



10:27 hrs. Mausoleum of Queen Astrid in Laeken

# LUCY MCKENZIE A DAY SPENT PHOTOGRAPHING THE NEW ATELIER E.B. COLLECTION

---

---

Text by  
Jessica Gysel

Photographs by  
Katja Matter

Posted on  
18.11.2015

---

---

**Lucy McKenzie—an artist of many trades and a gifted storyteller—shares her house with two elegant cats, Kingo and Dagny, both Burmese breeds, who sometimes turn up as models in her work. An oasis of peace and tranquility, the house is so typical for Brussels. Facing one of the busiest boulevards in the city, once the door is closed, you enter Lucy La La Land. It's early in the morning, and I'm joining Lucy for a day of shooting the lookbook for Atelier E.B., the clothing label she started together with designer Beca Lipscombe in 2011.**

Born and bred in Glasgow, Lucy settled in Brussels almost ten years ago. What started out as a three-month stint in 2004 became a long-term stay in 2006. When asked what drew her to Brussels, she says it was her love for Belgian new beat and record labels (such as Les Disques du Crépuscule), its fashion, its singular architecture, its comics, textiles, second hand culture. And, initially, also her fascination for some of its (fashion) designers. She tried to reach out to them, but quickly realized there wasn't

much of an interest. Nevertheless, she continued to use the city and Belgian culture at large as an ongoing inspiration for both her work and her world (in Lucy's case, they perfectly collide). She loves a quiet walk around the Floréal housing estate in Watermael-Boitsfort as much as a bumpy bike ride through Molenbeek.

Lucy is a woman of many differing interests, dwelling at times in the past, but always ready to match this with a contemporary counterpart. Citing among her influences writers Patricia Highsmith, Edith Wharton, Beatrix Potter, and Daphne du Maurier ("What's attractive about their work it that when you read it, you're shocked that it's so good! Most of these women writers are considered genre fiction, not even real 'literature', and the assumptions people make about the quality of that kind of writing means its power and subversiveness is a real discovery. I think the experience of reading *Wuthering Heights* is much darker than *Bataille* or *Sade*, and men basically laugh in my face when I say that."), designers like Madame Vionnet ("She was the one who invented the *bias coupe*. If you

take a piece of fabric and turn it 45 degrees, it falls in a different way, like a party dress. She also had such great working conditions; she had to force her women to join large strikes because they never felt the need.”) and Beatrice Porter. She also loves contemporary critics such as Beatriz Colomina (“She links architecture and sensuality. There are a lot of artists interested in architecture in Belgium, but it’s always so design oriented. I think about architectural terms, which have to do with gender and power, just like Beatriz”)—a typical choice for a woman whose first sexual memory was looking at a drawing by Erté.

When I ask what made her decide to become an artist her deadpan reply is: “When I got my period. I changed very quickly with puberty, and immediately became interested in alternative culture, sexuality, and politics.” As a teenager, Lucy was impressed by her father’s cool-looking female students (he was an art teacher at the Glasgow School of Art), in the class of 1980-something. “They were just so cool. Like goddesses with their big hair and their boots and 1950s dresses. I just loved them. But for me art was linked with the social. I always wanted to be part of something that involved other people.” Later she would become involved in the burgeoning Scottish riot grrrl scene, playing clarinet, synthesizer, and guitar in several bands. Lucy enjoyed the time while it lasted, but there was a hunger for a more intellectual challenge. Slowly but surely she started to build her by now not only impressive but most of all distinctive and idiosyncratic body of work, all the while on the lookout for collaborations. When she met the Scottish (fashion) designer Beca Lipscombe in 2002, what started out as a playful adventure eventually turned into Atelier E.B. (Edinburg and Brussels), a clothing label that perfectly balances on the thin boarder between fashion and art. Beca and Lucy are currently working on their third collection, deliberately dismissing the current must of a minimum

of six collections per year (The Inventors of Tradition, their first collection, was presented in 2011, followed by Ost End Girls in 2013). The new collection is called IOTII: The Inventors of Tradition II and is loosely based around 1930s constructivism, Japanese tracksuits, and why Atelier E.B. thinks tracksuits (and sportswear in general) contain as much folkloric fantasy, and a comparable level of sexual charge, as any kimono. “We sponsor the Leith Athletic Ladies All Ages team, and in theirs, or any other football shirt, the effect on the opposite sex is remarkable. It works better than a push-up bra.”

While Lucy develops her own exhibitions for museums and galleries all over the world, she creates an autonomous space for Atelier E.B., taking advantage of the network and opportunities the interest in her solo work offers. The formula works rather well. Each collection comes with a series of unique *paravents* (Lucy takes care of one side, Beca the other) that are then sold separately as fine-art objects—their sale through a different economy facilitates future design work.

When we leave Lucy’s house to go to the first location for the shoot, I notice a typical Brussels landmark, the Gesticht voor Kunsten en Ambachten, on the opposite side of the road. Lucy tells me she loves the idea of the building still being there, and daydreams of taking a class to become a dressmaker. She already made a similar move in 2007 when she enrolled in the Ecole Van Der Kelen Logelain, an intense (forty-six hours per week!) six-month course in decorative painting. She lost 7 kilos in the process and barely had any contact with her friends, but did have a great experience. “It was amazing to realize how much more you could actually do than you think when you have to work to somebody else’s criteria. Only then I realized that as an individual and as an artist, you can really underestimate how much you can achieve.”



10:45 hrs. Mausoleum of Queen Astrid in Laeken

We head off to the first location, the mausoleum of Queen Astrid. Lucy’s fascination with totalitarianism and colonialism is often a topic of discussion among critics of her work, but she doesn’t really understand what all the fuss is about: “We still live in a culture that completely celebrates money and the idea of breeding. Of course all my politics are on the Left, but there’s still so much rich culture that came about through the actions of other side. There are a lot of things that come from a bad place, that were built on the back of slavery, but that are still beautiful. I love this combination of rational and irrational, of private and public, transgressive and conservative... It’s always about a kind of balance. Power structures and combating the male ego on the one hand, and, on the other, I don’t want to

deny my own libidinal pleasures, like looking at pre-photography *Vogue* covers.” Lucy’s a strong feminist, and very much at ease with her body. Aged eighteen, she went to a lecture by New York’s 1980s underground porn photographer Richard Kern at the National Film Theatre in London, asked questions from the audience, spoke to the artist afterward, and they stayed in touch. Lucy says he was the first person she ever met who had an e-mail address. She posed naked for him on several occasions. “You know, he’s a voyeur, this very nice, shy guy who’s there with his camera for anyone who wants to show off their ass. He’s not Ryan McGinley and his definitely not Terry Richardson. He’s really interested in his subjects, and I think he’s really aware of the cultural shifts in relation to porn.”



10:38 hrs. Mausoleum of Queen Astrid in Laeken



16:44 hrs. Waiting room of De Ooievaar in Ostend

After a little hide-and-seek, we spot the mausoleum. Apart from some people walking their dogs, no one seems to care much about this hidden jewel of a landmark, tucked away in the gardens close to the Royal Greenhouses in Laeken. Our model—hair done all 1930s, in white gym shoes and a light blue work suit—blends in seamlessly with the surroundings. The whole setting shines a perfect light on Lucy's aim to, "Toy around with the idea of how histories are reexamined. And make room for the marginal stories and actors." Or, in this case, a story built around the tracksuit, a central element of the new collection. "Yesterday I was thinking about the Stepanova work suit. She was Rodchenko's wife, the Russian artist, and in the 1930s she made a work suit for him with the ideal that clothing should be functional. I have a copy of it, made by adidas like about fifteen years ago. It's a very constructivist symbol. Then

thinking about the people who were remaking this sport suit, how it became mainstream and was eventually made in China, is that there's already a whole narrative about the history of style contained in just this one thing."

We head back to Lucy's to prepare for the next location. I notice a basket full of healthy snacks. "I just recently discovered the joy of cooking, Ottolenghi was a great help for that." It's a surprising thing to hear, coming from someone who seems to be endowed with so many skills. The snacks are delicious, and the bag also contains a complete meal of fish and baked potatoes. Our dinner.

On the way to Antwerp we pass the Atomium. After driving by so many times, it still works its magic on Lucy. "I had this great experience last summer of cycling around Laeken and the



18:01 hrs. Waiting room of De Ooievaar in Ostend



18:34 hrs. Bathroom of De Ooievaar in Ostend

park. It was a really nice day and there were lots of people. I didn't go up into the Atomium, but I bought a DVD about Expo 58. I stayed up really late that night watching hours of people's Technicolor home movies. So the next day waking up, I really felt like I had physically been on the site in 1958. Almost like a cyber experience."

Upon arriving in Antwerp Lucy realizes that she's forgotten the most important bag—the one with the shoes in it. The plan is to take the second picture in the St. Anna Tunnel, another typical Belgian landmark, which links the left bank to the center, and was built in 1931. A Saturday afternoon shopping crowd invades the narrow tunnel, making it impossible to take pictures anyway. Lucy decides to go back to Brussels to pick up the bag, and then head on to the next location, Ostend, Lucy's second Belgian hometown.

Last year she bought De Ooievaar, a perfect example of a 1930s art-deco townhouse. A product of the Flemish rightwing of the time, the house was commissioned by a doctor for his family and designed by the Flemish modernist architect Joseph De Bruycker, whose collaboration with the Nazis meant his archive was subsequently destroyed. The house is big, and still reverberates with a National Socialist "healthy mind in a healthy body" atmosphere. Lucy's slowly renovating the house—she acquired it after a plethora of interested parties backed off because the house is a monument and can't really be changed. So a no go for one prospective buyer's plan for a Chinese restaurant.

While taking pictures at several locations in the house, Lucy starts to construct fantasies around the people who lived there, the untold stories. She already bought a pair of Adolf Loos chairs to fill in some of the missing links. I ask her what she thinks of all the current developments in digital technologies, since she seems to turn

toward all things analog. "What I want now is just for somebody to digitally print me a copy of the Horta house. I want to be able to go to every single world fair that ever happened via a kind of 3D headset, and go inside every pavilion and look all the objects. That's what I want."

We talk a bit further about modernism. Lucy reveals she isn't particularly interested the big names of the period, and finds her inspiration more in the slipstream of major narratives. "I was never a big fan of Le Corbusier. And even Duchamp, although I think he did very interesting things, I would never cite him as an influence." She's also very aware of being caught in the current moment's focus on design. "The last thing I want is to just by accident get sucked into just this kind of design-culture art. That's not what I find interesting at all. I have to keep really responsive to the clichés and to the easy readings of these aesthetics. Even though I have a real attachment and interest in certain subjects, behind it all is something extremely dispassionate and conceptual."

When night starts to fall we drive back to Antwerp. As it's a Saturday night, the party talk is definitely on. Lucy tells me she doesn't party as much as she used to, but still enjoys nights focusing on dark wave, new wave, and new beat, such as the infamous Remember of Past events. This time, the St. Anna Tunnel is as good as empty and the last shoot is done within seconds.

On the way back to Brussels, Lucy tells me she realizes she's in an incredible position of freedom. But that, at the same time, she wants to shake up the way her work is being read. "I made some work recently where instead of doing a trompe l'oeil, which is this tiny detail, I just made digital prints and put them on canvas. Any time I feel like the work is being fed into a certain narrative, I want to kind of destroy that." And lucky for her, she says that it's never damaged her career. As long as shaking up the



20:19 hrs. Staircase of De Ooievaar in Ostend



22:13 hrs. Sint-Annatunnel in Antwerp

narrative is built into the narrative then it's fine. She says she loves this about Mike Kelley's work, and that in this sense there is no such thing as a failed work. And Lucy doesn't regret much either. I guess she's too busy looking ahead and continuously creating her own world. "I live in this kind of fantasy. I have the house in Ostend, I'm doing these weird hairstyles, there's no need to dream." And perhaps this is not so strange for a girl who grew up in a very normal household, with parents who never bought a single lifestyle magazine. "My parents were no snobs. I didn't go to a private school. My interest in this fantasy life certainly came out of some thing more exotic." As we approach Brussels by night, I ask her if her artistic reveries are still inspired by the city. "You know, I like this discourse of being together with friends, doing something interesting and making something together. That's how I want to spend

my time and that's the way I get stimulated. Not by looking for the unknown in the city." But Belgium has undeniably left a mark on Lucy, and even if there hasn't always been interest in her work from the local scene, elements of Belgian culture are definitely woven into her practice. "I presume there's something Belgian in my work. Because it jumps around a lot, the styles kind of change, I'm not so interested in this consistency thing that so many artists are in to." Over the last years, she collaborated a lot with Lucile Desamory, a Brussels expat artist and filmmaker, who currently lives in Berlin. They dream about making a TV series together. They're currently looking into funding and would love to film not only in Belgium, but also in the Congo. The beginnings of a new narrative. Again.

[www.ateliereb.com](http://www.ateliereb.com)