

# THAT WHICH PLEASES

Lucy McKenzie:  
*Quodlibet XXXIV*,  
2014, oil on canvas,  
71 by 51 inches.

Images this article  
courtesy Galerie  
Buchholz, Berlin/  
Cologne.

**Lucy McKenzie, whether making paintings, films or clothing, has a knack for using marginalized genres to shake up the status quo.**

by Kirsty Bell

LUCY MCKENZIE'S *Quodlibet XXVI (Self-Portrait)*, 2013, depicts a printed copy of an e-mail pinned to an otherwise empty corkboard, both painted in a hyperrealistic trompe l'oeil style. Dated Feb. 4, 2010, and signed by the artist, the message is addressed to two curators (whose names have been crossed out) and protests the attempt of an artist (whose name has also been crossed out) to appropriate photographs of McKenzie taken by photographer Richard Kern. According to McKenzie's e-mail, the artist plans to make works about her and the performance artist Cosey Fanni Tutti for a show. The letter declares:

If this goes ahead, these pornographic pictures of my body and the indirect link to Cosey are being put to use by a male artist who bypasses the women involved to just transact with the pornographer. This would be an example of the inherent sexism and lip service to 'discourse' that I position myself against.

McKenzie, laying claim to the content rather than the authorship of the images, objects to the artist's choice to deal only with Kern—man to man, so to speak—ignoring any interest the women might have in their own representation.

Framed as a self-portrait, this defiant statement touches on the complex issue of appropriation—the borrowing and reworking of preexisting material—at the heart of McKenzie's work. Looking back, she has described her decision as a teenager in the late 1990s to pose for soft-core porn photographs as part of an early shaping of an artistic identity, which included control of her own sexuality; she inserted her own image into the public realm of magazine porn. Though she wasn't aware of Cosey Fanni Tutti's work at the time, retroactively seen, these images of McKenzie seem related to Tutti's radical performances from 1973 onward. Tutti's long-term investigations into female sexuality and desire often took place in the pages of porn magazines or in adult films, where she performed various erotic scenarios as a means of examining sex as a commercial product.

McKenzie does not reject appropriation per se but rather what she calls "the colonization of subject matter."<sup>1</sup> She cites the recent high-profile court cases accusing Luc Tuymans and Richard Prince of plagiarism as examples of the reuse of image material at the expense of unacknowledged primary producers, who do not benefit from high art's lucrative value. The fine line between appropriation and plagiarism is all about integrity, she implies, and how artists acknowledge or reinterpret their source material.

COMING SOON  
"Lucy McKenzie,"  
at Galerie Buchholz,  
New York,  
Mar. 18-Apr. 23.

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See Contributors  
page.





Wieder Kuchere Gold für die UdSSR  
Die Rhythmusgymnastinnen der UdSSR haben bei den Olympischen Spielen in Seoul wieder Gold gewonnen. Die vier Athletinnen haben mit ihrer Leistung die Erwartungen der Zuschauer erfüllt und sich gegen die Favoritinnen aus der DDR durchsetzen können.



Oliga Korbuz: Aus Tränen wurde Gold  
Die Rhythmusgymnastin Oliga Korbuz hat bei den Olympischen Spielen in Seoul Gold gewonnen. Sie hat mit ihrer Leistung die Erwartungen der Zuschauer erfüllt und sich gegen die Favoritinnen aus der DDR durchsetzen können.







View of McKenzie's exhibition "Inspired by an Atlas of Leprosy," showing *Quodlibet LX (Violet Breche Desk)*, on floor, and *Map of the Dutch East Indies*, on wall, both 2015.

THE CHOICES THAT Glasgow-born McKenzie has made since she began exhibiting in 2000, at the age of 23, often appear idiosyncratic. Take her early interest in mid-20th-century Scottish muralists, for instance, or fin de siècle architecture and interior design, or her recent turn to artisanal painting techniques, adopting a labor-intensive procedure at odds with much of the smart and light-fingered post-conceptual painting around now. The title of McKenzie's ongoing series "Quodlibet" refers to a type of trompe l'oeil painting in which everyday items are laid out as if at random, pinned on a board or arrayed on a tabletop. The first works in the series, painted in 2011 after McKenzie had completed a course at a school for decorative painting in Brussels (where she lives), were "portraits," in which she represents friends and associates only with accumulated notes, documents, images and objects—identity as a sum of incident and predilection rather than a physical likeness.

McKenzie's self-conscious use of this willfully anachronistic painting style is just one of the many forms of appropriation at work in her multifarious practice. She is not only a painter but also a writer, fashion designer, interior designer, musician and, most recently, filmmaker. *The Girl Who Followed Marple*, a film

made for her 2014 exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, saw her collaborating again with Richard Kern (who directed it) and indulging her love of the crime fiction genre. In the film, she plays Miss Marple, Agatha Christie's aged spinster sleuth, who through the course of the 10-minute work grows younger until she finally inhabits—and gleefully displays—the body of a 36-year-old. The film showcases various items of clothing designed and produced by the fashion company Atelier E.B., which McKenzie has run since 2007 with Edinburgh-based designer Beca Lipscombe. It is hard to tell if the film is a promotional clip masquerading as a detective story, or a detective story masquerading as a promo. Throughout the diverse disciplines McKenzie engages in, collaboration is key. Among her past group ventures are the record label Decemberism and the 2003 artist salon and speakeasy Nova Popularna, which she opened for a month in Warsaw with Polish artist Paulina Olowska.

As for painting, McKenzie describes it as a means to an end—a vehicle put to use in a larger discourse. The "Quodlibet" series (the Latin word means "that which pleases"), with its self-conscious illusionism and studious perfection, seems to perform





the role of “painting” in a theatrical sense. There is nothing accidental about these works’ mix of casual appearance and controlled intention. The series, which now numbers 61, has moved from portraiture to themes such as literature written by women and ideological architecture. Each work operates like a visual essay or a system of note-taking, in which diverse references are reproduced in incredible detail but the necessary connections between them are left to the viewer to make. Their clear articulation of the relation of source material to final work (the opposite of Tuymans’s or Prince’s suppression of their sources) results in a still life dense with symbolic value and declared intent.

LIKE THE “Quodlibet” paintings, for which the viewer must piece together clues, many of McKenzie’s exhibitions function like detective stories; they are held together by a fictional premise that nevertheless asks pertinent questions about contemporary modes of address. Her interest in crime novels led her to a writing course at the New York Crime Fiction Academy, and those studies inform not only *The Girl Who Followed Marple*, but also her recent exhibition “Inspired by an Atlas of Leprosy,” at Galerie Buchholz

in Berlin. On the floor above the gallery in an elegant 19th-century apartment, McKenzie staged an elaborate mise-en-scène that appeared to be the live-work space of an unknown protagonist. (The space is usually used as a private showroom.) Waiting room, office, living room, bedroom and servants’ quarters were all supplied with paintings made by the artist; they either hung on the walls as one would expect or were incorporated into pieces of furniture designed by McKenzie. Every surface of every piece of furniture was a meticulous painted representation: the rich marble of a massive desk, complete with trompe l’oeil renderings of a coffee cup and smart phone; the wooden doors of a bulky wardrobe; the magazines scattered on a waiting room table; a dressing table with various cosmetics. Thus, while the entire apartment functioned as a kind of extended portrait of a mysterious unidentified person—some cultural entrepreneur with a penchant for grand materials and ostentatious furnishings—it also evoked a strangely encrypted hierarchy of painting. What was the difference between the artworks hanging on the walls—impressive colonial-era maps of the Dutch East Indies in the office and waiting room; generic small-scale abstractions in the bedroom—and the kind of decora-

Above left, *Quodlibet LIX (Secretary’s Desk)*, 2015, mixed-medium installation with trompe l’oeil painting.

Above right, *Quodlibet LXI (Cerfontaine Coiffeuse)*, 2015 oil on canvas stretched on MDF, copper and mirror, 56 by 38½ by 20 inches.





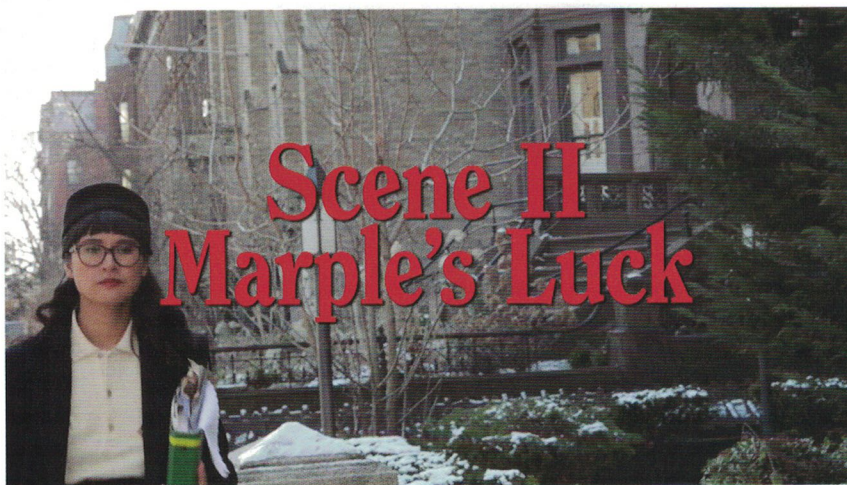
Detail of  
*Quodlibet LX*  
*(Violet Breche Desk)*,  
2015, oil on canvas  
stretched on MDF,  
shell and mixed  
mediums.





Detail of  
*Quodlibet LIX*  
*(Secretary's Desk)*,  
2015.





Two stills from *The Girl Who Followed Marple*, 2014, video, approx. 10¾ minutes.

Opposite top, exhibition model for “Inspired by an Atlas of Leprosy,” 2015, mixed mediums, 67¾ by 65¼ by 1¾ inches.

Opposite bottom, Atelier E.B.’s collection *The Inventors of Tradition II* on view at Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, 2015.

tive painting used to create the trompe l’oeil surfaces? Are the modes of representation inherently at odds? By taking the trompe l’oeil method to an insistent extreme (the finely delineated wooden surface of the wardrobe in particular seemed maddeningly detailed and superfluous: it would be so easy to simply use a piece of wood!) while bringing different kinds of painting into such sharp juxtaposition, McKenzie destabilized relations between form and content. Here the notion of painting as a means to an end took on almost manic overtones.

In keeping with McKenzie’s focus on appropriation, the exhibition can also be read as an elaborate manifestation of this methodology. All the images used—whether the pictures tacked on pin boards or the magazines on the waiting room table—were poached from other situations; they are “ready-made” still lifes, found and photographed in doctors’ waiting rooms, on community notice boards or friends’ dressing tables. The map paintings are based on early 20th-century murals McKenzie came across in the Collège néerlandais, the Dutch hall of residence at the Cité internationale universitaire de Paris. Representing the Netherlands’ colonialist expansions in terms that appear immediately questionable to 21st-century postcolonialist sensibilities, the maps present the issue of the “colonization of subject matter” in geographical form.

On the floor below, in Galerie Buchholz itself, a dollhouse-size model of the mise-en-scène upstairs was displayed in a side room, effecting an uncanny, miniaturized double take. The main gallery space, meanwhile, hosted the new Atelier E.B. collection of clothing and jewelry, titled *The Inventors of Tradition II*. Loosely based on the usually male domain of soccer, as well as the question of Scottish national identity (a topic of growing significance, given the recent referendum on Scottish independence), the collection features chic knitted soccer shirts and unusually elegant sweatpants adorned with Greek key designs, as well as a selection of finely crafted silver jewelry. Atelier E.B. is dedicated to supporting local artisan traditions—in this case, Scottish silversmiths and producers of cashmere—and discovering methods of production and distribution other than mass marketing or High Street retailing of luxury fashion brands.

In both the showroomlike setup of Atelier E.B. downstairs and the fictional staging upstairs, the experience that an art gallery usually provides was all but eradicated. On one floor, the role of painting was displaced and the viewer became a reader enlisted to decode an enigmatic scenario; on the other, the shoplike function of the gallery and the viewer’s role as a consumer were made explicit.

While Atelier E.B. is effectively a catchall for McKenzie’s collaborative projects with fashion and design, it is also another form of appropriation, an inhabitation of a genre, like crime fiction, pornography or trompe l’oeil painting. By adopting marginalized forms of creativity rather than the mainstream, canonized disciplines—crime fiction instead of literature with a capital L, or decorative painting rather than post-conceptual abstraction—she aligns herself with an avant-garde that has traditionally existed on the boundaries, a less-observed realm from which to agitate. Clothes, architecture, interior design, post-Communist Eastern Europe, post-punk music, crime fiction, friends, even cats—all the things that interest Lucy, “that which pleases”—are allowed into a practice defined by its porousness.

Though her means are often oblique, McKenzie addresses legacies of cultural discrepancy that still linger around the cultural production of the 21st century, hangovers from the century before. The woman positioned as active subject rather than passive object comes up repeatedly; sexuality, like artistic identity, is something to be self-defined and owned. McKenzie’s is a lived-out feminism, and she uses her art to articulate it, through thematic content, working alliances with other women and staging her own sexuality.

In an essay about the influence of Martin Kippenberger, McKenzie wrote: “He looked at what worked for him as a man and made it in turn work for art.”<sup>2</sup> Switch the gender of the subject, and the sentence could easily apply to McKenzie herself. ○

1. All McKenzie quotes, unless otherwise noted, from a conversation with the author, October 2015.

2. Lucy McKenzie, “Now That This Has Been Done It Will Never Have to Be Done Again,” in *After Kippenberger*, Vienna and Eindhoven, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien and Van Abbemuseum, 2003, p. 191.

Lucy McKenzie’s “Inspired by an Atlas of Leprosy” and Atelier E.B.’s *Inventors of Tradition II* collection appeared at Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, Nov. 20, 2015–Jan. 23, 2016.



