

Noel McKenna: Artists' Artist

SYDNEY CURATOR FELICITY FENNER CONSIDERS THE POWERFUL EFFECTS AND LINGERING IMAGERY OF ONE OF OUR MOST PROMISING CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS...

"A certain strangeness, something of the blossoming of the aloe, is indeed an element in all true works of art: that they shall excite or surprise us is indispensable. But that they should give pleasure and exert a charm over us is indispensable too; and this strangeness must be sweet also - a lively strangeness."

WALTER PATER, 1839-94,
THE RENAISSANCE



Noel McKenna, *Sooty Owl*, 1987. Oil and enamel on cardboard, 75x73 cm. COURTESY MCDONALDS

The experiences Noel McKenna visualises are not those applauded in history books or lifestyle magazines, but those quiet, private moments in suburbia not considered lofty enough subject matter for high art: a lone parent daydreaming while waiting for a child on the merry-go-round, a council worker changing the bulb of a streetlight in the dead of night; an owl perched high above a McDonald's neon sign; a rural nightscape illuminated by a passenger train crawling silently through it.

The strangeness and charm of McKenna's imagery arise from the artist's delicate blending of an incisive wit with wry understatement: the strangeness of his visual narrative lies in its capacity to exude innocence and vulnerability

on the one hand, black humoured pessimism on the other. A disturbing union of banal comedy and filmic foreboding permeates his work. Mr Bean meets David Lynch in figurative vignettes which are universal and timeless in their emotive content, yet specific to the Australian urban landscape in their visual reference.

In the sixteenth century, Italian artist and scholar Alberti wrote that images were introduced by the church because people better remember stories told in pictures than words. McKenna's limited palette, subdued tonal contrast, relatively sparse compositions and effective use of simple perspective is a contemporary reflection of early renaissance painting, particularly the carefully calculated composi-

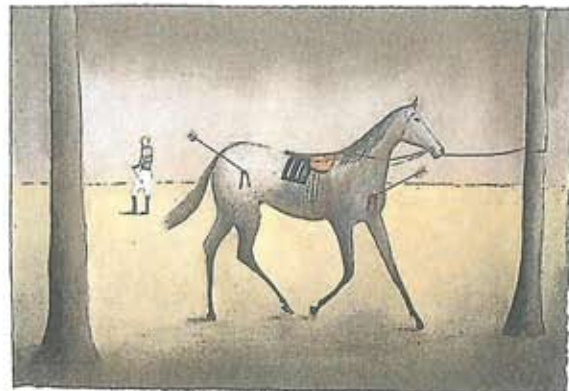
tions of Piero della Francesca. In the whimsical subject matter with its sometimes macabre invocations, one can also trace in McKenna's work the principles of de Chirico's 'Scuola Metafisica', whose founder aimed "to evoke those disquieting states of mind that prompt one to doubt the detached and impersonal existence of the empirical world, judging each object instead as only the external part of an experience which is chiefly enigmatic in meaning". This is the stuff of dreams - in McKenna's case suburban dreams of the lonely, dislocated and eccentric.

Born in Brisbane in 1956, McKenna studied architecture and art before moving to Sydney in the late 70s. His practice today spans painting and watercolour, drawing, printmaking and ceramics, with works ranging in size from two metre canvases to small kitchen tiles. He counts among his collectors state and national galleries, corporations and movie stars. He has twice won

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the Art Gallery of New South Wales Trustees' Watercolour Prize (awarded in conjunction with the Wynne Prize) and in 1994 was awarded the Sulman Prize for genre painting with a characteristically cartoon-like depiction of a boy dressed as Batman, his aloneness encapsulating the feelings of desolation which can hover like clouds over the suburban childhood experience. In 1991 McKenna was included in the Moët & Chandon touring exhibition with a diminutive painting of a man flying a kite by moonlight, and in recent years he has been a regular exhibitor in the *Salon des Refusés* at the National Trust's S H Ervin Gallery, the quirkiness of his relatively unadorned Archibald entries were of more interest to the Salon's art world selectors than the AGNSW's business world trustees. In August this year at Melbourne's Niagara Galleries, McKenna holds his 22nd solo exhibition since making his debut at the Garry Anderson Gallery, Sydney, in 1983, a year after completing his artistic training at Alexander Mackie College (now the University of New South Wales College of Fine Arts).

Interested in art historical movements from the early Italian Renaissance to surrealism to folk art, and equally by film, fiction and poetry (Raymond Carver and Rainer Maria Rilke both assume an especial presence in the artist's visual imagination), McKenna's stylistic character is nevertheless very much his own. There are echoes of popular culture and advertising in his practice, but they take



Noel McKenna, *Unplanned Effort*, 1987. Ink on paper, 55x57 cm. COURTESY THE ARTIST



Noel McKenna, *Woman at Window with Baby*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 50x40 cm. COURTESY THE ARTIST



Noel McKenna, Ray with Fire 1999. Oil on board, 41x24 cm.
PHOTO: BRUCE DICKSON

on an almost surreal significance in his quirky and enigmatic scenes. Fast food McDonalds and Ken Done, signs and symbols so unquestioningly assimilated into our collective consciousness, become both flippant and filled with foreboding under McKenna's brush. A 1996 exhibition project, *Welcome to Daww Place*, considered the implications of creating a housing estate devoted to the designs of Ken Done. What emerged from the project was less an indictment of Done's commercial ubiquity than a disturbing reflection of the comfort society takes in acceptable social signage, which, as a modern form of tribalism, provides a superficial sense of belonging.

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McKenna's silent evocations of everyday peculiarities are as haunting as they are amusing. We smile at them with an understanding and familiarity tinged with pity and disquiet. The oblique sense of humour which underlies his imagery describes human vulnerability, here played out in an atmosphere of silence and apprehension. The quietness of McKenna's pictures is in the gaps that lie between his characters – areas of uncertainty or over-familiarity that cannot be described in words and, in any case, have no need for articulation. Evening often encroaches upon the figures which appear on McKenna's eerie stage. Under the veil of night humankind is revealed at its most candid and intimate. Darkness prompts the emergence not only

of profound thoughts and hidden desires, but the encroachment of fearful disturbances and surreal distortion.

McKenna's world is on the edge of the one we know. His protagonists, whether human, animal or somewhere in between, exist on the periphery of society and suburbia, on the edge of sanity and of night, in a suspended zone that lies between dream and reality. His last exhibition at Niagara comprised a series of bird paintings – solitary owls patrolling the city's night sky and a series of budgerigars reduced to almost abstract markings of line and colour. The human protagonists of McKenna's theatre are stoically optimistic. Usually solitary, or accompanied only by an animal, and seemingly silent and thoughtful, their child-like rendering belies a mind inflected with adult cynicism and disappointment. The tragedy they carry within them is gently rendered, humble and poetic yet perceptive and poignant. They are easily tempted by childish delights – toys, McDonalds, circus animals and playgrounds are recurrent themes.

Often McKenna's characters are anthropomorphic animals, their idiosyncratic antics apt metaphors for the vagaries and vicissitudes of human existence. Tellingly, these pensive creatures engage the viewer more directly than McKenna's human protagonists, making eye contact with us while their human counterparts look away, apparently engrossed in everyday activity – as they are in life.

McKenna's Melbourne dealer, Bill Nuttall of Niagara Galleries, claims his collectors enjoy the work because "it is sensitive and poetic, quirky and humorous – that the artist sees with a true artist's eye." His collectors recognise in the work



Noel McKenna, Portrait of Lindy Lee, 1997. Ink on paper, 36x27cm. COURTESY: NIAGARA GALLERIES

"an honesty, which people are really looking for in art these days, especially young collectors." Gallerist Darren Knight, who represents the artist in Sydney, concurs, claiming that it is the uncompromising candour of McKenna's work which imbues it both with pictorial strength and emotional accessibility. Nuttall and Knight agree that one of the reassuring factors for collectors about McKenna's work is its stylistic consistency and coherency. Nuttall says that, like that of Rosalie Gascoigne or Ken Whisson, McKenna's work is not only "established, coherent and extremely like-

able, but is easily identifiable. You see a painting by Noel McKenna and you know exactly whose it is... people identify a quality and an honesty in McKenna's work which brings them back again and again... many collectors will purchase a work from every single exhibition, staying with the artist as his career evolves, certain in the knowledge that he will be an artist for as long as he is on this earth."

Nuttall also believes that it is not only the gentle humour or sombre melancholy that collectors respond to in McKenna's work, but its immediacy. "Collectors need

to be able to respond to something in a visual way. They often don't have time to get very involved in the scene and the words that go with it. Noel really appeals to that sort of collector, because his work lets people in on so many levels."

In Darren Knight's view, "McKenna's work is a sometimes humorous, sometimes poignant look at small moments from everyday life. I think we enjoy his work because it is a celebration of what we all experience but may not always notice." He believes that the suburban experiences alluded to in McKenna's work resonate in the collective imagination of most urban Australians and that "people enjoy the humour – very dry, quite sharp – which can be seen as light-hearted or indicative of something more sinister."

McKenna's work finds its way into the most high profile private collections around Australia. A more interesting fact is that in the small, competitive and fashion conscious Sydney art world, other artists admire, discuss and even expend their humble incomes on McKenna's work, a legacy of the artist having carved a niche for himself outside the usual art collecting cliques. In many ways "an artists' artist", in the words of his Sydney dealer Darren Knight, McKenna's work characteristically evades critical pigeonholing. Perhaps it is to do with the humanist quality of his imagery as Joan Miro once said, "You can look at a painting for a whole week and then never think about it again. You can also look at a painting for a second and think about it for the rest of your life." McKenna's work has the latter effect on most of those who encounter it.

Noel McKenna is showing at Niagara Galleries in Melbourne August 3-8.



"Winnemby Pinnacles"
24cm x 24cm Oil on canvas

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