

ARTFORUM

Noel McKenna

DARREN KNIGHT GALLERY

840 Elizabeth Street

May 14, 2016–June 11, 2016

By turns naive and discerning, Noel McKenna's work is well known in Australia for its examination of the minutiae of suburban life. Based in Sydney since 1981, McKenna originally hails from Brisbane—a city that has only recently outgrown its reputation as a large country town—and a regionalist or “outsider” viewpoint is central to his work, which combines shrewdly observed scenes of everyday life with the aesthetics of amateur painting, replete with awkward three-dimensional perspectives, subdued colors, and idiosyncratic fixations. In his latest exhibition (which consists of fourteen small paintings as well as ceramic tiles, lithographs, and an ink-on-paper work), McKenna, now in his sixties, turns his eye to New York City, to which the artist has been traveling regularly over the last five years. The title, “Seltzer,” alludes to the Gomberg Seltzer Works in Brooklyn, a family-run business that has become a particular source of fascination for McKenna. A bottle of the beverage features in a still life of a drab-looking lunch, Beef Brisket on rye, Katz's NY \$16.95 US (all works cited, 2016).



Noel McKenna, Liam Neeson and friend walking Central Park, NY, 2016, oil on plywood, 21 1/2 x 23 1/2".

Characteristic of the artist's folkloric sensibility, customers having their shoes polished in Shoe Shine NY and Shoe Shine NY 2 are presented in vast and mostly empty interiors, as if self-conscious participants in an urban ritual. The works compel further engagement through subtle details, such as a hastily painted wall or a particularly pleasant shade of green. McKenna's outdoor scenes of New York are the standouts, especially his dispassionate Water Tower A. NY and Water Tower C. NY, which pay homage to Bernd and Hilla Becher. Archetypal touristic observations are also featured, such as the queue for lunch in Katz's Delicatessen NY and a random celebrity encounter in Liam Neeson and friend walking Central Park, NY. Less a paean to the city than a muted celebration of the overlooked, McKenna's exhibition rewards patience, appearing as the product of someone who values privacy and who uses art to record things in the process of being lost.

— Wes Hill