

Noel McKenna

*to wink at the cat*

18 April – 15 June 2024

We were having dinner, or at least some manner of meal in an uncertain city in my memory - not even so long ago actually, which says something about the city, meal or memory, but not the company, that one stuck: the unmemorable meal was with the incomparable Noel McKenna. It was probably New York, probably brunch... Brunch is an uncertain sort of meal - neither this nor that, after all. Probably lower East Side. It's a common meeting point; Noel McKenna has made regular working visits to New York for many years now, walking the streets, obsessively, habitually visiting museums, galleries, looking at art, digging out unexpected moments, as well as compulsively observing life, drawing, taking phone photos, instagramming<sup>i</sup>

Noel, bagel with white fish, tomatoes and onions in hand (mental picture building nicely now), cream cheese on the side, probably, was speaking of the fact that for uncertain reasoning and after many years absence, he had recently returned to the discipline of life drawing classes in his home city of Sydney. And he began to show some of the drawings on his phone - this is a tangential story in itself, as the Master McKenna doesn't actually use the phone as a phone, but rather as a camera, notebook, storage device and mechanism for his beautifully observed Instagram postings<sup>ii</sup> - Back to life-drawing, somewhat surprisingly (*or not*, knowing Noel) most of the ink drawings were of horses, not unclothed humans. One such 'life drawing' gifted to us at said brunch/breakfast/dinner (?) a dark blue ink, full standing profile horse, is included on archive shelving in *to wink at the cat*, Noel McKenna's fourth solo exhibition at mother's tankstation, Dublin. Noel shrugged, "My mind wanders" - which would also be a good title for a show. The conversation swung to how difficult it was to accurately articulate a linear description of the manner in which the bone structure of a horse's leg determines its particular function, how this facilitates the smooth, fast and powerful movement of such an elegant beast, and how for centuries the horse, in motion, was "impossibly drawn"... Noel McKenna is pretty much an expert on the 'form' of horses... I could footnote a story of an Australia Council grant and the Melbourne Cup... but that's all water under something or other. Still no nudes (unclothed people)<sup>iii</sup>.

Why not surprising? The sphere of interest of McKenna's oeuvre has always privileged animals over humans and previous essays, including *concealing the spot*, detail the historical interrogatives of humans and animals<sup>iv</sup>. McKenna simply expresses greater and genuine empathy with them, as expressed in numerous texts and particularised in a too-short but delightful article in *Elephant*, that begins with the large banner quote; "*It is only perhaps in the last couple of years that I have begun to have thoughts about the sadness that can exist in the minds of our pets*". A self-penned introduction to the *concealing the spot* publication also notes that he would like to have all the dogs and cats he has lived with, known and loved, Max, Rosie, Melman et al, bark and meow at his wake.

When our species does show up, irregularly (drunk in underwear) in McKenna's art, it is generally in a subservient role, humans deputise as pets' pets, subordinate temporary co-occupants of space, housekeepers, restaurateurs, waiters/butlers, and general cleaning contractors, personal trainers, willing, generous hosts to beloved guests - "*love me, feed me, never leave me*"; homo sapiens are generally more-so 'implied' by nearby objects, vestiges and services, rather than representations of incorporeal fleshy actuality: Shadows and things, momentarily refractions in the winking cat's cornea (before, with disinterest, it averts its gaze and casually exits).

Only two of the paintings included in *to wink at the cat*, feature 'the human ones' (one not even so much a painting, and with a very canine-like title to boot; *this man is very woofy*, (2011), a crafty hot pokerwork rendering into wood, of a pipe smoker - a subtle gay trigger that McKenna stumbled

across, somewhat accidentally, during an internet search for something more in the vein of Cézanne. The majority of works have the animal kingdom at their compositional and emotional heart. Human life lurks by trace element, or at least, as a solidly functional *mise en place*, making things happen for the major players. A pink-eyed, albino koala - they are rare and fragile, but they are out there – stares fixedly at the viewer from its vantage point, three-quarters up an evening gum tree, casting a long fluffy-eared-shadow, (dead-of-night-no-shadow-tree in an attendant tile). Brisbane stilt house in recessive background space (lights on but flat, frontal, no perspective, no space to actually live in the electric light, but again, a distant representation of human presence). More of a flattened pareidolia,<sup>v</sup> than a human home; with cooling stilts and dark negative under-space forming skull-like teeth, a staircase nose and illuminated windows as eyes - a slow wink formed with partial shutters.

A singularly overfed cat, newly named by the artist, *Augustus*, after the apparently corpulent Roman emperor and thusly an archetypal “fat cat”, is immobile before a cold hearth, as if waiting for the human ‘help’ to set the exceptionally long logs to a warning fire. A vase, sporting a question mark for decoration - the eternal why(?) - rests on the Deco over-mantle, with a miniature “© McKenna chair” (a broad carver version, generous enough to seat a mini/massive Augustus) at the opposite end. And all over-hung by a *painting within a painting*, a thought-within-a-musing, of an ‘*Aboriginal bark*’. A carefully ironic and satirical tone is primed and set<sup>vi</sup>. In similar spirit, in a second work featuring McKenna’s newest and fattest creation, Augustus<sup>vii</sup> < as he patiently waits at the base of a building’s front stoop, to be carried home? No way it’s gotten up those steps unaided for quite some time. Perhaps he lives on the ground floor at No.58a, next door. On closer inspection, No.58, up the steep stoop, has a curtain-twitcher-blue-eyed cat (slim/agile), keeping a careful watch on the proceedings of the street below. The street-level door of No.58a is distinctly wider.

Back to horses; in one of the artist’s elegantly existential works, with its moody green sky, *Stables*, 2018, humanity is again lightly indicated by a vacant (© McKenna) chair, tiny, out of scale, (four legs for two legs - not at all suitable for Augustus), placed in the shade of a much-too-large-tree. Interestingly, the proportion of the tree’s occupant bird is relatively scaled to the natural world; horse, bird, etc., but not the McKenna ‘copyrighted’ chair. The horse-house is also, of course, the work of man, for the benefit of its enigmatic, handsome equine counterpart, lovely articulation of the legs, *nice form*. The foreground horse outdoors, wears a bridle, perhaps if one can apply Freudianism to equines, subconsciously expressing a willingness towards a shared life-purpose (?). The one ‘*at home*’, not-so-much. Thanks anyway for the shelter and all the hay. The horse-house, is very much a ‘home’ as depicted in the drawings of children with the merest nod to Alberti and Euclid, but with half door eyes, windows of the soul, winking?

Following the example set by a recent small museum exhibition, *Sleep my horse.....5 August 1956*, at Maitland Regional Art Gallery, NSW, 2023, *to wink at the cat*, has similarly included a shelved display of archive materials, documents, letters, notes, a handmade Christmas card that took eight-to-nine festive seasons to reach its destination, photographs, ephemera, paint pots, elastic bands, etc, accrued over a fifteen year collaboration with the artist. The compilation includes a significant collection of the artist’s ceramic ‘tile’ paintings. Oddly we rarely show (reveal) these, as we simply cannot bear to part with them. In a similar manner and attitude perhaps inherited from McKenna, himself; he too likes to linger along with them. Often ceramics that come to us have production dates akin to vintage wines. Without fail when travelling, the artist carries some of his newest favourite tiles, his latest pottery babies, to be studied and aesthetically enjoyed in hotel rooms or rented Airbnb apartments, mentally familiarising strange spaces. Given their status as hard shiny little comfort blankets and soul-warming travel companions, it’s no surprise, really, that the miserly unwillingness to be separated from them has been inherited on our part. They are simply beautiful. But to be fair to one and all, as the artist has always conceptualised these works as democratic symbols wherein anyone should be able to afford his art, the time has come to let some fly the coop.

However, the net result of our unwillingness/restraint, is a special collection of ceramics that span twenty years of the artist's very closest focus and most intimate artistic creations: one that he describes as both a relaxation and experimental break from the stringencies of more formal studio painting and exhibiting. For McKenna, the surprise of glaze effects, the uncertainty of how the kiln affects colours, the pleasure of them not exploding (!), profoundly influences new larger works. They stand as crucial precursors, as well as expansive antecedents to major works. McKenna ceramics also tend to be restricted by the seasons, as kiln temperatures work better with a Sydney winter rather than its summers. They are also 'special' in the fact that he confesses fairly significant losses to the firing process... They may be small, irregular, and often explosive objects, as each piece of clay is hand-rolling-pinned by McKenna to approximate 'tile' form, and scale. Which, each time we meet in Dublin, New York, Hong Kong, or unfortunately less commonly in Sydney, to share long meandering conversations and many memorable meals, a couple of new(ish) tiles wrapped in little foam bags, held by characteristic elastic bands (a bulk buy, I think), are ceremonially handed over, in trust, and friendship. Like a McKenna ceramic, friendship is precious; an iridescent little jewel as rare and fragile as the wink of an almond eye. (Before it walks off).

---

<sup>i</sup> And exhibiting; Noel McKenna has also recently (2023) had his first major solo Manhattan show, *thoughts covered in moss*, Francois Ghebaly, (lower east side). Noel McKenna's instagram posting are highly rewarding to follow: observer noel (@noel.mckenna)

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> The closest we have in gallery inventory are two small paintings (male and female versions) of people getting drunk, at home, in their underpants. Both paintings bare (pun and spelling intended) the Finnish name for this activity: "kalsarikännit"

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.motherstankstation.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Noel-McKenna\\_Essay-by-David-Godbold\\_Concealing-the-spot\\_-2016\\_Thinking-Fisherman-PublicationsCopyright-all-rights-reserved.pdf](http://www.motherstankstation.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Noel-McKenna_Essay-by-David-Godbold_Concealing-the-spot_-2016_Thinking-Fisherman-PublicationsCopyright-all-rights-reserved.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Nicely defined as ... the tendency for perception to impose meaningful interpretation on a nebulous stimulus...

<sup>vi</sup> The manner in which, what is now more appropriately called a 'First Nation Australian' or 'Indigenous', bark painting is rendered, its clichéd imagery and certainly the style or the interior in which it resides, suggests a heavy irony on the part of McKenna; comparable to the decorative wares that were common to Australia white culture in the Deco era, that were unafraid to use Indigenous culture in a cavalier manner. c.f. The popular 'Diana' potteries produced for decades in the Sydney suburbs, where indeed, in both time and geography, the interior could easily be located.

<sup>vii</sup> Augustus is even more obese than McKenna's previous and eponymous "fat cat", as featured on the MCA's *best-selling-ever postcard*, and even exhibited in the Louvre: *Living Rooms*, Musee du Louvre, Paris, 2014, curated by Bob Willson.