

Graeme Simsion, Keeping it fresh: Noel McKenna's 'Map' series

'Noel McKenna: Landscape-Mapped', *Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2017*

Keeping it fresh:

Noel McKenna's
'Map' series

Graeme Simsion

In making sense of something new, we instinctively begin with the familiar, and, as a writer and one-time database designer, I'm immediately drawn to — and drawn in by — the wealth of text and information in Noel McKenna's 'Map' series. In preparing for my interview with the artist, I've spent a disproportionate amount of time reading rather than 'looking at' the paintings.

I'm visiting McKenna's Rose Bay house and studio to discuss his creative process and compare it with my own — in both my current and former professions. We begin with the paintings themselves, and I'm relieved to find that my absorption in the facts and stories is in line with the artist's intention.

'I read somewhere that when people go to a museum they spend about 30 seconds on each painting,' he says. 'I thought this would be a way to make people actually look at the work and spend time . . . Colin McCahon, one of my favourite artists from New Zealand, did lots of text things. When you're an artist, you look at other artists' work and subconsciously things stay in your mind.' Creative people in any field would relate to this — particularly the 'subconscious' aspect. My own writing owes as much to the books I've read for pleasure as to those that I've studied for technique. McKenna points out that the text is more than an adjunct. It is *painted*.

'When you first load up the brush, it's quite heavy and as you go along it gets lighter . . . I use the brush to do as many letters as it can and then I reload it, so you get this kind of in-and-out effect in real life, which I like. I see it a bit like music in the highs and lows.'

And if some don't see beyond the words?
Does he think about the response he wants?

'To be honest, generally, I don't.'

The degree to which the artist takes into account an audience is a differentiator of creative disciplines. Architects and engineers (and database designers), whose work has a utilitarian aspect, begin with a brief. Their creative processes have much in common. As they move towards less constrained work — in my case, to screenwriting and then to freer-form prose — practitioners split into two camps: the writing community divides itself into *plotters* (kin to architects in their structured, top-down approach) and *pantser*s (who write 'by the seat of their pants', making it up as they go). Plotters are generally more prolific in articulating how they work, perhaps because there is more process to describe. One suspects that pantsers may not want to mess with the magic (though writer Zadie Smith, who has written about her 'micro manager' process, is a notable exception). I'm a rusted-on plotter who looks at the freewheelers with a mixture of awe and incomprehension.

Visual artists are new territory for me. In preparation, I've read Martin Gayford's *A Bigger Message: Conversations with David Hockney* and noted that the English artist's approach checks many of the 'design paradigm' boxes: high-level preliminary plans; a concern, if not preoccupation, with process and technique; substantial revisiting and reworking. It's quickly apparent that McKenna belongs to the other camp. He abandoned preliminary sketches

'The crux of creativity lies in the ability
to manufacture variations on a theme.'

Douglas Hofstadter



a long time ago and 'just goes into the painting': 'I do just start out with the basic idea and things change as you go . . . I think I work instinctually about where to put things — you know where to put the figure in a composition, where to put the shadow. The painting dictates itself to you as you go along. Not an easy process, but I like it to grow by itself'.

On technique, he says: 'Generally, the artists I like are not overly reliant on technique . . . I'm perceived as a kind of primitive artist, like I don't have a lot of technical skills . . . The horse was one of the first things I started to draw [and] I think I can draw a horse better than what I did when I first started. So, I have developed some kind of skills'. He laughs, but later adds: 'The general public often are seduced by the ability of some artists to depict (for example) the movement of a horse. I try not to worry too much about that kind of thing'. (I'm constantly worrying about that kind of thing — improving my prose, finding ways to describe a scene — when, in fact, I believe most are reading for the story.)

And on revisiting his paint on canvas: 'When I'm doing smaller scale paintings, I usually do them at one sitting, I work quite quickly, so there's where I make some more instinctual decisions. I use my paint very thinly. If it doesn't work out, you can just wipe it off, back to scratch very quickly. I like things to be fresh'. (I did about 70 full drafts of *The Rosie Project*, 11 of *The Best of Adam Sharp*. Noel has been painting far longer than I've been writing fiction, so perhaps I'll get there eventually.)

Noel's studio is a big, cluttered space at the back of his house that seems consistent with a spontaneous, improvisational process.

'I've never used an easel,' he says. 'When you've got the easel, you've got the painting there and you feel obliged to paint that way, but often I'll turn the painting upside down — I think I'm more experimental if I don't rely on the easel.'

We talk about the sources of his ideas and he points out the overflowing boxes of photographs. 'I go around taking photographs by myself, every day. I was watching Hitchcock's *The Birds* on TV and I'd forgotten what a beautifully visual movie it was. I took 30 or 40 photographs . . . which may end up in paintings.'

Most of Noel's ideas come from his everyday life — he's attracted to the everyday, 'the vernacular of life, things that aren't specifically seen'. Here, we are in accord: I'm similarly interested in uncovering the hidden dynamics of 'ordinary' relationships, rather than writing about the obviously extraordinary. He goes on to say, 'there's a lot more inspiration in the suburbs than there is in the desert for me. And the Big Things — everyone's got a Big Thing story'.

Big Things, Australia 2004 — an outline map of the country populated with images and descriptions of 'big' tourist attractions, from the Big Pineapple to the Big Golf Ball — was inspired by a TV documentary. But McKenna was, in the tradition of the creative process, already exploring variations on a theme he had established with *Australian Racecourse Locations* 2002. 'It was sort of an experiment . . . After I did the first one, I didn't really know if I'd do any more.' He entered it for the Wynne Prize (for landscape), where it generated positive feedback.

Noel is equivocal about whether that response affected his decision to develop the idea into a series. 'I never had to think much about what the next one was going to be — they just sort of came to me. The *Country Rail Network* — I did that because I just love trains.'

Noel McKenna, with dogs
 Rosie and Melman, 2017 /
 Photograph: Margaret McKenna

McKenna's other works are of a scale that befits their quotidian subjects. He says: 'About 40 x 40cm, that's a good generic size for me, domestic scale'. The size needed to accommodate the detail in the 'Map' series (the *Racecourses* work is roughly 150 x 180cm) necessitated a change in method.

'I like things to be fresh, so this series of paintings is not typical of my practice, because of that workmanlike thing and the gathering of information. I go backwards and forwards [for] maybe a month. Just the act of putting all those names down takes time. I'd put *Racecourses* aside in a studio and just work on it when I felt like it... Once I gathered all the information, it was just a matter of getting a map and an atlas and locating where [the towns with racecourses] were... When I'm doing smaller scale paintings, I work quite quickly, so I make some more instinctual decisions, whereas these are more tradesman-like, maybe.'

He picks up on my comment that I still feel I'm being creative in the execution, even when writing to a well-defined outline.

'When I started doing *Big Things*, I didn't know how many big things there were going to be. I wanted the image to be opposite where the town is, but after a while I ran out of room.' He points to the inset illustrations. 'It's sort of instinctual. Some artists may have started again and made the images smaller, but I really loved the quality of the line with the arrows — it gives it a hand-done effect.'

So is there any reworking at all?
 'No, it goes down and that's it'

McKenna has 'rung the changes' on the underlying idea. The quantity of text, for example, varies from placenames on *Lighthouses of Australia* 2006 (which he nominates as a favourite) to dozens of anecdotes on *Brisbane: My Home 1956–1979* 2014. And he's pushed the limits of the original idea: in *SELF* 2011 — a graph of McKenna's state of happiness over his lifetime, which he painted for the University of Queensland Art Museum's National Self-Portrait Prize — even the hand-drawn map that is a fixture in the other paintings is absent. He says: 'For me, a graph is a map. It's a map of my journey'.

'Part of being an artist for me... it's a little bit of therapy... I love paint, I love mixing it up, I love the brushes, I do love the process, but the end product is what sustains you, you want to keep it interesting for yourself... Because it does happen a lot with artists, hitting on a style and you just do it ad infinitum. I get it myself. People say, "Do you think you could do another cat a bit like that?"... I've been known to slam the phone down.'

Graeme Simson

