

MacMonagle, Niall, *What lies beneath: Calm* by Noel McKenna, **Sunday Independent**, 19 April 2020

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## REVIEW

**ART** What lies beneath

### Calm by Noel McKenna

Oil on plywood

courtesy the artist and mother's tankstation Dublin | London

A stark room, green walls, grey floor, grey table, a yellow lamp, a table, a window, a white curtain, a cat and a man reading all spell calm in this painting by Australian artist Noel McKenna. It's dark outside, the lights are on; the figure, eyes down, looks relaxed; the cat looks startled.

Compositionally, the clean lines, those interesting perspectives, Spartan interiors, lonely souls and animals are distinctively McKenna's world.



Born in Brisbane in 1956, he was educated by the Sisters of Mercy and the Christian Brothers, and as a boy he tried to tame wild cats and fed them cat food he bought with his paper-round money. His father took him to the races and horses; dogs and cats became part of his world. He gets on better with animals than people: "They're not as judgemental."

McKenna studied architecture at university, but thinking he wasn't good at some technical aspects, switched to art.

A 22-year-old McKenna went to an art opening in a local gallery and, having little money, when leaving he helped himself to a pineapple and some mangoes from an elaborate fruit display at the door. The gallerist's mother ran after him; she didn't catch him, but that ended McKenna's link with the Brisbane art world. The following year he left for Sydney, where he knew no one. He lived in shared houses, got a studio, worked nights in cafes through the 1980s and painted.

Now married with two grown-up sons, he lives in suburban Sydney. McKenna doesn't drive; he chooses to live life "at a slow pace" and sees himself as "more introspective than outgoing".

In 1993 he began painting images of tied-up dogs on ceramic - "every time you walk down the street you'll see a dog tied up"; also in the nineties he made paintings inspired by posters of missing pets.

Believing that "you can make a painting about anything you see", he's painted a street scene with fox, an image from his night walk with his greyhound, or there's a painting of a woman and her pet pony that he came across in a photo in an architecture magazine.

More unusual among McKenna's work are two list paintings, *Things That I Like About* and *Things That Bug Me About Today's World*. The Bug List is longer and includes "Arrogant poets; Not enough respect for teachers; Food that is serious; Too much aggression in sport". On his shorter Like List we

read "Riding my bicycle around Centennial Park at 6am on a winter's morning; Taking my two dogs, Max and Rosie, for a walk..."

And then there are his Map Paintings, in which he painted on an image of Australia's land mass the *Country Rail Network*, *Australia's BP Stations*, *Australia's Racetracks*; and on a smaller scale there's McKenna's *Map of Public Toilets in Sydney*, a "documentary painting" in which every toilet is marked and rated. "The best toilet is Number 8 in the Opera House, definitely the most enjoyable toilet to be in" but, "let down by the toilet paper", he gave it 9 out of 10. And then they say art isn't useful?

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**NIALL MacMONAGLE**