The art of Noel McKenna

A contemplative stillness characterises the art of Noel McKenna: he creates an enigmatic and silent world of captured moments. The appeal of his art lies in its articulation of the quintessential significance of ordinary things, expressed with humour, simplicity and understatement. McKenna transcends the banal to reveal the profundity of the commonplace.

The presence of humans, direct or implied, is fundamental. McKenna shows how the natural world is shaped by people, either through a direct intervention in their surroundings or through the objects they leave behind in the landscape. A road traverses the countryside in *Road, Southland*, 2000, for example, with power poles disconcertingly placed in the asphalt, their wires invisible against the green hills, the destination unknown. In *Bird on a stump*, 1999, a brightly coloured bird contemplates a tree – denuded of foliage, its growth cut short by an axe – and ambiguous footsteps lead nowhere in the snow.

People have a particular relationship with the natural world via animals. In McKenna's work animals are invariably domesticated and living interdependently with humans; they are often autonomous and are allowed their own inner life, but this is predicated on a two-way dependence. *Jumping pet*, 1993, is a duet with an unseen figure, indicated only by a shadow, re-enacting a daily game of catch. Everyday activities and objects are deified, disclosing the rituals and small pleasures that define our lives.

Born in Brisbane, McKenna has been based in Sydney since the early 1980s. He began a degree in architecture but discontinued it in order to study art at the Brisbane College of Art from 1976 to 1978, and in 1981 moved to Sydney to study at the Alexander Mackie College in Paddington. He has exhibited consistently since 1983, predominantly in Sydney and Melbourne.

McKenna has produced a rich body of work since the early 1980s. He works principally on a domestic scale using a variety of media, including enamel, acrylic, ink, watercolour, sculpture and ceramics. His work has been in keeping with a prevailing tendency towards the figurative in Australian painting over the last twenty years, fuelled by strong symbolic and idiosyncratic iconographies,

and is also attuned to a surreal urge that has been sustained in Australian art since the 1930s. His is a distinctive voice, free of bombast, humble in intent and execution, and alive with an incisive wit.

McKenna has a natural facility for distillation; his images are wry, subtle and sensitively rendered. Humour has a sustained and central role in his work, although it is tinged by pathos. The interplay of anxiety and absurdity gives McKenna's work an edge that is startling and memorable, as exemplified in his image of an impassive cat falling from a tree, *Falling cat*, 2003. The laconic wit that is intrinsic to McKenna's sensibility acts as a counterpoint to the tensions he creates, filling his compositions with an optimistic but restrained and reverberating energy.

McKenna's world is characterised by contained spaces, both physical and those defined by the picture plane, which reinforces intimacy. The dreamlike stasis of his subjects denies them a larger context and opens them to broad interpretation. His paintings declare the poetic essence of things and places, his coolly observed, refined, quasi-naive aesthetic conferring ambiguity, narrative and allusion on the ordinary. The works have an affinity with the surrealists and the Italian metaphysical painters whose subversions imply a more profound reality. Narrative is elusive and must be discovered by the viewer.

McKenna admires the work of a diverse number of artists with whom he shares a particular sensibility, such as Giorgio de Chirico, Balthus, Edward Hopper, Giorgio Morandi and Sidney Nolan. His is a constructed world that combines the real with artifice and demands sustained interrogation. McKenna strikes a balance between unease and optimism, desolation and humour. An air of anxiety is evident in his paintings; a detached quality achieved through the displacement and interplay of objects in space and the subtle distortion of scale. Another key device in McKenna's work is the strong counterpoint of darkness and light. *Man changing lightbulb*, 1998, for example, offsets the ghostly face of the worker against the gloomy grey of a dull night, the man's arms arced gracefully above his head in the glow of a streetlamp. An otherwise banal subject, the bearing of the figure and the atmospheric light present a

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Anne Ryan

The value of things

poetic portrayal of humble labour, elevating it to a higher plane.

McKenna's work is distinctive for its spareness of execution, simplicity of line and clarity of tone and colour. His work has become more colourful and his range of materials has expanded, particularly his use of ceramics and found materials, many of which are deliberately fragile. *Train in landscape*, 2002, which was included in the 2003 National Sculpture Prize and Exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, is typically delicate, constructed from thin sheets of metal that seem to balance precariously as they reach into space.

McKenna works quickly, with compositions often completed in a day. His preferred mediums of acrylic, enamel, oil and watercolour are applied directly, and have a strong painterliness. He frequently alternates between mediums, in part to remain interested and fresh, but also because of the intrinsic qualities available in a variety of surfaces and objects. The execution of his work is deceptive, suggesting naivety and a childlike discovery of the subject which belies the sophistication of the compositions. McKenna's skill comes partly through experience, but also through instinct, which lies at the core of his practice. His choice of imagery is adopted intuitively and is often revisited. *Lilyfield twilight*, 1998, is typical of his watercolours, a moody image of anonymous suburban houses at nightfall, inspired by his own evening walks through neighbourhoods where lighted windows ignite a curiosity about the activities within.

A number of key themes have remained central to McKenna's work: urban and rural landscapes; figures engaged in everyday activities; the reinterpretation of found images; and animals, including racehorses. McKenna's earliest subjects were from his immediate environment and also his particular interests, such as horses and racing. He first painted racehorses during his student days and they have reappeared in his recent work, such as *Australian racecourse locations*, 2002. This painting, the result of enquiries to every regional post office in the country, resulted in a mapping of racecourses in the most obscure corners of Australia and is evidence of an industry that is more a cultural obsession than a mere pastime.

McKenna extracts detritus from the overload of information that bombards us daily so that it becomes the focus of sustained and concentrated contemplation. New narratives are born from salvaged scraps of disjointed, discarded images and text, as well as imagined incidents and memories. They include the artist's observations while walking or travelling, combined with ideas and imagery from film, art, poetry, the media and photographs he has found or taken himself.

In a series of paintings and watercolours from 2001, McKenna painted diverse works of seemingly unrelated subjects from photographs and newspaper texts. *McGrath-Sarwan spat*, 2003, for example, recalls a widely reported incident of sledging between two cricketers. The halo above the figure of Glen McGrath canonises him as a saint of Australian cricket while, simultaneously, his transparency and the oppressive grey of the picture plane emphasises the immateriality of the Australian worship of sport. McKenna deliberately acknowledges the subjective nature of the media, drawing attention to the choices it makes in its comprehension and presentation of the world and, by extension, the connections and simplifications we ourselves develop for interpreting ideas and events.

Occasionally, the subject for a work is sparked by an anecdote or from scraps of information people have discarded, such as drawings, photographs or text that McKenna retrieves and re-presents, such as the 2001 'Found and Lost' series which is based on posters for lost pets. McKenna understands the value people place on things – locations, pets or objects can take on intense meaning for individuals that far exceeds their relevance for others. His elevation of domestic animals is partly a result of his own affection and respect, but is also a recurring enquiry into the nature of their existence and relationship with people. The homemade declarations of loss and hope in the 'Found and Lost' series are direct and candid and expose the raw emotional investment people have in their pets, as expressed

MISSING DOG
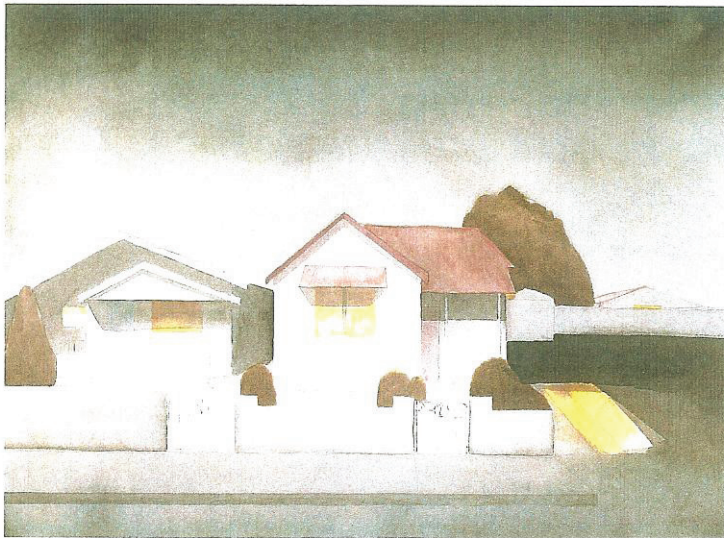
SHORT FAT WHITE DOG WITH BROWN EARS.

NEED SPECIAL DIET : WILL DIE IF GIVEN WRONG FOOD.

PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE

CALL 95136227.

DOG'S NAME IS "ROGER"

in their awkward drawings and amateurish snapshots. McKenna's re-rendering of the posters in paint echoes the simplicity of their execution, but also reveals their emotional intensity and elevates them to the realm of art.

Media images, found photographs and book illustrations have been a continuing source for McKenna's work since 1981. His etching *Granville train crash*, 1981, for example, a dense mass of scattered objects with a flattened perspective, is sourced from media photographs of the 1977 Granville rail disaster, in which eighty-three commuters were killed in a train derailment in suburban Sydney.

McKenna's most recent series, 'Big Things', 2003, is drawn from illustrations and postcards of tourist attractions around Australia. These icons of the mundane scatter the Australian landscape; they are objects of personal or community obsession and markers of regional identity, built in the hope that they will attract the attention of the passing tourist trade. McKenna has painted about ten individual 'big things', including *The big orange*, *Berri*, *South Australia*, the series culminating with the large painting, *Big things*, 2003, which maps the nation's big things via the device of postcard images superimposed on a map of Australia. As in *Australian racecourse locations*, the theme of mapping is strong, revealing an urge to capture all there is to know about a place. The monumentalising of everyday

objects through big things emulates a similar impulse in McKenna's work which, with its focus on particular objects or acts, enacts a process of veneration and celebration. The homely quality of big things also correlates with McKenna's interest in the handmade and the vernacular.

Landscape is a major theme in McKenna's work, ranging from the anonymous to the intensely personal, the imagined to the real. He is particularly interested in ideas of place and our relationship to specific locations. Areas which have special appeal to him are the rich, green, mountainous regions of Tasmania and New Zealand, the antithesis of conventional visions of the Australian landscape in art. In 1984 he made a series of works based on Centennial Park in Sydney, followed in 1986 by works on Tasmanian subjects. His travels, such as a trip to the United States and Europe in 1986, and subsequent visits to New Zealand and rural Australia, continue to provide him with subjects. In 1987 he exhibited a series of works that flowed from a residency in New York; most were imagined incidents located in a space informed by that city, but not in a documentary or didactic way.

McKenna has made a number of landscape series based on his experience of particular locales, such as southern New Zealand in *Southland*, 2000, and the Bruny Island landscapes of 1994. Roads and paths through the landscape reinforce the idea of a

journey, which is key to understanding them. These landscapes are based on a specific place, mediated by his experience of them, but McKenna also uses artificial landscapes – unnamed, unknown, invented landscapes that lack any identifying features and merely serve as a backdrop to action.

McKenna's work is characterised by strong graphic qualities, although he does not place a particular emphasis on drawing per se. Since the late 1970s he has produced a significant body of etchings related to the paintings which are a sophisticated and consistent part of his oeuvre. He also has a particular affinity for watercolour, which he has used as his primary medium in several series, occasionally re-creating its effect with strongly diluted acrylic or watercolour that runs thinly on the surface. These qualities are most evident in his paintings, which reveal a reliance on drawing directly onto the surface and an occasional preference for working solely in black and white, or grisaille (monochromatic painting in shades of grey).

The art of Noel McKenna sustains a humble appreciation of the everyday that is monumental in execution and intent. His quiet focus on aspects of daily life continues to remind us of the dignity and consequence of small things.

opposite left
Noel McKenna, Lilyfield twilight, 1998, pencil, watercolour, 57.5 x 74.5 cm, Thea Proctor Memorial Fund 1998, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Photograph Christopher Snee.

opposite right
Noel McKenna, Roger, 2001, from the 'Found and Lost' series, enamel on board, 96 x 65 cm, private collection, Melbourne. Photograph Paul Green.

right
Noel McKenna, The big orange, Berri, South Australia, 2003, enamel on board, 60 x 70 cm, private collection, Melbourne. Photograph Paul Green.