Lucy McKenzie
Prime Suspect

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#MB_LucyMcKenzie

Exhibition Booklet

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Museum Brandhorst
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The exhibition is accompanied by an extensive catalog, which offers the first systematic overview of Lucy McKenzie's practice. With essays by Jacob Proctor, Mason Leaver-Yap, Anne Pontégnie, and Leah Pires, as well as a fictional text by the artist.

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MUSEUM BRANDHORST

"If you asked me to just do a painting, spontaneously, from my imagination, I would have no idea what to do. Everything for me is in response to something else."

—Lucy McKenzie

Cover: Mooncup, 2012 (detail)
Acrylic on canvas, 3 parts; each 400 x 260 cm

For more than twenty years, Lucy McKenzie (*1977 in Glasgow) has excavated and transformed images, objects, and motifs from an almost impossibly broad range of historical moments and contexts in the histories of art, architecture, and design; literature, music, and film; fashion, politics, and sport. Beginning in 2008, she has practiced the tradition of trompe l'oeil painting, using it as a means to inhabit, critique, and reimagine earlier eras of art and design; illuminating an alternative history of modern art in which the so-called applied arts emerge as essential actors in a narrative that diverges from the established chronologies of modernism and the avant-garde. Despite her impressive skills as a painter—present from the start but honed by the unusual decision to complete a rigorous course of study in nineteenth-century decorative painting techniques—McKenzie has consistently refused to privilege one form of visual or material production over another, and she has traced an idiosyncratic path emphasizing vernacular and collaborative practices long marginalized or denigrated in the context of the fine arts. Her embrace of what she calls "procedural" painting is part and parcel with an approach that treats the medium less as an autonomous art than as a technology, one that is deeply imbricated in the same commercial, industrial, and cultural systems as photography or music.

The title of the exhibition—Prime Suspect—alludes to the way that McKenzie's works often function like detective stories, in which a fictional premise provides the structure for her own investigations, using historical material to ask important and resonant questions about contemporary society. It also points to her own elusiveness in the process—in which the artist herself has a way of disappearing into the dense web of references she weaves in her work—and the challenges this poses to the traditional model of the solo exhibition. Over the years, McKenzie's most recognizable style has become precisely a lack thereof, and the formal variation from one body of work to the next can be disconcerting. Assisted by her prodigious technical abilities, McKenzie has developed a methodology that involves taking up and temporarily inhabiting the styles of other artists and periods. In so doing, however, she is more a forensic pathologist or method actor than a counterfeiter or forger. For McKenzie, imitation operates not as a form of deception but as a means of understanding her subjects (whether individuals, movements, ideologies, or some combination thereof); of getting inside their heads and figuring out what makes them tick. Here, McKenzie herself performs the role of detective, excavating and rearticulating overlooked visual or material details from the past in order to reveal something of the social relations involved in their production—as well as what made them compelling in the first place—and thereby to better understand those relations in the present.

-1.1
Architecture and Interiors

Painting and drawing's relation to architecture is one of McKenzie's abiding interests, one that has taken many forms over the years. In the mid-2000s, she created a series of canvases in which she enlarged illustrations of interiors by "fin de siècle" architects such as Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Joseph Maria Olbrich, Paul Hankar, and Paul Jaspar to actual architectural scale. ➔"Interior (P. Jaspar – Michel House, Liège, 1899; J. M. Olbrich – Blaues Zimmer auf der Ausstellung Turin, 1902; C. R. Mackintosh – Design for the Dug-Out, Willow Tearooms, 1917; P. Hankar – Wijnand Fockink, Rue Royale, Brussels, 1897)" (2007) combines renderings of four different spaces by these architects, creating a three-dimensional enclosure—like a stage set—within the gallery. Exposing the raw back sides of the canvases, McKenzie highlights the constructed nature of social space and its articulation and enforcement through physical form.

➔"May of Teck," ➔"Town/Gown Conflict," and ➔"Kensington 2246" (2010) each represent one wall of a once bourgeois London residence transformed into a modern tenement, in which the trompe l'oeil cloudscapes and architectural moldings of its elegant past coexist alongside the water damage, communal telephone, and general grime of its run-down present.

In ➔"Ludwig Haus" (2009), McKenzie created an imaginary Brussels townhouse, borrowing motifs and inspiration from a variety of late nineteenth-century designs on the border between Gothic Revival and art nouveau, styles that have been largely excluded from the lineage and lexicon of modernism due to their abundant use of ornament and polychrome surface decoration. Here, "Ludwig Haus" is juxtaposed with the equally monumental ➔"Loos House" (2013), based on the floorplan of the Villa Müller, a house in Prague designed in 1930 by the Austrian architect Adolf Loos, perhaps best-known today for his polemical 1908 essay "Ornament and Crime." While Loos rejected the ornamentation of art nouveau, his interiors were nevertheless replete with opulent surfaces, including the signature Cipollino marble cladding paraphrased by McKenzie's trompe l'oeil canvas structure.

Atelier E.B (Edinburgh Bruxelles) is the company name under which McKenzie and designer Beca Lipscombe sign their collaborative projects. First formed in 2007, since 2011 Atelier E.B has operated as a fashion label utilizing local production methods and alternative forms of distribution and display, as well as a platform for research into the intertwined histories of fashion, commercial display, and exhibition-making. Atelier E.B places art and design on an equal footing, applying methodologies from both spheres to these projects. Filled with items of Atelier E.B clothing, ➔"Faux Shop" (2018) takes the form of a typical twentieth-century shop window, positioning window dressing itself as an overlooked yet crucial form of art and design practice.

-1.2
Ambivalent Narratives: Video Works

➔"The Girl Who Followed Marple" (2014) features a frumpily dressed and heavily made-up McKenzie as Agatha Christie's famous spinster detective. Over the course of the video's ten minutes, Marple grows steadily younger, eventually lifting her blouse to reveal McKenzie's own thirty-six-year-old body. The video is a collaboration with the photographer and filmmaker Richard Kern, for whom McKenzie worked as a soft porn model while she was a student in the 1990s, and that genre's implicit voyeurism and fungibility of (mostly female) bodies hovers in the background of the video. It also serves as a showcase for the fashion label Atelier E.B (McKenzie and designer Beca Lipscombe), and an unauthorized infomercial for the Mooncup brand of menstrual cup—a massive painting of which hangs on the wall in the adjacent gallery—delivering its commercial message through the familiar conventions of the detective story.

The short video ➔"De Ooievaar" (2017), screened in the small media room, presents a fly-through of an architectural rendering of the Villa De Ooievaar, a modernist house located in the seaside town of Ostend, Belgium. Since purchasing the house in 2014, McKenzie has been researching its history, restoring it to its original finishes. The villa was built in 1935 by the architect Jozef De Bruycker for a Catholic doctor. Both men were involved with the far-right Flemish nationalist movement Verdinaso, and De Bruycker was an active Nazi collaborator during World War II. In many ways, the house embodies the contradictions between modernist aesthetics—usually associated with ideals of progressivism and internationalism—and the conservative politics of its designer and original owner.

-1.3
International Sport and Underground Music: Early Work

In McKenzie's earliest body of work we can already see her approaching painting primarily as a reproductive medium. Her paintings of athletes and scenes from Olympic Games are based on mass media representations of these people and events, or staged photographs of herself and her friends in the guise of history. And while there is little that is didactic or overtly political in the works, McKenzie focused on Games with particularly fraught ideological and political contexts: the 1972 Munich Games (during which the militant Palestinian Black September Organization kidnapped and killed eleven Israeli athletes and murdered a West German policeman), the 1980 Moscow Olympics (of which the United States led a boycott in response to the Soviet Union's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan) and the 1984 Los Angeles Games (boycotted by the USSR and several of its allies in retaliation).

In ➔"Sport March" (2000), the Russian words of the title repeat up and down the right-hand side of the canvas, as if the words themselves are marching out of the background. The five colors of the Olympic rings fill one of the central letterforms and extend in thin bands along the painting's outside edges. Here we are reminded how the once-revolutionary vocabulary of Russian avant-garde Constructivism, shorn of its political context, had—even before the collapse of Communism—been thoroughly absorbed and metabolized by the field of design.

In ➔"They Are Lying on Their C.V.s" (rendered in the style of Glaswegian architect and designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh) the text overlays an image of the Los Angeles Games' Hollywood-style opening ceremony, a spectacle that included, in a particularly over-the-top bit of symbolism, eighty-four pianists hammering out George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" in unison.

In ➔"Top of the Will" (1998–99), McKenzie supplemented historical source materials with staged photos of herself and her friends, dressed in gymnastics uniforms based on those worn by the Soviet teams of the 1970s, taped directly to the wall and interspersed with pages torn from vintage books and magazines. In its blend of fact and fiction, documentation and imitation—and a mode of presentation that simultaneously evokes a teenager's bedroom décor and the "evidence wall" familiar to viewers of police procedurals—"Top of the Will" introduces the combination of fan-like enthusiasm and forensic analysis that is among the most enduring features of McKenzie's oeuvre.

In another early series, McKenzie reused abstract paintings discarded by other art students. On top of these failed exercises in modernist aesthetics, McKenzie painted the names and details of Berlin club nights. The coolness of McKenzie's hand-painted yet almost mechanically precise typographic renderings atop fields of anonymous gestural abstraction accentuates the sense that, by the turn of the millennium, the revolutionary potential of abstraction, punk, and new wave alike had already disappeared into the rearview mirror of history.

-1.4
Muralism and Public Art: East and West

"Kubrick [was] trying to tell us that in this future world even forms of rebellion or disaffection, which graffiti represents, are repositioned and divested of their power."

In 2001, McKenzie created a series of works based loosely on the work of the East German Socialist Realist Walter Womacka. ➔"Global Joy II" (2001) borrows its compositional structure from Womacka's 1962 canvas "On the Beach," which was reproduced on countless posters, postcards, calendars, and even as an official GDR postage stamp. In McKenzie's reimagining, a stylish young couple lounge in a kind of non-space. A banner and record player appear in the background, while their hands almost meet on the surface of a record jacket bearing the image of a candle, a reference to Gerhard Richter's painting "Kerze" (1983), from the cover of the 1988 album "Daydream Nation," by the American noise rock band Sonic Youth. McKenzie makes no effort to hide her methodology, leaving visible the graphite gridlines employed in the process of mapping out her composition. In fact, it is in many ways the constructed nature of such representations that comes through most clearly, highlighting the difficulty in articulating a position of nonconformism at a moment when it had become abundantly clear that nearly every historical form of artistic and subcultural resistance had already been absorbed by the culture industry.

Murals, wall paintings, and other forms of public art have long been ambivalent sites for the affirmation and contestation of collective identity. ➔"If It Moves, Kiss It I" (2002) is based on a mural created as set decoration for Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film "A Clockwork Orange," an image devised by art directors and set designers for the sole purpose of being filmed. McKenzie was also interested in the contrast between the musclebound men, clearly intended to convey an aesthetic of totalitarianism, and the mildness of the graffiti itself, which she interpreted as "Kubrick trying to tell us that in this future world even forms of rebellion or disaffection, which graffiti represents, are repositioned and divested of their power." Only later did she discover that the mural in the film had been based on Nazi-era works by Fritz Erler.

In Scotland, muralism played a supporting role in urban renewal projects of the 1960s and '70s. While many of its practitioners viewed their medium as inherently democratizing and themselves as acting in solidarity with the communities in which they worked, their work was often met with skepticism and even hostility. ➔"If It Moves, Kiss It II" and ➔"If It Moves, Kiss It III" (both 2002) are based on a pair of murals (since destroyed) located at the Glasgow School of Art. McKenzie had known these works since childhood, but was struck by their incongruity with their context, classical motifs having become more associated with corporate and state power than with the ethos of an art school. In transferring these motifs to canvas, McKenzie simplified their geometries and accentuated the complex play of negative and positive space, choosing to omit the copious amounts of graffiti that had accumulated across much of their surfaces, clearly visible in a number of photographs that McKenzie took at the time.

-1.5
Advertising and Illustration

"Historically, public art has rarely been received in the way it was intended, or held in high esteem by the general public … I give equal consideration to the visual importance of advertising, community murals, graffiti and vandalism alongside civic commissions of sculptures and murals in the urban landscape."

Even before moving to Brussels in 2006, McKenzie was fascinated by the Belgian capital's art nouveau architecture as well as the country's history of graphics and illustration. Like architectural drawing and mural painting, illustration has traditionally been ignored in the context of the fine arts, looked down upon for its associations with advertising and design. For McKenzie, it is precisely illustration's multivalent quality, and the way that it is imbricated in a larger cultural and economic context, that has made it such a fruitful arena in which to work.

In 2004, McKenzie was invited to produce a proposal for a piece of public art. Executed in the "ligne claire" style pioneered by the Belgian illustrator Hergé, her proposed work took the form of a vintage advertisement for a fictional deodorant with a nonsensical name, to be installed as a large exterior mural. In her proposal, McKenzie noted that "historically, public art has rarely been received in the way it was intended, or held in high esteem by the general public … I give equal consideration to the visual importance of advertising, community murals, graffiti and vandalism alongside civic commissions of sculptures and murals in the urban landscape." ➔"Co? Në!" (2004) is a mock-up of the project, accompanied here by a vitrine filled with preparatory studies and source materials including vintage advertisements for brands like Estée Lauder and Elizabeth Arden, photographs of wall paintings in urban settings, a Tintin bookmark, and a page from a pornographic comic book. Collectively, "Co? Në!" and its source materials point not only to the ways that murals (including both commercial advertisements and commissioned artworks) have historically served the interests of capital and state power, but also once again to the culture industry's relentless adoption of the tropes of protest and liberation (in this instance of the movement for women's liberation) as a means to market and sell commodities.

-1.6
Quodlibets and Trompe l'Oeil Painting: More Than Meets the Eye

In 2007, McKenzie enrolled in an intensive training course offered by the Van der Kelen-Logelain School of Decorative Painting in Brussels. The curriculum—developed in 1882, when decorative painting was at the height of its popularity—teaches trompe-l'oeil techniques for the illusionistic rendering of wood and marble paneling. There, McKenzie also encountered the "Quodlibet," a form of still-life painting containing various items as if they were left lying around an arbitrary manner. Despite their appearance, Quodlibets are quite carefully composed, and the interplay between objects produces subtle narratives for those who look closer. In the context of Van der Kelen-Logelain, where the labor-intensive nature of illusionistic painting and the traditional alignment of value with craftsmanship reigned supreme, the Quodlibet figured as an inherently conservative genre. In McKenzie's hands, however, it has often functioned as a means to question and subvert dominant ideologies and contemporary systems of value.

McKenzie often employs the Quodlibet to construct a visual accounting of a particular topic, such as the aesthetics of political ideologies (➔"Quodlibet XX [Fascism]" and ➔"Quodlibet XXI [Objectivism]," both 2012), or to call attention to visual codes that might otherwise go unnoticed. ➔"Quodlibet XXXIX" (2014) depicts a group of mass-market paperback books by two well-known female authors. Interchangeable images of women's heads and bodies adorn each of their covers, despite having absolutely nothing to do with the literary style or narrative content contained within, highlighting editorial assumptions about their (presumably female) readers.

McKenzie's earliest Quodlibets are comprised of personal artifacts and studio materials. She quickly expanded into "portraits" of various individuals, pictured in more complex ways through the quotidian but nonetheless telling details of their private and professional lives. ➔"Quodlibet XXVI (Self-Portrait)" (2013) depicts a single sheet of paper showing a partially redacted email thread. The emails date from 2010, when an unnamed male artist had requested permission from the photographer Richard Kern to exhibit pornographic pictures of McKenzie that Kern had shot and published in the late 1990s. Addressing the unnamed curators of the exhibition, McKenzie's email tersely summarizes the ethics of appropriation and the oftentimes regressive sexual politics of the art world.

Sexual politics are also central to ➔"Quodlibet XL" (2014), which can be understood as a kind of group portrait. It depicts, from left to right, works by the artists and theorists Eric Gill, Otto Muehl, René Sherer, Adolf Loos, and Graham Ovenden, all men who have been celebrated for their work on aesthetic grounds but either accused of or directly linked to pedophilia in their private lives. "Quodlibet XL" raises important questions about how much we want or need to know about the artists we admire, and the extent to which biography impacts our interpretation of the works they produce.

-1.7
Trompe l'Oeil Furniture and Maps: Articulating Spaces

In 2015, McKenzie expanded the Quodlibet to encompass entire pieces of trompe l'oeil furniture. At around the same time McKenzie decided to collage actual paper documents into a series of bright blue "bulletin-board" Quodlibets (➔"Quodlibets XLVI and LIII," 2015) questioning the equation of value with virtuosity that she established in her earlier works. She thus complicates the already unstable perceptual relationship between the thing and its representation that undergirds the entire trompe l'oeil enterprise. Whereas McKenzie's trompe l'oeil furniture pushes that relationship to the limit, the importation of the object itself, in the form of a printed document, both absorbs and rejects the whole premise of painterly mimesis. At the same time, the particular nature of the collaged elements—various pieces of business correspondence related to Atelier E.B—reflects McKenzie's own embeddedness in a culture of administration.

Given her longstanding interest in forms of visual representation that have historically existed outside the fine arts, especially those related to the public sphere and constructions of national or collective identity, it was perhaps inevitable that McKenzie would turn her attention to cartography. Neither passive reflections of the world nor mere bureaucratic instruments, maps are both a form of knowledge and a form of power. McKenzie's appropriations highlight the ways that maps—both decorative and functional—are ways of conceiving and structuring the world, and therefore deeply ideological.

The history of cartography is inextricably linked to the rise of the nation-state and the expansion of colonial powers in the modern world. Based on a large cartographic mural in the Grand Salon of the Collège Néerlandais, the Dutch residence hall of the Cité Internationale Universitaire in Paris, ➔"Map of Holland" (2015) depicts a map of the Netherlands, accompanied by the coats of arms of the great Dutch universities and representations of Erasmus, Rembrandt, and other prominent figures from Dutch intellectual history. In contrast to the Collège's 1930s modernist architecture, which emphasized openness and internationalism, the murals were executed in an anachronistic and conservative seventeenth-century style intended to convey the glories of the nation and its colonial empire.

This incongruity is also visible in McKenzie's monumental canvas ➔"Ghent-Sint-Pieters" (2017). At the time of its completion in 1913, Sint-Pieters train station in the city of Ghent, Belgium, held a large mural depicting an extensive network of railways, extending from London to Moscow (a system that would be profoundly disrupted with the start of World War I the following year). During the 1960s, the mural was overpainted with generic, cartoonish signifiers of a pseudo-medieval past. During a recent renovation, the original mural was rediscovered, and a thin vertical section of the overpainting removed (a second small area of removal is visible in the upper right corner). It is unclear why the painting was left in this arrested state of restoration, but it was precisely this palimpsestic state of overlapping temporalities and visual languages that appealed to McKenzie.

-1.8
Fashion, Architecture, and Urbanism Against the Grain

➔"Glasgow 1938 1966" (2017) depicts two maps of central Glasgow superimposed upon one another. One maps the city's expansive public transit system at the time of the 1938 Empire Exhibition, designed to showcase the innovation and modernity of the "Second City" of the British Empire. The other depicts alleged gang territories recorded in 1966, sharply delineated urban areas hemmed in by poverty and violence. By simultaneously representing these two moments in twentieth-century history, McKenzie uses the visual language of municipal administration to undercut the modernist myth of "progress" and to highlight the ways that social life and economic conflict are inseparable from the environmental infrastructures in which they play out.

In ➔"Arcade 2" (2019) a replica of a 1933 couture dress by the celebrated French designer Madeleine Vionnet clothes a handmade mannequin in a large wooden vitrine. The same mannequin and dress, as well as the double-map of Glasgow, both appear in the painting ➔"Rebecca" (2019), which is executed in the style of the British painter Meredith Frampton. For McKenzie, Frampton and Vionnet are linked both by the technical perfection of their respective practices and by the way that their anachronistic aesthetics each cut against the prevailing tendencies of their early twentieth-century milieus. Frampton, whose work hovers between the psychological charge of surrealism and the ocular fetishism of photorealism, has always been seen as representing a conservative position in the history of British art. Similarly, the overt femininity and neo-classicism of Vionnet's clothing designs stood in stark contrast to many of her peers' adoption of a more masculine look to capture the experience of modernity.

The large painting ➔"Fountain and Portrait of Mannequin" (2019) depicts the entrance foyer of the Villa De Ooievaar, a modernist house in the town of Ostend, Belgium, which McKenzie purchased in 2014 and is currently in the process of restoring (see also the video "De Ooievaar", screened in the small media room). Like most of McKenzie's subjects, De Ooievaar is a structure of contradictions, in which progressive modernist aesthetics are strangely intertwined with the social and political conservatism of its original owner.

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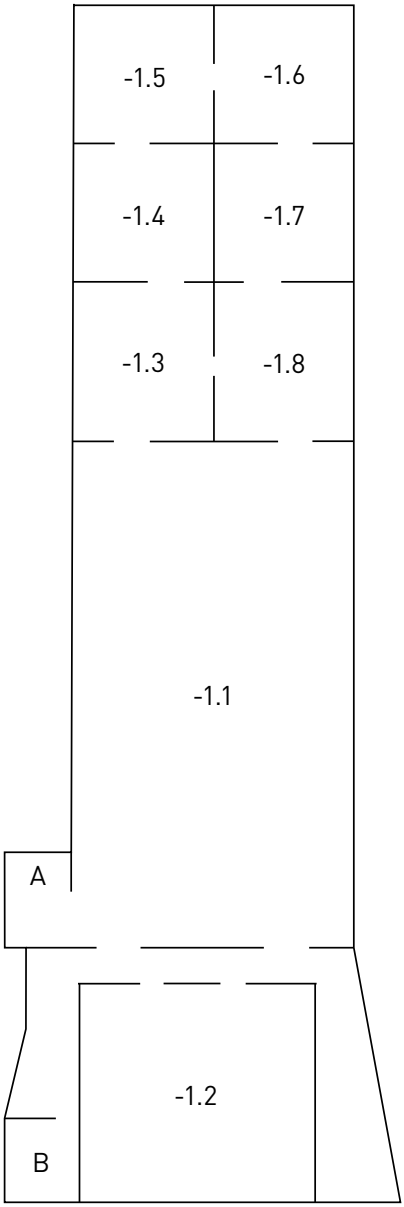
Lucy McKenzie—Prime Suspect



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