



Noel McKenna

If it's real art, it comes from you, your life, it must be connected to your life.¹

Noel McKenna has painted and drawn animals since the late 1970s.² As a child living in West End, Brisbane, he befriended the neighbourhood stray cats, spending his pocket money on tinned food for them, much to the consternation of his family. He remembers a neighbour's horse that was tied up in a paddock all day, and his father's pet budgies. McKenna has maintained a lifelong love and affinity for animals, forming strong attachments to his pets and consistently returning to the subject of animals in his work.³

The animals in this suite, *Animals I have known* 2015–16, are shown in relation to humans and the built environment. Both the artist and his subject are observers, suggesting an engagement between species is fundamental to human interactions with the natural world.⁴ This is more than unthinking anthropomorphism – it is the conclusion McKenna has come to after a lifetime of keeping and observing animals, of quietly watching and cohabiting, of deeply forged emotional connections. Each animal has its own story, sometimes revealed via text, which is of particular significance to the artist's own story. McKenna captures the pathos of passing time, through his own life and that of animals long gone.

Some of McKenna's animals reveal a clear interdependence with people – the dogs gazing expectantly at food laid on a table, the horse tied up with a rope – while others are wild, such as the wily wagtail perched on a clothesline, one leg delicately poised, or the small mouse with quivering nose approaching a loaded trap. Many of the dogs gaze directly at the viewer, an emotional relationship between animal and human implicit. Other creatures are more aloof, signified by an averted eye – or the disdainful rear end of a cat. While there is a connection between human and animal, there is also an inherent unknowability, and the remnant wildness of every animal, however domesticated, remains. The mutual ties fluctuate with the singular needs of the participants; the animals do not speak, except through their actions or their eyes.

McKenna relies on photographs for his visual source material, either of a particular animal or generic images that recall the significant animal he is depicting. However, while a drawing may start with a photograph,

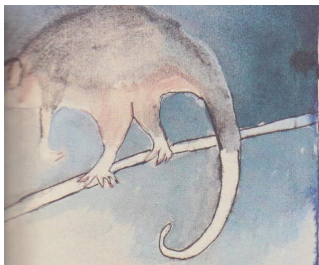
NOEL MCKENNA
Untitled drawing from
Animals I have known 2015–16 (detail)

McKenna does not reproduce it faithfully, but rather uses it as a visual stimulus. Some drawings are more linear and raw than others, and several have incidental process marks – blotches and stains – that lay bare the drawing process itself. McKenna needs to be relaxed when he draws, and this openness extends to the simple manner of the works' presentation, pinned to the gallery walls as if they were in the studio.

Two of the drawings are larger, more densely worked chronologies, with drawings and text that give a detailed and compelling account of the artist's life and the impact of animals on it. This is an extension of McKenna's habit of keeping travel journals, some of which he has exhibited⁵, and an urge to document daily life and the passing of time. The anecdotes in these works are self-contained moments – some descriptive, others philosophical – written with poignant honesty and directness. The artist writes as he thinks, corrections plain to see, the words in a conversational tone. He cuts the paper long to accommodate the span of his years and while some of the early images have underdrawing in pencil, this disappears as the drawings and texts progress, becoming more fluid and confident.

While McKenna's drawings may initially appear matter of fact or detached, close observation soon reveals the deep emotional connection between the artist and his subject. The drawings are profound in their expression of the simple things that make up a life.

NOEL MCKENNA
Untitled drawing from
Animals I have known 2015–16 (detail)



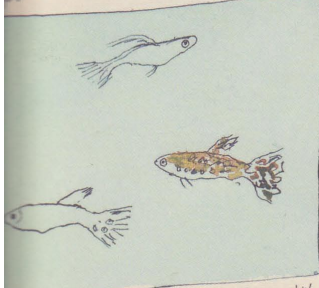
WAS SEEN POSSUMS, but since moving to where large trees are all around our see one or two most nights with spot them. Found a large dead one in our area once.



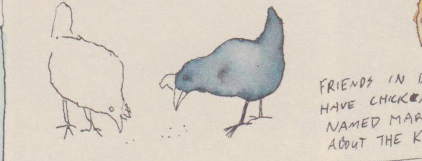
Spotlight a Terrier who lives next door at Rose Bay. Used to get on well with our spot



"Mia", Our Brod dog a big dog 38 Kg for the house but dog to live with beautiful



end gave us a Fish Tank which we still Generally have only ever had Guppies breed quickly so the population does explode. small delicate fish, elegant shape with a array of markings and colour.

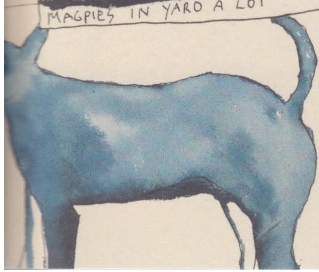


FRIENDS IN DARLINGHURST HAVE CHICKENS. ONE IS NAMED MARIA. MARIA WALKS ABOUT THE KITCHEN

Animals mean different things to people. I have known many people who cannot stand dogs or cats, even some who seem to hate almost all animals. The history of man is full of abuse of all kinds of animals, from hunting just for sport to horrible treatment of domestic pets. Dogs would be the animal I know best, having had 7 as pets in my life. All can be said to have an ancestry to the wolf. Dog and human-kind has been intimately tied to them for thousands of years. Their best quality is their unconditional love and devotion which supersedes that of humans often. They guide us, protect us. Past civilisations have used them as symbols of the journey between the world of life and death, the conscious mind and the unconscious psyche and soul. Dogs is keenly sensitive to how it is treated, any dog can be made to be savage just as myth. They often were buried with their owners to help and guide them on their final journey. The Romans held the greyhound in high regard, people who were found to have been cruel to a greyhound were sometimes killed. The world without animals would be quite tragic, too terrible to even imagine. It is a kind of irony + predictable thing to say but we are in this world together.



MAGPIES IN YARD A LOT



FRIENDS WE KNEW LIVED IN HONG KONG adopted a large dog called "POPPY" which they bought back to Sydney. A couple no children have not I think known someone more attached to their dog. Both educated, successful people poppy was more than a pet, hard to find right word. Poppy became herself was a nice dog, even if I found her a tad, sort of close to angry sometimes, her stance + demeanour sometimes, con/roving.



BLACK CAT LIVES OUT BACK
"BRAWL'S" FRIENDS PUG FROM LEICHHARDT