

Love me, feed me, never leave me – the vegetable joy of Noel McKenna’s emoting paintings.

Hounds follow those who feed them. Otto von Bismarck (attributed)

In Jim Davis’s comic strip, *Garfield*, the eponymous hero’s incredulous and long-suffering owner, Jon, enters the domestic home to find his outsized pet sprawled and groaning on the floor beside empty ‘take out’ containers. “Garfield! Did you eat all four boxes of lasagne?” He asks. “What am I going to do with you?” Garfield, returns completely without irony; “Love me, feed me, never leave me.” Food and love are synonymous and the relationship of humans with domesticated animals has this at its core; sustenance and shelter are countered by (un) conditional love.

For over three decades the work of Noel McKenna has orbited key themes of the domestic home: its exteriors and interiors and its closely shared occupation by humans and animals alike, ensnared in the reciprocity of food and shelter for love and company. To approach the intimacy of this long-term negotiated arrangement and McKenna’s painted representation of human, canine and feline bonds and its unspoken rules, it seems appropriate to firstly look back to look forward, at some of visual art’s informal histories to help understand the artist’s very personal pictorial vernacularities. Why does McKenna so rarely depict humans and animals in the same space at one time? It is as if we hear Jon’s voice ‘off’, but we see Garfield centre stage: cats and dogs seem dominant in McKenna’s world, they are in control, in primary occupancy and humans are a subservient adjunct. It appears likely that although we fully, yet subliminally, understand the emotional manipulation, we fall and fall again, into the soft pools of deeply dilated pupils. Is it any surprise therefore, that the postcard reproduction of McKenna’s *Fat Cat*, 1999, has been the best-ever selling paper product from the store of Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art?

While exact histories of human interactions with cats and dogs are vague and varied, a shallow grave in Cyprus, dating to 7500 BC, during the Neolithic period, contained the skeleton of a human buried ceremonially. In close proximity, in its own tiny entombment was a juvenile cat, its body oriented in the same westward direction as the human skeleton. The fact that cats were not native to Cyprus evidentially suggests that they were being fostered, tamed, loved (moving in), just as humankind was establishing the first settlements in the Middle East. In colder climates, the goddess Freyja in Norse mythology was also associating with cats. Farmers sought protection for their crops by leaving pans of milk in their fields for Freyja’s special companions, two grey cats who fought alongside her and pulled her chariot. Not only useful, but strong to boot (pun intended). I feel if I look long and hard enough, I will eventually find a print or ceramic tile of this scene in McKenna’s extensive archive.

The represented relationship of man and dog in art history is a well documented. From the outset of graphic culture, dogs have been depicted in cave paintings – domestic dogs can be clearly seen surrounding a dead deer in an upper Paleolithic painting from southern Europe – and similar to the universal spread of cat traditions, stylised canine representations, self-evidently influential on McKenna’s own style, are evident from the diverse cultures of ancient Egypt, China and Mexico. Until the Middle Ages, dogs were primarily depicted as hunters and guardians or incorporated into religious imagery like that of Cerberus, the multi-headed canine guardian of the Greek mythological Hades. Canine imagery became more diverse in the Middle Ages, as wealthy patrons commissioned treatises, realised as

handmade books, hand lettered on vellum and painstakingly, flatly illustrated, dedicated to hunting lore and attendant rituals. The detailed miniature paintings demonstrate that dogs were celebrated, loved and mourned. The fourteenth century hunting treatise of Alfonso XI of Castile, *Libro de la Montería*, includes a tiny panel showing huntsmen despondently, lovingly, stroking a dead hound.



Dog, Pie. 2015

While cats insinuated their presence amongst humans through the practical application of rodent 'maintenance' (mice generally run free in McKenna's pictorial lexicon), in general dogs in art were symbolic of faith and loyalty, which holds true in his work. Interestingly, some of the few combined images of man and dog in his oeuvre show the *abject* bond of defecation: man facilitates canine toilet and cleans up afterwards, as if in self-denial of the animal as animal. Historically, a dog, when included in an allegorical painting underscored the attribute of fidelity personified. In a portrait of a married couple, a dog placed in a woman's lap or at her feet, represented marital bond. If the portrait was of a widow, the dog then became an emblem of a continuing faithfulness to her husband, beyond the grave. Jan van Eyck's 1434 'Arnolfini Marriage' (painted on a wooden panel like most of McKenna's smaller paintings), is believed to represent the Italian merchant Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini and his wife (unnamed), posing in their Bruges home. The double portrait shows the wedding scene, where a small gathering of invited guests to witness the ceremony, can be seen in the convex mirror at the back – itself symbolising *the eye of God*. Further allegorical devices are present in the work: the fruit, the symbol of fertility and wealth (the oranges, apparently *casually* placed, act an indicator of considerable riches, as they were both expensive and rare); the shoes removed (denoting a holy place); and of course, the dog. The *little dog* symbolism is dualistic, denoting both faithfulness and devotion, but also stands as an emblem of fecundity, lust, signifying the couple's immanent sexual expectations, desires and the will to reproduce. Unlike the couple, the dog looks out, coolly meeting the viewer's gaze. Mostly, McKenna's dogs similarly connect to the viewers' eye, while, probably indicative of the artist's greater suspicion of the feline kind, almond eyes avert.

David Hockney evidently drew on the *The Arnolfini Portrait* in the symbolic composition of his 1971 painting, *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy*; in which the artist claims he deliberately deployed such symbolic devices – like little bombs – to illustrate marital tension. It depicts the British fashion designer, Ossie Clark and his new wife, the textile designer Celia Birtwell, shortly after their wedding. A white cat sits on Clark's knee¹ looking dispassionately out of an open window that compositionally divides the couple. The positions of the two figures are reversed from van Eyck's composition, with Birtwell in the dominant standing position and Clark seated, poutingly, if not quite submissively. The viewer is left in little doubt that Birtwell is the assertive partner here, and despite Hockney being Clark's best man, it's evident where his sympathies lay: in counterpoint to the symbolism of a dog, the cat on Clark's lap, back to viewer, denotes infidelity and envy – trouble ahead... In this case, Clark continued to have affairs and over-indulge in drugs, which contributed to the breakdown of the un-ideal marriage in 1974, and his ultimate, unseemly end².

The cat speaks, beyond his/her time (in search of a pithy title, Hockney perhaps knowingly, transmutes the white, virginal female *Blanche*, into the malicious male mouthpiece, *Percy*)...

The paintings of Noel McKenna can be similarly dualistically posited in both the structural frameworks of pre and post Renaissance painting, the flattened Cartesian space of *Libro de la Monteria*, and the Euclidian (and emotional) depth of Stubbs, Landseer and beyond. Renaissance art was a dramatic departure from the flatly stylised images of medieval painting, to which major aspects of McKenna's work – particularly its *directness* in depiction - arguably attune. A kindled interest in classical art encouraged Renaissance artists to study



Cat at Table. 2014

from nature, and pursuant technical improvements in rendering 'believable' Euclidian space (mimesis) emerged³. Every point in Euclidian three-dimensional space is determined by three co-ordinates, from which vectors might be drawn to a single point of plausible rotation (the outcomes of trying to 'spin' a McKenna painting are of course, mind-bending). Better understanding of light and shadow, perspective and anatomy were also substantial breakthroughs of the Renaissance, and two centuries later George Stubbs (1724 -1806) drew upon all these intellectual resources to lift animal painting, arguably, to a pinnacle. Britain's aristocracy regularly commissioned his work to celebrate their hunting dogs and prized racehorses. Stubbs's interpretation of these familiar themes stands out for its academic precision and anatomical accuracy of the animals, but what, in particular, sets his work apart is the shift away from the clichéd poses and generalised features substantially relied upon by earlier paintings. Stubbs actually looked, noticed, and cared, and consequently elevated (humanised – in the sense of making empathetically comprehensible to humans, rather than to anthropomorphise) animals, through natural gestures, realistic expressions and unmistakable sympathy for his subjects. McKenna shares the latter while showing a degree of ambivalence to the former.



Breakfast Table with Dog, 2015

McKenna's begging series (which first appeared as the central subject of his 2015 exhibition, *Concealing the Spot*, and is the particular focus of this publication) falls between the observational mimesis of Stubbs and the functionality of pictographic linguistics of pre-Renaissance symbolism, or art before the *era of art*, as the historian Hans Belting describes it³. Belting explores embodiment, suggesting that a 'pre-art' image of deity for example, was not so much considered a simple representation, but rather a hardwired, physical link to that represented. Holy images or icons were not viewed as art, but as objects of veneration, which possessed the tangible embodied presence of that which they depicted. Form, matter and function were deemed merged and the artisanal skills involved in representation were inextricably bound to the act of devotion, or love. We can perhaps best understand the labours of the maker in these instances, as devotional functionalism, where meaning is revealed by use.

Similarly, McKenna talks about certain works in the series wherein he discusses subjects as if *embodiment*: "Max" (cheeky, inquisitive, assertive), or "Rosie" (reserved, demure, softer, subservient). Conversely, the artist is quite specific when the situation is otherwise, when broader constructed surrogates or symbols are employed: generally speaking, this appears to

occur more commonly with cats and less with dogs, wherein the bond is evidently profound. McKenna's (wary) paintings of cats are about territory and spatial occupation, but his images of dogs feel like acts of love. In a tangential shifted way, and to varying degrees, certain *still life* objects embedded within the paintings represent 'embodied' experience from the artist's real world. In *Cat, breakfast*, 2015, a collective knowledge of McKenna's work and life habits (these too are inextricably linked), lead us to clearly envisage the artist seated at lunch in Katz Deli, New York, carefully handling and studying his expensive bottle of home-branded Seltzer water, knowing full-well that it will subsequently appear in painted form. In this, McKenna's work is as diaristic as it is emblematic: the squared-off, frontal pipe, also laying on the table of the same work, is as much Magritte's as it is McKenna's. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, there is of course no smoking in Katz (more intended puns?). The treachery of images...



Dog Begging, 2015

Always refreshingly frank about the practical evolution of his work, McKenna claims that the emoting, begging paintings grew out of an initial intention to paint a series of still lifes, simple assemblages [?] of domestic items; plates, cups, condiments, cutlery, teapots, fruit, eggs, etc., rendered with the modernist, abstract flatness of William Scott in mind. McKenna moves fluidly from medieval flatness modernist flatness. The first compositions, however, seemed incomplete to the artist, and he instinctively began to reveal eyes and faces. Growing in the reverse of the Cheshire Cat from Alice, emerging, form-filled, from the darkened voids of the picture plane. Animal faces longing to make a connection with the insinuated, but unrevealed owner of both themselves and the assembled groceries, precariously placed on the impossibly-angled tabletops. The absence of human owner, life-share-friend, however, creates the space for the direct emotional plug-in between the isolated animal (interior) to viewer (exterior). The plates of untouched food - ham, a pie, a whole fish, fried egg and a tin of tuna - hang tersely in the perilous space between it and us, *him/her* and me. Eyes locked, as the items begin to slide off the vertical table plane.

In comparison to the direct, physical and instinctual evolution of the imagery and its emotive power, McKenna's version of the origins of the curious title *Concealing the Spot*, is perhaps more cerebrally-driven. His provisional notes indicate that the title came to him while researching the obscure, post-academic, French/Swiss painter Félix Vallotton (1865-1925). McKenna notes⁴: "According to the text he was a "gloomy, bitter man" (a cat, perhaps?) who observed the world at a safe-distance. His paintings, a lot of the time, are about the everyday; single figures in rooms, groups of people in rooms, but the compositions – the way he uses negative space – create quite disturbing and complex situations". Re-pivoting on the instinctual, McKenna's notes conclude, "...My eldest son is named *Félix* and the first dog we had when he was young was named *Spot*"...⁵ As human beings we fashion consequence, nothing we do, say or think is so divorced or insulated that the artist's expression of a relatively linear personal logic arguably casts a textured shadow that understates more than it overstates. Speculating upon a sequence of tenuous connections between a minor, moody French painter of symbolist leanings, to a beloved, but deceased family pet, (sadly Max has also gone) of course opens a door to bigger questions that lay in wait, lurking in the Cartesian darkness.

Aside from a shared liking for painting interiors, there are further correlations of interest between Vallotton and McKenna, heightened by the observation that the former was much influenced by Japanese woodcuts - which akin to Medieval flatness, and the scaling of objects by importance - a study which also, largely, centres on the positive-charging of negative space. With McKenna's particular vision in mind, looking at a painting like Vallotton's 1898 *La Chambre Rouge*, the subject is not really the interior room at all, but rather the two figures lurking in its exterior doorway and the reflection cast in the over-mantle mirror (the eye of God) of the part of the room in which the viewer might be hypothetically located. Absence as presence: the commonality with McKenna here is the masterful undertow created by the un-showing or plain-sight-hiding, of the *thing* the artist really wants us to see: the allegorical 'point' of composition that emotionally spins the room.

Dog at breakfast table (2014) contains five apparently simple compositional and symbolic elements – vector points, if you like; (i) A greyhound dog, *Max* embodied, one good eye, the other greyed-out with blindness. (ii) A blue-edged, white breakfast plate with two sausages, two strips of bacon, three segments of tomato, and two Sarah Lucas-*esque* fried eggs, one

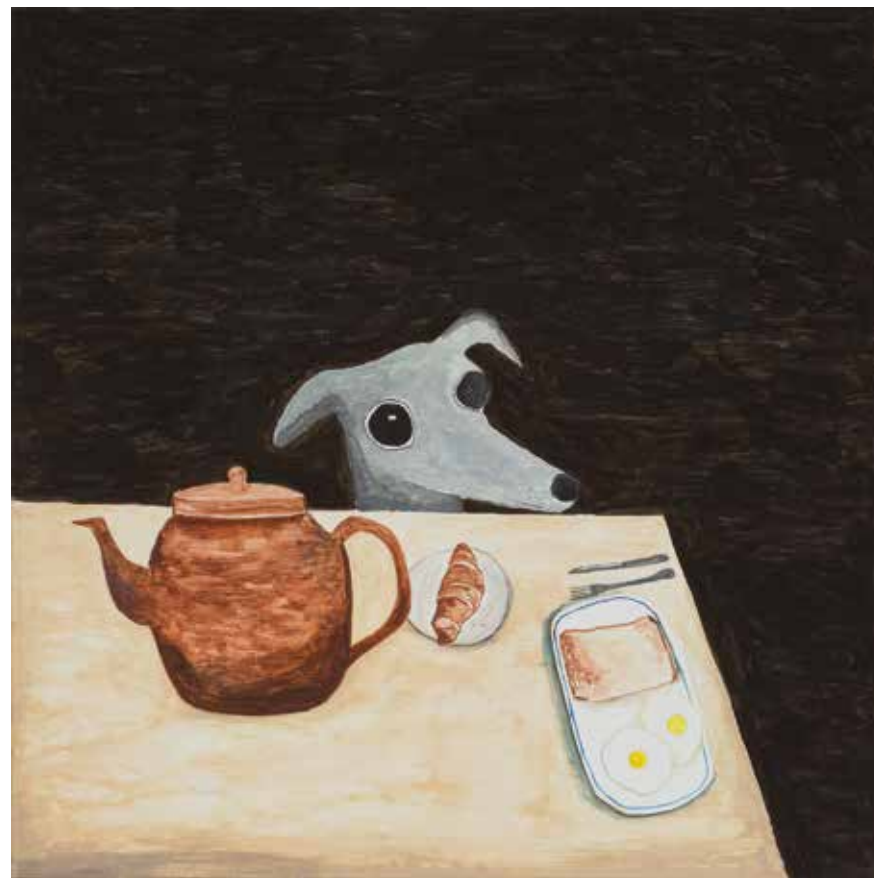


Dog at Breakfast Table. 2014

edging over a piece of toast. (iii) A cup of dark tea in an ornate cup and saucer. (iv) A table setting (knife and fork – long grey handles) for one right-handed recipient, facing the viewer but absent, and implicitly exterior to the scene and looking on/in. (v) The fifth element is a dominant band of brown/black negative nothing that occupies the greatest part of the painting's surface, high enough to hold an absent, seated figure and which envelopes *Max*. McKenna has manipulated *Max*'s head, so in a *cubistic* manner, both good and blind eyes situate on one side of his face. A glint in the good eye suggests the pathetic, begging aimed at an absent master, and the dead orb ambiguously, ironically, 'eyes' the breakfast. The dog sits patiently waiting in limbo for an answer or food that, heart-wrenchingly, will not come. *Love me, feed me, never leave me...*

Simultaneously the dead eye creates a perfect modernist hole through the sculpturally cubistic form of *Max's* head, recessing so deeply into the background of the negative nothing that it becomes the painting's Euclidian vanishing point. Or perhaps the window out of which *Percy* (Blanche) stares knowingly, solely aware of the future. The constituent elements of the composition become the layers that conceal, *presence as absence*, which McKenna applies so that we do not see the point through which we inevitably, emotionally sink, right into the heart of the work, the spot (carefully unconcealed), directly drawing us through *Max's* dead eye.

Meanwhile the huntsman, with loyal and faithful hound at his side, a painting-within-a-painting rendered on the teacup, has us in his gun-sights, eye-to-eye. The dark liquid in the cup mirrors *Max's* dead eye, as the yellow band of the saucer's decoration forms a lower concentric 'ring', an echo to *Max's* collar. The former, plausibly rendered in three-dimensional modelling, the latter a flat graphic device, complete with buckle and studs, that makes little attempt to correspond with the suggested tonal shaping of its owner's neck. McKenna hovers between Stubbs and pre-renaissance flatness, flipping and spinning spatial rendition at will. The saucer also carries a painted banding of laurel leaves, a crown for fidelity personified?



Dog Begging, Breakfast. 2015



Dog Under Table, Lunchtime. 2015

Enshrining love, loyalty and commemorating loss. The pair of fried eggs, positioned on the plate, in exact spatial alignment to Max's eyes, through which we fall inwards, become a comic allusion to overseeing, to 'looking' on and out (*the eye of God?*) Whatever, the eggs follow us around the room...

The odd thing is that although McKenna's observational choices may come from the normal, domestic, which like the inert colour of the table-top, Baudelaire described as "the grey flats of the everyday" (*planète gris du quotidien*) – the super-normal as McKenna has called it – but in his paintings of animals, in fact all his paintings, the normal comes out the other side as polychromatic, extraordinary, metaphysical, unconcealed, unspoken, embodied. "It is the joy of receiving, the joy of breathing, the joy of contemplating, of living, of growing. It is a vegetable joy. And so, in general, it is more like a smile – something analogous to the wagging of a dog's tail or the purring of a cat."⁶

"If a dog will not come to you after having looked you in the eye, you should go home and examine your conscience."

Woodrow Wilson (attributed).

David Godbold

¹ The cat in the painting was not in fact Percy — this was the name of one of the couples' other cats — but Hockney thought 'Percy' simply made a better title than 'Blanche', the actual cat he painted.

² In 1996, 54-year-old Ossie Clark was stabbed to death in his council flat London, by his former lover, 28-year-old Italian Diego Cogolato. Cogolato was convicted of manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility and jailed for six years.

³ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence, A History of the Image of Art Before the Era of Art*, trans Edmund Jephcott, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁴ From an emailed dialogue in advance of the artist's 2015 exhibition, 'Concealing the Spot', at mother's tankstation, Dublin

⁵ Ibid. the artist's email notes.

⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *De l'essence du rire*, 156.