

Fowler, Martin ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0128-4231> and McCall, Billy (2024) In The Dark Times. [Show/Exhibition] In: In The Dark Times, 21 October - 1 November 2024, Vallum Gallery, University of Cumbria, Carlisle, UK.

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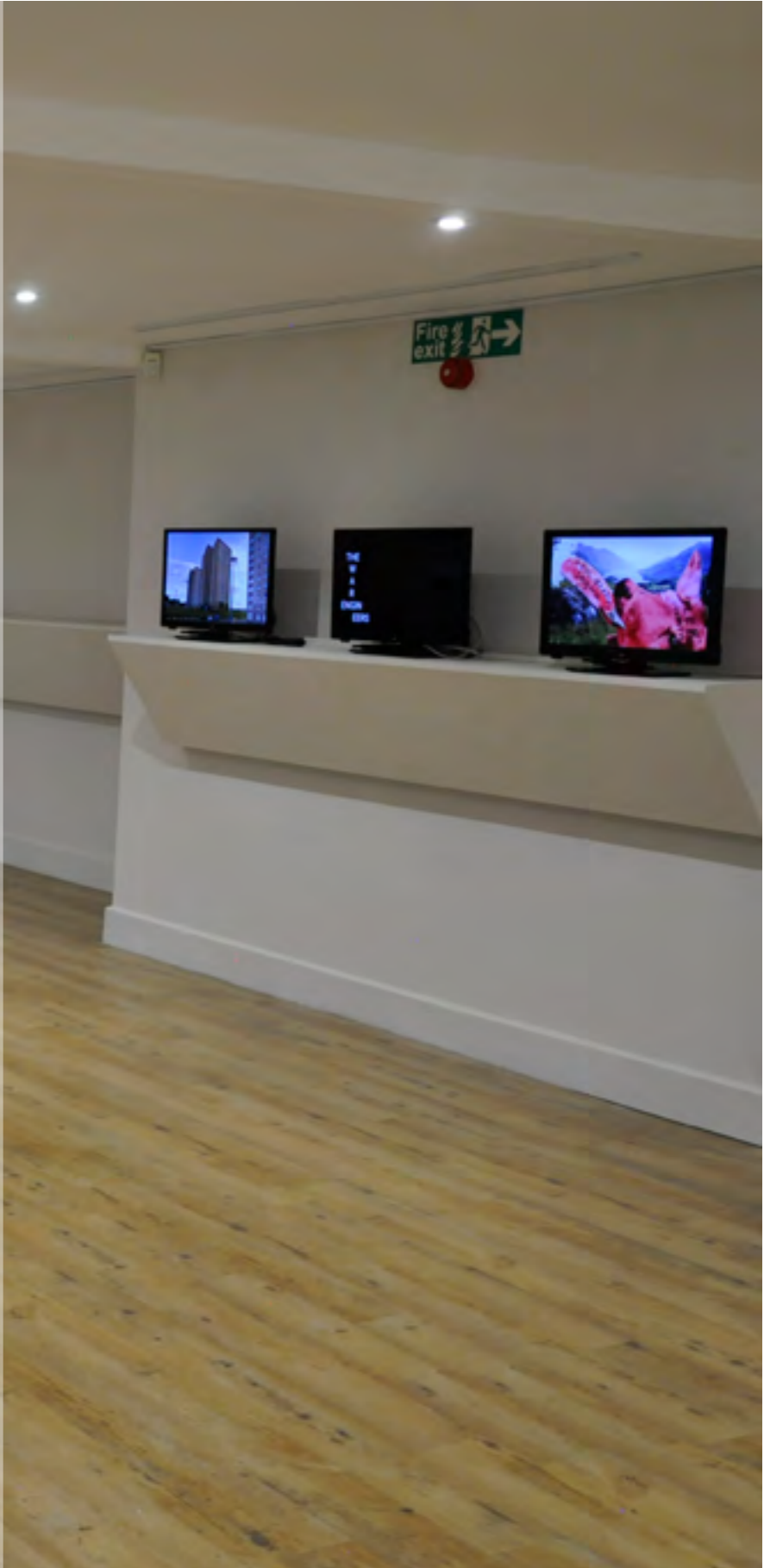
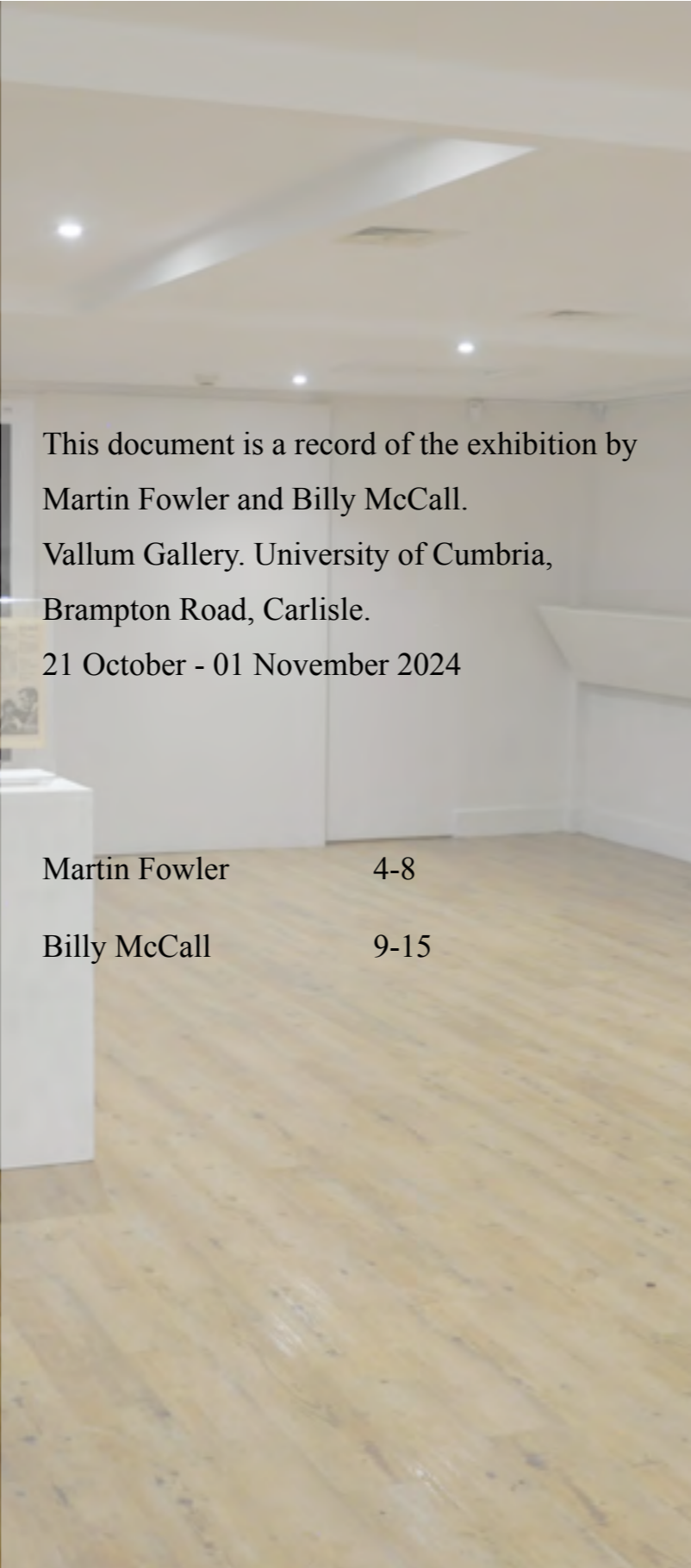
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**IN THE  
DARK  
TIMES**



This document is a record of the exhibition by  
Martin Fowler and Billy McCall.  
Vallum Gallery. University of Cumbria,  
Brampton Road, Carlisle.  
21 October - 01 November 2024

Martin Fowler	4-8
Billy McCall	9-15



## INTRODUCTION

*In the dark times  
Will there also be singing?  
Yes, there will also be singing  
About the dark times.*

- Bertolt Brecht

Drawing its title from Bertolt Brecht's 'War Primer' (1937), *In The Dark Times* offers a critical counter to so-called liberal humanist society and the pernicious myth of progress.

Referencing the oil industry, weapons manufacturers, the British Army and neoliberal 'freeports', this vivid, cartoony and often scabrous exhibition points to the legitimisation crisis engulfing the governmental aristocracy and its potentially catastrophic impact on political and civil society.

Taking inspiration from diverse sources such as Disney's 'Fantasia', John Gray's 'Straw Dogs', 1980's amusement arcades and the poems of Tom Leonard, this 'state of the nation' report offers a critical and disturbing reappraisal of 21st century Britain and the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.





# MARTIN FOWLER



**Martin Fowler**  
*Fun & Games* (15-63), 2024  
acrylic on board  
12 x 30 cm

*'Alas, we who wanted  
kindness, could not be  
kind ourselves'*  
- Brecht



## Fun & Games: 'Seascapes' of modern Britain

Comprising images of a contemporary St. Andrew, his identity concealed behind a welding-mask, crucified on an x-shaped cross; a lone palm tree; rising sea-levels; the conning towers of nuclear subs - replete with engorged phalluses (a reference to both the experience of women serving in the British Navy's submarine service and Ukania as willing dupe to American hegemony); and the façade of an (un)welcoming citadel (in reality the façade of the Tower Amusements in Portobello, Edinburgh) – 'Fun & Games' offers an anti-illusionistic counter to a morally corrupt governmental aristocracy and an intellectually debased avant-garde in service to bourgeois ideas and interests.





With Ensor's scathing critiques of the Belgian Establishment circa 1890, Beckmann's Bird Hell, Nolan's Ned Kelly, and the small paintings of late-career Guston in its backlight, *Fun & Games* offers a painful vision of a so-called modern Britain defined, in reality, by vandalism, sadism and violence. Taking aim at the petro-chemical industry, the military-industrial complex, the British 'deep-state' and the possessive-individualism of the professional managerial class (PMC), these critical realist images seek to counter bourgeois ways of seeing, knowing and telling.

So defined, these political modernist paintings, challenge liberal humanism's potentially catastrophic belief in the pernicious myth of progress, whilst attacking the formalism of a 'new Right' in thrall to the residual traces of Thatcherism's vulgar philistinism.



*'Those who don't know the truth are dummies, but those who know the truth, and call it a lie are criminals'*  
- Brecht

## Sheep-Walk: Dissident Montages Against The Capitalist Common Sense

Taking its title from Karl Marx's description of the large-scale industrial farming which resulted in the forced clearance of thousands of Highland Scots from their ancestral lands circa 1820, these stop motion animations challenge, amongst other things, emergent ethno-nationalism, the reductive binarism of the nationalist-unionist / unionist-nationalist discourse (memorably described during the 2014 Independence Referendum by George Galloway as 'Two cheeks of the same arse') and the 'narrowness', 'subjective illusion' and 'romantic nonsense' of so-called modern Scotia.

Grounded in the estrangement techniques of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre, Esther Leslie's 'Hollywood Flatlands' and the nihilistic performances of Paul McCarthy, **Sheep-Walk** offers a dissident counter to the invented traditions which





underpin prevailing notions of Scottishness. Epitomised by the supposedly eternal symbols of ‘ben and glen’ such as the sporran (invented by Tory Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger for his Highland battalions aka the ‘shock-troops of Empire’), the kilt (invented by Lancastrian businessman Thomas Rawlinson for his Scottish mill-workers), and tartan (the made-up textile designs of the Anglo-Welsh Allan brothers ‘Vestiarium Scoticum’ of 1842) - these crudely made truth-to-materials montages challenge the self-delusions of a Scotland, or North Britain, defined by its continuing fealty to militarism, monetarism and monarchism.

Martin Fowler  
October 2024



# BILLY McCALL



**Billy McCall**  
*Achnacarry Agreement. (detail). 2024*  
3 framed drawings, a photograph in three parts  
and river debris.  
Size variable



## A Gaggle of Galloping Ghosts\*

Billy McCall's work is a visual essay which rewards careful reading. His is an art of appropriation, investigation and recontextualisation.

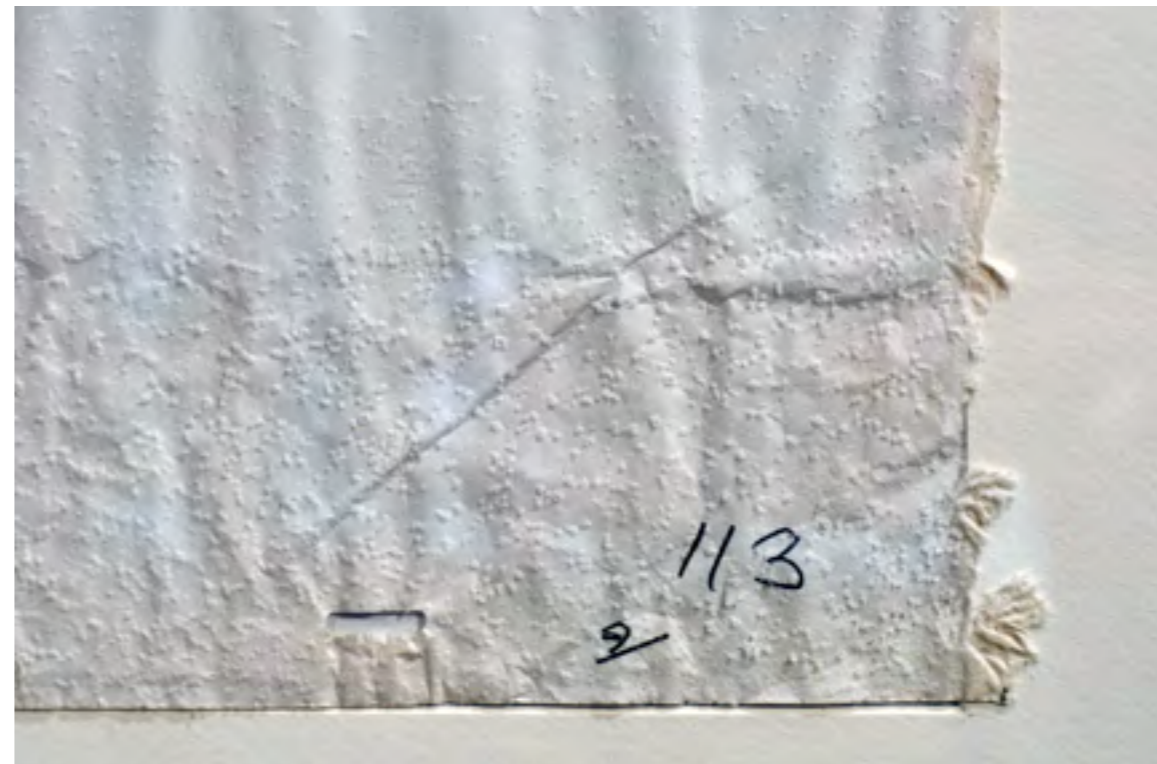
Often lifting screengrabs of classic animation cels and production drawings from auction websites that sell these fetishised drawings and paintings to collectors, McCall takes these familiar childhood/historical images, interrogates them for associations and meanings and then uses them not to cement their original meanings but rather re-animates these dead cels and production drawings so that they can tell new stories. Copying is central to his process for its through copying that he complicates the ideas of originality and the original bringing in Walter Benjamins essay 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' and arts relationship to politics and religion.



### Billy McCall

Above: *The Zombie Managerialist Revolution.gif*.  
2020  
1 framed drawing with dead sea salt and phone with gif file.  
Right: detail from *The Zombie Managerialist Revolution.gif*.  
2020  
Size variable

\* title of episode 11 of 'Scooby Doo, Where are You'



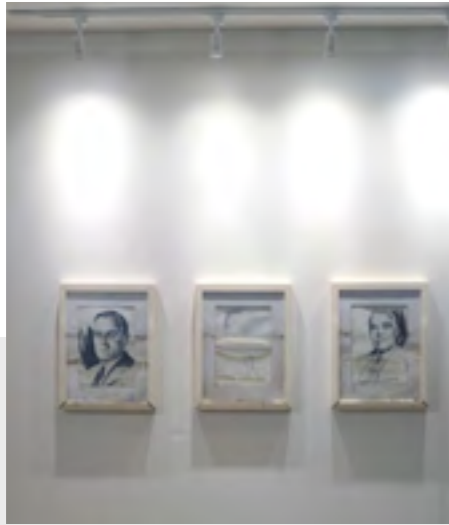




Themes of trauma, environmental catastrophe and class politics are woven together in a way which appears oblique but on examination is always precisely researched and carefully focused.

A framed drawing of Mickey Mouse, taken from from the adjacent video is half-caked in salt. In *The Zombie Managerialist Revolution.gif* the video is a hand-made copy of a Disney pencil test originally made as a study for Goethes ‘The Sorcerer’s Apprentice’.

Having ordered the blindly obedient brooms to fetch water, Mickey finds himself powerless to stop them. Inundated and desperate to stop the automatons he attacks the brooms but while he eventually manages to violently halt the activity of the workers, it is too late - the room is flooded and Mickey is unable to reverse the spell.



**Billy McCall**  
*Achnacarry Agreement*. 2024  
3 framed drawings, a photograph in three parts  
and river debris.  
Size variable





A large scale pinhole camera photograph of the grounds of Achnacarry Castle displays further evidence of water damage.

*Achnacarry Agreement* picks up on the story of 1928 when three oil barons - Walter C. Teagle of Standard Oil of New Jersey (Exxon), John Cadman of Anglo-Persian Oil Company (BP) and Sir Henri Deterding of Royal Dutch Shell met at the castle in the Scottish Highlands to create a secret price-fixing deal which would secure their profits into the foreseeable future. On the reverse side of the wall their water damaged portraits copied from existing artwork hang consistent with the waterline on the large photograph. McCall makes use of an existing wall within the gallery to bring spatial ideas of 'behind' to the story of the secretive imperialist plans to dominate the world oil market and uses the notion of future projections to fast forward to a time in fifty years when SEPA the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency's modelling shows that Achnacarry Castle will lie in floodwaters from the nearby river. The material of the work is literally traumatised by the river water in a display of self harm in order to convey the immense damage created when capitalism misuses its power for its own ends.

**Billy McCall**

Left: *Achnacarry Agreement*. 2024  
detail of photograph.

Right: Composite image showing wall  
with portraits on one side and photograph  
on otherside.

3 framed drawings, a photograph in three  
parts and river debris.

Size variable



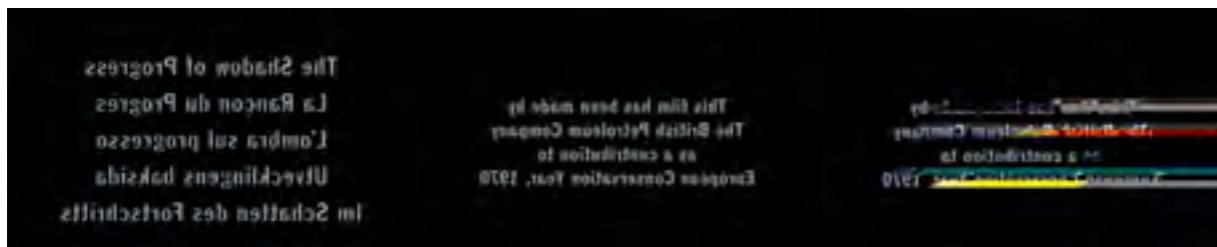


In *Floreat Etona* an animation cel of Captain Hook and the Croc is copied from the original. McCall displays the image reversed so we see it from the behind, it's ill-defined and lumpy backside revealed. The mirror allows us to glimpse the front but we are mostly thwarted from seeing Hook in his last moments as his arch enemy Tick Tock prepares for dinner.

In J.M. Barrie's original play for 'Peter Pan' Hook's last words were 'Floreat Etona' - 'Let Eton Flourish' the motto for the prestigious fee paying Eton College, it seems Barrie has given Hook the dubious privilege of a public school education. Are we to think of other Etonians through the same lens as Barrie? Those that spring to mind are previous prime ministers but also the entrepreneurial 'asset stripper' and 'corporate raider' James Goldsmith founder of the Referendum Party which had aims to leave the EU. Goldsmiths actions were often negatively compared to pirates but what of McCall's stealing of digital images is this not a form of piracy?

**Billy McCall**  
*Floreat Etona*. 2024  
Goache, animation cel, mirror and frame.  
50 x 50cm





Billy McCall feat Derek Blades  
Valley of the Kings. 2024

Radio Times page, video projection, and three  
painted animation cells, acrylic paint and frames.  
size variable.





For the ‘European Year of Conservation’ in 1970 the then British oil company BP commissioned a film about environmental damage caused by the misuse of the planet’s resources. The film ‘The Shadows of Progress’ suggests that the pursuit of technological progress and its costs is a responsibility we all share. That some bear more responsibility than others is not something the film addresses.

In *Valley of the Kings* McCall makes use of this documentary. When a showing of the film on network TV was listed in the ‘RadioTimes’ in November 1970, McCall discovered that an episode of the cartoon ‘Scooby Doo, Where Are You?’ was listed on the reverse side of the page in the same location so that Scooby Doo episode literally became the flipside of the BP film. In an ominous coincidence that particular Scooby Doo episode involved a dark explosion in a science lab in order to thwart a werewolf, this is where McCall talks of everything coming together.

As the projector appears to malfunction shortly after the reversed and corrupted intro sound projects from behind the screen. Feint voices and music emanate and on closer inspection we find behind the screen are three gold framed animation cels and the nostalgic noises from Scooby Doo mixed with the clipped tones of narration from ‘The Shadows of Progress’ in a haunting glitch ridden mashup.

Chad McCail  
October 2024.

**Billy McCall feat Derek Blades**  
*Valley of the Kings*. 2024  
Radio Times page, video projection, and three painted animation cels, acrylic paint and frames.  
size variable.



