

An aerial photograph of a water park. The image shows a complex network of white slides, blue and green pools, and various water features. People are visible throughout the park, some on slides and some in the pools. The overall scene is vibrant and active.

**ALEX S.
MACLEAN**

THE PLAYBOOK

Thames & Hudson

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introductory text by
Susan Yelavich

with 81 color illustrations



Thames & Hudson

PLAYTIME

Susan Yelavich

In his classic 1967 film *Playtime*, Jacques Tati follows his protagonist Monsieur Hulot as he stumbles his way through modern Paris. This is a Paris whose signature monuments, like the Eiffel Tower and Arc de Triomphe, are only visible indirectly, seen in the reflection of the revolving glass doors of the city's shining new towers. Like Tati, aerial photographer Alex MacLean keeps his distance from his subjects so that we can see them from a different perspective; and like Tati, he imbues his seductively playful images with a quiet subversiveness.

Playbook is MacLean's paean to a dimension of contemporary life all too often discounted as trivial or inconsequential: children play; gamblers play; slackers play; athletes play. In a society that places a premium on work, these players conduct their games on the margins, where the stakes are either the immaterial satisfactions of sandbox status or the extravagant perks of celebrity stature.

MacLean's photographs tell a different story, however. They are both a celebration of play and a document of its absorption into the Protestant work ethic.

Today, instead of viewing play with suspicion, corporations build their profits on it and groom their managers in its improvisatory virtues: creativity, intuition, fast thinking, and fleet action. MacLean doesn't editorialize; again, like Tati, he is benignly silent on the matter. Rather, he trains his camera with affection and acuity on the remarkable levels of invention through which we rationalize playing.

Playbook, as its name suggests, is a series of coded options. In American football, the playbook contains a series of diagrams of passes, blocks, and throws that are practiced and drilled in anticipation of the other team's moves. Likewise, MacLean's playbook offers insight into the systems, the architectures, of play. In the random array of blankets in a park or umbrellas on a beach, MacLean reveals our predilection to create patterns. On ball fields and gridirons, he shows us how we impose them, and in stadiums, how we contain them. In the baroque twists and turns of waterslides, he lets us see the genius of controlled confusion, how these liquid labyrinths are designed to raise heart rates within safe limits. MacLean shows us the slender realities that support every roller coaster rider's leap of faith. Taking us above the scenery of the carnival, he exposes the webs of steel that undergird the thrill of riding on a ribbon.

Of course, half the fun of play is based on the illusion of insecurity, and in his images of theme parks the photographer slyly pokes at our larger nervousness. Super-sized soccer balls, guitar-shaped swimming pools, and gargantuan tennis rackets assure anxious vacationers of exactly where they are. They also literally brand our choice of leisure activity and keep it within the respectable confines of capitalism. But he leaves us with no question that these are highly intelligent spaces; they illustrate just how much play depends on boundaries, deceptions, and fakes.

A skilled player himself, MacLean is adept at employing his own feints and illusions—strategies necessary to test the wits of the viewer. At the same time his images mesmerize us with the sheer brilliance of their patterns and their color, they also pull us into their mazes. He engages us in an optical guessing game. What is really going on between the lines here? Are we looking at pinwheels or a boardwalk of canopied carousels? Are those snowflakes? No, wait, they're boats docked on offshore rings. Look again and the zigzag turns of a game board turn out to be the tracks of a go-cart ride. It is a commonplace among educators that pattern-recognition is a key index of a child's intelligence. MacLean understands it is a talent crucial to the serious play of adulthood.

As both an artist and a documentarian, MacLean has spent much of his professional career cataloguing and collecting the tracks of our collective footprints in the sand. Parking lots packed with cars, golf courses built on land-fill, and a collapsed hot air balloon silently testify that play has its environmental costs. Snow-blown basketball courts and baseball diamonds blanketed white are gentle reminders that nature still has the power to call the shots or at least delay the game. The calligraphy of marks left by ice fishing and motorcycle racing are the only traces of winter sport to be found here. Apart from these sparse, mysterious scapes, this is a book of perpetual summers.

MacLean is an American optimist. His vision is shaped by the ethos of a country whose Declaration of Independence guaranteed all of its citizens the inalienable right to the "pursuit of happiness." On the pages of his playbook, surfers, sailors, dirt bikers, and sun-seekers share the stage with marching bands and soldiers performing stage-ground maneuvers. MacLean doesn't reject the artificiality of these playing fields; he understands they are quite literally vital. Play is not the sole prerogative of children. From the cockpit of his plane, we are all small again. The leitmotif of his work is fair play. MacLean believes that beauty is contagious, that if we see it, we will want to replicate

it for others. His work is proof of cultural critic Elaine Scarry's contention that in the face of beauty, "We cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us." For Alex MacLean, that "thing" is the ground we play on. The rules we play by are the measure of our respect for it.

* Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*
(Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University
Press, 1999), p. 112