

mother's annual 2017

Noel McKenna *Not too hot, not too cold*

September - October

Noel McKenna really likes animals; this much is certain. In fact with this latest collection of oil paintings, ink on paper, and ceramics at mother's tankstation, works are distinguished not by their *presence* of animals, but by their *absence*. Of course, exceptions exist: a series of paintings of houses, head-on; digital kerb-appeal culled from property listings of places the artist has never been to; a painting of the now 'z-list' actress Jennifer Love-Hewitt playing tennis in high-heels (*You can not be serious*, 2017);ⁱ and a small mustard-glazed ceramic plate (*Man holding dog*) showing a man's back and a dog, the latter visibly delighted — smiling even — clasped tightly like a new-born baby to face us. Mostly, though, what we see in this exhibition are individual works, with individual animals, who catch and return our gaze; animals that seem to have, if not quite agency, then at the very least some kind of essence worth chewing over. McKenna's dogs and cats usually occupy unpeopled spaces, strange ones; perspective is typically awry, colours are flat and space is cavernous. One further exception is the painting, *Corner*, among the largest, in which a man in a dusty-brown suit sits, neat childlike hands one atop the other, on a jungle-green couch that extends out at a horizontal to meet us. His socks, which match the couch, are visible, trousers inelegantly hoisted upwards up in the act of sitting. *Corner* has the unmistakable "look" of a portrait; the man's formal pose is reiterated by a cat that sits on the grey ground to his left hand side. And what a cat: a majestic figure with bright blue eyes; a commanding presence, its coat in gradients of grey, and tail stretched out languidly towards the couch. These two are a pair (a near Gilbert & George double act), and no doubt about it; our attention split restlessly but evenly between this man — the artist, or his proxy? — and his cat. We can feel two pairs of eyes.

I have it from a reliable source — the horse's mouth, even — that McKenna once took life-drawing classes only to find the model's poses too theatrical, and so began to draw horses instead. Over time, the teacher learned to simply leave him alone: a revealing incident if ever there was one. And, in *Not too hot, not too cold* we can see the same fascination with, and generosity towards, animals that has been a mark of McKenna's work from the very beginning. In a short film from 1986, now digitised and viewable online,ⁱⁱ we hear him being questioned about animals, horses and horse racing in particular, an interest piqued by horse-mad male relatives, his father and uncles; he placed his first bet, he tells us, at the grand old age of nine. But why do you paint horses? the interviewer asks; 'I nearly got run over by a horse once,' he replies, 'so I've always wanted to do them ever since that'. Shot between Sydney's beautiful and vast Centennial park and McKenna's studio, it is clear from this short film that, even at this stage, this is an artist prepared to be unfashionable, and obsessively so; prepared to paint ducks and horses in an era characterised by expressive and macho neo-abstraction, now broadly derided. Though confident in his eventual rehabilitation, he admits that, 'painting is bigger than gambling, in terms of getting a collect [sic]'. His style may have changed, become a little less expressive, more matter-of-fact, but this attraction towards animals remains; a different kind of animal, though: neither in motion nor in any way exotic, the ones that beg at our tables, graze idly by picket fences and doze on our couches. The animals most interesting, now, and have been for some time, are the ones nearest to hand — pets.

Of course, McKenna has many pets and this partially explains his fascination with them, but his interest runs much deeper than this. The bond with our animal companions is both well documented and mysterious. For example, in Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus returns home to Ithaca after twenty years fighting and exile; in his absence his house has been occupied by other men, would-be suitors of his wife Penelope. Odysseus, in the guise of a beggar hatches a plan to ambush the interlopers and reclaim what is his. No one can know his true identity; but, on entering he comes across an old husk of a dog, only to realise that it is his faithful hound Argosⁱⁱⁱ — now ailing and covered in ticks, when once, 'no animal could escape him in the deep forest once he began to track it'.^{iv} The old dog recognises him, of course, and welcomes him home with a wan wag of his tail, before expiring, satiated on seeing his master again. Odysseus cannot break character; but still, we are told, he sheds a quiet tear. Apprehending the dying Argos, his humanity comes fully into view.

John Berger writes, in the essay 'Why look at Animals?' (1977), that in their domesticity, their proximity to us, 'animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance'.^v In McKenna's work, by contrast, the fact of their returned gaze is something worth dwelling on. McKenna appears compelled to look, to paint these domesticated animals and ascribe them the agency that is typically elided. Perhaps his singular approach to looking tells us something about ourselves, something

that appears like an incidental effect; rather, animals are interesting in and of themselves, alone, without being eternally associated in their servitude to *us*. Instead of being 'objects of our ever-extending knowledge,'^{vi} what these quotidian beasts present is instead our depthless non-knowledge. Anyone who has passed an accompanied terrier on the street, out, seemingly, for an evening stroll, will surely know what I mean: just *where* are *they* going? Look at the lone dog that peeks out wistfully over the concrete wall, his eyes black circles and mouth a forlorn 'v' (629 *Watermill Towd Road Watermill*), and tell me they do not feel. Given our cruelty towards them, we hope for animals' blissful lack of consciousness, but examples like these suggest otherwise.

It's no surprise that one of McKenna's titles is *Spot looks at person*: in the domestic dream-space of these paintings, the animal seems personified; by giving him a name, it is *Spot* that specifically does the looking. Humans, when they are pictured, appear by contrast only to function as a point of differentiation – as more or less illustrations of 'the human'. And, though we are always looking at these animals, of course, here they return our gaze. Moreover, here they do not seem to depend on our gaze; and, in this new world, even the domestic becomes strange. Perspective and scale appear unstable, interiors taking on an endlessly expansive dint – painted as if a human sense of scale is itself askew. A poodle, that much-maligned but supremely intelligent of canines, sits on another green couch, which dwarfs it (*Poodle*). The floor a sea of dusky pink, the blue-grey walls disrupted by a rectangle of white, possibly signifying a window. In *Scene from Iran*, the tableau is constructed from a series of photographs sent from a friend in Tehran; with small but significant details – a pipe, a pair of glasses, and a table – added so as to signify the human, the artist, and to put him *there*, symbolically, among the cats. Is this what our world looks like to animals? Perhaps: in his wilfully warped interiors, McKenna intimates what we ourselves fail to see.

McKenna speaks of the photographer William Eggleston as an important influence on his work, his famous *Memphis* (c.1969)^{vii} in particular, and it's easy to see why. Working in different mediums, of course, but united by a fascination with the domestic; with saltshakers atop chequered tablecloth, with pets, with the melancholy droop of flowers in a vase. Head cocked, the everyday becomes a site of boundless possibility – new angles and meanings: *supernormal*.^{viii} This preoccupation with the domestic also surely explains McKenna's use of ceramics, which are interspersed throughout *Not too hot, not too cold*, and typically, here, resemble petite side-plates. Sometimes, they seem to act as preparatory studies for other, larger paintings; at other times, they are ends in themselves, no worked-up version to be seen. Fragile and yet resistant through their shiny patina, these ceramics seem to anticipate their own use. In contrast to the delicate paper works or larger paintings that accompany them, these are works to be hung *in a house* (or anywhere for that matter) but expressly, to be lived with. They are vernacular in both appearance and function.

More and more, though, it is technology that is becoming our everyday; and it is from here that McKenna finds much of his work takes root, in the rumble-tumble serendipity of online space. In a trio of paintings, *House Hungary A, B, and C*, he paints houses waiting to be bought from images taken from an online property site in Hungary; we might hazard some poetic license with the animals in them, but can never be sure. *You can not be serious* is a painting sourced from a photograph of Love Hewitt playing tennis in bikini and high-heels: ideal online celebrity fodder, its title reiterating the incredulous reaction it surely once faced as well as John McEnroe's infamous, on-court expression of disbelief. Its fleeting infamy rekindled, here the tennis court has become as big as a football pitch, the net far above head-height, Love Hewitt's markedly slender frame outstretched so to make her head appear almost shrunken. In the painting *Bedroom*, the starting point is a simple Instagram photograph of a cat on its hind legs; but now isolated and painted into an uncanny and characteristically wide domestic space, in so doing, giving it the distinctly human pathos of a rumbled intruder. The internet, that new domestic, is a rich space for McKenna. Images, in whichever way they arrive – Instagram, art history and property websites alike – never cease to fascinate him, never seem to sit still; much like Eggleston, McKenna is *at war with the obvious*.

Returning to the internet, we can sense animals' affective currency in the simple fact of their ubiquity. Online, it seems they are *everywhere*, and all of the time. Amongst ourselves, we share funny videos of dogs singing, of emotional ones as they delight in their owners' long-overdue returns, and of unimpressed cats wearing silly clothes. "*Grumpy Cat*," a sullen and likely overbred cat is a worldwide celebrity; and memes, more often than not, are just simple combinations of animals and text. Online, we delight in animals, in their lack of self-awareness that makes them perfect for infinite reproduction. But at the same time this implies something, in animals, that allows us to communicate *through* them, like a not-quite-human proxy. In their unthreatening blankness, as image, animals are ideal for this role. Through them we can somehow transmit human and complex emotions, *shorthand*. This is carried through in our reliance of them in language, with phrases and metaphors, such as; cold as a fish, the cat's pyjamas, strong as an ox, rat race, pig out, wolf in sheep's clothing, catnap, puppy love, and so forth. Instantly tangible, they function as stand-ins for complex human ideas, for particular kinds of people, behaviours or characteristics; we thus gauge ourselves, and probably become human, in our relation *to them*.

Perhaps, I have tarried too long on the animals in McKenna's work; but, my point is that it is striking he chooses to represent them at all. Because, due to their proximity to us, and our quotidian fascination with them, animals are rarely the subject of so-called *serious* art and can easily be mistaken for 'cuteness'. We love them, of course, but humans are more deserving of our gaze; immeasurably more complex, more productive, or so we are told. For McKenna this is not the case: fellow travellers, animals share the same spaces, and feel in much the same way, as us. In their dependence on us, too, they allow us to care, to feel the asymmetric responsibility of their need. This is an important lesson; as Berger put it, "animals offer man [sic] a companionship which is different from any offered by human exchange. Different because it is a companionship offered to the loneliness of man as a species".^{ix} In their very distance from us, animals demonstrate our capacity to love, more broadly; to care for what is foreign or mute, or to give to those that can never give back.

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ⁱ All further works dated 2017, unless stated.

ⁱⁱ The short film was directed and shot by Kriv Stenders, and produced by the Australian Film Television & Radio School.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-IAX-sEjyug>

ⁱⁱⁱ Interestingly, Argos also lends his name to an American project set up to use dogs to help soldiers adjust to life after service.

^{iv} Stephen Mitchell, trans., 2013, 'The Death of Argos' (Homer's *Odyssey*, Book 17: 260-327), *The New Yorker*, 23 September 2013, available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/23/the-death-of-argos>

^v John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?' in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) pp. 1-27

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} Dye transfer print, 29.9 x 45.7 cm. Collection of MoMA, New York

^{viii} McKenna quoted in the press release that accompanied *Not too hot, not too cold*, available at <http://www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/not-too-hot-not-too-cold/text/>

^{ix} Ibid. p. 6