

MIRROR MODE

Maija Timonen on Lucy McKenzie at Cabinet, London

While a reflection can reveal something, it can equally serve to obscure or confuse. The erotic hinges on this tension between what is seen and what remains hidden, a tension that has been integral in shaping the different ways in which women have historically been conceived as sexualized objects of desire. Here, writer and filmmaker Maija Timonen offers some reflections of her own on Lucy McKenzie's recent show at Cabinet in London.

The exhibition “Giving Up The Shadows On My Face” by Lucy McKenzie is accompanied by a long press release, extending to the format of a leaflet, that details the intricate web of references contained within the show. This web is expansive, stretching from the tension between the private art market and state-supported artwork to fashion history and Surrealism. While the text does not purport to offer full exposition of the works' content, it is extensive enough to generate a sense of the exhibition as a puzzle, with each piece waiting to be slotted into its correct place (or at the very least to have its place recognized) by the viewer.

Having picked up this leaflet upon entering the gallery, this was how I first encountered the works: as slightly tainted by the ghost of a correct answer to any questions that might be posed by them. And indeed, the degree of detail in the works themselves does lend itself to such an approach. Spending enough time with them, the connections begin to make themselves known, and the show tightens around itself. Components of each piece reference and reflect each other, in some cases literally, as with *Still Life* (2019) and *Glasgow 1938/1966* (2017). The former is a painting incorporating a (painted) mirror, perfectly positioned to show the “reflection” of the latter painting, which hangs opposite – its angle and scale both painstakingly realistic. It

seems an odd thing to ask which of the paintings are real, and which are paintings of paintings, but the question lingers, contributing to a Russian doll effect.

Trompe-l'oeil is a consistent feature throughout the show. Much of what is on display is made up of illusions rendered in paint: picture frames, marble, even the pornographic photographs hidden inside a likewise-painted book, which lies splayed open on the painted-on texture of a table's surface. The pornographic offers an entry point to something beyond the claustrophobia of a hall of mirrors, allowing the show to transcend the tightness of its composition. Is a pornographic photograph still pornographic once it is no longer a photograph? Something of the documentary that the pornographic image relies on disappears with paint, and the trompe-l'oeil becomes a transparent illusion – a trick that fools no one. Suddenly the Magritte-like visual puns of the rest of the show, which knowingly nod at Surrealism, begin to breathe. They now seem to communicate something more complex about the erotic dimension of illusions, or the illusory character of the erotic.

Also painted onto the table is Irina Ionesco's controversial book of photographs *Temple aux miroirs*, with texts by Alain Robbe-Grillet, which contains erotic photographs of Ionesco's 12-year old daughter, Eva. In 1977, the same year the book was published, social services stripped Ionesco of custody of her daughter, who in later life won a court injunction forbidding further reproduction of the book (something the lifelike rendering of the book in paint perhaps alludes to and almost tauntingly plays with). The book's title echoes the show's feel of a hall of mirrors. By staying firmly shut, the presence of the book on McKenzie's painted table next to the openly pornographic



Lucy McKenzie, "Quodlibet LXVI," 2019



“Lucy McKenzie: Giving Up The Shadows On My Face,” Cabinet, London, 2019, installation view

images evokes thoughts of the forbidden and the allowed, but also more plainly of the interplay of the hidden and the revealed as that which structures any notion of the erotic.

This conceptual formation is repeated by the two mannequins in the space. One, naked apart from a pair of Czech gym shoes, sits on top of the table with the images of the books. The other stands in one of the two display cases in the middle of the room, dressed in a replica (crafted by McKenzie) of a 1933 couture dress by designer Madeleine Vionnet. The dress is translucent, giving a sense of nudity underneath its layers, an illusion undone by the more complete nudity

of the other mannequin, which points out (as does the gallery text) that a mannequin cannot, in fact, be naked. In a strange way, this brings to mind that the same is true of actual humans, too, at least in those situations in which their nudity is understood as having sexual overtones. To be nude in an erotic sense is about being dressed, even if in just some gym shoes.

The piece comprising the table with the pornographic books and the naked mannequin is titled *Quodlibet LXVI* (2019), a musical reference to a composition consisting of a playful mixture of different melodies, but also literally Latin for “whatever you like.” This gives one a sense of

the female body, even or perhaps particularly in its highly objectified and abstracted form, as an offering. From the now hidden but contentiously photographed 12-year-old naked body, to the open legs of pornographic images, to a generic approximation of a female body, it is presented as “something for everyone,” depending on your tastes and degree of depravity. The overall mood is solemn and dark, despite the surface playfulness. Also invoked is the thought that doing whatever you like, the absence of boundaries, is a freedom for some containing the absence of freedom for others, be it libertine, libertarian laissez-faire capitalist, or liberal democratic.

The bodies of the two mannequins in the room are different, but their heads and faces are the same. They have been modelled on a bust in the plaster cast workshop of the Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels and invite us to question what their standardized and specifically dated beauty has to say about the figuration of women’s bodies. Is “Giving Up The Shadows On My Face” invoking a loss of individuality in the face of the uniformity of beauty standards? The reconstructed Vionnet dress and the piece *Quodlibet LXVII (Dressmaking)* (2017–19) – a composition of the making of the aforementioned dress, including patterns and other tailoring paraphernalia painted onto the surface of a table like the books – brought to mind the Paul Thomas Anderson film *Phantom Thread* and the way in which its main character, a couturier, selects a woman as his muse and object of desire, not only for her perfect proportions to fit his dresses, but seemingly also because she embodies something of the rigidity of a mannequin. Anything that falls outside of these proportions – her clumsiness, her own will – is approached with

irritation by him, but tolerated as an insignificant inconvenience.

The titular piece of the show, *Giving Up The Shadows On My Face*, which occupies the back wall of the gallery space, acts as a kind of cipher for what lies beneath the surface of the exhibition, its subtext-made-subject matter: the hidden and the revealed. Cited in the gallery text as a reproduction of a mural in the main reading room of the Russian State Library in Moscow, it appears here covered over with plasterboard with holes cut out to reveal parts of it, making these fragments actually appear not like reproductions but interpretations. We are, it would appear, having scenes highlighted to us that remain hidden in the totality of the original, but this seems a playful conceit. These scenes show erotic gestures one doubts are present in the mural in the library. Unfinished and unpainted patches also give the sense that we are looking at a sketch, or a set of erotic fantasies. In these fragments, the thematic of eroticism that is elsewhere in the show hardened and bound, even suppressed, finds an articulation. There is agency in the imaginary license of these images. They also give form to the strange ephemerality of the erotic. The trompe-l’oeil or the outright lie of sex.

“Lucy McKenzie: Giving Up The Shadows On My Face,”
Cabinet, London, October 3–December 7, 2019.