

How to tame a distance: On the recent work of Noel McKenna

I first wrote about Noel McKenna's work for an essay published alongside his solo exhibition in Dublin during the autumn of last year.¹ There, as here, I observed a singular ability to capture the pathos of domestic animals, along with the humdrum of everyday life. And, at least on first glance, these more recent works seem to work in a similar fashion: uniting them all — the series of ceramics and paintings depicting dogs waiting for their owners, diminutive painted slivers of trucks observed from McKenna's wintertime studio in New York, one larger map painting, alongside a pair of still-life scenes — is an oddly tenacious, but now-characteristic preoccupation with the generally-overlooked. As others hurry past, McKenna has demonstrated a long-standing tendency to slow, right down. Still, sitting down to write about the work now, I realise that I fell prey to an easy misconception: an easy one to make, and one even easier to proceed with, unexamined. Because whether it is just my present cast of mind, a twist of light or the simple passage of time, McKenna's works now seem rather less warm, rather less compliant alongside any well-tread ideas of "The Everyday". They do not seem at all quotidian; or, if they are, they seem to offer up a wanting at the heart of McKenna's everyday, a wanting daily cognisant of its own impossibility. Perhaps, this has always been the case. But clipped back into something like invisibility, all but stepped over or around.

That this recent body of work is diverse in material and subject matter does little to shake this sense. Take *Sydney My Home 1979-2018*, for example: a large map painting continuous with a series of other works — mapping railway lines, Sydney's public bathrooms, the habitats of Australian freshwater fish, Australia's lighthouses or simply its "Big Things" — which has played a consistent role in McKenna's practice for at least fifteen years. This latest one, a natural sequel to his 2014 work, *Brisbane My Home 1956-79*, has the ring of a caption on a nostalgic postcard, or the name of a school project dished out to reluctant children for completion over the weekend. Just like its precursor, it is an attempt to map places of personal significance, but on this occasion from all those accrued over an even more unwieldy chunk of time. Former places of work and shared flats, including one spent living with 'a French girl who used to wash dogs in our bath for a job'; various studios and galleries where McKenna made and exhibited his art; all the schools attended by his sons; the precise spot where he first met Margaret, his wife: all are carefully marked out and annotated on the map, while the writing on the left, starting with the earliest and working down through time, goes some way to explain their inclusion. At times, these notes are very funny — one regular haunt from the early eighties, for example, is recalled (but recalled nonetheless) as 'A good no fuss breakfast with "ordinary" diners' — and composed with the deadpan matter-of-factness that suffuses not only McKenna's text-based works, but his understanding of painting too.

¹ 'Not too hot, not too cold,' mother's tankstation, Dublin, 20 September – 28 October 2017

At the same time, though, *Sydney My Home 1979-2018* also grasps something of the problem of numeration, the problem of summing-up. Memories fade or become distorted as the business of living rolls on; sentimentality, after all, can also be understood as an acknowledgement of time; and with it, the bittersweet acceptance of distance: that things move further away, and rarely, if ever, closer. If they are remembered at all and consigned to this map, they then become little more than a dot. No matter how thoroughgoing, a map cannot track movement or emotion; largely indifferent, it holds a life — any life — firm, in stasis. In contrast with all its rich, lived complexity, a life becomes a series of decisions separate and estranged from one another. So that initial sense of warmth, it seems to me, is something of a red herring. Instead there is a coldness that runs throughout McKenna's work: the strangely dispassionate and exacting eye — open, though, and always curious — that looks to grasp life as a series of dates, places, and people. In his paintings and ceramic works, everything includes something akin to the possibility of its specific, numerical physicality. Painting in general, and representation in particular, becomes a game of thwarted possession.

We are all familiar with the image of a dog waiting for its master. It is a common sight: near my home, I see them almost everyday, with collars twisted round lampposts or bike racks as their owners rush into the adjoining supermarket to buy groceries. Not infrequently, they cry out distraught, like babies; on other occasions, they simply wait, composed and angled up at a slight diagonal, their mildly expectant eyes locked on the human-height horizon. Given the familiarity of this image, it is then quite natural that McKenna's recent series, 'Dogs Tied Up in Rose Bay' — which groups together a series of small ceramic works, alongside some larger canvasses — invites, if not demands a similarly emotional reading. Worked up from photographs taken by the artist near his home on the shore of Sydney Harbour, McKenna links the dogs' waiting with his own — specifically, his childhood experience of waiting for his father, back in Brisbane. Saturday mornings they would depart for the local shopping centre, where McKenna-senior would buy his son sweets from a corner shop. The young boy would then be left to eat his sweets outside the shop; often waiting for more than an hour, while his father caught up with friends over drinks in the adjacent hotel.

These dogs of Rose Bay then, have two separate kinds of significance: first comes with the act of simply pausing, to consider their situation, because really to stop and consider them at all means to accept them *as* meaningful. The second comes when that animal-experience, newly meaningful, is conjoined with ones' own. The latter, I think, is the weirder and more pressing of the two. Because the point of this exercise is not to use non-humans as fodder for human experience: it is instead to wilfully grant them a kind of parity. Though the dogs hold an easy affective heft, McKenna does not seem to separate his personal experience, from theirs. Likewise, McKenna's delicate paintings of huge American trucks, hulled from the thousands that hurtle past daily on New York's Highway 278, is linked back to childhood memories, and in particular

the model truck that McKenna obsessed over but never got to own. If this knowledge grants these everyday objects more meaning than they usually have, though, it is via McKenna's willingness to *accept* them as more meaningful than they are usually perceived. While they clearly interest him as objects, the act of painting them means they slip once again from his grasp.

A rather more holistic interpretation of the world, whether it be communicated through fired tile or painted canvas, such a worldview is sentimental only insofar as it creates distance. To see the world like this has to be somewhat detached — Daisy Hildyard, writing in her recent book *The Second Body*, indeed describes it as something like *horror*.² It means to be confronted both with our human smallness, supported by an eye that is capable of representing a person like a vase, a dog or even a truck. No connection is out of bounds: it is entirely possible to claim fresh-water fish have places of sentimental importance, just as it is that dogs feel loss. And, more and more, it is this painterly eye that strikes me in McKenna's work: the one that is rather more surgical in its handling of subject matter, and which then applies that same unflinching precision to his own life. It is in this way that a dog, left to linger outside a shop or supermarket while its master goes about their business, can be made to speak to McKenna's childhood memories. Making these links, McKenna simply accedes to the possibility of their comparability.

Dogs, maps, trucks, and vases are not tropes or symbols for a superior, human-centric "reality". They exist, quite happily, alongside. Each can be quantified, if not exactly possessed. This is not to claim, of course, that we do not find ourselves reading McKenna's works in this way. We're only human, after all; this means the dog always waits for its master, to be granted meaning *through* them. Clearly, a truck has a driver who controls it; it has a destination, and is used towards human ends. Being human, though, we like to think of ourselves as omnipotent lodestars: like the dog waiting for its master, we assume everything else must be similarly rapt and expectant on our cue. The problem is, and one I think McKenna captures quite clearly in his work, is that objects and other animals are distinct from us at the same time. Oftentimes, the dog waiting outside the supermarket appears lost in thought, almost inaccessible to us. Much like a life up on sitting down to map it.

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² Daisy Hildyard, *The Second Body* (2017), London: Fitzcarraldo Editions