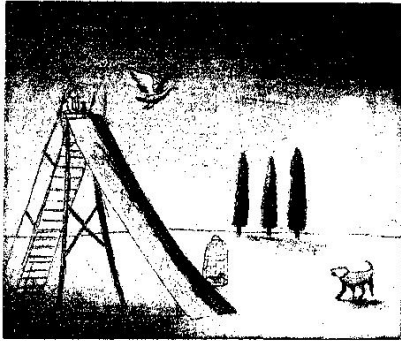


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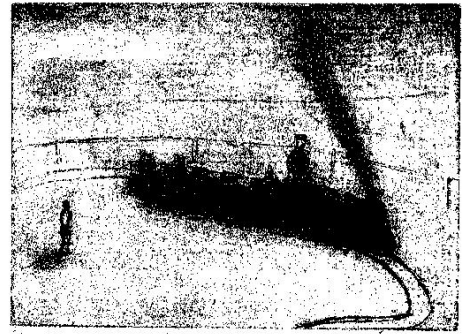
# Quiet moments: the prints of Noel McKenna



Noel McKenna, *Bird liberator*, 1988, etching and drypoint. National Gallery of Australia, gift of Margaret McKenna 2004



Noel McKenna, *Man in room*, 1988, etching and aquatint. National Gallery of Australia, gift of Margaret McKenna 2004



Noel McKenna, *Children's ride*, 1989, etching. National Gallery of Australia, gift of Margaret McKenna 2004

Noel McKenna's small, quietly poetic compositions are strangely moving and rarely fail to elicit some kind of response from all that view them. Sometimes amusing, sometimes poignant—and frequently both, his seemingly naïve vignettes hold an almost universal appeal. The qualities that are so appealing in McKenna's art are difficult to pinpoint. However, given that his work is typically described as whimsical, poetic, quirky, humorous, melancholic, poignant, enigmatic and so on, it clearly has much to do with his effectiveness in conveying mood, emotion and ambience. McKenna's simple, unaffected style is disarming and has the ability to move people in a way that more technically complex work can sometimes fail to do.

Margaret McKenna's generous donation earlier this year of 22 artist's books and 57 prints by her husband, artist Noel McKenna, to the National Gallery of Australia represents a substantial body of the works he has created in the print medium since the late 1970s. This wonderful gift greatly

enriches the gallery's holdings of work by this enigmatic Australian artist, and is the most recent in a series of significant donations to the Australian print collection.

Born in Brisbane in 1956, McKenna studied architecture briefly at the University of Queensland before attending Brisbane College of Art between 1976 and 1978 and Alexander Mackie College, Sydney in 1981. He has been exhibiting since the early 1980s and has had numerous solo exhibitions in both Australia and New Zealand. Although he is best known as a painter, both in oil and watercolour, McKenna has been experimenting with printmaking since his days as an art school student.

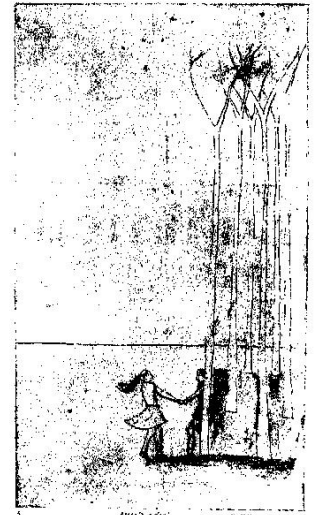
McKenna has produced a small number of lithographs and linocuts, however, his most effective prints are his etchings. It is clear that he prefers the distinctive qualities of intaglio printmaking, sometimes returning to a plate to produce subsequent states, such as in *Showjumper* (1983) and *Lighthouse* (1996). Many of his etchings are often closely related to works in other media such as *Forest's edge*

(1991) that also exists in a similar form as the sculpture *Girls on the edge of a forest* (1991). Similarly, his artist's books, published by Thinking Fisherman Publications, extend and explore his subjects.

According to Bill Nuttall of Niagara Galleries, McKenna's Melbourne dealer, collectors recognise in his work 'An honesty, which people are really looking for in art these days'.<sup>1</sup> McKenna's Sydney dealer, Darren Knight, concurs claiming that it is the uncompromising candour of his images that imbues them both with pictorial strength and emotional accessibility.<sup>2</sup> The loneliness and alienation invoked in works such as *Man in a room* (1988) and *Man up a tree* (1992), for instance, is almost palpable. These solitary, introspective figures feature frequently in McKenna's work—everyman (and woman) caught up in the ebb and flow of life.

While many of McKenna's works are tinged with melancholy, others are patently amusing. *Big mower, Beerwah, Qld* (2003), for instance, never fails to raise a smile. This gentle jibe at our peculiarly Australian penchant for creating massive replicas out of the mundane, is just one of an array of giant objects that McKenna has depicted. Other recurring subjects in McKenna's prints are children and animals—mostly dogs, horses and birds. *Tethered dog* (1991) and *Bird liberator* (1988), for example, are both endearing evocations of his animal subjects.

McKenna's narratives are often ambiguous. For instance, the small figure in the foreground of *Children's ride* (1989) might be interpreted as an image of a shy child rendered inert, watching on but unable to join in the fun—restrained by their introversion. Alternatively, the work could easily be depicting a parent, happily watching their child enjoying the ride. The viewer's



Noel McKenna, *Forest's edge*, 1991, etching. National Gallery of Australia, gift of Margaret McKenna 2004

interpretation ultimately depending on the experiences they bring to the work.

While McKenna's prints are highly accessible and appeal on many levels, his art is anything but lightweight. As Sarah Thomas has written, 'McKenna is a master of deception. He disguises a facility for draughtsmanship and an interest in existential concerns behind a veneer of naivety and childlike innocence.'<sup>3</sup> McKenna's enchanting imagery lodges itself deep within your psyche and stays with you long after your first encounter ■

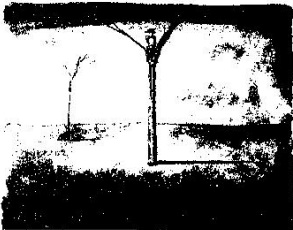
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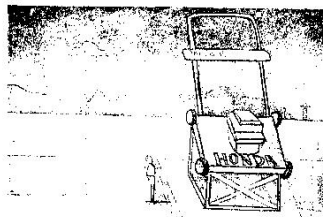
<sup>1</sup> Bill Nuttall cited in Felicity Fenner, 'Noel McKenna: artists' artist', *Australian Art Collector*, (July–September 1999), no. 9, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Thomas, 'The silent world of Noel McKenna', *Imprint*, vol. 33, no. 3, p. 2.



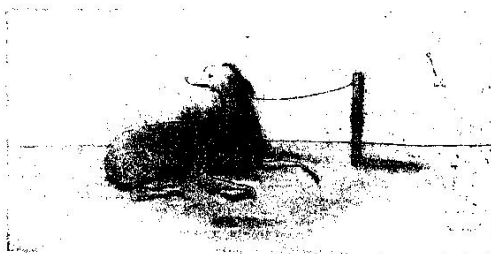
Noel McKenna, *Man up tree*, 1992, lithograph. National Gallery of Australia, gift of Margaret McKenna 2004



Noel McKenna, *Big mower, Beerwah, Qld*, 2003, etching. National Gallery of Australia, gift of Margaret McKenna 2004



Noel McKenna, *Man with a crate*, 1992, etching. National Gallery of Australia, gift of Margaret McKenna 2004



Noel McKenna, *Tethered dog*, 1991, etching and aquatint. National Gallery of Australia, gift of Margaret McKenna 2004