



Janice McNab, 'Green are our Valleys' (detail), 2008. Oil on board. Courtesy of Doggerfisher, Edinburgh.

JANICE MCNAB

TRUE ROMANCE

Janice McNab is a Scottish artist based in Amsterdam who approaches painting in a very particular way.

Her choice to paint could even be misleading. Although she is very obviously interested in painting and the end works that she shows arising from her practice take the form of paintings, photography and other means of image production are of just as much interest to her. In fact, they are crucial to the processes of her practice.

Janice McNab is very strongly preoccupied with the nature of "reality" and "truth" and how we experience images in these terms. Working from research photographs that she takes herself and, no doubt, spending a lot of time looking at and thinking about other images, she engages in a kind of research that seeks to find the exact building blocks of the kinds of images we understand to represent "the real". Whether this distillation is to merely deconstruct and understand or to subvert and manipulate once the essential parts have been defined seems somewhat open. It depends on her particular focus at a particular time and it has shifted from one series of works to another.

For example, in her most recent series we see her returning to themes and motifs arising in much earlier work - the 'Chocolate Box Paintings' - in which discussions about 'realism' are very much in the foreground. In the intervening period however, she has produced a number of works in which the discoveries about representation and image construction, though still key, were not as overt.

She might be seen to have produced two main groups of work after the Chocolate Box series and the flotation tank paintings that first brought her attention as an artist. These two groups can loosely be described as a series of interiors where the 'view' has somehow

been masked, by a curtain, by darkness, and a second series of works examining how landscapes, particularly those with elements of grandeur of the kind exulted by the Romantics are dealt with by image makers, including the contemporary mass media.

These sound like very different sources, maybe too far apart to be reconciled in the current works, but the intersections become very clear when taken as a whole. McNab's new work does manage to conflate the main strands covered in a number of preceding series. There is a way in which this artist is the weariest of viewers, untrusting of any image until she has made sense of it for herself. The same concentrated research whether applied to the intimacy of the domestic or the widescreen vistas of nature constantly show her refusal to be simplistically seduced or unquestioningly accepting of what appears to be real. The flat, hard surface of MDF onto which she usually paints with a tightly controlled palette serves to create paintings that though often beautiful, are hardly ever pretty. These are not paintings that fade delicately into the background even when they address what we seldom notice in our peripheral surroundings.

This is evident in the paintings that represent details of interior views easily overlooked: curtains; a section of a conservatory in the rain; a bedside digital clock glowing in a darkened room. And yet, in the very process of an intellectual practice, of approaching the subject matter in a structured way, the resulting paintings take on a subjective quality that is allegedly absent in their prosaic content. Her depictions of a crypto-documentary everyday life appear to be a cognisant act of creating emotion-laden narrative potential.

It is undeniable that many of the works almost vibrate with the kind of emotive presence that only a kind of nakedness can bring. Reduced to their bare essentials, these representations - or arguably even misrepresentations - of everyday domestic elements and interiors, in theory, should say nothing, be pure documentary. Yet they seem to scream with a pent up rage or sink, forlorn and depressed, at the realisation of a life not lived. These are close-ups of the interiors of a Bergman or a Mike Leigh Film, the torrent of human emotion smothered beneath a pile of mass-produced textiles in a dimly lit room. The people, it seems, are no longer present. Nor do they need to be for us to understand the traces of their possible emotional states.

There is a strong sense in these works of the failure of glamour, luxury or even hope to pierce the banality of everyday life. The garish curtains in "Morning" speak not of a Las Vegas found, but a Las Vegas lost. The undeniably false nature of the beach in an indoor leisure centre talks more about being beached than reclining in sun-kissed comfort on a beach. These are works in which the longing for a better place is acknowledged, but also the grimness of its failure to arrive in a million suburban lives is contemplated. There must be more to life than this. But not here, not yet. Pity.

In such works McNab almost seems to be proving the point that no image, once it becomes that - a picture - can be devoid of meaning or subjective content and that the very act of selection and construction inevitably builds layers of meaning, intentionally on the part of the artist or purely through the projections of the viewer.

However, the real irony is in their formal layer. As pieces of visual research into painting, they also exist as beautiful objects. If we narrow our focus and look to the surface, avoid the potential emotive narratives, we find beautiful patterns and lines realised in paint. It is this aspect that enables us to see that one of her other concerns is the nature of painting itself. She often appears to be engaged with

finding the point at which photographic realism and abstraction are interchangeable.

A similar interchange between abstraction and realism takes place in the 'volcano' paintings from the 'Philosopher's Ridge' series, works drawn from both a physical research trip to Mt Etna and a review of various tourist and National Geographic-style media representations of the natural majesty of the volcano. The familiar discourse about the nature of two-dimensional and three-dimensional image construction in painting after Modernism is overtly present in many of the works. Flat surfaces of paint, appearing at first like abstract patterns, reveal themselves to be credible ciphers for aerial or long-distance photography, figures of varying sizes forming the coordinates by which our eyes understand these initially abstract works as representational.

The works in this series, however, are very different from the domestic paintings. The inevitably implied ongoing presence of human beings that exists in the domestic paintings is absent. Who could live here? People can visit only temporarily. Herein lies more than one irony. These are the paintings - some of them at least - in which we actually see the humans that hover, although unseen, as an implied presence in the thwarted interiors. And in introducing these human figures, McNab, intentionally makes a connection with Romanticism's legacy.

The landscapes to which the Romantics turned their attention, like McNab after them, constituted an intrinsically unsuitable terrain for human habitation after industrialization. Far from civilisation and, above all else, far from the means of making and managing capital, these constituted the solitary and last free terrains of the human soul. Yet, the ironic thing about their spectacle when depicted in paint is that it seems to demand relational qualification. As Caspar David Friedrich learnt, a wild romantic landscape soon loses its power as spectacle as a static image.



Janice McNab, *The Philosopher's Ridge*, 2007. Oil on board. Courtesy of Grusenmeyer Gallery, Durlie.



Janice McNab, 'Pure', 2007. Oil on board. Courtesy of Grusemeyer Gallery, Deurle.

To paraphrase a cynical English wit, after fifteen minutes, any landscape, no matter how beautiful, is just another landscape. And the smart Romantics soon learnt that the insertion of a few well placed figures with carefully thought out scale relationships to what else was being depicted is a useful device for maintaining the visual stimulus that reads as spectacular and awesome. McNab's tiny figures traversing a treacherous volcano ridge or, as in more recent works, a landscape derived from the architecture of a plastic chocolate box tray, serve this same function. Furthermore, through making the connections with her far less purportedly naturalistic representation, we are made mindful of the staged nature of reputedly natural terrains in the Romantic tradition.

A further aspect of her 'Philosopher's Ridge' series is that it makes connections between Romanticism's tradition of framing and staging the spectacular and the contemporary equivalents as deployed by popular media such as travel and tourism literature or even scientific and geographic journals, for example National Geographic. The same motif and scale relationships that we see deployed in Romantic painting are frequently used in the selection of images by such magazines, often exploring the possibilities of technologies available much more recently than Romanticism such as bona fide aerial photography. In two wry works, Janice McNab offers us 'Centre-Fold' and "Double-Page Spread", views of Etna billowing fumes in which the crease between the pages is meticulously replicated on each painting's surface. It is at once a faithful rendition of a magazine's ploy to inspire awe and wonder in the reader and an artist's pointing us towards the similarity with tactics used by the porn industry. The connection made, things fall readily into place. Spectacle rather than realism is, after all, a key feature of much pornography.

Of course, when Janice McNab deploys these devices in the context of a real location such as Mount Etna, the implications and meanings are substantially different compared with those arising from the new series in which similar devices are deployed to depict figures

in an overtly imaginary, possibly even hallucinatory, landscape. It would, for instance, be neglectful to not consider the overlaps with Surrealism, the sensibilities of which appear to be resurfacing in the work of a number of contemporary artists.

Whilst her work might have a very different immediate appearance, it shares a number of features with the visual languages of the Surrealists, least of all that Surrealism intrinsically relies on the recognisable and daily, the credibly realistic, in order to make its unreal and disorientating worlds have an impact. McNab's chocolate box landscapes may not be painted with the airbrush preciseness of many Surrealist paintings; nonetheless they are instantly recognisable as chocolate box trays, just as the people are recognisable as people. It is only because they are recognisable that we can identify this as an unreal world in which the juxtaposition cannot possibly be misunderstood as standing for 'realism' or 'naturalism'.

In these more recent works by McNab, as by other artists exploring a kind of revision of Surrealist imagery, the viewer is presented with a number of problematic questions, perhaps the most immediate of which is exactly where they should locate this work within value systems of taste. Surrealism is, undoubtedly, one of the artistic movements that is blighted by a complex set of quandaries relating to values, social and art world hierarchies that are the outcome of its own descent into kitsch. The point at which Surrealism became an assimilated orthodoxy immediately presented problems for its claim to ongoing Vanguardism. Could 'The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie' possibly remain radical once the bourgeoisie appropriated it? Could any thinking art lover take certain visual languages seriously once album covers, sci-fi airbrush artists and pop videos had appropriated them? Surrealism exposes the inherent snobberies and old value systems still impacting on the art world more than any other movement.

Undoubtedly bound up in this is the fact that Surrealism was a hugely influential cultural force. It is retrospectively a popularly embraced movement in its ultimate trajectories, even if its origins are of little interest to the popular cultures that have taken from it. And therein lies the crux of the problem. It remains at the centre of unresolved struggles over the notion that for something to even be able to become popular it must somehow be intrinsically flawed, devoid of some special kind of mechanism that ensures that it can only ever be truly loved and appreciated by an elite cognoscenti. It sidesteps the traditional rules defining who is allowed to be an arbiter of taste.

Janice McNab's new body of work wades straight into this debate, even if we barely see it coming. Not only does it fundamentally challenge us to consider the nature of image construction itself - the nature of realism and what is not real - but also to consider our own values and ideas of (good) taste in how we approach painting. It's not that she has never addressed these issues before: numerous works from the various series showing interiors select details in which the taste displayed in the particular interior is 'bad' according to aficionado standards or at least open to question. But, with the new series, she almost seems to be rattling our cages to observe the response.

Despite the methodological approach to examining image construction, what usually transpires with McNab's work is that nothing is as it initially seems. Maybe this is even a form of demonstrative illustration of the findings of her research: nothing is what it looks like it is.

In the early series, for example, the chocolate boxes ultimately proved devoid of the sickly sweet promises of gratification they have traditionally held for women. The flotation tanks - offering our consumer desires a quick fix of relaxation - turned out to be a place of claustrophobic anxiety; a potential existential gas chamber. Yet both series offered easy access for their measurements as manifestations of contemporary visual art, their intellectual provenance and style presenting clear anchor points even when their hard, flat surfaces were an intentional denial of hedonistic pleasure.

By contrast, her new series in which the elements of all preceding work are conflated are arguably her softest and most pleasing works. At least to the first glance. Here, the palette, though not frivolous, has darker warmth than the cold icy quality of previous works. In some of these paintings there is even the potential for joy as figures clamber over lush green fantasy landscapes, roaming freely or gaze, like pioneering astronauts, from behind helmets on undiscovered off-worlds. And then comes the crunch.

For, unlike other works that merely ask us to consider our position as viewers, these works demand that we have to consider our positions as connoisseurs. In much the same way that Glenn Brown treads a careful line to ensure that our horizons of good taste and kitsch are thrown into confusion, McNab, through the vernacular of Surrealism, leaves us exposed and having to take a position. This work is far more about the social construction of images than any preceding series as we are forced to work out what it would mean to like or not like it, to embrace it or reject it. To some extent, her skill as a painter that has always previously been shown, especially where the work twists between depiction and abstraction. Now it has been reigned in to serve the greater end. It takes a backseat in order to ensure that we meet the work as fully formed images rather than a puzzle that we can pry apart. This work is not a riddle requiring contemplation, but a question demanding an answer.

When we enter one of her landscapes, do we actually find the immediate liberty it promises or, do we find that, left with so many supposed choices and freedoms, it can be very difficult to take a stand? KP

Janice McNab lives and works in Amsterdam. She has participated in solo and group exhibitions in a range of international commercial galleries and institutions. These have included The Changing Room, Stirling; Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh; The Essl Museum, Vienna; The Fleming Collection, London; Vleeshal Museum, Middelburg and The Museum Kunsthau Baselland, Basel amongst others. She was included in the 2004 EAST International Norwich, curated by Neo Rauch and Gerd Harry Lybke and the 2005 Prague Biennale 2.



Janice McNab, 'Chairs I' (detail), 2002. Oil on board. Courtesy of Doggerfisher, Edinburgh.