

Noel McKenna, Art Now, **MCA Magazine Issue #1**, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Summer 2023-24

Noel McKenna

MCA Collection artist

How did you come to the art world?

I was studying architecture in Brisbane in the 1970s. One of my lecturers took me aside and said I would have trouble graduating and should try art school as 'my drawings are so messy'. He also mentioned in a slightly sarcastic manner that I should look at the poems of Sylvia Plath. I went to the library and found a general book on poets and their lives, and Sylvia Plath mentioned that her biggest influences were the paintings of Paul Klee, De Chirico, Gauguin and Henri Rousseau. At that stage I had no real knowledge of art. I investigated these artists and still love their work to this day.

What is your connection to the MCA?

I was living in Sydney when the MCA first opened, and it was good to have another museum to go to in addition to the Art Gallery of NSW. I had been exhibiting for a few years in Sydney and Melbourne and was a regular visitor to both places. The MCA showed far more contemporary work as the AGNSW had been around for over 100 years, so there was a clear difference between them.

Why contemporary art?

I love art from all periods. If pushed, I may say I enjoy work from ancient periods – I am particularly fond of Egyptian art and objects. The Met is a place I can get lost in, just wandering around.

It's hard to isolate what makes one interested in certain periods. Some things just draw you in. I particularly like work that could be done by artisans, such as Shaker objects which were not signed. I love ordinary objects as well, things that might never make it to an art gallery or museum.

First artwork you remember seeing, or that made an impression?

The very first work that made an impression on me would have been a Paul Klee painting, which I would have seen in a book as a result of my uni lecturer telling me to look at the poems of Plath. I'm pretty sure it was a very early one that he had done of his family garden, with plants and possibly a watering can or hose. The image instilled in

me the idea that subject matter that is close to you or everyday in nature is good to use. It's hard to find the exact word to describe its effect on me, but it has had a lasting impression.

Can an artwork change your life?

I do believe an artwork can change one's life. Some works have affected me in lasting ways, especially the boxes of Joseph Cornell, the lonely New York artist active from the early 1940s to early 70s. His work is small in scale with ordinary objects but put together in strange compositions.

The MCA artwork you'd love to take home?

Michelle Nikou's installation work *Hanging Glow Bulb* (2009). It's a work that comes from the everyday, a functional object most people just live with. Made to make the dark light, Michelle has made it glow without an electric current. The image of a light bulb on a cord is one I have used many times in my paintings.

