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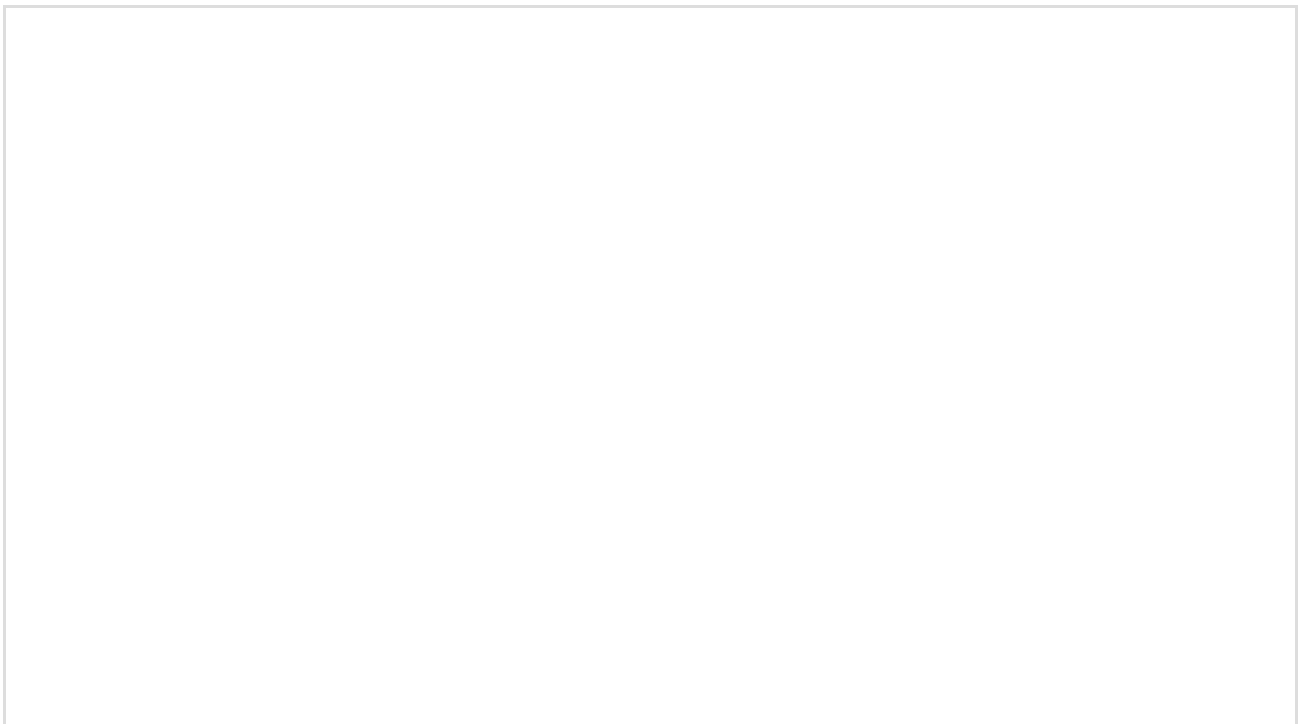


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# You Iz a Machine a Homage to Comics by John McCarthy

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We are talking about comics and discussing 'You Iz a Machine' the latest exhibition by John McCarthy at the [Ben Oakley Gallery](#). Now perhaps best known for his photo realistic paintings, comics is really where it all began. Over and over he would draw superheroes and characters. It marked his childhood and was an interest that would spark a love of art. Something that would last a lifetime.

You Iz a Machine is a homage to those childhood days. The title a subtle reference to a friend who found their own passion and calling. The machine is yourself, in the zone and with energy to do more. "It sort of seemed to describe me these past few months" says John. Constantly creating, doing good work and never seeming to stop. The

machine is the person who has found their passion. John McCarthy is a man who has found his, or perhaps is one who is rediscovering it.



John McCarthy in the Ben Oakley Gallery

## Comic Beginnings

“We didn’t have much” says McCarthy of his roots growing up in Thurrock. It was he says a working class upbringing. One where at school the aspirations were mainly set around sport. A talented footballer himself there was even some hope that he’d choose this as a career. Art though was always more of a draw. The comics were his interest but not one that his tutors thought would lead to anything. His art was encouraged to go in a different direction. He started to experiment with photo realism. Mastering new, more advanced techniques and leaving the line based drawings behind.

It was his uncle who first noticed a that the young McCarthy might just have an interest that could be nurtured. Thurrock in 1972 was not known as being a hotbed of comic art. London however was a different story and John would visit with his uncle. His first trip to the capital was to go and visit the comic shops. Plentiful especially around Greenwich. John’s uncle would buy him the odd comic which John would first read and then re-read though this time just looking at the drawings. “It was like a different world” John says of those first early experiences.





## Past and Present

"I'd spend about two months just looking at the one comic" he says. It was a process that would firmly root the artwork into his mind and he would learn to draw them. Honing his skills he would copy the characters, the lettering and the style before even creating his own. For the young John McCarthy it was a passion and it developed his love for art prior to re-focusing towards the more photo realistic work he is known for now. "It was my childhood and it just stopped and I went on to do what I considered serious painting".

It was the lockdown which really re-ignited the interest. Spending so much time at home led to McCarthy rediscovering his old collection hidden away in an old white box. First experimenting with collage he created a few. Placing images on top of images, the process became more instinctive and less planned than his work normally is. It was a freeing experience and one that only the time provided by lockdown could have prompted. He started to enjoy the rediscovery of these icons from those early days.





## Collage to Canvas

John McCarthy's artwork has always been marked by its attention to detail. He will spend hours and days even months perfecting a piece. As such not much is left to chance. The collages created during lockdown have been re-created as painted artworks. Yet this time a bit more room has been left for extra additions and for a freer flowing style to develop. "The first one took me a hell of a long time to paint" says John. "But by the time I got to the end painting I was a lot more spontaneous with it". Certainly it marks a departure from the rigid focus which is such a hallmark of his perhaps better known portrait work.



## Childhood Memories

The collection created for 'You Iz a Machine' is a throw back to John's childhood. Rediscovering memories from those early years and remembering his life growing up in Thurrock. Drawing was a passion but it still wasn't something which perhaps he would have seen as a career. "My parents were like you have to get a real job you have to get money, you have to get paid". It was something he understood, it was very much the expectation. Looking around artist simply wasn't a viable career choice. "I kept thinking as a kid that I didn't know anyone who does that".

Drawing then was a passion if not an aspiration and going to college to pursue his interest was never going to be on the cards. "We just didn't have any money so it couldn't happen" he tells me. Careers wise the very thought of being an artist was pushed far away "it's dreamland really that's never going to happen". Perhaps those weren't the exact words of the careers teacher but they were close. "You get knocked down a bit when your working class and I felt that as a kid". His response was just to keep painting and "I just got better and better at it. No one can stop me doing that it's not a job or anything I'm just painting".



Choosing later in life to take the jump to being a full time artist the time seemed right to try it. "Lo and behold people seemed to be interested in the work" he laughs. "I was thinking as a kid that I don't feel like this is something I want to do. This is something I have to do. I have to paint, I have to draw, I can't just let that go. If I don't get paid for it or if no-one buys it or no-one cares, it doesn't matter. It's only if you enjoy it that matters".

You Iz a Machine is an exhibition by John McCarthy at the [Ben Oakley Gallery](#) in Greenwich. It runs from 12 November 2021 to 28 November



2021. John was interviewed at the gallery on 6 November 2021.



John McCarthy

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