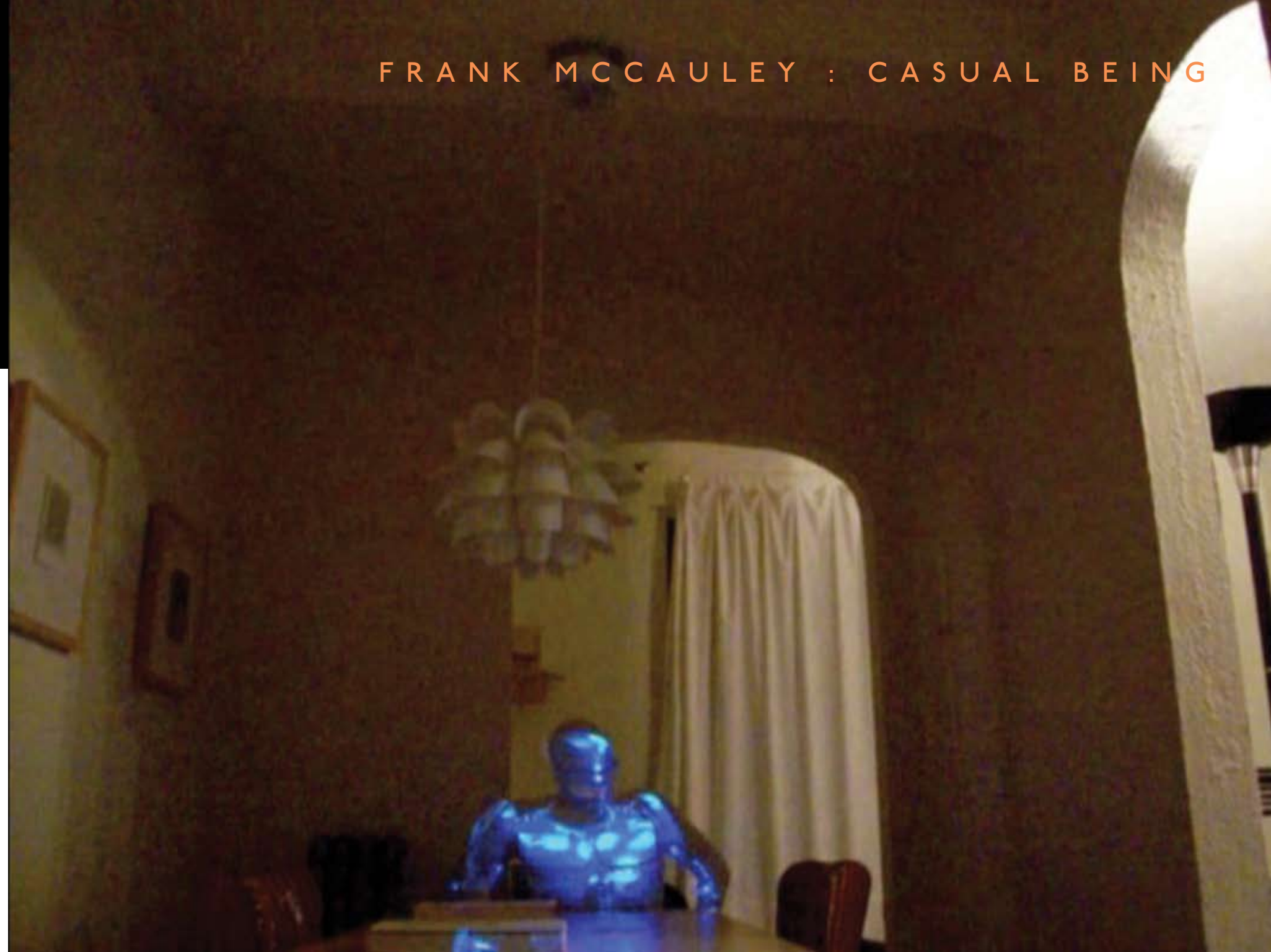




FRANK MCCAULEY : CASUAL BEING



FRANK MCCAULEY • *Casual Being* • January 15 to February 26, 2009

Frank McCauley was born in Jacksonville, FL in 1980. Upon receiving his BFA in painting from Winthrop University in 2003, he moved north, to Syracuse, NY where he attended Syracuse University and received his MFA in 2008. Frank has been the Director and Curator for Spark Contemporary Art Space in Syracuse, NY and is currently the Assistant Director and Chief Curator for the Sumter County Gallery of Art. As an artist he has been in numerous group exhibitions both nationally and internationally and has had solo exhibitions in CA as well as NY. Whether through printmaking, painting, video or performance, his work extends from an internal investigation of childhood role models, popular icons and cultural stereotypes and relates to the confusion, desperation and, often times, failure we experience when attempting to either locate ourselves within our popular cultures or aspire to their unattainable ideals.

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## Not The Hero We Need, Not the Hero We Deserve, Not The Hero

On the surface, Frank McCauley's recent works appear to take scathing comic jabs at the trope of the hero, dismantling it in numerous ways to lay it bare before us as a fallible and pathetic guise. And while they do accomplish this, these works operate on additional levels as well. They contain within them multiple performative actions realized in real-time scenarios. They illustrate—sometimes in broad comic action—the process of the artist at work. And they, ultimately, speak to the refinement of one's sense of self and the ongoing search for individual identity.

What is most intriguing about these multiple layers is McCauley's emphatically low-tech processes. In *I Am The Way I Am The Light*, the simple gesture of re-shooting his own image off a video monitor creates a stunning dissolution of image from a stark documentary portrait of the bare-chested artist to a glowing avatar that vaguely resembles the artist. With each pass of the camera, McCauley's image deteriorates further, breaking down bit by bit until it becomes a shimmering vision of self, a white hot glow surrounded by incidental video effects that begin to read like a swarm of fireflies. At the beginning of the work, the artist appears tentative and vulnerable. By the time his image has moved through several passes, it appears iconic and eternal.

This notion of a reflected self (or the self reflected) continues through much of McCauley's works, as does his penchant for the cheapest, most efficient tricks to accomplish his intentions. In *Friend/Enemy*, McCauley begins to utilize a projection suit, as he projects upon himself scenes from a classic *Star Trek* episode in which Captain Kirk is beset by his living, breathing doppelganger. Part of the appeal here is the obvious and problematic issue of McCauley trying to keep pace with the scenes and position himself in such a way that only Kirk is projected onto the artist's form. Coincidentally or intentionally, this creates multiple moments of hilarity with the artist's shadow stepping into or out of the frame.

By revealing the obviousness of his process, McCauley is also sharing a specific performative moment in the creation of his work. While he could have chosen to veil his sometimes erratic body movements by some savvy editing or reshooting portions, McCauley stays true to the moment and gives us an imperfection rendition that nonetheless functions incredibly well, perhaps more so than had he smoothed over its awkward edges. On the one hand, the visible effort of the artist trying to keep pace with the projected image of Kirk occasionally verges on slapstick. Genuinely laugh out

loud funny. On the other hand, even with the obviousness of McCauley's performance, this simple trick is wildly and deeply evocative as the artist's figure cuts the heroic figure into fragmented versions of itself and immensely amplifies the themes of duality playing out on the screen.

With this simple exercise, McCauley is not only dismantling the notion of the heroic male figure, he is inserting himself as artist into this heroic equation and dismantling that notion as quickly as he introduces it. There is a weird intimacy to the image of a projection-suited artist in this and succeeding works. There is a sense of public and private selves at play, the desire to blossom and display oneself as a fully-realized individual vs. the impulse to stay somewhat hidden and not reveal all that one might. Unlike *I Am The Way I Am The Light*, the artist's face is gone here, tucked beneath a projection fabric mask—within a broadly-realized performance, there remains an impulse toward anonymity and safety.

McCauley continues to blur the line between the work and the performance of the work in *Herowarmer*, which reads as a projection suit test run, as we watch the artist standing outside while a friend attempts to film him and apply the image properly to the suit. Both the artist and friend are heard in the video discussing the means of properly achieving the effect as we witness McCauley figure with a colored test pattern laid upon it. The artist is laying bare the artifice of what he is attempting to realize in a way that looks both preposterous and alluring. His figure-with-stripes could just as well be a new, radioactive action hero. When the final image of Batman comes to rest upon his form, it looks both dramatic and absurd—it is clear that McCauley has the same inner geek as many of us when it comes to comic book heroic tropes, but he's also well aware of their inherent lunacy.

By the time we get to *The Sentinel*, McCauley has come close to perfecting his use of the projection suit to a nearly-seamless treatment while also clarifying the abject absurdity of the hero. McCauley begins the piece with his projected Robocop at home. Alone. With nothing to do. Sitting at the dining room table. Standing in the kitchen with the fridge open. All dressed up with no place to go. McCauley's projection suit looks so good in these shots—his Robocop gleaming like some gigantic, misplaced

jewel—that it only makes this heroic form even more abject, more lost, more alone and unwanted.

When he takes his sentinel outside to industrial, crime-fighting settings, he looks more at home though there appears to be as little crime here as in the kitchen. The sentinel still looks dynamic, but lost. The series of performative portraits that comprise *The Sentinel* are an arresting set of images. Their real-time aspect (rather than McCauley superimposing the figure into these settings) contributes to a heightened sense of reality. The interiors seem just that much more banal when laced with ambient sounds or the flickering light of the fridge and the exteriors contain a quality of genuine grit. In a brilliant coincidence, as the artist is standing outside posing for his projection, police sirens wail and a police car appears in the background. Appropriate to the pathos, Robocop's assistance is not required.

One might take the attitude that the streets are free of crime precisely because the sentinel is there, watching over us, but I suspect not. Robocop is not the only heroic male icon McCauley has punctured—prior to using superhero figures, McCauley had explored the self-promotional heroic in the guise of Tom Cruise. In all cases, McCauley exhibits a duality of perspective—he recognizes the congenial impulse most males have toward heroic form and action while recognizing the ultimate frailty of this pose.

And anyway, is McCauley's Robocop looking for crime to fight or for a self to call his own? One of the great underlying themes of comic book heroes is not merely duality of identity, but an overwhelmingly indeterminate sense of self. It is through their perpetual actions (ostensibly heroic) that they continually seek to refine what that self is and what it means. They rarely succeed, remaining tortured instead, living to fight another day.

So the question remains—if the Hero is, in the end, a fallible and pathetic guise, what do we make of the Artist? The Artist is, after all, standing in for the Hero in these works. Is he fighting the good fight or tilting at windmills? Is he an anachronism or acutely relevant? To use the inane parlance of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, is he the Artist we need or the Artist we deserve? Or does he share the Hero's pathos and folly?

And if he does, then don't we all?

John Massier  
Visual Arts Curator

