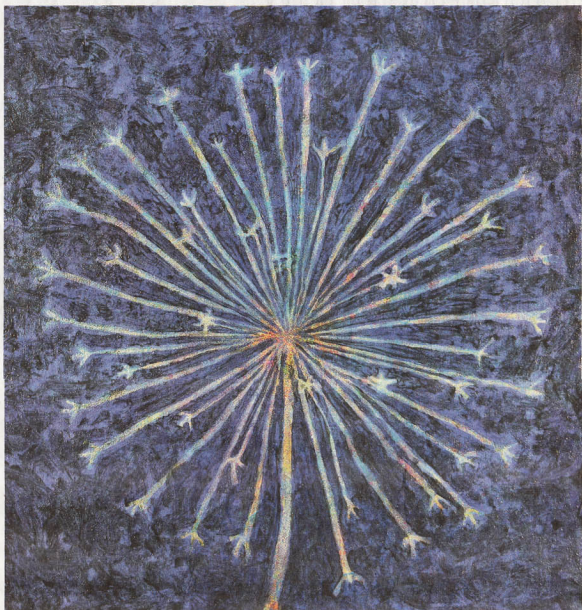


Obituaries

Abigail McLellan



Painter whose work was defined by her use of intense colour and simple, bold forms

Abigail McLellan, who has died aged 40, was one of the brightest stars of the talented generation of painters that emerged from Glasgow School of Art in the early 1990s. She drew on the rich traditions of Scottish art to create a commanding personal vision. She was born in Middlesbrough, North Yorkshire, in the week before the Apollo 11 moon landing and was the youngest of three sisters. Her father worked for ICI and the family moved to Dumfries when Abigail was 12. By then she had already revolved a strong artistic bent – rather to the surprise of her scientifically minded family. (Both her sisters are doctors.) At primary school she was a serial winner of the Easter bonnet competition. For the Silver Jubilee in 1977, she created a memorable fancy-dress outfit, transforming herself into a giant commemorative mug.

Having completed her schooling in Scotland, she won a place at Glasgow School of Art, and began to explore the possibilities of painting. It was an extremely rich period of experiment and discovery. She made many friends among her GSA contemporaries, and also met her long-term companion and future husband, the painter Alastair Wallace. Glasgow – a city that has retained and sustained an extraordinarily strong painting tradition – became her home.

Although McLellan's early student works ranged from bold portraits to "mixed media" works on canvas, she gradually resolved her own personal vision: taut and economical in design, luminous in colour. The art school itself proved an important influence. Designed by the visionary architect Charles Renie Mackintosh, the building's idiosyncratic interpretation of the Japanese aesthetic would find an echo in McLellan's simplified depictions of single flowers and isolated objects.

The intense colour that came to be the other defining feature of her art derived in part from her admiration of the work of Craigie Aitchison. Her technique, however, using acrylic paints of varying transparency, built up meticulously in layers of stippled strokes, was entirely her own. She began exhibiting in London at my gallery, Rebecca Hosack Gallery, in 1996. It proved an enduring and rewarding association. Her last exhibition there was held in March this year.

McLellan's extraordinarily sure sense of colour and design found ample scope in a series of paintings of coral sea-fans begun in the mid-1990s. The pictures were intricately constructed records of negative space: "For some reason," McLellan recalled, "I thought I've really got to make this as difficult as possible for myself by not painting the lines and just painting the in-between bits." One of them was acquired for the Fleming-Wyfold Collection of Scottish Art.

In 1995 she opened up a new front with her portraits, employing the distinctive stylisations and simplifications of her plant pictures, yet somehow managing to capture the likeness of the sitter with extraordinary effectiveness. Her picture of Louise McCabe was the first of several of her portraits to be displayed



Allium on Blue, acrylic on canvas, 2008, by McLellan, above, in her studio
Rebecca Hosack Gallery

as part of the annual BP portrait awards. She was delighted to find the picture used for the exhibition's publicity posters on the London Underground. She won the Morrison Portrait Award from the Royal Scottish Academy in 1997.

Her interest in oriental art prompted her, when she won a travel bursary in 1998, to visit Japan. It was there, while walking along the Nakasendo Way with Wallace, that she began to fall over with alarming and increasing regularity. On her return to Scotland she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

Over the next 10 years the disease took its awful toll on her body. Her

mobility decreased steadily. To each setback, however, she responded with extraordinary courage. Sustained by a fine streak of stubbornness, as well as an indomitable sense of humour, she sought a practical solution to every problem. As walking became more and more difficult, she got first a Pashley tri-cycle, then a sleek recumbent trike, and finally an electric wheelchair.

Every aspect of daily life became a challenge. If the right equipment were not available to help meet the challenge, she would devise it herself. Wallace recalls that "there were quite a few trips to the mountain-climbing section at [the outdoor specialist shop] Tiso to buy straps, buckles and bungee". As the business of painting became harder, McLellan adapted her style to simpler, bolder forms, refining and abstracting her subjects to their essence. Ironically, this is a progression that many artists make in their careers without the cruel prompting of MS; and certainly the force of her pictures remained undimmed.

Returning to her early enthusiasm for three-dimensional work, she began a series of bronze-cast sculptures of sea-fans. The creation of the models was a typically ingenious affair, involving layers of acrylic-felt and a soldering iron. Despite all difficulties, she continued to work. At the end, unable to hold her brushes for any length of time, she deployed assistants to build up her coloured backgrounds, and stencils to fix her forms. Her creative energy and her engagement with both life and art remained undimmed to the end.

Wallace survives her.
Rebecca Hosack

Abigail McLellan, artist, born 11 July 1969; died 11 October 2009