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OUTSIDE IN: THE ART OF LUCY McKENZIE

LUCY MCKENZIE GREW UP in Glasgow, Scotland, in the 1980s and early '90s, an era that saw the dismantling of much of the United Kingdom's welfare state in service to Margaret Thatcher's idea that "there is no such thing as society"—only striving, self-interested individuals who should be given every encouragement to make their own way in the world. This philosophy was widely understood as a sick joke in old industrial cities like Glasgow, whose economies had been all but destroyed by the forces of global capital. In response, in Glasgow at least, the political and intellectual classes began to see themselves as aligned with the still-extant socialism of Eastern Europe rather than with the rampant capitalism being rearticulated in London. This meant that for two decades (roughly from the early '70s to the early '90s) progressive Scottish artists argued for politically engaged figuration and for a lot of public art, mostly murals, often produced by collectives. By the time McKenzie went to art school, a younger generation of neo-Conceptualists, led by the likes of Christine Borland and Douglas Gordon, had made most of this well-meaning stuff look downright backward and utterly naff—which made it also, therefore, ripe for appropriation by a young artist trying to find her own place in this particular contemporary art scene.

McKenzie's practice since, though anchored in an expansive idea of painting, can seem at once inexplicable and all-too-obvious, defined as it is by protean cross-disciplinarity and an attraction to *recherché* styles, texts, and images pungently redolent of the historical dustbin. In casting about for a critical frame, one is certainly tempted to draw correspondences between her strategies and the local conditions cited above. There is, for example, her penchant for almost glibly naturalistic figuration, for murals, for projects that instigate a certain collectivist *esprit de corps*, all of which have distinguished McKenzie from the artistic generation immediately preceding her. And yet, of course, something more than a simple anxiety of influence is at work. Recalibrating her appropriated elements in paintings and drawings as well as in installations, collaborations, and endeavors that fall outside the realm of art proper—e.g., a record label named *Decemberism*—McKenzie seems always to be working toward the construction of a larger, more

worldly notion of self, one that is too big for Glasgow, as it were. She tries on different roles, most of them freighted with layers of overdetermined meaning, as if to liberate herself from the mundane (or even the germane).

For me, McKenzie's art bespeaks the complexities of being a misfit from a small country. If, as critic Terry Eagleton observed not long ago in these pages, Oscar Wilde made an art of "parodying or inverting the stale wisdom of the metropolis"—using the language of the dominant culture against itself, as any good colonial subject would—so McKenzie might be said to turn that strategy on its head, adopting the modes and manners of the provinces and re-presenting them with the confidence of the center. Though much of her work has been made in the peripheral cities and smaller museums of northern Europe, she was also a very precocious participant in the Walker Art Center's 2000 survey "Painting at the Edge of the World" and had a solo show last year at Metro Pictures in New York. Having moved recently from Glasgow to Brussels, she has also lived in Berlin and spends time in Gdansk, Poland, and in New York. She presents herself, in short, as a provincial (a series of exhibitions that she and Polish artist Paulina Olowska curated in Sopot, Poland, in 2000 was called "Dream of a Provincial Girl"), but one with a very cosmopolitan flair. She seems to revel in being someone who, as she says, "visits" the art world yet remains firmly planted in the "normal life" of a small city. Indeed, as she observed in a published conversation with Olowska, "I certainly place some value on showing things that are actually relevant on my home turf, without a uniform sheen of *kunstverein* professionalism." McKenzie, in other words, trains her deadly eye for context on the question of identity as it is understood from the edge; this, it seems, is the animating factor, the itch she returns to in order to make art.

In part, McKenzie's approach turns on her unerring knack for selecting the least promising source material. As she told interviewer Isabelle Graw in *Parkett* earlier this year, "I'm interested in things that at first sight somehow seem socially redundant and seem to fail on their own terms." Her choices defy the very idea of taste and appear to embrace any kind of expression only to mock it—except that there is an earnestness in her presentation that is confounding, as if she were mocking even the condescension of cosmopolitan irony. Much of her earlier work deftly repositions socially "uplifting" forms of public art. In 2001, for example, again in collaboration with Olowska, she created a mural in the Solidarity Shipyards in Gdansk under the auspices of a local community organization—combining maritime imagery and graffiti art of the most generic, anodyne sort, while old strike posters nevertheless nodded toward the shipyards' storied and bloody history. A painting from 2004, *Untitled (Bi-Curious)*, harks back even more overtly to Glaswegian progressive art circa the '80s and more or less savages it: McKenzie reproduces a found photo from an old news magazine showing a group of Glasgow schoolgirls, awkwardly shy and cheeky, in front of an abstract mural crackling with jumpy, mock-cheerful optics. The various degrees of fake and forced optimism captured by the photographer are magnified and rendered creepily mute in the very dry, deadpan, near-photorealism of the painting. The image is all smiles, but what you take away is a depressed recognition of flattened hopes. That same year, at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, McKenzie took the bold, ugly pattern of the mural in the background, with its bright soullessness, and reproduced it on the wall of a hallway, a sort of awkward dead space connecting the museum's galleries and its café. Pointedly titled "Deathwatch," the intervention transformed the museum into just another bit of cheerless urban renewal, impishly drawing attention to the degradation of

the aesthetics of Constructivist art (of which the Van Abbemuseum has a significant collection) while beckoning viewers toward the more immediate rewards of coffee and cake.

The harshness of such projects—a harshness magnified by the dry, unforgiving nature of her paint handling—has consistently been given a friendlier aspect in proximity to McKenzie’s social collaborations (the best known being *Nova Popularna*, a temporary salon and performance space McKenzie and Olowska opened in Warsaw in 2003). The locations once again scream out the numbing alienation of provincial nowheres, but here at least the idea of getting together with friends is an actual option. People can meet, talk, flirt, make or watch performances. For a few hours a utopian space is created out of all the scraps and remnants of avant-gardism that are gathered together and made new. But despite an upbeat, “let’s put on a show” enthusiasm, the event resolutely goes nowhere. Hopes are raised, and left suspended. Nothing seems romantic here: There is no nostalgia or idealism, no pretense of offering a refuge, even a transitory one, from capitalism; rather, there is just the use of a failed language—the counterculture, the underground, bohemia, what have you—and a kind of ironic self-aggrandizement.

These two strands of McKenzie’s work—the pictorial and the social—have always been intertwined but are perhaps even more so in her most recent efforts. During a previous sojourn in Brussels, McKenzie discovered a comic-book tradition that spans genres, from the old-world adventure tales of Tintin to hard-core erotica. This find, which she has described as striking gold, gave her access to a range of graphic styles that still carry all kinds of uncomfortable baggage from the past but are much easier to look at than earnest murals. And more fun: For McKenzie, commercial graphic art opened up a way to make static, gallery-ready work from her friendships. In portrait drawings and insouciant scenes made in the past several years, the artist and her friends appear as characters in cartoon adventures. *Lucy and Paulina in the Moscow Metro (Ploschad Revolutsii)*, 2005, finds the pair happily cruising the night on their way to party; *Cheyney and Eileen Disturb a Historian at Pompeii*, 2005, shows the titular duo engaging in high jinks amid the frescoes. McKenzie’s discovery also made it possible for her to find a way into making sexier, more complex paintings predicated on what could be described as a thoroughly historical, premodernist idea of establishing a narrative premise in order to deliver content.

In one of these recent paintings, an untitled work from last year, McKenzie presents a modern morality tale: A glum-looking young woman is shown eating alone, holding her head in one hand while she absently plays with her food. She is pressed against the wall in an oppressively grand room encrusted with gold leaf and faux marble. Above her hangs a framed erotic cartoon of a woman masturbating—though whether this is a bit of “shockingly” trendy decor or a thought balloon is not entirely clear. Apparently inspired by an experience in the fancy dining room of a private art foundation that had images from Jeff Koons’s sexually explicit “Made in Heaven” series on its walls, McKenzie probes a sore spot where art and life meet: the intersection of private reverie and public display, imagination and the social, the confusing commingling of desire and commerce, art and venality. With its range and its particularity the work manages to be both appealingly naive and almost brittle in its world-weary sophistication—a portrait of the ambitious artist as a disillusioned young woman, perhaps, suggesting that while McKenzie may in many ways be new to audiences, she is in other ways already a hardened pro.

Thomas Lawson is dean of the School of Art at CalArts, Valencia, CA.



Outside In

THOMAS LAWSON ON THE ART OF LUCY MCKENZIE

LUCY MCKENZIE GREW UP in Glasgow, Scotland, in the 1980s and early '90s, an era that saw the dismantling of much of the United Kingdom's welfare state in service to Margaret Thatcher's idea that "there is no such thing as society"—only striving, self-interested individuals who should be given every encouragement to make their own way in the world. This philosophy was widely understood as a sick joke in old industrial cities like Glasgow, whose economies had been

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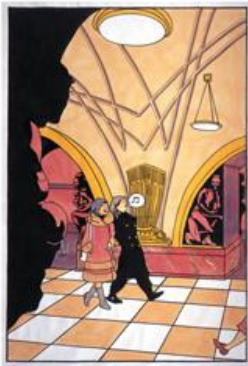
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Opposite page: Lucy McKenzie, *Untitled*, 2005, oil on canvas, 96 x 72 1/2". This page, from left: Lucy McKenzie, *Lucy and Paulina in the Moscow Metro (Ploshchad Revolutsii)*, 2005, acrylic and ink on paper, 12" x 8" 2". Lucy McKenzie, *Untitled (Bi-Curious)*, 2004, acrylic, oil, and collage on canvas, 28 x 20".

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