

Peter McKay, Noel McKenna: Big-picture thinking

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What kind of map is intended to distract you from your route? What kind of a map is meant to be a destination in itself? Artist Noel McKenna's undeniably charming 'Map' paintings are exactly these. McKenna astutely recognised that large graphic paintings, particularly those with iconic motifs, are perfect for capturing the attention of gallery-goers from a distance. Enter the familiar shoreline of the Australian continent, front, centre, big.

As a career artist since the early 1980s, McKenna has honed what is best described as an idiosyncratic vision in paint, print, and the occasional ceramic. Indifferent to trends, though not unaware of their presence, he generally paints at a small, domestic scale and takes a domestic or suburban theme regardless. His early paintings earned comparisons with the shadow-filled nostalgia of Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978) of the Pittura Metafisica (Italian metaphysical art) movement, as well as the naive, dreamlike work of Henri Rousseau (1844–1910). But whereas de Chirico and Rousseau seem intent on throwing away the proverbial map — the subject of this exhibition — in the hope of discovering new aspects of the self by losing themselves in mystery, McKenna has matured to be comparatively playful, prankish and precise.

He is inspired by the familiar and amusing, brushing out pictures like he's dusting off memories, illuminating the lives of humans, pets and wild animals alike. Those who are already aware of his practice will know that regular subjects include napping pets, cats and dogs begging for food at the table, watchful birds, people reading, people watching television. He keeps an eye

on the smaller details. Occasionally, he takes us on an excursion, cycling through the streets or walking through a park, but even on these outings, the works maintain a strong feeling of 'home'.

He likes to walk — it keeps him close to life's details — and many of his works could be easily tucked under the arm and walked from studio to gallery, or through an airport. By necessity, however, the maps are large. His conscious use of scale in the 'Maps' series is more than a bid for attention: the works are filled with content. At close range, orderly trails of text and image detail various general-interest subjects — the geographic distribution of bird life or public pools, for instance. This precise ordering of Australian minutiae is hypnotic at times and inspiring at others, while the overall view — the sheer volume of information — stirs a sense of magnificence. With his literalist's method, McKenna shows that the minor elements of the world don't just repeat and reappear — they add up to something great. While it's true that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, it is still, to a point, the sum of its parts.

And while he has created the occasional text-rich work before (his 'Lost and Found' paintings of homemade flyers for missing pets, for instance), the maps are significantly independent within his practice, and picture not just a yard or a street, but an entire country. It has even been suggested that the maps are McKenna's foray into conventional 'museum art'.¹² After all, he made the first in the series, *Australian Racecourse Locations 2002*, with the scale and clamour of the Art Gallery of New South Wales' Wynne Prize in mind.

Perhaps coincidentally, maps have been a prevalent theme in 'museum art' since the 1960s. North American Jasper Johns's messy, colourful paintings of maps of the United States illustrate how iconic images are registered but rarely examined. Italian Alighiero Boetti's Mappa project of the 1970s employed Afghani embroiderers to produce giant tapestries chronicling the changing geopolitical borders, using corresponding flag designs as infill. More recently, Lebanese-born Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum continued a similar line in *Present tense* 1996 by employing the unconventional medium of soap as a proposition for 'dissolving' borders in occupied regions of Palestine. Works of experimental geography might sit here, too – from English sculptor Richard Long's *A hundred mile walk along a straight line in Australia* 1977 to Ethiopian-American Julie Mehretu's gestural works, which present impressions of space made dynamic and apparently limitless by our digital technology (though sometimes hemmed in by close-mindedness).

But while McKenna is well versed in this art history, his practice remains primarily occupied with the retelling of his own experience. For him, choosing a subject is a question of what he can express first-hand. His maps might be best cast as domestic thoughts scaled to meet contemporary conventions. Yet they are information-rich, with something of the obsessive focus of a trainspotter in them. It is in this way that McKenna contributes to the dialogues of nationhood and space by answering, one map at a time, the elemental question: What is Australia made of?

Of the 19 works in the series, 13 take Australia as their central motif. One is of New Zealand. A further four provide finer details of parts of Australia: Queensland, Brisbane, Sydney's Centennial Park, and the Sydney CBD's public toilets (the male toilets, at least). Finally, *SELF* 2011 charts the artist's life events in corresponding degrees of happiness in a graph. Grouping these works into three main themes – infrastructure, nature and memory – allows us to venture beyond their general-interest topics and glimpse a few impressions of the national character.

Infrastructure

Through *Australian Racecourse Locations* 2002 and *Public Swimming Pools of Australia* 2012, McKenna directs our attention to the infrastructure that contributes to our social rituals and platforms for sporting prowess, sites that offer a span of potentially formative experiences and reflect some of our general affinities. We can observe where facilities are concentrated and imagine the relative scale (and perhaps wealth) of the populations that host them. We can find our 'local' and wonder how it compares with the others in neighbouring communities or other cities and states. Extending from local and regional to a national scale, even the most occasional swimmer or race-goer will find something of our shared character at all these sites across the continent.

***Big Things, Australia* 2004 captures an infrastructure of sorts: the convention of building oversized, provincially themed sculptures. It shows, in the fullest view, the enduring popularity of attracting tourists with self-representations that are overly simplistic. But whether these 'folk monoliths' endear us or not with their inflations of earnestness, they do show, in some strange measure, what people across the country have chosen to project about their towns – and subsequently, about themselves – to outsiders.**

Similarly, the ordinary infrastructure of our daily experience, such as trains, petrol stations or lighthouses, takes on new appeal when seen in full scope, as in *Country Rail Network of Australia* 2005, *BP Fuel Outlets in Australia* 2005 and *Lighthouses of Australia* 2006. The great possibilities of road and rail are laid out before us. We might consider taking an ambitious route somewhere, even around the entire coast. We might imagine the agricultural and industrial activities that necessitated these engineering feats: literal nation-building. In McKenna's maps, it is easy to see how we are tied together by transportation, an aspect of our street directories and road atlases that we tend not to notice.

Public Toilets of Sydney CBD 2012 varies this idea of infrastructure, edging towards reflections on place. Clearly public toilets are essential facilities, making it easy to appreciate the utility and methodological rigour of McKenna's research. Evocative and relatable, the painting opens up conversation on a subject about which we are still somewhat repressed. The subject is keenly democratic, bodily functions being a great leveller, so with some irreverence he situates the viewer amid the highest concentrations of wealth in the country. *Centennial Park 2012* is similarly democratic, pointing to the need for public green spaces by detailing the site and the remarkable range of activity found therein. A park is a relatable concept, a place for exercise, rest and contemplation — a site for the expression of the best aspects of ourselves.

Nature

The natural environment is lovingly chronicled in *Birds of Australia 2004*, *Australian Freshwater Fish 2005* and *Butterflies of Australia 2010*, showing mere fragments of the remarkable diversity of wildlife that occupies the sea and sky around us. Operating within tighter parameters, *Shark, Ray Species of Australia 2006* is the only work of this group that lists its subject completely. Like wildlife photography, bushwalking and other activities that foster contact with nature, McKenna's nature-inspired paintings remind us of the awesome variation and complexity that exists outside ourselves and our culture. A self-described animal person, McKenna knows the value of a domestic animal's companionship, but also of communing with natural beauty. His affection for nature evokes the kind of awareness that engenders our instinct to care for and protect it. It seems useful to strengthen this because, as we have seen, we are expert at building infrastructure and encroaching on the natural world.

Dangerous Australia 2007 posits that, despite having a large number of the world's most venomous snakes, spiders and sea-life, we are statistically more likely to die by human hands than be taken by any of these. Some 1636 persons were killed in car crashes in 2005, for instance, and 294 were murdered (often by family members and close associates), but only 13 reported deaths have ever resulted from a red-back spider bite and those occurred before the development of the antivenene in 1956. We are more likely to die after a fall, by accidental drowning, by smoke and fire, or even by our own hands, than we are from the bite of a creepy-crawly. We may be afraid of the wilderness, but it is the wilderness that should be afraid of us.

Memory

The works in this third grouping place the focus on the artist himself. McKenna arranges and reveals a good deal of personal information, some of it somewhat cryptically. *Australian Art History 1933–1978 2004* is a crossword in the shape of Australia, intended for an in-crowd interested in Australian art history of the twentieth century. Curiously, as time marches on, the questions become harder to answer and now pose a challenge to the crossword-maker himself. New expressions of culture inevitably take the place of old, yet it is sobering to have what's been forgotten in our lifetime spelled out. *Australia in Reverse 2006*, which McKenna painted freehand, is a canny test of studio dexterity for the artist and optical plasticity for the audience. It's a challenge that school children might set for each other. In fact, ever young at heart, McKenna did once challenge one of his son's primary school classes to draw a map of Australia from memory.³

Three remaining works — *Queenslander 2004*, *SELF 2011* and *Brisbane: My Home 1956–1979 2014* — stand apart from the other maps. Here, McKenna attempts to understand himself better by tracing his life experiences back to Brisbane, where he was born. Filled with regional vocabulary and definitions, through *Queenslander*, McKenna shares his place of origin with his wider circle in Sydney (where he now lives) and beyond. In larger social groups and nations, people are often compelled to suppress difference, but it is important to counter this — difference adds richness to both cultural and personal experiences. In this quirky yet powerful self-affirmation, McKenna embraces his past and his points of difference.

SELF and *Brisbane: My Home* are more intimate works, containing clear recollections many would struggle to summon. These memories stay fresh for McKenna because he has spent so much time combing through his life and mapping it all out. Reading through the anecdotes in these two paintings, and piecing together the significant events, we can appreciate the ups and downs, twists and turns, the conscious self-designs and the out-of-nowhere events, that shape a life. The counterpoint these works lend the series is significant; from shared places and systems, he has moved inward to focus on the individual he knows best — himself.

What makes this last group of works so personal, however, is not only their content, but also their stimulus. After McKenna's mother passed away in 1999, he avoided Brisbane and Queensland year after year, only returning when his eldest brother, James, developed early-onset Alzheimer's disease.

Brisbane: My Home took shape as McKenna retraced the steps of his youth — his paper route, his path to school, his trips to the races — while visiting his brother. 'Memories come back quickly when you are in the exact location of past events', he notes.⁴ Writing them down, too, sure doesn't hurt.

The 'Map' series reminds us that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. Magnifying, or rather, repeating, the small details that occupy his works, reveals aspects of our collective nature. Somewhat paradoxically, McKenna's sense of vastness and sublimated individuality can make us feel even more at home. Deeply aware of Australian art history, his works seem an updated and confident attempt to come to terms with the Australian landscape, much as the Heidelberg School painters did in the late nineteenth century. McKenna taps into the kind of identity awareness that strikes us when we land on the runway after spending time abroad — that flash of affection based on familiarity and a confidence predicated on knowing how things work here. McKenna, who has exhibited widely (and never misses an opening) in Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Japan, Hong Kong and North America, knows this 'tarmac' feeling well. Equally, a citizen from elsewhere might view these works with a sense of remove. In this instance, maps reveal their inherently abstract nature as they offer unfamiliar insights and textures that speak of *elsewhere*.

There is a wonderfully dry wit in these works, partly owing to the fact that physical maps no longer need to be made. In an era of global positioning systems (GPS) and Google Earth, physical maps are redundant; they have become artefacts. Think of the last time you twisted around the pages of a street directory, or saw a retractable rolling map of Australia fixed above a classroom blackboard. It's all whiteboards and data projectors, touchscreens and mobile phones now. McKenna knows it, too, making his maps an absurdity of labour. At the same time, his sincere interest in his subjects makes these maps a labour of love. McKenna's humour resides in the space between these duelling interpretations.

Aside from being a means to orient ourselves, maps have been powerful instruments of economics and politics, historically employed to allot and claim possession of land. An unambiguous world order was promoted by map-producing nations, who placed themselves in the centre and relegated the rest of the planet to the newly invented 'periphery'. Maps lent fuel to colonial expansions into 'new' territories, Australia included; the legal claim of terra nullius would never have had purchase without one.

This unresolved colonial history often colours my view of our iconic continent's form, and to my mind ensures that we are mostly awkward, maybe juvenile, in many of our patriotic expressions. Yet McKenna's appreciation for the 'things' of Australia, naive as it might seem, is sophisticated and contagious. His enthusiasm for classification, description and location endows us with facts, and facts build confidence. We are better acquainted with our country, and with ourselves, for his efforts. What we have here are some big-thinking pictures, ready for a new era of big-picture thinking.

Peter McKay

Endnotes

- 1 Anne Loxley, in Natasha Bullock (ed.), *MCA Collection Handbook*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2016, p.204: Loxley suggests that McKenna 'rarely makes "museum-scale" works', but, as she observes, his 'map' paintings certainly fit this definition. Loxley also makes reference to Gregory O'Brien's text in *Noel McKenna: Sheltered Life* [exhibition catalogue], City Gallery Wellington, Wellington, 2005, p.6, which proposes that McKenna's practice is a 'cottage industry' not in the business of making 'Museum Quality Works', which O'Brien directly equates with scale.
- 2 Noel McKenna, *Google Series, Men Smoking Pipes, Autumn, Men Fishing, Cats etc.* [exhibition catalogue], Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide, 2009. Here, McKenna quoted Saul Steinberg, from J Smith, *Saul Steinberg: Illuminations*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007, p.22: 'Becoming an artist was not, it is not an intention. I don't think anybody starts with the absolute idea of being an artist . . . Sure you decide to become a museum artist, you can decide that, but in my eyes that's just as bad as becoming a commercial artist, in the sense that you are not anymore a modern artist. You are subjected to the pope and the prince. The nature of the modern artist is to search, is to be in a precarious position and to be a non-professional'.
- 3 The hilariously endearing results were compiled in the small-run artist's book *Maps of Australia drawn by 18 year 5 boys Sydney Australia 17 June 2005* (2005).
- 4 Noel McKenna, *Brisbane: My Home* [exhibition catalogue], Heiser Gallery, Fortitude Valley, Qld, 2014, p.3.