mother's annual 2015

**Noel McKenna *Concealing the Spot***
May - July

*An Exact Tension*

American fiction writer Eudora Welty once famously advised writers to "write about what you don't know about what you know"[i]. Over four decades of painting, and mostly through small-scale works on plywood panels and on some occasions, on ceramic tiles, Noel McKenna has been doing exactly that; writing a sort of dairy, of things that he does not know about but formally connects through their exact proximity to his everyday and commonplace routine. The world in McKenna's work is so particularly observed that, it *affects* us as simultaneously deeply familiar and curiously alien. *Concealing the Spot*, McKenna's second solo exhibition at mother's tankstation, consisting of twelve such oil-on-ply paintings, each one focused on something so familiar to the artist that, en masse, the subject matter edges towards being confidential. The linchpin of each work - architectural exteriors, domestic animals, cyclists - occupy the centre of each composition, and surrounding details meanwhile, are minimised. The outlines of the central subjects are softly accentuated; their forms subtly elongated or curtailed, and on occasion the delineation of the subject is flattened, erring on an intent towards cubism, and causing some key subjects to carry a caricatured mien. McKenna's palette remains consistent across the subject matter; distinct ranges of ochre and natural tones, occasionally highlighted with washes of bright and luminous hues. His palette reflects his painting style, which might aptly be described as down-to-earth with occasional touches of the 'supernormal'.

In a series of three works, McKenna proffers various examples of the 'Queenslander' house (a domicile built upon stilts to aid the circulation of cool air), once common to the hot, arid climate of North-Eastern Australia where the artist grew up. In each painting the house is fronted with well-tended lawn and framed by darkening sky in the upper background. In *Brisbane domestic home* (2015), an illuminated window implies a human presence within the building. A back-lit muted yellow suggests the falling light cast by a lamp behind a screen. Here and as ever, McKenna's brushwork is shrewdly measured, worked to attain a minimum maximum, a balance between confident opacity and reticent transparency. This is particularly evident in his skies, modeled of blue bases worked over with reserved plumes of translucent inky black paint. Darkness also fills the underbelly made by the houses' stilts. If it were possible to enter the pictorial plane, to mount the timber stairs we would have to negotiate this fissure in the otherwise harmless, green expanse of the garden. Encountered by the artist first during childhood, the repellent engulf of shadow lingers on in the painting. This dimly lit house has the affect of what psychoanalysts, including Sigmund Freud, have labeled the 'unheimliche' – literally the 'not-homely' - creating a difficult-to-define feeling of the mystical, or metaphysical. Freud wrote, in his oft-quoted, 1919 essay, that the "'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar", fitting with McKenna's pictorial depiction of his boyhood surroundings. The uncanny, wrote Freud, was not simply a fear caused by what is 'new and unfamiliar', instead, the uncanny emerges *from* the familiar, which is the most chilling aspect of its peculiarity. Freud chooses as a starting point for analysis, objects that evoke "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate".[ii] While McKenna's subjects draw a subtler line between the living and the inanimate than the surreal living dolls exemplifying Freud's early thesis, the artist's (so-natural-it's-almost-supernatural) depiction of this traditional Brisbane dwelling occupies this strange threshold between the alive and the not-animate, unsettling enough in appearance to be suitably described as uncanny. The artist paints what he does not know about what he does, and the surrealist overtone of the black hole, the void, endures.

In a second group of five paintings, the morning routine comes under scrutiny. As with the domicile paintings, there are intriguing particularities in how the scenarios are created. In the casually titled *Dog at breakfast table* (2014), the artist furnishes a scene with ingredients typical to any breakfasting event. The table, however, does not adhere to traditional perspective points, nor is it painted in relief, but rather rendered as if from above, its surface literally 'consuming' the flat plane of the painting's own lower half. All elements on the table - the artist's (we assume) breakfast plate, bacon, eggs and tomatoes ready for consumption, the cutlery set - are spaced apart, and only the plate casts a light shadow. Like William Scott's kitchen-table still lives, McKenna chooses 'objects without any glamour', composing them sparsely with his singular, far from naturalistic style. The perspective points and

scales vary: visually jarring, overstressed colours of bacon/ tomato, the painterly detailed decoration of a tea-cup and saucer seen (in contrast to the table top) in relief, and a fork drawn longer than it might be in life - all the more curious for its elongation. Scott intended to articulate basic elements as they were subjectively felt, rather than universally seen, and McKenna also hones in on the specifics of things that pique his interest and thus 'affect' him.

In *Dog at breakfast table,* the 'horizon', separating the cloud-gray tabletop and brown-black background is interrupted and redefined by the cartoonish shape of a dog. It is peering longingly at the feast, snout pivoted and the eyeballs nigh-on popped out (but made palpable in the counter-posed image of the two fried eggs on the plate). Both eyes, dilated to the point of mirroring the background void, are included despite the head being painted in relief - a doubling-up that underscores the animal's yearning. We intuit this particular animal's desire (McKenna's beloved and deceased greyhound Max) rather than needing to translate them through language. Intimacy between man and dog is achieved by innate and sustained bargaining, an aspect of man's relationship with domesticated animals that has been a long-standing fascination for McKenna. Moreover, he is obsessed with the honesty articulated by animals; "animals are much more complex than most people give them credit for and the debate I often think about is whether or not they have souls... The domestic dog is what I can speak about most, having lived with quite a few in my life. They are a perfect example of the attachment object theory psychiatrists write about... They are very sensitive to peoples' moods, they have a memory, they dream when they are asleep. Enough said, for me, they are very *soulful* creatures."[iii] McKenna's work repeatedly touches on animals' extra-linguistic ways of communicating scientific understanding, and their variations on human 'knowledge'. Shared by McKenna's rendering of the stilted house and the domestic dogs, are the loaded apertures through which they communicate; the gazes of the animals and the built houses are so expressively registered, as to prompt intuited responses from the viewer. In this sense, McKenna's paintings also echo William Scott's assertion about his increasing abstraction, that "behind the facade of pots and pans there is sometimes another image...a private one...sensed rather than seen".[iv]

Commonplace elements that inspire both curiosity and empathy abound in McKenna's work. The Australian curator, Glenn Barclay has written of William Eggleston's influence on the artist; "[Noel] first remembers seeing [the photographer's] images as a young artist in the early 1980s and being struck by their focus on the commonplace – Eggleston's 'Democratic Camera' – the idea that anything, no matter how inconsequential, is worthy of being photographed and hence becoming the subject of art. Discovering Eggleston, clarified McKenna's own use of subjects drawn directly from the world around him – dogs, cats, horses, houses, beds, interiors and the vernacular architecture that fills our world."[v] Like Eggleston, who is long associated with a movement called 'street' photography, it is the strangeness of discrete details anchored in ordinary domesticity or public life which McKenna focuses in and works, upon. The more familiar we are with McKenna's work, the more aware we are of the highly individualistic approach he has towards the ordinariness of objecthood. He has a way of procuring peculiarities from any array of items, locations or activities, so habitually experienced in life, that they simply go otherwise unnoticed. What was discrete becomes penetrative. McKenna's publically meditative compositions often begin life as photographs taken in great numbers during routine morning walks or distant travels. He captures objects or compositions that hold immediate appeal, but also seeks out photographs from archives or albums, so that his compositions are not only procured from contemporary daily life, but also from unpublished periods of his life which have accrued a circumstantial strangeness through the passage of time.

The artist's 'democratic' perspective supports a belief that there are pathways into the deeper unknown from otherwise unspectacular starting points. *Black horse amongst trees* (2015) depicts a beast that intrigues him: the horse (McKenna is fascinated by horse racing, especially the difficult-to-measure characters of champion racehorses; form). Here McKenna's horse is rendered in profile. It stands unsaddled, unbridled, within a formal cluster of eleven dark tree trunks, on pale ochre ground, touched with traces of pink. A pale, blue sky meets a super-straight horizon line. The setting is evocative but again, non-naturalistic; no traces of natural light or shadow, no shades of green foliage or other plant life populating the rigid composition made up of verticals and a single horizontal. The cluster of trees could not be construed as either a natural enclosure or as artificial fencing, but rather, again it becomes an aperture or hole. From within the anomalous ring of trees the equine subject - appraised for its extraordinary, sometimes preternatural, physical capacities - turns its eyes upon us. Painted within this protective environment, the horse seems reluctant to move. Far from the demands of humans, far from track or field where the horse is regularly made to perform, self-endangeringly displaying its grace or speed, here it appears to be taking a moment to observe us, to take us in. McKenna momentarily reverses the normal relations of spectator sports, inverting viewer and performer. Not only does the

artist unhitch the 'unheimlich' from his daily life, but implicates the viewer as voyeur, so that within a passive and under-considered habit of viewing, we suddenly feel acutely unsettled and self-aware.

Another American 'street' photographer, Robert Adams, has written of prowling around objects or scenes, to capture formal, compositional balance; "the photographer hopes, in brief", he says, "to discover a tension so exact that it is peace."[vi] McKenna's paintings of quotidian existence capture a consistent and exact tension between the familiar and unknown, and most exactly in subjects where the two elements, already, discretely co-exist. Balanced against the affirmative details, the minutia of recreational life, portals appear, in or through which we might withdraw or disappear. From the cavernous darkness beneath the 'Queenslander', to the black roundels of Max's hungry eyes, to the ring of trees that embrace McKenna's quiet horse, an absence is allowed, the exact tension of a bared unknown.

Isobel Harbison

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[i] American art critic Sean O'Hagan quoted Welty when writing about the approach and work of American photographer William Eggleston, with whom Australian painter Noel McKenna has been associated. O'Hagan, *The Unreal Everyday: William Eggleston's America*, 'Everything Was Moving', London, Barbican Art Gallery, 2012.

[ii] Sigmund Freud (quoting E Jensch's, "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen"), *The Uncanny*, 1919, II, trans. David McLintock, London, Penguin Books, 2003.

[iii] Artist's statement, published in the catalogue 'Animals and Friends' Greenaway Gallery Australia, 2013.

[iv] Paul Laity, 'William Scott: The Painter who made the everyday into a masterpiece', The Guardian, Saturday 2nd March, 2013.

[v] Glenn Barclay, 'South of North: Laurence Aberhart, William Eggleston and Noel McKenna', Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia, exhibition catalogue, 2013.

[vi] Robert Adams, Introduction, 'Denver: A Photographic Survey of the Metropolitan Area, 1970–1974', Yale University Art Gallery, 1977.