

Living With Art: Noel McKenna, Art Almanac, 24 July 2020



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Noel McKenna's enigmatic practice is comprised of, at face value, direct symbols and the mise-en-scene of everyday life and yet his works bounce us out of stasis and strike an emotional chord. Uniquely, his career took off from a false start in architecture, a professor took him aside noting his 'messy' sketches, why not try art school? And from there McKenna's idiosyncratic expression found solid ground in oil, enamel and watercolour, lithography and etching, ceramic and metal.

3:33 Art Projects had the pleasure of working with McKenna on a curated exhibition at Bank of America Merrill Lynch in 2016. The artist has won the Sulman Prize and been a finalist in the Dobell Drawing Prize and the Wynne nine times. McKenna's work is held in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Art Gallery of South Australia and the Queensland Art Gallery, to name a few. McKenna's latest exhibition 'The night is doubtful' will be on view at Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney from 25 July to 22 August.



Noel McKenna, Chair and Table with Coloured legs, 2020, ceramic, 10.8 x 12 x 7.2cm (combined)

Cats, dogs, horses and other animals are often seen leaping or in repose in your compositions. Why do you include these sentient beings?

I have a natural affection for animals which may have started in my childhood when I was a bit of a loner and found a stronger closeness within my case the neighbourhood stray cats. Animals have a complexity in their nature which most people do not see, their range of feelings and behaviour which go much beyond the "simple".

Often your work is spoken about with a nexus of terms – humble and existential, emotional and sparse, making the banal, poignant. How would you describe what drives you creatively?

My works for the most have come out of my everyday life. Everyone's life is different in varying degrees but they are all interesting, people are connected by our limited time being alive and how to make that time fulfilling and purposeful. I often question myself if my life making things is the best way to spend my time or should I be doing something else, but I still persist. I have been an artist for around 40 years and I still enjoy what I do which is an important factor in continuing, working for yourself and not worrying what other people think keeps me almost sane.



Noel McKenna, A worker digging grave for Harper Lee, February 2016, Monroeville, Alabama 2020, oil on plywood, 42 x 44cm

Can you elaborate on the cultural references in this body of work?

In my current show there are a few text pieces, two about Aretha Franklin recordings. Respect, lyrics and melody were written and recorded first by Otis Redding. Originally about a man coming home and wanting respect from a woman, when recorded by Aretha Franklin the message is reversed. Also with You Make Me Feel Like A Natural Woman, a great song by Aretha which in time has become an anthem for women, I was interested in the lyrics being written by a man Gerry Goffin. Also, the Gertrude Stein quote from the 1940s about people losing their common sense because of so many distractions is even more relevant today with the reliance on the smartphone.

How have your international exhibiting experiences enriched your practice?

Exhibiting overseas in fairs and galleries with mother's tankstation my Dublin and London gallery has been great, getting one's work seen by a bigger audience is a plus and I enjoy travelling to where the fairs and exhibitions are so I get that. I have Irish grandparents so it was good to go back to my roots, definitely felt an attachment and connection to Ireland when I was there.



Noel McKenna, Small Table with Horses (2), 2020, glass, wood, ceramic and enamel paint, 16 x 31.2 x 30.2cm

You include sculptures and neat tables with tile tops, what's so compelling about the materiality of our everyday lives?

The tables in the show are a more recent development in my practice. They connect my tiles which I have made for a long time now into something "practical". I am interested in the history of the "artisan", their importance in centuries past, the spirit and integrity with which they made things by hand. This has been lost especially in the Western world, one sees it making a comeback in small pockets but for the most is lost in today's world.