

On the Beach: Lucy McKenzie

Lucy McKenzie in conversation with Marie Canet

Villa De Ooievaar is situated not far from the beach of Ostend, Belgium, in the region of Flanders. The beach is a long strip of white sand that opens upon the North Sea. On the seafront, the low-rise buildings facing the sea have replaced the singular constructions of the Belle Époque. Large format photos hang under the columns of Thermae Palace that invite visitors to imagine how the beach was before its complete restructuring during the period between the two World Wars. Behind the low-rise buildings sits the city, and in a contemporary residential area we find the villa De Ooievaar, a modernist villa built in 1935 during the interwar period by the architect Jozef De Bruycker. He was a member of the Flemish Nationalist movement ‘Verdinaso’ and part of the Flemish SS during WWII.

In 2014, the Scottish artist Lucy McKenzie bought this house and worked on restoring it, based on her historical research. Here, she develops a vocabulary of appropriation, which she conveys essentially through imitation and identification. Her interpretation of the lifestyles of the previous owners and the functioning of the villa as well as her furniture design work—which attempts to merge the formal and pre-existing color tones—produces a space sequenced in a temporal strata. The house is a study of identity and history. McKenzie, who lives here occasionally, uses the space to create ambiguous and relational arrangements.

We are sitting in the living room on a round, ochre sofa designed by the artist, in agreement with the curved lines of the bay window. The seat is not very comfortable. The finishing touches are rudimentary. I’m unsure if I can actually sit on this thing or not. Close by, two brown pedestal tables with steel tubular supports are decorated with the same tints and in the same style as a nearby original, embedded cupboard. Fixed into glass surfaces of the pedestal tables are trompe l’oeil paintings realized by McKenzie, each representing stages in the passage of life.

Marie Canet: Lucy, can you tell me something about the people who built this house—about the organization of the rooms and the design choices?

Lucy McKenzie: There were bourgeois Catholic nationalists in the countryside—let’s say “provincial”—in the heart of the establishment. As a doctor’s family, they would have been this kind of respectable figure. They had many kids, thirteen in all. We must remember that Belgium never really had any kind of large metropolis. The art made here never really rivaled the art coming out of Paris or Berlin. In the 30s, if you were a sophisticated intellectual or an artist living in Belgium, you would get everything from Paris: clothes, furniture, culture. The French-speaking bourgeoisie of Belgium were indelibly connected to France. They had, in fact, a lot of interesting kinds of complicit agreements—like, for example, in the fashion industry. In France, people would go to fashion shows in order to make copies of the work of Vionnet, Lanvin, or Chanel. But you couldn’t do that if you were from France. So in France, people had to sneak in and to make secret copies. However, if you were from another country—like Austria, Germany, Belgium or America—

you could pay a fee and go to a Vionnet fashion show, make sketches, and take them home. You then had the right to make your version of what you had seen. And, of course, Belgium was a great producer because people would come from France and buy these copies that they couldn't really get in their own country. It's as if Belgium designers were saying, “We deliberately don't develop our own fashion industry because we want to be your number one counterfeiting client.” It was also in this context that this villa was built. The house has a lot to do with nationalism. I spoke to a friend yesterday, and he said to me, “Yes, of course it seems strange today to hear the Flemish describing themselves as victims because they seem so powerful now, and they dominate the culture. But their culture is a tool of cultural war.” In fact, it wasn't until 1968 that you could actually take classes at the university in Dutch. It wasn't so long ago that the Flemish people established that their courses, their education system, and their official documents were to be bilingual. So it's still close enough to be painful for a certain generation. It seems quite strange for us now to see a display of nationalism such as this.

MC: They were Catholic?

LM: Yes, Catholic. All these questions about nationalism is something like we see now in Europe. There is a Pro-European nationalism and an Anti-European nationalism. In Scotland, we have a nationalism that is absolutely left-wing. In Flanders, there is this specific kind of history and in the 30s, if you would have been part of a certain class—with money, tastes, and ideas—you wouldn't feel like a part of the French-speaking cultural scene. That's why a lot of artists and designers looked to Germany with Bauhaus or were looking to Holland and De Stijl and were creating their own styles, and this house is definitely a reflection of this tendency. The blurring of national, political, and artistic ideas marks Flanders at this time, pushing the avant-garde into collaboration with the Nazis. Villa Ooievaar synthesizes avant-garde principles to fit the needs of a conservative bourgeois family.

MC: You told me the owner was a gynecologist?

LM: As far I know, yes, but I'm not totally sure.

MC: Thirteen children. The house is massive. It was surrounded by fields. Over there is a tennis court.

LM: Yes, but this was never a place where you would have parties, for instance. (Lucy shows me pictures from a book dedicated to modern interior design.) In Brussels, a couple own a house that is called the Van Buuren, built during the same period. It's open to the public. They have a lovely art collection. They had a piano where Satie would play for Christian Dior and the Belgian royal family. But this is not that kind of house, and as far I can tell, these were not those kind of people. This was a baby factory. This was a family.

MC: Can we visit?

LM: Sure. (Here we are in the living room, the main room at the back of the house, with the huge garden just over there. The room is very big, curved and open, with big windows opening onto the back garden. The floor has grey tiles. The room is divided into two, by means of a long sofa, which creates separation between the sitting room and the space dedicated to the fireplace. The sofa that Lucy McKenzie designed faces this original one. The room connects to the dining room

by means of two sliding doors. Lucy opens a wall cabinet. Inside are an impressive number of keys, maybe thirty in total. On each one, the functions of the spaces of the house are indicated. These are all the keys of the house and it is actually a useful guide to know what is in each room and where.) Here is a dumb-waiter, a small lift for taking things up and down. I assumed it was used for food, to pass meals up to the roof or something. But, of course, it was not. It's written here “dirty clothes,” which means it was used to bring the wet clothes up to the top floor to dry them. Like a factory.

MC: Just practical.

LM: Yes, but not just practical, because there is a kind elegance. Look at this, just above us. (There are UV glass bricks embedded into the terrace floor of the balcony to filter the light down into here. The idea was to get sunlight coming right down from the terrace into the living room. It's very elegant. We enter in a dark blue room without any windows. Here is the kitchen. There was a big window here, which has been closed off.) The sink was here. Here, the lift. You have the basement here to store food and charcoal and all these types of things. This would have been a very central part of the house, cozy; the children would have played here. Here you have the stand for the telephone. I don't think this room here would've been directly connected to the kitchen. I think this other room here was where you sat during the day with the children, listening to the radio. This room is somewhat more intimate in comparison to other rooms, which are more formal. If you look here (she shows me a plan of the whole house), the veranda and the sitting room are there, as was the dining room and this kind of more representative space, rooms for guests. Here it's untidy with all the toys strewn about. Here the office, the waiting room, examination room, and dressing rooms.

MC: So his office was attached to the house?

LM: Yes, the patients would come in through here, and he could come in from there, through this door connected to the house. The kids were one floor above, in a row of rooms like a boarding school or something of this sort. It is a mystery how the house functioned. You see, every key has a number so it's also about control, order, efficiency.

MC: Rationalization of the living space.

LM: It's also indicative of the period, I guess. You have nature, and sunlight, hygiene...

MC: These are some kind of fascist characteristics, aren't they?

LM: Well, it was a tendency of this time that was certainly very important to the Fascists. (Lucy takes samples of the original colors and displays them on the walls.) This is the dining room. This table is the original one. I think the furniture had been made later because you can tell it is more traditional, and I heard that his wife wanted the dining room like this, more traditional. That was her taste, and that was her world. So if you imagine that blue, that grey, that green. It's so colorful! I can't wait to have all the colors on the walls.

MC: You can do that. Paint the house again?

LM: Of course, they are the original colors.

MC: Where is the main entrance?

LM: Just here. And yes, it is impressive. It's not a contradiction, but this entrance is across from a private room and the hall of a cinema, a kind of ocean-liner aesthetic mixed with this kind of sentimental retro shield design in glass. Above the staircase, the windows are engraved with three big shields. At night, their designs are projected on the adjacent walls. On one window, the image of a frog draws reference to the husband, Depuydt, which means “toad.” On another window, the mysterious face of a North African man, Moorish, is part of a shield with twelve ducks, a reference to the wife's maiden name, Van Izegem; it is the town of Izegem's coat of arms. On the last one, a boat with the three keys of Ostend and the lion of Flanders. And there are these beautiful colors. That was the green (taking samples). Originally, there would have been a door here. The man would enter the house through this way.

MC: What is it?

LM: I think it was a kind of fountain (Lucy taps out a rhythm with her fingertips on a metal stick: to ta to ta to ta ta). The water falling would have made this sound. The clock is also very impressive. (The clock chimes just at this moment. It is 3pm. The sound is soft, sophisticated, and keeps resounding until it becomes absorbed into the surrounding ambience of the house.) You can see, we are in an empty room, but you don't need to add anything else—apart from some objects in the cabinet, some pictures on the walls. So you understand why there is so much potential here to create an art project. For an artist, it's the complete opposite of a neutral blank space.

MC: You have to react.

LM: Yes, you have to react, to acknowledge the artist decoration. You can work with it, or you can work against it.

MC: You have to take a position, in regards to this history. Last time we met, you said you weren't bothered by living here surrounded by fascist signs because you said, “I'm not concerned with the symbolic.” So you are in a kind of iconoclastic position toward history and art, although what interests you first of all is the how aesthetics and ideology work together.

LM: Firstly, I want to clarify what the fascist signs are. The logo of the Youth League of Verdinaso is still etched into the glass of the house's windows, and I speculate that the owner of the house knew the architect through Verdinaso. While Flemish Nationalists will argue that an association with the Fascism is a step too far—we all know that the far-right always have and still operate like this, decrying their victimhood, and nitpicking the symbolic. I don't overvalue the symbolic; I think that leads to clouded thinking. But I have to analyze why certain things are so problematic, like this dramatic symbolism. You can't ignore that all these images have this dimension, but that doesn't mean they are evil. The only thing that is evil is a discourse, which doesn't acknowledge their power and tries to separate design and politics.

MC: (Lucy switches the light on.) It's not a light; it's a disco ball. It's not a lobby; it's a club. And here, are these the original colors?

LM: Yes, and as you can see, it's much more subtle. It's very colorful with the marble and the stained glass. (This part of the house has no windows to the outside; it's like a theatre. On the

back side, you have those massive windows, with all the light and the view on the garden.) This room is an entrance hall. Here, you have to see and be seen. It’s made for putting on a public face. Can you imagine, I bought this house on a realtor’s website? Someone wanted to convert it into a Chinese restaurant.

MC: The house is protected?

LM: Yes, it’s completely protected. You can’t touch the main structures of the house or make any changes.

MC: That’s why you work on the furniture of the house?

LM: Yes, I want to make things in the style of the house.

MC: Why is it so important to copy this aesthetic?

LM: Because I learned so much copying other people’s styles. When you make a copy, it’s not just a copy. Dutifully, you have to think, “How did this person make it?”, inhabit their methodology, and then create a copy channeling their way. In decorative painting, you are working for money, so you work efficiently. Like DeBruycker, my furniture is not of a super high quality; it is very well-made, but not like Ruhlmann or something, less fine.

MC: Are the archives of the house inhabited?

LM: No. The idea is to create artworks from at least three different motivations and follow the avant garde vision of the architect—so, for instance, producing geometric abstract paintings for the walls in the style of Victor Servranckx, or to go with the taste of a type of provincial bourgeois, so making much more tame décor, landscapes, or seascapes. Or finally just following my own whim for what I want to see decorating here.

MC: Or you own reality.

LM: Yes. (We are going upstairs). Here, there would have been a door going to the children’s bedrooms. Here, the bathroom, a big bathroom. You can go from the shower directly to the terrace. Here’s the lift for dirty clothes. Here is the old heating system. What I don’t understand is that usually when you lie in the bath, you lie here, and you are facing the door connected directly to the public space. The entrance is just there, down the stairs. It’s nice, but a bit odd. I can’t imagine the mother lying in the bath with a cigarette and a radio...

MC: Well, I think it was to be available at anytime.

LM: It’s true. Here’s another bathroom, but it’s only for the babies. (There is a baby-sized bathtub.) It’s connected directly to their bedroom and you have to pass through it in order to go to the adult bathroom. And here, connected as well to the bedroom, is a big room, which I guess was for the youngest ones. This would have been like a nursery. It’s got a sink. (Lucy has installed her studio in this room. It smells of oil paints.) In this house, I want to be surrounded by a lot of people. The idea is that you can take a building that was made for a strict patriarchy and fill it with a lot of different kinds of people coming and going, to make a kind of flexible space and not the secret

space dedicated to the family. (In the parent's room, now Lucy's room, there is a bed on a raised platform. Above it are windows decorated with representational stained glass. Besides the bed, the original furniture includes a piece of furniture with a red, gold and blue mirror and a set made in the same style that has been adapted to the angles of walls. The room opens out onto the terrace. A bed for the baby, typically modern in red, black, gold with tubular metal rods, is positioned near the bed.) I don't spend much time in this room. These pieces of furniture were made by the architect for the family in their first house. When they came here, they brought them with them. The architect made this to go with it. Here on the wall, you have a representation of Saint Marguerite, the name of the mother. Saint Marguerite is the patron saint of childbirth. Here's Saint Camillus, the patron saint of doctors; this doctor was also named Camillus. And there's also this funny detail here. You have to lay down on the bed to read, and at the head of the bed, under the lamp are the words “'t puiden nesje,” which means in local dialect “the pigeon's nest.” Depuydt and ' 't puiden' are very close phonetically, and with Depuydt being the first name of the family, this is the family nest. Here, there is a kind of little fridge in the bedside table. And there is something else you can only see from the terrace. It's crazy. It's a big window engraved with the symbol of the nationalist party, a bird with open wings. (We go out onto a big terrace.) From there, we have a view onto the garden. Originally the floor was ceramic. Here, you see the detail I mentioned about the fireplace with the blue light.

MC: It's subtle.

LM: I think it was their private place. You can see from here, the symbol I was talking about. From here you can see the bird of the Nationalist Party. It was socially important enough for him to engrave it on the glass window. (We go up to the next floor. There are three big rooms. Lucy wants to transform them to welcome visitors who could possibly produce things here. We go on the roof swept along by the wind of the sea.) So the arch is here, the tennis court there. It's huge. So the house is called De Ooievaar, which means “the stork” and apparently, I've never seen it, but on the feet of the bird, there is a ribbon where the names of all the children are written.