

THE SILENT WORLD OF NOEL McKENNA

Sarah Thomas

While best known as a painter, Noel McKenna has produced prints since the late 1970s. Like his paintings, his prints transform the banal activities of everyday life into an enigmatic world of dreams and illusion. His landscapes, devoid of detail yet richly evocative, are often inhabited by solitary figures engaged in simple activities — juggling, vacuuming, kicking balls, riding bicycles or simply watching the world. Rarely is there any interaction between players, but rather a lingering introspection, silence and stillness.

Such silence was also a hallmark of the art of Giorgio de Chirico, the father of Surrealism, whose mysterious dreamscapes inform those of McKenna. De Chirico elaborated in his manuscript of 1911–15: '...a work of art must go completely beyond the limits of the human: good sense and logic will be missing from it. In this way it will come close to the dream state and also to the mentality of children... There is no murmur of brooks, no song of birds, no rustle of leaves...there is only what I see with my eyes open — and even better closed.'

Many of McKenna's tableaux take place in the darkest and most secret moments of the night. Ordinary human activity, when solitary and nocturnal, becomes illicit, sinister, filled with a sense of foreboding. In *Night rider* (1988) an anonymous figure on a bicycle is starkly back lit by a ray of light. Here is a figure with no history or identity; this street corner exists in every suburb, yet it is nowhere in particular. Like many of McKenna's images, *Night rider* has no apparent reason, no place and no time. As in the deserted, metaphysical landscapes of de Chirico, the light source is unseen and shadow becomes an unsettling means of articulating space.

While many of McKenna's prints show a fascination for the nocturnal, there is sometimes an ambiguity between night and day, moonlight and sunlight. Dark, grainy aquatints create brooding skies and dark cavities which evoke a sense of unreality, a zone of perpetual twilight. McKenna's fascination for exploring the city at different times of day was shared by American artist Edward Hopper, whose

empty street scenes were similarly filled with a sense of imminence. Unlike Hopper's paintings however, the figures in McKenna's prints often exist in flat, shallow space devoid of detail. When the illusion of depth is created, as in *Night rider*, it is a vertiginous, claustrophobic space which seems to propel the rider forward with even greater urgency.

McKenna's etchings have an affinity with those of Fred Williams, particularly his London music hall subjects. But while Williams was more interested in the characters themselves, setting them against empty backdrops, McKenna's players have greater anonymity and are part of some larger mysterious narrative. While Williams drew directly from life, scratching into his copper plates in the darkness of the Chelsea Palace Music Hall, McKenna creates an imaginary world unconfined by reality. The jagged linearity, and use of rough-grained aquatint and fowl-biting is also reminiscent of Williams' graphic technique. This is particularly apparent in *Single swing* (1991) in which a grainy aquatint is used to delineate the ground, and acid has bitten into the upper part of the plate to produce a rough, tarnished effect in the sky. McKenna's strangely sparse tree trunks to the right of this image would not look out of place in a Williams' forest.

Now based in Sydney, McKenna began experimenting with printmaking as a student at the Brisbane College of Art, from where he graduated in 1978. While producing some lithographs and linocuts, he clearly prefers the distinctive qualities of intaglio printmaking, often returning to a plate to produce subsequent states. Some of his etchings relate closely to individual oils or watercolours. *Single swing* for example, also exists as a watercolour and the differences between the two works are striking: the fluidity and delicate colouring of the painted medium creates a seamless, dreamlike world; the etching on the other hand, depicts a harsher more sinister terrain, barren and inhospitable. McKenna often achieves a similarly textural effect in his use of oil paint.

McKenna has always shown an interest

in the pain and innocence of childhood. Many of his subjects are engaged in activities associated with childhood — juggling, rowing, riding bicycles. Yet often such apparently innocent activities express adult fears and desires — juggling the conflicting demands of contemporary life (*Man juggling* 1996), a woman cradling the house of her dreams (*A woman's dream* 1991), a lone figure rowing, cycling or kicking a ball in the midst of the night (*The rower* 1988; *Night rider* 1988; *The oval* 1988). These figures are self-absorbed, remote and withdrawn. Animals appear frequently, particularly horses, dogs, elephants and birds. Yet like their human counterparts, these assume a representative status, symbols of some greater reality which we can only imagine.

While McKenna's prints are sometimes melancholy, there is often an element of whimsy, a fairy-tale quality which encourages us to suspend belief. In *Man juggling* for example, we are willing to believe that the objects in mid-air are being cleverly manipulated by the juggler, but it is easy to recognise the physical impossibility of his action. Gravity will not return these objects; they are, in fact, being thrown away.

McKenna is a master of deception. He disguises a facility for draughtsmanship and an interest in existential concerns behind a veneer of naïvety and childlike innocence. He is a visually literate artist, acutely aware of art historical precedent. Children, animals and bleak vistas are part of an allusive landscape of magic, games and dislocated fantasies in which events happen for no apparent reason. •

Sarah Thomas
Acting Associate Curator
Prints, Drawings & Photographs
Art Gallery of South Australia

NOTES

1. Giorgio De Chirico, 1911-15 manuscript. Cited in James Thrall Soby, *Giorgio de Chirico*, New York, 1955, p.245.