

Lucy McKenzie (°1977) is a Scottish artist who lives and works in Brussels. She moved from Glasgow to the center of Brussels in 2006 and settled on one of busiest boulevards of the city.

McKenzie works with different mediums ranging from trompe l'oeil paintings and installations to curating, writing and publishing. Together with the Scottish designer Becca Lipscombe she runs Atelier E.B., a fashion label which uses local production methods and alternative forms of distribution and display. The label staged an exhibition in 2018 which has traveled from the Serpentine Gallery and the Lafayette Anticipations in Paris to GARAGE in Moscow in 2020.

I visit her on a Sunday in her studio, where we spend the morning talking about her artistic journey.

Lucy tells me she grew up in Glasgow, Scotland, where her father was a lecturer in art history. How she, as a teenager, looked up to his female students and was impressed by their coolness. It's a reason why she chose to attend art school herself, to emulate their individualities.

As a first question, at what point did you identify yourself as an artist, and not just an art-student anymore?

It is difficult to locate exactly what the moment of this change was between an art student and an artist. When I was a student, my social life was a lot outside of college: I did music, which meant I had to travel a lot for concerts and practicing. And I had a big social life, so I'm not sure if I already made a distinction between the two at the time.

I knew so many people who were self-taught, they never attended university or art school. While I was studying, people didn't worry about the grades they got at art school. Students didn't care about that kind of thing. It's a sign of being a bad artist anyway if you're overly worried about this kind of 'proof' of your abilities on paper. As an artist you should be wary of external measures of value and instead develop and on the ideas you have yourself.

Of course, in some other countries people study for so much longer and the blur between being a student and a professional is much more fluid. I taught at the Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf, where some students sold work at the year-shows, and were already represented by galleries.

But to answer your question: I considered myself an artist the moment I got my period. That's when I really felt like one.

Did the idea of being a woman then resemble the idea of being an artist? Did one activate the other?

I guess it was more the transition to adolescence than womanhood itself. From a very young age I had the urge to communicate, to work with other people and to express myself. When I was fourteen I was playing music and writing fanzines. Coming out of a music or underground scene, you think that making posters, for example, is artistic. I didn't even consider the difference between high and low culture, because it's just another form of communication and expression.

With this as your background, is there something you would consider as your first 'artwork'?

I don't think there's one specific work that I consider in that way. Many people want to emerge onto the scene fully-formed as the perfect artist, but it was the incremental little things I did, such as making posters, fanzines or music that form the basis of my artistic practice. Making lots of mistakes and made ideas along the way.

An artwork that was really important for me, were the sketches I made in 2011 of cats in dresses. I was making illustrations for the fashion label [Atelier E.B.] and I made portraits of cats wearing the clothes. I remember this really felt important to me. There's this idea that as an artist you have to tap into your deepest desires or your subconscious, that you should express something very personal. At the same time by showing that to the world, you render yourself vulnerable. You want to make artworks which fit a certain idea or criteria of something legitimate, serious, acceptable to an art world. When I made the cat drawings I really thought this was exactly the art I wanted to make. In a way it feels so self-indulgent, I mean 'cats in dresses', that's the ultimate!

I thought a lot about what it would have been like to make these drawings as a student. For instance, around the same time I was reading the biography of Roxy Music where Brian Eno mentions that during his time in art school everything was about Cybernetics and performance. I wondered what it would have been like to come there, especially as a young woman artist, and say: 'here is my art, here is a cat in a dress!'. This would have been very problematic for some people. Probably, it would have been dismissed as 'frivolous', 'childish' and 'girly'. But when I made these drawings I really felt that I was living the best life.

In the end, they were used as fashion illustrations. When you're working in fashion you're working with different criteria of judgement and that's what I want to play with. I made these drawings at a point in my professional life where anything I did was considered in relation to other things, other discourses. I'm less vulnerable now than if I would have drawn these in art school for example. Especially if you're a young woman artist who wants to play with forms that directly antagonize the idea that you have to make things more polished, neutral or masculine to be taken seriously. I fear that young women artists who want to work like this, will either be misunderstood or dismissed. Therefore, I feel it's important to mention these drawings as key pieces in my art practice.

Were there specific artists that influenced you, or that you were looking at during your student-time?

Crucial to my art education were the several young women professors who taught at the school. As I said, my father was a lecturer in art history at the Glasgow School of Art, for which I wasn't accepted as a student. So instead, I went to a smaller art school, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design in Dundee, which I really enjoyed. It was interesting to attend this smaller art school where there was no existing underground scene. You had to create your own context to make things happen, you had to do everything yourself. At the same time however, it was a really good school: there was a fantastic library, great workshops and really nice people there.

But the fact that there were these young women teachers was really important to me. One was the painter Victoria Morton, the other was artist Cathy Wilkes. I really valued their presence at the school. I got to see how they were treated because they were so different: they were fashionably dressed and practiced music. For me, they embodied an alternative to an old, male painting scene. That's what mattered: to have a connection that I could understand, to have tutors to identify with.

In school you were taught a course in art professionalization, where you learned to apply for grants and funds for example. How did you reflect on this as an art-student? Did it demystify your idea of being an artist?

I think it was such a great idea. In Scotland there's no private market for art, there is no culture for private collecting; Scotland is too poor. So, we were taught to be pragmatic, if you want to survive as an artist you have to do as much as you can by yourself. There's a reason that Scotland wants to be independent. It's actually a different place, psychologically and politically.

We learned how to document and write about our work. During our studies we were already applying for grants. It is so important to understand that to be able to survive you have to rely on a different set of resources. If you just sell your work through one gallery, if that's your only access to a livelihood, it becomes a very stressful relationship.

It opened up the world: there were specific grants for conferences, travelling, Erasmus, etc. This felt so empowering already, to be twenty years old and to be able to go to Poland for instance, with a small grant to meet artists there. I don't think it demystified, or maybe it did, but I don't think there is any reason to mystify the artist position in the first place.

Looking back now it seems like such a lucky time, when there was still public money for small projects. It's a much worse situation now for young artists with all the cuts.

In the past we have talked a few times about craftsmanship. It's a very important factor in your artistic practice as you use many different skills sets: sewing dresses, making scale models, painting faux-marbles and faux-bois, etc. When discussing the idea of craftsmanship you mentioned Charles Rennie Mackintosh. You grew up in Glasgow, where his architecture is omnipresent: he designed the Glasgow School of arts. How did you respond to the architecture of your home town, did it influence your work?

First of all, it's a strange situation that the building where your dad works happens to be this world-famous modern architecture masterpiece. Also, the high school I attended was designed by a famous Brutalist architect called Basil Spence. Glasgow growing up was a dirty, poor and beautiful city with many layers of history; it's filled with neo classicism, gothic and modern architecture. In the late eighties a whole industry arose around Mackintosh. He was re-discovered and became a tourist draw. You could get t-shirts, mugs or umbrellas. I really liked his designs and it was really interesting to witness first-hand how those modernist ideas were filtered down into a tourist mainstream, how his work was translated to a 'lower' form of culture.

Secondly, I have spent much time in the Glasgow school of art, running around in the basement or the attic. I was there on Saturdays, when no one was around. It had a profound impact on my expectations of space and architecture.

In 2006 you moved to Brussels. Nobody did that at the time. Did you flee from Scotland or was it an attraction from Brussels?

It's very normal that at some point you want to move away from your hometown. You keep meeting the same people and if you are ambitious, you run out of road. I came to Belgium because there were many things I was interested in that came together here: music, arts, comics, architecture, fashion, etc. I visited for three months to explore in 2004 and realized this was the perfect place for me. If I were to live in New York for example, I would just be overwhelmed with the sense of guilt that I wasn't enjoying all this culture and friends that the city was offering. Brussels is ideal, there are interesting things going on and it's still small enough to have time to work and not have FOMO.

Did you find it easy to infiltrate in the artistic network here in Belgium, coming from Scotland?

I had these strange spontaneous encounters when I was here for the first three months. I went to openings by myself and got an email the next day by someone saying "Hi, you're Lucy McKenzie. You're in Brussels, let me take you to dinner". Its a small city, you are just meeting people and if you're an artist with a certain profile, people are interested in you.

But I don't know if I have infiltrated the artistic networks here. Because of the cultural differences and the language barrier I'm uncertain whether I actually understand this place. Sometimes I feel as if I just live here without really contributing to the scene. One day, I would like to do something big here in Brussels. I feel a bit disconnected to the city, so perhaps I should organize it myself.

For young artists looking for advice on how to connect with people, the main thing is to be interested in people and their work. When I was teaching I would have students complaining that nobody was interested in their work, when they were only interested in themselves. You should ask questions, visit studio's and be interested in something other than yourself. And of course, you have to be self-organized; that's the thing I learned in Scotland. You don't wait around to be chosen, you organize things yourself.

Is that why you often operate as a curator in your work, and in relation to fellow artists?

Definitely. For me, art is always linked with the social. When you feel a connection with someone you can sit around and complain that things don't happen or you can manifest it yourself. It's very common that I collaborate with my close friends in exhibitions. I get so many offers to do things, way more than I could ever fulfill on my own. Of course, I feel incredibly privileged to have that. But on the other side, I don't want to do ten solo shows. It's much more fun to invite people and do something together.

It's also a way of exploiting the resources or access that I have in the artworld because of my reputation or my profile. Collaborating is a way to share this platform, maybe because somehow, I feel guilty about it. There are so many people I think of as great artists who don't have the same kind of access. So, if I share it I feel it becomes less problematic. I recently had a show in the Serpentine Galleries (Atelier E.B., Passer-by), to which I brought all these friends from Glasgow. Instead of doing a solo show there, I curated a group show.

There are so many gatekeepers in the art world. I don't know if some of these artists would otherwise get this opportunity, unless that people who do have access share them. I have a ambivalent relationship with the artworld as a whole, so to operate in a way that is ethical naturally involves using these opportunities.

These ethical conditions also reflect on the fashion label: Atelier E.B. stands for Edinburgh and Brussels, It's the label's identity to solely work with local productions. Looking around in your studio you can see that it's designed in response to your work. But self-design and self-organization are also common themes in your practice. How do think about the idea of total design or the Gesamtkunstwerk in your practice?

The set-up of my studio is something that grew organically, definitely with the work in mind. The stairs make it easy to lift paintings up and down. All those years ago, the first thing I thought about in relation to how I would like my studio to take shape was the Mackintosh gallery inside the Glasgow school of art. There is something about its proportions, the way the staircase goes up, the skylight. It reminds me of that space which is so beloved to me and is now a ruin.

It's fascinating to think and read about the Gesamtkunstwerk, but at the same time I'm extremely skeptical for those dogmatic ideas of how people should live or how they should dress; ideology often suppresses normal life. The fashion label is a combination of intent and pragmatism. It exists only in a way that's achievable for us, because of certain restrictions such as the manufacturing, which has to happen in an ethical way, but also in relation to the time we can devote to the label.

We want to make clothes that we and people like us, people who work in the creative field or just working people, can wear. Especially people with cold studios from Scotland and Belgium. I looked a lot at fashion in the Soviet Union and the ideas of the constructivists. Pragmatism has to interact with these dogmatic or idealistic ideas of how people should behave. For example, I always loved that Rodchenko's worker suit didn't have a zip, so he couldn't pee. Yet, it's held up as an example of amazing utopian work wear. But of course, a

designer wouldn't think of that, only an artist would. A designer has to think much more practically. I place all these different kinds of criteria and restrictions on the way I work, no artist wants complete freedom. You want to set a template or some rules for yourself to play around with. That's how interesting things get made, by different kinds of restrictions.

Your studio and your personal living space are located next to each other. How do the two spaces communicate?

I worked for many years without having a studio at all, which was also an interesting situation. If I had an exhibition I had to work in the gallery to realize it. So, you have to be really organized and planned, but it's a good antidote to the idea of the studio as a liminal space where you could do whatever you want.

Now I have my studio in my home. I don't have a border between my private life and my working life. I don't feel either of them need to be protected, it's a joy to mix the two. And if I need to take a break I can simply close the curtains, and the switch in my head.

We are now in your living room. Would you consider this space an extension of your studio, or is this part of your living space reserved for more personal encounters?

If you're invited through the door, there are no special secret chambers anymore. It's purely practical, my library is here. When I work with my assistants it's important for me to stay around. It would never happen that I outsource the work and they are expected to just go on with it. I have to stay connected to the work, I have to stay within the same room, and of course I have to be sensitive to when they're tired, if the work is boring or difficult. We work in such an intense blitz, like a period of a month or two. On this small scale of being one individual and having two assistants, that has to stay a sensitive relationship.

Speaking of working with assistants. How do you relate to the idea of the studio as a factory (the renaissance, Warhol) or the studio as an ivory tower?

To be honest I mostly hear really negative stories about the studio as an art factory. For instance, there is this British artist who had a room full of people making his paintings for him, and he obliged them to constantly change paintings so that nobody could ever claim ownership. Or artists who are being told to make artworks for other artists and then it turns out it takes twice as long but they are expected to realize it with the same amount of money they were promised from the start. When you're dealing with art, there is such a huge margin of profit. If you compare the costs of materials to make a painting with the amount of money it's sold for, then it would seem totally mean to not treat or pay your assistants well.

I don't follow a specific model of an artist's studio, as with anything else I just do what feels right to me. But it's an interesting topic. Los Angeles, for instance, is a city which is very difficult to navigate through, it's very private. So, there are a few art schools that became a meeting place for people. The artist's studios there, like the Mike Kelley-studio and the Paul McCarthy-Studio have become like surrogate art schools. I think this is a really nice idea.

The studio is an interesting space. When my assistants and I are working we listen to audio books, which makes it a very personal and odd space.

Do you have the need to appropriate your studio when you are working with assistants? Are you in charge of the choice of audio book for example?

I've worked with my assistants, Alison and Josephine, for almost seven years, so the way of working has grown organically. I always have to check, because I know that my taste in listening or reading can be a bit extreme. I basically could listen to murder-rape-porn all day. I found the whole #MeToo situation really intense. There was so much discussion around it on the radio and the news. Normally you would think 'oh god the news, it's invading our lives too much', but then this thing happened with Harvey Weinstein and suddenly the news is talking about exactly the thing that you cared about for years. It's unbelievable to hear these conversations in the mainstream news.

I think we got really used to listening to these intense and sometimes completely crazy, trashy paperback stories like 'Flowers In The Attic'. I'm lucky that my assistants don't mind listening to either total garbage or heavy hardcore things, but I had to check. Because sometimes the things we listen to are quite sexually explicit. We go through phases of listening to certain writers or themes, which generates a lot of discussions.

The use of cultural phenomena, or this mix of so-called high and low culture, often appears in your work; you named an exhibition after 50 shades of grey. What have been important influences?

A curator asked me recently why I use such anachronistic material, why I'm always working with old stuff. You would never question the logic of a director who's making a period drama, because a period film is using the one step of removal to talk about the present. You set a film in past but it's actually talking about contemporary issues. Take for example 'The Crucible' by Arthur Miller. It's a film about the Salem witch trials, but actually it was a reflection on McCarthyism and blacklisting. It's such a flexible and useful device to talk about the present through this hall of mirrors. I'm interested in doing the same. It's the idea that you take culture and you transform it and you filter it. You cross-pollinate it through these different forms, genres or materials to make something new.

When I was a student I really loved the work of the group Art & Language. They made this portrait of Lenin in the style of Jackson Pollock, to, of course, make a comment about Jackson Pollock and all the art instrumentalization as propaganda during the Cold War. And then they would take the painting of Lenin in the style of Jackson Pollock and make a painting of it being made in the studio. Of which they would take a photograph with flash so all the texture shows, and then make a new painting of the texture. All these different forms working together, I found that so inspiring.

When we were working together in your studio you mentioned the work of some fiction writers, it's a topic which came up quite often. For example, the exhibition '50 shades of grey', you like references to literature. Could you explain your interest in this?

I like the idea of dissolving. Artistic structures are there for a reason, and they're also there to be destroyed. There's a logic that underpins different kinds of artistic expression, and I find it fascinating to study these structures. And some theory writing has the drama of fiction; the architecture theorist Beatriz Colomina, for instance, has a huge influence on artistic thinking, writing and approaches because she's a complete visionary, she's making the same discoveries and links that artists do today in research based practice.

I discovered a correlation between detective fiction and decorative painting. Both are procedural, systematic and have a perfect veneer that hides all the labour. I'm not interested in painting for its own sake, I'm rendering images. Especially ones that I've found, to say something else. I was talking to a curator recently who felt that my work had more in common with certain new conceptual photography than it did with contemporary ideas of painting. I like the work of writer Kathy Acker, for example, who appropriates Dickens, or different kinds of writing. I want to transform the same move into painting. In the end a painting isn't just about what you look at, it's a conceptual launch pad. There's no reason it can't behave like writing. I use this layering of styles and mediums as a way to speak about them

You write the texts that accompany the exhibitions yourself, do you see this as an inherent part of your artistic practice?

I write about my own work for many reasons. First, to order my own thoughts. When I begin a certain cycle or project the way I work is very intuitive. I'm attracted to certain themes or materials, and I think it's important to stay open-minded and to see where things go. To not have a specific reason to do things. But at a certain point in the process you start to reason why you want to put things next to each other and they reveal their own logic to you. So, to do the writing at the end of the project, as simple as a press release, is a way to gather all those thoughts. In a way it's a bit schizophrenic when one side of your brain does things organically and the other side works out why. It's very self-reflexive, almost psycho-analytical. Secondly, I write about my own work because I'm simply the only person that can really say what I mean.

Luckily, my dad is involved in the editing process of my texts. I want to write something legible. It's not merely an artistic kind of writing, it's about communication, that's what it's there for. You want people who don't have a high level of post-grad art education to know what you're talking about, that's why I try to use inside references or quotations quite carefully.

As a last question, I ask Lucy about things that would be indispensable in her studio. We take a tour through her atelier where she shows me some objects which she uses for her painting practice, as well as inherent elements of the studio and some decorations. Each has a particular story of its own.