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The Grass is Not Always Greener: Blue McRight's On the Lawn

by Lisa Melandri

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The American lawn is everywhere. It takes up more than 32 million acres in North America, occupying more land than any single crop, including wheat, corn, or tobacco. And it is our great obsession: Americans spend approximately \$750 million a year on grass seed and more than \$30 billion to care for and maintain our (hopefully) ever-green outdoor carpets. Though originally a feature of eighteenth-century French and English aristocratic country estates, the grassy patch of land—in all sizes and shapes—has become a domestic goal and democratic ideal. It is ubiquitous and it signifies a successful social and financial familial existence. With all of its environmental, horticultural, and societal complexities, it is the subject of Blue McRight's series *On the Lawn*. In these sometimes charming, sometimes haunting, always powerful paintings, the lawn is both protagonist and backdrop, serving as the stage for a theater of human activity and natural phenomena.

McRight has long explored the sometimes tense interface between nature and culture—between the wild and our impulse to tame it. Her work not only investigates ecological trends but also illustrates man's physical and psychological positioning in the environment. *On the Lawn* encapsulates many of these concerns in small-scale paintings, each on a six by nine inch piece of notebook paper. *On the Lawn* lays bare the American fascination with the lawn as a site for recreation, game play, rest, high-jinks, and hard work.

McRight is sometimes a documentarian—reporting on such mundane activities as watering or mowing the grass. But through intriguing crop and composition, the paintings become something else. In *The Trouble with Water*, the caretaker is rendered headless by the end of the paper, as is the Boy with Watering Can. In *Grow*, a barefoot woman wills a spot of grass to flourish with a pointing hand and seemingly all of her focus and resolve.

Often McRight is an interpreter of the emotional states—sometimes fragile or troubled—of the human condition. Her more surreal vignettes illustrate a mysterious character or action and provide clues to a narrative that we cannot always start or finish. In *Bob*, a man lies face down, his head impossibly sunken in the earth. He is well dressed and the dappled sunlight and healthy, soft grass indicate leisure and calm. Is it a scene of violence or improbable respite? *Kiss* features a woman set against dark, earthy land, genuflecting before a single luxurious patch of green. The title would lead us to believe that she is celebrating growth and the beauty of nature—but there is a sinister ambiguity in the image, as though she might be abandoned, lonely, ill. Similarly, the main characters in *Man with Tree* and *Pull* wear suits and hats, and cling to trees in what appears to be a surmounting storm. Are they clutching the trees for safety as nature threatens to harm them, or communing with nature, in perfect sync with which way the wind blows?

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Though there are buoyant paintings in the group that embrace the simple joys of summer on the lawn—The Lovers embrace against green grass and bright sunshine, and the man in Speedo surveys his vast, verdant estate with great satisfaction—many of McRight's images show the ideal gone wrong. Another Day Prepares for Heat and Silence depicts the utter desolation of a ram-shackle, clapboard cabin in a sea of endless brown, where scorched, desiccated earth meets dust-filled sky. Lawn for a Trailer proves the owners' absolute insistence on the green carpet as a marker of domestic success—though the surrounding landscape may be dead, dry, and uneven, the other-wise humble mobile home sits proudly atop a perfect oval island of lush, emerald green.

For the perfect metaphor of where domesticity and the wild meet, one need look no further than Unnatural Act, where the beagle and the raccoon are engaged in cross-species coupling. Certainly, McRight reminds us that nature untamed should not be underestimated. Her depiction of atmospheric phenomena in such paintings as Tornado prove our powerlessness and vulnerability in the face of nature, no matter how hard we may try to control it. But in Lightning, though the sky rages and the tops of the trees glow a fiery, cataclysmic orange, a single tiny figure bounds on the grass, with arms raised—in celebration, supplication, or defiance.

The American suburb is synonymous with the lawn—where it is the moat around, in front of, or behind each house, delineating property line and domestic domain. The suburb is neither city nor country, and the lawn is neither public nor private—often open to the gaze of the street or the neighbors. McRight's portrayals of the usual suburban lawn are imbued with an evocative quality that turns normalcy into uncertainty. Jockey depicts the typical little man, complete with cap and riding boots, but his scale and position appear to bring him to life as the protagonist in a fantastic narrative—just as the happy squirrel lawn ornaments in Dream (for M.G.) have grown to human scale, changed into menacing creatures ready to prove their fierceness at any moment. The small white house in Cul de Sac sits on a generous plot of land, with grass in front and back, as well as perfectly positioned clumps of trees and low bushes. The night sky is a deep blue, and the unassuming but orderly property is washed by the lights on either end of the house. As the black dog scampers across the yard, we can but wonder why the Cutlass Sierra's front end is submerged in the earth. There is no sign of turmoil, nothing seems amiss. Perhaps the vision of this neat house with its manicured lawn could simply be a dream.

Many of us can remember a father or mother pushing the hand mower or riding atop the more deluxe version, dragging the hose, carefully placing the sprinkler, controlling and surveying the land with great pride and satisfaction—or perhaps great frustration dependent upon the lack of water or the presence of dandelion, crab grass, or even an untrained pet. McRight, in this remarkable, intimate series, has taken our shared, ordinary memory and experience of the lawn and transformed it into a poetic, moody, funny world, filled with a full complement of both recognizable and completely unexpected personalities, places, and occurrences.

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