

art | Pip Cummings

## Clay dreams

Familiar objects have a surreal appeal in Noel McKenna's painted ceramics.



Potter about: above, Noel McKenna at his Rose Bay studio. Right, ceramics from his exhibition.

Photos: Tanya Lake, Karl Schwerdtfeger

**W**eird. Quirky. Offbeat. Commentary on Noel McKenna's art is peppered with disquiet as critics struggle to describe a body of works poised between sentimentality and incisiveness.

His style has been described as conceptual, metaphysical, naive and – by McKenna himself – as realistic. It also owes something to surrealism's magnification of "the marvellous in the everyday", a practice that aimed to evoke the strangeness of familiar things.

When he is not in his Rose Bay studio, McKenna spends a lot of time walking around the streets, paying attention to "everyday, common, mundane things". His mindfulness was rewarded 12 years ago when he chanced upon a ceramics studio while walking in Newtown. Its name, he recalls wryly, was Have-a-Go, and the suggestible artist responded.

Beginning by painting a few plates, he persisted with the practice and the result is his current exhibition: a collection of jugs, vases, teapots and tiles painted since 1993.

For a decade, Have-a-Go's casual visitors unwittingly painted alongside the winner of the Wynne and Sulman art prizes. McKenna bought his own 35-centimetre kiln only two years ago when the studio closed. Its former proprietors still pour for him, although he also hand-built



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some of the works in this show and is considering learning how to throw pottery on a wheel.

"I did it in my first year in art school in Brisbane, way back in the mid-'70s," he recalls. "I just love the whole process."

McKenna favours working on a small scale. He finds objects easier to handle and can work quickly, expressing the abundance of ideas that assail him daily. Both scale and subject matter also reflect his sympathy for "the domestic".

"I do like the vernacular of everyday life," he says. "I particularly like painting things which are often overlooked."

Earlier works by the artist include re-renderings of posters seeking lost pets, patient observations of Australia's "big things" (the Big Orange and other oversized monuments to

regional primary industries) and a map detailing all the nation's racecourse locations.

McKenna's imagination was recently captured by a book on indigenous art. Like some of his favourite potters – Carl Cooper and Neil Douglas – he reproduced Aboriginal symbols. He adapted designs from the book to decorate his jugs and vases, without "a second thought about whether anyone would be offended".

There is little, it seems, which evades McKenna's acquisitive regard and keen sense of pathos. "I just think everyone's life, even the simplest things, can be interesting."

Noel McKenna: *Ceramics 1993-2005, until April 30, Darren Knight Gallery, 840 Elizabeth Street, Waterloo, 9699 5353.*