



Noel McKenna

*“It is perhaps only in the last couple of years that I have begun to have thoughts about the sadness that can exist in the minds of our pets”*

At times funny, intense and isolated, the domesticated animals in Noel McKenna's paintings are far more complicated than the content and docile innocents that we often imagine them to be.

Words: Emily Steer

*There seems to be a sadness or an impossibility of connecting with the animals in your paintings.* For the most part, the animals I paint are the ones that we have tamed and learned to control: dogs, cats and birds. It is perhaps only in the last couple of years that I have begun to have thoughts about the sadness that can exist in the minds of our pets- this is dependent on how we treat them, of course. I have even thought about sadness in the pets I have had, and I like to think that I have treated them all well. Despite this, they are in some ways prisoners, even if some get five-star treatment. Dogs, who I would say I know best, are at their happiest when running in a pack, even if its a fenced-in dog enclosure in Tompkins Square in Manhattan.

*Would you say your paintings carry an ethical message?* The domestic pet is continually evolving as it lives with us, so maybe we just have to be more aware of their needs. With dogs, for example, it is very important that they mix with other dogs. A dog or a cat that is not well looked after is usually easy to spot, but all over the world cats and dogs are seen and “used” differently. Back to my paintings, I do not think there is any particular message inherent within them. I try to make a painting visually interesting and I work in an instinctual way with compositions, but nonetheless my feelings towards pets are clearly evident here.

*What is it about the domestic that interests you?* The domestic is one of the things that connects everybody in the world - the basic need for shelter but also how people shape the particular space where they live; a complex thing to answer in some ways, but the domestic is where we can feel safe in our private thoughts.

*The domestic settings in your paintings are often basic almost cell-like in some instances, yet your exteriors are occasionally brighter...* When I am making a painting, in a way the painting tells me what direction to go in and my rooms are a sort of distillation of the clutter of life. I want there to be a focus in the picture and in the last few years this has been the dog or cat in a domestic setting, and in some ways it gives the animal a kind of dignity, which, for me, they deserve. On another level, it may come from my interest in architecture and the abstract and philosophical thoughts I sometimes have about spaces and their proportions, and how those things affect us.

*What first interested you in making art?* In my last year at school, which was a Christian Brothers school for boys in Brisbane, we had a male lay teacher from Canada who showed us slides of some of Dali’s paintings, some of which had nude women in them and got the teacher into a lot of trouble... but that was my first exposure to an kind of art history. The class was Modern History, mainly to do with more general social issues such as governments and war and the like. I did nearly two years of architectural study at Queensland University before one of the lecturers took me aside and said that my architectural drawings were so poor that I would have trouble graduating but maybe I should think about art school, so I took his advice.

*Noel McKenna: Landscape-Mapped* runs from 18 November until 2 April 2018 at Queens and Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.





Previous pages  
Portrait by Levon Baird

This page  
*Scene from Iran*, 2017  
Oil on canvas  
100 x 100cm



This page  
*Bedroom*, 2017  
Oil on plywood  
52 x 64cm

Opposite  
*You Cannot Be Serious*  
Oil on plywood  
52 x 64cm



