

New Work: Lucy McKenzie



New Work: Lucy McKenzie

November 9, 2007–February 24, 2008

Sight lines are incredibly important in museums. Glimpsed views into adjoining galleries orient visitors and entice them to move through the exhibition space. A peek into the next gallery might foretell the artistic developments about to be experienced, while a backward glance may serve as a reminder of the forms, concepts, and innovations underlying the artwork immediately at hand. Installed in the last gallery of SFMOMA's display of painting and sculpture from the permanent collection, *New Work: Lucy McKenzie* is the final stop in the museum's telling of recent artistic progress. And from this vantage point, sight lines, both literal and temporal, become the key to revealing layers of meaning in McKenzie's exhibition.

The sight line leading viewers into the gallery is uncommon in that it presents more of an obstruction than an invitation. The first thing one sees is the backside of an enormous canvas—the part of a painting rarely exposed to the viewing public. Upon entering the room, the sight line widens around these glimpsed stretcher bars

and unpainted, raw canvas backs, giving way to a fuller view: an installation of four canvases arranged in the center of the gallery, their painted fronts facing one another. Across the surface of each, McKenzie has re-created spaces emblematic of the Art Nouveau style that was popular among cosmopolitan residents of late-nineteenth-century Europe. For McKenzie, who grew up in Glasgow, Scotland, this highly ornamental style marks spaces of wealth in a city historically known for great economic disparity. Based on period renderings, the paintings are life-size reproductions of luxurious interiors by renowned architects and designers. Now doubling as walls, the lushly painted canvases function like a stage set, creating a three-dimensional architectural enclosure within the gallery. The roughly hewn two-by-fours that buttress each canvas announce the installation's slapdash construction. By revealing the mechanics behind the enclosure, McKenzie emphasizes the artifice inherent in painting and design, revealing each to be an elaborate game of illusion through which one can create any world and transform any space.

McKenzie has "sublet" part of her allotted gallery space to her friend, Scottish fashion designer Beca Lipscombe, who shows her fall line in a self-contained mini-boutique. The space between this structure and McKenzie's installation is populated by ten drawings that McKenzie created for a calendar promoting Lipscombe's line. Each depicts a single fashion model clad in the designer's garments; two of these drawings are freestanding, life-size cutouts backed on board.

In the trajectory of art history, a discursive sight line leads us back more than half a century to an uncannily similar episode that also incorporated large-scale paintings, fashion for sale, and figures in proximity to a canvas. In 1951 *Vogue* magazine ran several spreads featuring models clad in the haute couture dresses of the moment, rigidly posed before the avant-garde art of the moment: Jackson Pollock's newest giant-scale, dripped and splattered abstractions.

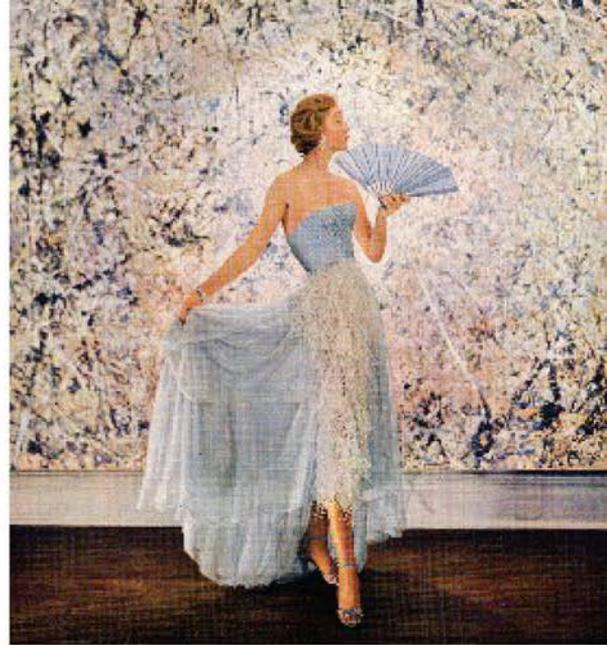
Installation view of McKenzie's 2006 exhibition *Ten Years of Robotic Mayhem (Including Sublet)* at the Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland



At the time, several critics were angered by what they viewed as gross misuse of the paintings. More recently, art historian T. J. Clark has argued that the controversy surrounding this use of Pollock's work remains relevant today as a cautionary reminder of commodity culture's ability to assign meaning to works of art.¹ Seen through the lens of this history, the works presented in this exhibition, although at first seemingly disparate, beautifully cohere to underscore the fundamental flexibility of meaning, reminding us at every turn of the importance of context.

Though McKenzie's exhibition and the *Vogue* photographs share similar components, the ultimate effect of each project is markedly different. In the *Vogue* spreads art is reduced to a marketing tool, existing only to augment the appeal of the dresses in the photographs. McKenzie uses similar visual materials, but questions the relationship constructed in the magazine by revealing the ways in which art and the market can reciprocally inform each other. Though the similarities are wholly unintentional, our critical sight line from McKenzie's work back to this episode in the history of large-scale painting is significant: it positions McKenzie's practice as the most recent stopping point in the ongoing artistic narrative of visual art and the status of the commodity. In this context her project becomes a reflection of a contemporary art scene in which modern market concerns often subsume artistic intention.

Art-historical discourse has primarily addressed the salability of small-scale paintings. Scholars have noted that the relative ease with which smaller works can be bought and hung in interior spaces contributed to their use as signifiers of class. When Pollock created his large-scale canvases, the critic E. C. Goosen applauded the fact that their scale placed them outside of commodity culture (too large to fit comfortably in most domestic interiors, they could not function as fixtures of elite decor).² However, in the *Vogue* photographs, Pollock's paintings became mere backdrops; this led critics to rail against the perceptual likening of large-scale abstract painting to wallpaper.³ Viewed within this



discursive history, McKenzie's installation offers a delicious upending of the relationship between paintings and commodified interior space. Her works are not room-scale in the traditional sense, as in paintings made to hang on the walls of inhabitable interiors. Instead, her canvases literally depict such interiors at an architectural scale. Once inside the space they create, every sight line, no matter which direction one turns, confronts a painting. The result is an illusionistic interior that monopolizes the entire visual field—including peripheral vision—and produces the remarkable sensation of simultaneously standing inside a painting and an architectural environment that has been decorated according to a meaningful stylistic trend from a particular moment in history. In a clever twist, McKenzie's large-scale paintings are a decorative backdrop *and* an immersive environment. Their dualism is both literal and conceptual: the subject of the paintings—Art Nouveau interiors—is equal parts background and setting.

Each painting is based on an architectural elevation of a different room; their combination ruptures any sensation of standing within a coherent space. Visible brushwork, thinly applied color washes, and occasional drips of paint reinforce the paintedness of the representations

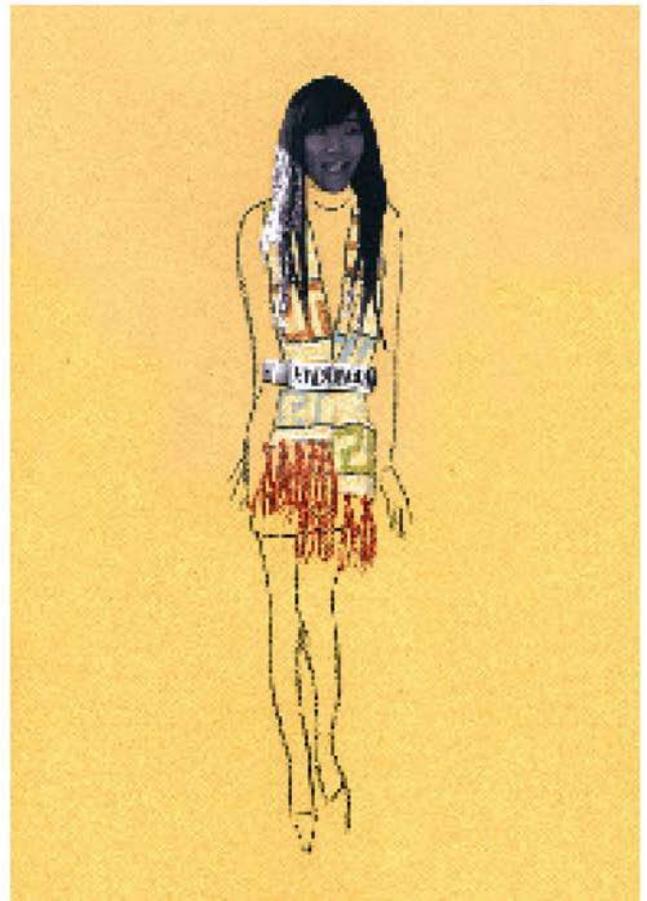
despite the lifelike detail recorded on the surface of each canvas. The impossibly flat, fully frontal perspective used to depict these spaces foregrounds their theatricality—every illusionistic effect is diminished by these insistent reminders of the installation's construction. McKenzie asserts the artificiality of the painted medium and pushes it further: her appropriation of the tropes of elite culture highlights the inherent constructability of class and social status.

McKenzie's sublet to Lipscombe is an unusual gesture, and boldly subverts institutional convention. A museum's store is usually separated both architecturally and visually from the galleries, creating a physical division between retail space and the spaces for viewing art. With the sublet, McKenzie makes the experiences of both museumgoing and shopping strange, blurring the boundaries between viewing and buying. Lipscombe's boutique is a real one; the clothes are available for sale from the gallery. The proximity of the clothes to the paintings channels meaning in both directions: the paintings become part of an overt system of commodity consumption, and the clothes are conferred the status of art objects.

The sublet and the installation are conceptually united by the calendar drawings featuring Lipscombe's designs.⁴ Unlike the *Vogue* photographs, McKenzie's drawings move beyond the representation of contemporary fashion. McKenzie has depicted the model using ten distinct stylistic guises borrowed from the history of twentieth-century fashion drawing. Their combination reminds the viewer that at various moments in modern history different styles of representation defined social ideals and conditions of beauty, each of which may be created and manipulated as easily as the interior decoration within a room. The flimsy flatness of the cardboard cutouts echoes the physical reminders of the paintings' construction. In both cases, the initial appearance of reality abruptly dissolves as closer inspection reveals overt artifice. Significantly, each of the calendar drawings depicts the same model. In *Calendar 7* (2007),

a sketchily rendered body is topped by the collaged photograph of her face, providing viewers with a touchstone of her actual features. In each work the model's physiognomy and body are represented differently—her appearance is controlled by the hand of the artist and the dictates of the stylistic mode appropriated. Just as the paintings reveal the constructed nature of wealth and elite culture, these subjective versions of likeness expose the nature of personal appearance as unfixated and malleable.

McKenzie consistently looks to the past in creating her very contemporary works. And it is her own deft tweaking of history that makes her practice so relevant today. However, like our metaphorical sight line back to the *Vogue* images, the works assembled in this



Calendar 7, 2007

presentation remind us that acknowledgment of the market's impact on the environments and objects we encounter remains of paramount importance in understanding our conventions of social status and self-definition. With this McKenzie's project offers a sight line to our own future as viewers and consumers, both within and beyond the confines of the museum. She cautions us to encounter the next step with an eye to the past and to carry with us an awareness of our own position in the contemporary moment.

Alison Gass

Assistant Curator, Painting and Sculpture

Notes

- 1 "The photographs are nightmarish. They speak to the hold of capitalist culture: that is, to the ease with which it can outflank [the paintings] . . . and make [them] part of a new order of pleasures—a sign of that order's richness . . . They show the sort of place reserved within capitalism for painting like Pollock's." T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 365.
- 2 Of large-scale paintings in the mid-twentieth century, E. C. Goosen wrote: "Now the size of pictures is not adjusted to the kinds of rooms we currently live in. It is not adjusted, so to speak, to the market, as one can say seventeenth-century Dutch painting was and as most easel painting has been, for that matter." Goosen, "The Big Canvas," in *The New Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1966), 53.
- 3 The potential equation of large-scale abstract painting to interior decoration was of great concern to contemporary critics. Arguably the two most significant critics of Abstract Expressionism, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, both pointed out the risk of the paintings morphing into the realm of the interior: "Greenberg cited the 'fatal' influence of 'all-over' abstract art, which because 'it comes very close to decoration—to the kind seen in wallpaper patterns that can be repeated indefinitely,' now "'infects' painting as a whole,'" notes Christopher Reed. "Likewise, Rosenberg . . . argued that abstract 'action paintings' became simply 'apocalyptic wallpaper.'" Reed, introduction to *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. Reed (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996), 15.
- 4 The calendar format is significant here, as it suggests Lipscombe's desire to create something that might serve an actual purpose: a calendar helps people keep track of their lives, while traditional catalogues are intended only to sell clothes.

Reverse, from left: *After V. Horta, Entrance of Maison Antique, 1893, Brussels*, 2006. *After Hankar, Proposal for a Fireplace, Date and Place Unknown*, 2006. *After G. Hobe, Salon Library for the Great Exhibition, 1902, Turin* (detail), 2006. Installation views at the Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland. All images courtesy the artist; Cabinet, London; and Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne.

The *New Work* series is organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and is generously supported by Collectors Forum, the founding patron of the series. Major funding is also provided by the Mimi and Peter Haas Fund, Nancy and Steven H. Oliver, and Robin Wright.

Lucy McKenzie was born in 1977 in Glasgow, Scotland. She participated in the Erasmus exchange to Karlsruhe Kunstakademie, Germany, in 1998 and received a BA with honors in fine arts from Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, Dundee, Scotland, in 1999. She has had solo exhibitions at the Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland; Norwich Gallery, England; Arnolfini, Bristol, England; Metro Pictures, New York; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne; Cabinet, London; and Tate Britain, London. Recent group exhibitions include *Noel sur le Balcon / HOLD THE COLOR* at the Goetz Collection, Munich, and *Painting in Tongues* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. She has also participated in site-specific cultural interventions and performances throughout Europe, including *Nova Popularna* in Warsaw, Poland.

Works in the Exhibition

| | |
|---|---|
| <i>After C. R. Mackintosh, Design for a Fireplace at 'Westdel,' 1898, Glasgow</i> , 2006 Acrylic and ink on canvas 105 1/8 x 189 3/4 in. (267 x 482 cm) | <i>Calendar 4</i> , 2007 Felt-tip pen on paper 11 7/8 x 16 1/8 in. (29 x 41 cm) |
| <i>After G. Hobe, Salon Library for the Great Exhibition, 1902, Turin</i> , 2006 Acrylic and ink on canvas 105 1/8 x 177 1/4 in. (267 x 450 cm) Private collection, New York | <i>Calendar 5</i> , 2007 Graphite on paper 8 1/4 x 11 1/8 in. (21 x 30 cm) |
| <i>After Hankar, Proposal for a Fireplace, Date and Place Unknown</i> , 2006 Acrylic and ink on canvas 105 1/8 x 105 1/8 in. (267 x 267 cm) | <i>Calendar 6</i> , 2007 Acrylic and ink on paper 11 7/8 x 15 3/4 in. (29 x 40 cm) |
| <i>After V. Horta, Entrance of Maison Antique, 1893, Brussels</i> , 2006 Acrylic and ink on canvas 170 1/2 x 83 1/2 in. (433 x 212 cm) | <i>Calendar 7</i> , 2007 Collage and colored pencil on paper 25 3/8 x 19 7/8 in. (64.5 x 50 cm) |
| <i>The Glasgow Drawings 1–26</i> , 2007 Various media and dimensions | <i>Calendar 8</i> , 2007 Colored pencil on paper 25 3/8 x 19 7/8 in. (64.5 x 50 cm) |
| <i>Calendar 1</i> , 2007 Ink on paper 11 7/8 x 16 1/8 in. (29 x 41 cm) | <i>Calendar 9</i> , 2007 Acrylic on paper 30 3/8 x 69 1/8 in. (78 x 177 cm) |
| <i>Calendar 2</i> , 2007 Watercolor and ink on paper 11 7/8 x 16 1/8 in. (29 x 41 cm) | <i>Calendar 10</i> , 2007 Acrylic on paper 20 7/8 x 69 1/8 in. (53 x 177 cm) |
| <i>Calendar 3</i> , 2007 Watercolor and colored pencil on paper 11 7/8 x 16 1/8 in. (29 x 41 cm) | <i>Sublet to Beca Lipscombe</i> , 2007 Clothes and clothing rack mounted on plywood plinth Clothing courtesy Beca Lipscombe |

