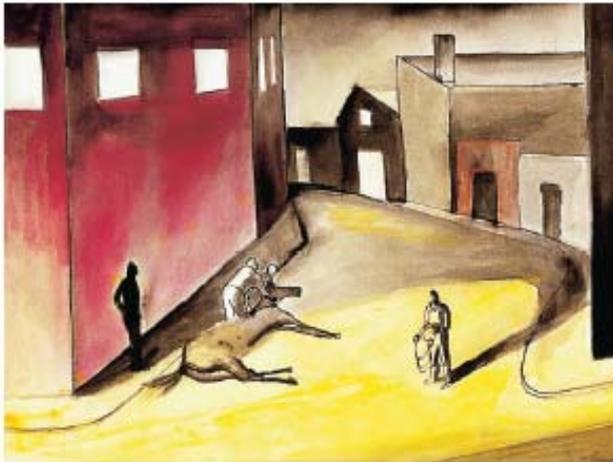
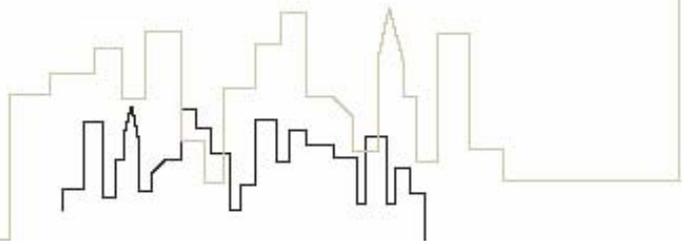


## TEACHERS' RESOURCE



# Somewhere in the City: Noel McKenna



**QUT** Art Museum

8 September – 6 November 2005

*There is often something unsettling about Noel McKenna's work, as seemingly innocent images can take on sinister overtones. This exhibition presents a glimpse of McKenna's substantial output in a show that focuses on imagery of figures in the urban environment, portrayed in paintings, drawings, prints, ceramics and sculpture.*

### **About the artist**

Noel McKenna was born in Brisbane in 1956. He undertook studies in architecture at the University of Queensland 1974-75 and studied at the Queensland College of Art 1976-78 before moving to Sydney to study at the Alexander Mackie College in 1981. His first solo exhibition was held at the Kelvin Grove College of Advanced Education (now QUT's Kelvin Grove campus) in 1978 and he has exhibited widely across Australia and overseas. He continues to live and work in Sydney.

## Somewhere in the City: Noel McKenna



*Somewhere in the City* is McKenna's first major solo exhibition in his hometown of Brisbane since he departed for Sydney some 25 years ago. It focuses on his **urban imagery**, particularly the **figure**, and the **element of danger**, which has always been a source of attraction in his work. Lonely figures caught in city scenes that are both empty and isolated as well as being claustrophobic, have an impending sense of peril. Just what is around the corner? Similarly his animals, usually metaphors for the foibles of humankind, are often trapped or in a somewhat compromised position.

McKenna's driving motivation is not doom and despair; rather it is the strange, yet real force of positive outcomes in the realm of adversity. While life does not always provide the outcome one may seek, when it does this often passes unnoticed. McKenna depicts humans as the strange animal that we are, and one that seems to learn through mistakes rather than through logical or even obvious options.



Left: Noel McKenna, *Interior* (2003), Enamel on recycled door, Courtesy of the artist.  
Middle: Noel McKenna, *Man with kite* (1990), Oil and enamel on plywood, Laverty Collection, Sydney.  
Right: Noel McKenna, *Jockey* (1991), Oil on plywood, Gift of Margaret McKenna under the Cultural Gifts Program, 1998 QUT Art Collection

## Media and Style

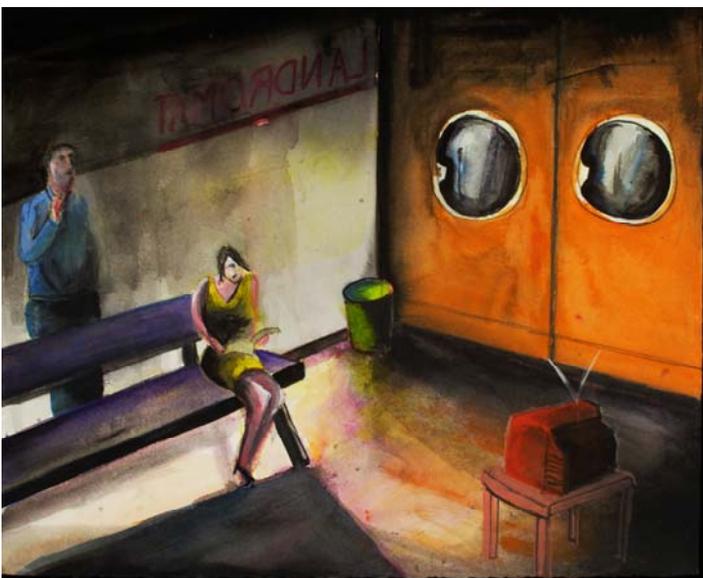
McKenna's choice of a variety of media isolates his work from simple categorisation - for example in the view through a second-hand French door in the work *Interior* [2003], he has painted a strange cross-section of living areas. The door was salvaged from a local building site, as were the French windows that McKenna used for a series of works, all titled *Beach window* [2002]. These windows, previously facing one of Sydney's eastern beaches, now depict surfers wiping out in an undeniably McKenna style. While primarily recognised as a painter, he does not limit himself to a single medium or support material. This is the crux of McKenna's work. While utilising a naïve style, McKenna is certainly not a naïve artist, and his work has a cool, detached, intellectual. McKenna is 'not interested in technical perfection', but rather 'he is more interested in (figures) as symbols than as representations'.<sup>i</sup>

**Choose one of McKenna's works and analyse how the figures have been used as symbols – what do they represent? What gives you this impression?**

**Compare the different mediums throughout the exhibition. How do the prints, oil paintings and watercolours differ? Why do you think McKenna chose specific mediums for particular works?**

## Colour

McKenna has often worked within a restricted colour range (or limited palette) and whereas recently his work has at times been dominated by muted hues, he has also worked with bursts of colour. Reds and yellows featured strongly in the mid-1980s. Of particular note here are the pieces McKenna completed in New York, such as *Central Park* [1986], and *Hotel room, Broadway, New York* [1986]. The selective dominant tones were also carried over into other works such as *The alley way* [1988] and *Laundromat* [1989].



**How does McKenna employ colour throughout his works to convey a mood or create atmosphere?**

Above: Noel McKenna, *Laundromat* (1989), Watercolour and coloured inks over pencil, Courtesy of the artist

## The City

*Somewhere in the City*: Noel McKenna focuses on the artist's visual exploration of urban imagery.

**Find 3 works which explore different aspects of the city theme. Subjects may include alienation, loneliness or the experience of 'the big city'. Through visual analysis describe how each work portrays the city or the experience of the urban environment in differing ways.**

Unlike the majority of other artworks, *Earth from moon* (1995) doesn't apparently relate to city life. Or does it? The work is reminiscent of the famous photograph *Earthrise*, taken by an Apollo 8 astronaut in 1968. The photograph shows a diminutive earth floating in the inky black abyss of space, half-lit by the sun, with the surface of the moon creating a horizon line across the lower section of the image. *Earthrise* had a startling impact on its release, highlighting the insignificance of humanity in the greater scheme of the universe. It also helped to draw humankind together, highlighting the oneness of all people, as we are bundled together on a planet akin to an oversized marble. The bustle of city living becomes an unseen microcosm of the life on our planet, which is dominated not by the skyscrapers of the cities but by the vastness of the oceans.<sup>ii</sup>

## Memory

Memory plays an important role for McKenna. Works such as *Showing off to Pandora* (1991) could either be a snippet of a local spectacle that the artist witnessed, or based on a memory from his childhood. Such works are of everyday scenes, from everyday memories. Remembrances of childhood, a kind of nostalgia for a time more innocent, less demanding, less uncertain, is a common source of inspiration for artists. But rather than depicting a 'major' childhood event (major in a child's mind), *Showing off to Pandora* is a simple little scene, probably played out on the way home from school. A boy, having 'discovered' girls, haphazardly tries to impress Pandora by showing how far he can throw a rock, maybe even smash a window. Such events seem so incredible and exciting at the time, but lose their impact as time marches forward.



Left: Noel McKenna, *Showing off to Pandora* (1991) Coloured inks  
Gift of Margaret McKenna under the Cultural Gifts Program, 1998  
QUT Art Collection

**Loneliness** is also integral to McKenna's work. While McKenna's depictions of loneliness may be a reflection of his past or even his quiet nature, it is also a symptom, paradoxically, of living in a large city. McKenna is an astute observer, and spends considerable time on the move, either within his local environs or further afield. Observation is central to his practice and photographs are often the source of his work. This is particularly evident in McKenna's *SMH Watercolours* series, which are directly derived from front page photographs of the Sydney Morning Herald. Such images often have an initial strong impact which diminishes as their newsworthiness diminishes. McKenna appropriates these images and in representing them in his characteristic style jolts the viewer's memory and reminds us of what will often fade into insignificance in one's daily routine. In *SMH Watercolour (bushfire)* [2000] the devastating Sydney fires of 2000 are presented, reminding us all of the potentially destructive force of nature. In doing so McKenna prompts us to consider our ability to prepare for such events and to work as a society to minimise the danger.

## Influences

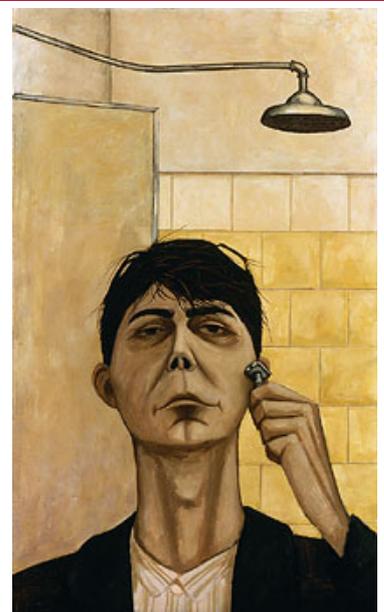
Influence comes from many sources and McKenna has cited **Albert Tucker** (1914-99) and **John Brack** (1920-99) as influences, as well as **Balthus** (1908-2001), **Edward Hopper** (1882-1967) and **Giorgio de Chirico** (1888-1978).<sup>iii</sup> Tucker's bleak view of post-war Australia certainly resonates with McKenna, and some of Brack's most iconic work often deals with the figure in the street (such as *Collins Street, 5 p.m.* [1955]) or indoors (see his vast array of nudes and domestic scenes such as *Self portrait* [1955], a self-portrait showing the artist shaving). French artist Balthus also produced such imagery. His street figures often appear to be caught holding poses in various positions, rather than captured mid-movement. McKenna utilises this approach, for instance a person's legs may be slightly apart and one a little bent to signify movement, but ultimately there is not much sensation of motion.

### John Brack

**Compare and contrast this work by John Brack with one or two of Noel McKenna's works on display.**

**Consider colour, line, composition, subject matter, theme and style**

Right: John Brack, *Self portrait* (1955), oil on canvas, 81.5 x 48.3cm, Purchased by the National Gallery of Victoria in June 2000 with the generous assistance of the National Gallery Women's Association.

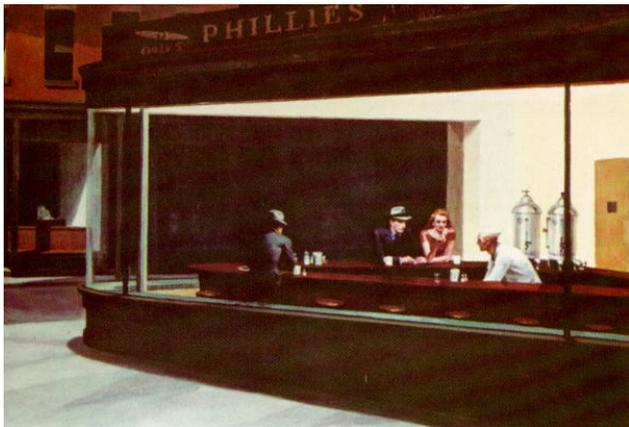


## Edward Hopper

Like McKenna, American artist Edward Hopper portrayed a variety of scenes, particularly sparse landscapes and interiors. Hopper's street scenes were often near-empty, with just a couple of figures depicted.

**Compare the works below to McKenna's. How do you think McKenna has been influenced by Hopper? What similarities and differences are there?**

**Items to consider include composition, identity of characters, and the use of paths and directional lines.**



Left: Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks* (1942) Oil on canvas, 30 x 60 in., The Art Institute of Chicago

Right: Edward Hopper, *Approaching a city* (1946), Oil on canvas, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C

**The work on the below left is by McKenna and the one on the right is by Hopper. Compare and contrast these 2 works.**

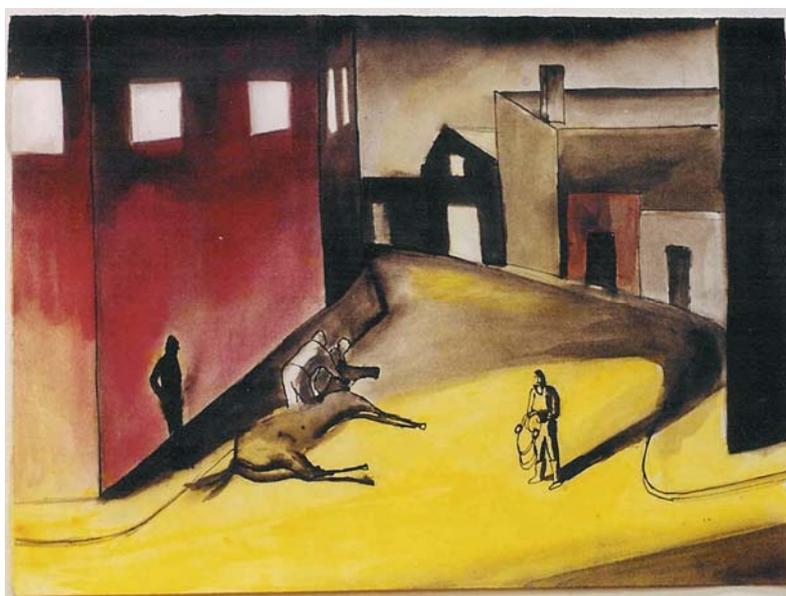
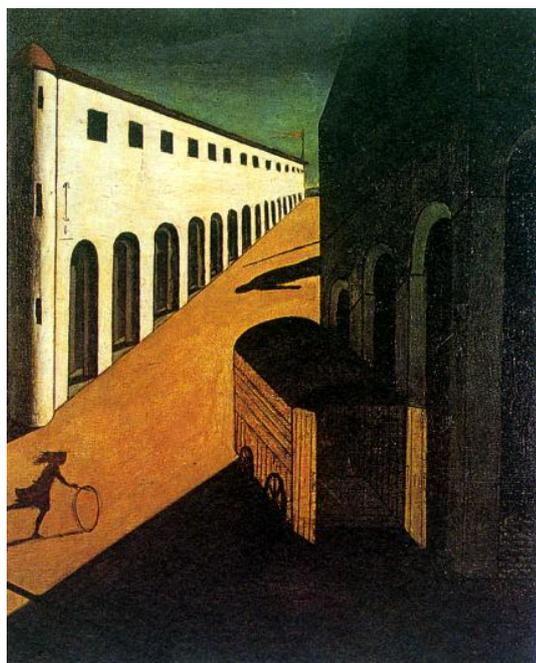


Left: Noel McKenna, *Woman at window with baby* (1986), Oil on canvas, Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Edward Hopper, *Room in Brooklyn* (1932), Oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

## Giorgio de Chirico

De Chirico is a key figure in twentieth-century art, not only for what he produced, but more importantly for his development of ideas and the subsequent influence he has wielded. De Chirico helped to develop *Pittura Metafisica*, an early precursor to the Surrealism movement. His work dealt with metaphysical concerns and often contained enigmatic emblems. Stylistic devices such as dark archways, trains moving through the landscape, heightened perspective and partially backlit subjects are all features of his paintings, and have subsequently reappeared in numerous artists' oeuvres. His influence on McKenna is evident in works such as *11a.m.* [1987], *The alley way* [1988] and *The oval* [1988].



Left: Giorgio de Chirico, *Mistero e Malinconia di una Strada (Melancholy and Mystery of a Street)*, (1914), Oil on canvas, 88 x 72 cm, Private Collection

Right: Noel McKenna, *The alley way* (1988), Coloured inks, 29 x 39cm, QUT Art Collection.

Teachers' Resource compiled by Simone Jones, Curatorial Officer (Public Programs) with the use of text by Gordon Craig, Curator (Collections and Exhibitions) and Curator of *Somewhere in the City*.

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<sup>i</sup> Watson, Bronwyn. *TV artists look at life in the living room*, The Sydney Morning Herald, Reviews, 29 July 1988, p.12.

<sup>ii</sup> With thanks to Professor John Urry, Lancaster University, who presented the paper *Cultures of Cosmopolitanism* at the *Sites of Cosmopolitanism* conference organised by Griffith University's Centre for Public Culture and Ideas and held at the Queensland College of Art, 6-8 July 2005. In his presentation Professor Urry spoke specifically about the *Earthrise* photograph, its importance and its ongoing symbolic use and appropriation.

<sup>iii</sup> Drury, Neville. *New Art Three*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1989, p.124.