



Justin McCarthy's *Show Girl* (ca. 1950), in "Justin McCarthy" at GoggleWorks



GoggleWorks Center for the Arts in Reading, Pa.



Justin McCarthy's *Nancy Cowperthwar* (n.d.), in "Justin McCarthy" at GoggleWorks

BIRDS OF PARADISE

by N.F. Karlins

Art collectors and dealers have been known to keep a close eye on the graduate exhibitions of top MFA programs, but sometimes searching for old talent, even neglected talent, is the smarter way to go. Such artists are likely to have some track record and their works, possibly out of fashion, can often be had on the cheap.

My favorite unsung artistic hero is Justin McCarthy (1891-1977), about whom I wrote my doctoral dissertation. Artists like McCarthy -- whether dubbed "self-taught" or "contemporary folk" or "Outsider" -- first got hot in the 1960s, but only recently, with shows of Henry Darger, Martin Ramirez and the quilt-makers of Gee's Bend, have these artists gained a lot of recognition again.

Thank heaven they can now be looked at as artists and not as self-taught or folk artists, though I did attend an odd symposium at the American Folk Art Museum recently that tried to put them back in their artistic ghetto.

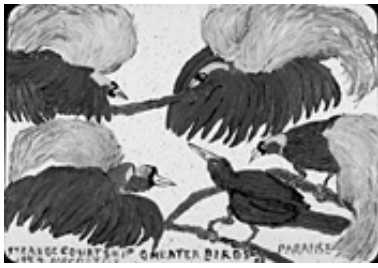
McCarthy has yet to have a major museum exhibition in New York, which is a pity. Are you listening, Whitney, MoMA and the Metropolitan? Or perhaps the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which owns some of his work, will take the lead.

For the moment, though, you can visit a terrific show, titled "Justin McCarthy," July 8-Aug. 19, 2007, at the two-year-old GoggleWorks Center for the Arts in downtown Reading, Pa. This community arts center, housed in a series of factory buildings that once made safety and swim goggles, is exhibiting more than 200 of McCarthy's paintings and drawings. Many are for sale.

I was invited to join a panel on McCarthy there and was inspired by the many creative opportunities offered at GoggleWorks (which I'll describe later).

But first let's consider Justin McCarthy, who made thousands of drawings and paintings of glamour girls, nudes and gifted guys, like movie stars, sports heroes and important political figures. He adored animals, giving them distinctive personalities in his work. He also created landscapes, historical works, still lifes and cartoons.

Whether exploring pop culture, the past or the natural world, McCarthy employed a nervous, edgy, expressionistic line. He had a miraculous sense of



Justin McCarthy's *Strange Courtship - Greater Birds of Paradise* (1959), in "Justin McCarthy" at GoggleWorks



Justin McCarthy's *Marylin and Cat*, in "Justin McCarthy" at GoggleWorks



Justin McCarthy's *Doris Winters - Ice Capades* (1964), in "Justin McCarthy" at GoggleWorks

composition, which he needed, as he worked compulsively, making do with inexpensive and scavenged materials for much of his life.

McCarthy loved the ladies and even his small drawing of *Nancy Cowperthwar* is a sexy, colorful gem, though it measures only 10 x 7½ inches. In pencil and watercolor, the mottled ground makes her limbs stand out, giving uplift to her thrust-out derriere. She invites and confronts the viewer, a dialectic that McCarthy made his specialty.

People in the town of Weatherly, where he lived for most of his life and where everyone knew him, gave him newspapers and magazines that he used as source materials. They also gave him things to work with, like left-over Formica tops for kitchens and baths that he used to great effect.

At the GoggleWorks, his oil *Strange Courtship - Greater Birds of Paradise* (1959) pictures five birds fanning their tail feathers and disporting themselves amid tree branches. McCarthy uses an off-white speckled Formica table top as his background. He ratchets up the energy of the piece by compressing the birds within a shallow space and by using vigorous, sweeping brushstrokes for their plumes.

Though self-taught, McCarthy was neither poor, at least as a child, nor ignorant of art. In fact, his family was wealthy. Justin McCarthy, an introverted and somewhat unloved child, shared the family mansion, farmlands, orchards and artificial lake with a younger brother, upon whom his parents doted. They even had an early cinema in their turn-of-the-century home.

When Justin McCarthy's younger brother died of pneumonia, the family went to Paris and London to recover. Justin, ignored in the family's despair, spent a lot of time in the Louvre and the National Gallery in London. His father was an amateur painter, too.

Justin McCarthy's father died not soon afterward, and the family's money disappeared at the same time. Justin, who was supposed to recoup the McCarthys' fortune through law, flunked out of law school, had a breakdown, was institutionalized and eventually returned home to live with his mother. He never married.

McCarthy projected his love and fear of women into his paintings and drawings of movie stars and debutantes, like his oil-on-Masonite *Marylin and Cat*. This *Marylin* is Marilyn Monroe. Her figure pushes aggressively into the picture plane along with her sexual alter ego, a pussy cat. The sexual overtones of that cat are echoed in many of this other figures of women, like his drawing of *Katherine Hepburn* with a leopard.

One of McCarthy's greatest oils, *Show Girl* (ca. 1950), adorns the cover of the GoggleWorks "Justin McCarthy" catalogue. She combines athleticism and the exotic, a favorite combination for the awkward



Justin McCarthy's *Basketball Player* in "Justin McCarthy" at GoggleWorks



Justin McCarthy's *Yankees vs. Brooklyn, World Series (1955)*, in "Justin McCarthy" at GoggleWorks



Justin McCarthy's *Lady in Polka Dots (1960)*, in "Justin McCarthy" at GoggleWorks

and stay-at-home McCarthy. Yet her attractive face also has a bemused, don't-touch-me look. The resulting tension infuses the work with a compelling ambiguity, while its distortions never let the eye settle, providing a hypnotizing imbalance. *Show Girl* does, however, prove beyond a doubt how talented a colorist McCarthy is.

McCarthy made several trips to see the Ice Capades and similar shows. These excursions produced an important series of paintings and drawings featuring single male and female performers, like his joyous leaping and feathered *Doris Winter – Ice Capades* from 1964, and groupings of skaters. Many are among his best works, and there are many to choose from at the GoggleWorks.

McCarthy's other most frequent subject is sports figures in action. His exciting use of line animates his drawing *Basketball Player*, who glances back as he runs, exuding all the confidence that his creator lacked.

McCarthy's image of Jackie Robinson stealing home during the 1955 Yankee-Dodger World Series, in ink and watercolor and probably done from TV, has an almost ballet-like grace. It shows McCarthy's ability to record micro-gestures by exaggerating them. He shares this trait with portraitist Alice Neel. I immediately thought of her in looking at his oil *Lady in Polka Dots* (1960)

McCarthy, as sensitive to animals as to people, uses his woozy line to capture the essence of each one of his little *Tigers*, another Formica-backed painting, like his Greater *Birds of Paradise*. His close-up of a single beast, *Tiger*, illustrates how original he is when repeating themes as he often did during his lengthy career. The more loosely painted *Noah and the Animals* with both birds and beasts from late in his career has a lot in common with German Neo-Expressionist painters like Georg Baselitz.

McCarthy tackled landscapes and still lifes as well. Surfeit immediately comes to mind on seeing his unstill still life of *Birthday Cakes*, crammed with goodies. This oil's nerved-up application of luscious paint must have made its maker salivate.

We owe McCarthy's discovery to two trained artists, Dorothy and Sterling Strauser of East Stroudsburg, Pa., who noticed his work at a local outdoor art fair in 1960. McCarthy was already 69 years old. For the rest of his life, they encouraged him, bought his work, and made sure he had good materials.

McCarthy had a two-person show with Red Grooms at the Pennsylvania Academy, among other gallery and museum shows in the 1960s, and was in the traveling exhibition "Self-Taught Art of the 20th Century: An American Anthology" organized by the American Folk Art Museum. Still, he's not seen nearly enough in galleries, and no major museum has given him a retrospective or even begun to explore his many drawings.



Justin McCarthy's *Tigers*, in "Justin McCarthy" at GoggleWorks



Justin McCarthy's *Tiger*, in "Justin McCarthy" at GoggleWorks



Justin McCarthy's *Noah and the Animals*, in "Justin McCarthy" at GoggleWorks



Justin McCarthy's *Birthday Cakes*, in "Justin McCarthy" at GoggleWorks

So congratulations to the GoggleWorks of Reading, Pa., for organizing "Justin McCarthy." GoggleWorks' executive director, Diane LaBelle, plus Grey Carter and George Viener, are the exhibition's curatorial team.

But the enterprising GoggleWorks of downtown Reading is more than just galleries. The GoggleWorks is a community arts center, one of the largest in the country. I was impressed by the breath of programs at this dynamic organization.

The GoggleWorks provides subsidized space for artists, fellowships for visiting artists, and space for community gatherings. Local colleges have art classrooms in the buildings, and the facility is home to an ongoing series of classes in everything from painting to computers. Organizations like the Berks Genealogical Society and the Berks Ballet Theatre call the GoggleWorks home, too. There's also a film theater.

The GoggleWorks' "Second Sunday Series" allows visitors to see all types of artists in action, including jewelry makers, glass-blowers and ceramists. The galleries contain not only the "Justin McCarthy" show but exhibitions and works for sale by local artists. All are open, free of charge, to the people of Reading and visitors.

I couldn't help noticing that many McCarthys were for sale and very reasonably priced. His *Fashion in Egypt*, an exciting drawing with a model preening next to the Sphinx, was available for \$3,000 in the GoggleWorks shop when I visited. For those wanting to start an art collection, McCarthy could be an inexpensive pleasure.

One of the commercial ventures at GoggleWorks is the Outsider Folk Art Gallery. The present show, "Coal Country," which remains on view through Aug. 24, 2007, includes additional works by Justin McCarthy and three other artists from his area.

Now all we need is a major Justin McCarthy show in New York.

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Justin McCarthy's *Fashion in Egypt*, in "Justin McCarthy" at GoggleWorks