myself, by not painting the lines and just painting the in-between bits."

And so, Sturgis notes, "using her favoured

Although Abigail McLellan's paintings and sculptures appeared simple, the Middlesbrough-born artist went to great lengths to create them

technique of building up multiple stippled layers of translucent colour, she set about painting the tiny interstices between the coral branches ... each picture became an intricately constructed record of negative space."

The book, like the exhibition, presents a clear and joyful picture of the Middlesbrough-born artist's development. From her early days as the star of a fancy dress party, aged seven, when she stood out from the crowd dressed as an Oxo cube, all copper-coloured hair and smiles, she was an individual unafraid to go her own way. With her mother, father and two older sisters, she moved to Dumfries when she was 13 and, encouraged by her art teacher, she applied for, and was accepted by, Glasgow School of Art in 1987.

The book charts and illustrates her progress from art student experimenting with various styles and mediums to mature artist. There are some virtuosic works in this well-written, beautifully illustrated monograph, which has been lovingly guided by Wallace, whom McLellan married just two months before she died. It's an honest, unpretentious tribute to an honest, unpretentious artist with a zest for grabbing life by the horns, as opposed to sitting waiting for the end. I for one am glad I was introduced to Abby McLellan and her beautiful work before she left this life too soon.

Abigail McLellan by Matthew Sturgis is published by Lund Humphries, in association with the Rebecca Hossack Gallery. The book is launched at the Glasgow Print Studio, Trongate 103 on October 13 at 2pm. Abigail McLellan: Retrospective 1969-2009 is at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, 2a Conway Street, London (020 7436 4899, www.r-h-g.co.uk) from October 29 until December 1.