

INTERIORITY

An Interview with Lucy McKenzie

Editorial

Mrs. Diack (2010) oil on canvas, 2 parts: 290 x 300 cm and 290 x 200 cm.
From the exhibition 'Slender Means', Galerie Buchholz, Cologne, 2010. Photo:
Galerie Buchholz.

Lucy McKenzie is a renowned artist whose work is exhibited widely in galleries and museums. While primarily a painter known for using traditional *trompe l'oeil* techniques in non-traditional ways, McKenzie's practice is capacious, encompassing sculpture, installation, text, and a fashion label—Atelier E.B—that she runs with her collaborator Beca Lipscombe. Interiors are a central concern of hers, not simply because of their aesthetic potential, but because of the politics written into their surfaces.

As a painter who employs *trompe l'oeil*, McKenzie's work has long been a loadstar for my own. In this interview, we spoke about why interiors and architecture became so important to her work, how we can read social codes in the layout of a house, and in what ways 'conservative' aesthetics can be radical and vice versa. We also discussed the Villa De Ooievaar, a

modernist house in Oostende with a murky history, that McKenzie bought in 2014 and has since been tenderly working into, creating new layers of fiction over the existing, paradoxical interior.

—Christopher Page

EFFECTS: Let's start at the beginning: do you remember how it is that you became interested in, and so keenly aware of, architecture and interiors? Was your childhood home an important site for your aesthetic thinking?

LUCY MCKENZIE: I think that the fact that my father taught at the Glasgow School of Art had a huge impression on me. I spent a lot of time there after hours. As a young person you could go and do art classes on a Saturday morning when all the students were away, so we used the studios. I was always snooping around and got to explore the attic and basements of the school. My high-school was designed by a British Brutalist architect called Basil Spence, who went on to do a lot of pavilions for world's fairs and embassies, and I have a memory of being aware that the school felt shabby and out of date but there was something about it that was really good: the volumes. I remember being disappointed when I got to art school in Dundee—Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design—because it was part of the modern university campus. The Harry Potter dream of being in this historical school was thwarted. Being around places that were designed by exceptional architects had a big effect on me.

McKenzie livingroom with family friends, 1980s. Photo: Ray McKenzie.

And then there was my parents' home. My parents were always interested in

art but you would never have seen a design or interiors magazine in their house. Their house contained an odd mix of artworks they had bought from, or been given by, students at the art school. Some really strange ones! They did the house up over 20 years and it was a complete hodge-podge. At some point in the 80's my dad tried to seem posh, but he didn't know how to do it. He thought it was about wearing green wellies and having a wind-up record player and he bought a Chesterfield sofa. So it was a strange mix. We'd have a Victor Vasarely-esque metal work on the wall with Christmas cards strung across it, a Chesterfield and my Tin-Tin drawings everywhere. There were never any rules and nothing was ever consistent, and I've never lived in any prescribed way either. I believe interiors should grow very naturally, and we should reflect how people actually live, the animals they share their house with and the people that come through. It should come from inside rather than seeing something in a magazine and trying to fit that ideal.

EFFECTS: So your work was born out of juxtaposition, the collaging of contradictory aesthetics...

LM: Yes. And I had about five doll's houses. My favourite thing to do was to redecorate them: to empty the rooms, redo the pictures for the walls, redo the wallpaper, arrange them and then do it all again.

McKenzie home, 1980s. Photo: Ray McKenzie.

EFFECTS: So you were carefully fashioning interiors from a young age?

LM: I wouldn't say carefully! It wasn't the Florine Stettheimer doll's house or anything.

The Stettheimer Dollhouse, detail (1916-1935).

EFFECTS: Right, or Queen Mary's...?

LM: My god, that was a big deal for me seeing that as a child. I went back to see it a couple of years ago. It's amazing.

EFFECTS: All the parts are made by all the best makers in the land, is that right?

LM: Yes, the keys turn in the locks! You know lots of members of the public sent things in for the house, which of course the makers of it didn't want. They should have made a second doll's house just with all the weird stuff that people donated.

EFFECTS: That would be an amazing thing... So the series of paintings of yours that I first saw, that had a big impact on me, were the ones that made up your exhibition 'Slender Means' at Galerie Buchholz, and exhibited later in the Tate. The centrepiece is titled *May of Teck*. These are a series of large, wall-sized paintings, that represent a dilapidated but evocative interior space. Together they make a room within a room. The represented interior is layered and haunting, and the title of the work points us to the fictional club in Muriel Spark's novella *The Girls of Slender Means*. How did those paintings emerge?

LM: As a teenager in Glasgow all my friends lived in bedsits in these beautiful, run-down Victorian tenements. I was fascinated by these apartments that were clearly built as one room that had been divided into four, where you would have a wall running through the middle vertical of a window. But at the same time, had dart and egg cornices and in the corner

would be a dumbwaiter, but you're in a room the size of a toilet cubicle! One in particular was actually built by Alexander "Greek" Thomson. So the background is growing up among the faded remnants of a time of grand architecture in Scotland.

May of Teck (2010) oil on canvas, 2 parts: each 290 x 300 cm. From the exhibition 'Slender Means', Galerie Buchholz, Cologne, 2010. Photo: Galerie Buchholz.

With that series of paintings in particular, I was thinking about Muriel Spark. In *The Girls of Slender Means* the descriptions of the May of Teck club come right at the start of the book. I think the first line is something like "in 1945 all the nice people in England were poor" and it describes the moment of so many people being in poverty and surviving, and particularly these young women living in this club/house together who are in genteel poverty with secretarial jobs. Spark describes the proportions of the rooms of this club. I thought to myself, how can I say something that speaks to that experience of history and poverty and grandeur and all those things that feel connected to growing up in Glasgow?

The decisions about the paintings were not to make it too narrative, because you can get bogged down in a lot of biographical detail, but that just by having these lovely clouds you can suggest that at one point someone really cared about this place. But then there are shadows on the wall as though pictures had been removed, but done in a very simple way; bits of electricity, plug points that had been put in, cables, phone numbers written around a telephone. It's a balancing act between how much to go into the narrative and how much not. You don't actually need that much.

It was one of the first projects I did after going to the decorative painting school Van Der Kelen, in Brussels— so had this fresh toolbox of

techniques. I came up with a simple thematic that meant the paintings would all go together, knowing that they would be hung with some space between them. I tried not to get too bogged down in realism or abstraction, but finding the spot that feels comfortable between them, and between biographical detail and generic schema.

EFFECTS: The paintings are powerful on a formal level, but the layers—layers of paint, layers of narrative—give it a dream-like quality. In the opening pages of *The Girls of Slender Means* is a description of bombed out buildings where, walking the streets of post-war London, you all of a sudden encounter a gaping interior, uncannily. Your paintings do something like that: force an encounter with an interior you don't expect to be in.

Quodlibet XXVII (Unlawful Assembly I) (2013) oil on canvas, 90 x 60 x 2 cm.
Photo: Cabinet Gallery, London.

LM: I'm so inspired by fiction - Muriel Spark, and Caroline Blackwood or Patricia Highsmith. Writing is like tapestry weaving, it takes so much work, so much practice – yet you can also express utterly wild ideas and attitudes. Translating that into the visual, is that even possible?

There are important details that you learn by trying to replicate interiors, like scale. For instance life-size is too big! Everything being a bit dinky is fine. The dream for me is to have somewhere to make something more permanent, like a commission to make a fresco. Doing something like that is more of a commitment than doing a wall-painting. It's a good test, because if someone asks you to do a fresco they must really mean it!

EFFECTS: Yes fresco is a complicated process isn't it...?

LM: All I know is would want to do that the way Diego Rivera did it. Every join of the wet plaster corresponded to a border in the work, so you never see any kind of patching.

In preparation for a future fresco I made a big painting on canvas for an exhibition last year here in Brussels in the exhibition space of Hermes, a space called La Verrière. Even though it was on canvas, it was a large space so I approached it as though it was a kind of fresco. I worked out a way of doing it so that it was consistent from beginning to end and that it could accommodate some different hands as I had some help from assistants for certain parts of it, and do a certain amount in a day and when that's done and you don't go back, in part to make the deadline. That keeps a certain energy, but also amounts to a kind of training for when I get the chance to make a fresco.

On the Prowl (2021-2022) acrylic and oil on canvas, 5 parts: 400 cm x 196 cm, 400 cm x 315 cm, 400 cm x 315 cm, 400 cm x 315 cm, 400 cm x 266 cm. From the exhibition 'Buildings in Belgium, Buildings in Oil, Buildings in Silk', La Verrière, Brussels, 2022. Photo: Isabelle Arthuis.

EFFECTS: Interiors and dreams are often talked about together—people talk about 'dream interiors', 'dream houses'—but dreams are complicated things. Interiors are complicated things too. Walter Benjamin talked about the 19th century bourgeois interior as a hysterical dream set against the nightmare of work, and Freud had an image of the unconscious barging its way through the hallway of the preconscious and into the orderly salon of the conscious mind. In your work you reference interiors and artists that are complicated and contradictory. I wondered if you see your work as akin to dream analysis, working through aesthetic contradictions, exposing latent fantasies in these aesthetic worlds?

LM: In Beatriz Colomina’s essay on Eileen Gray’s house on the south coast of France, E1027, she makes a beautiful point about the layout of the house: the fact that the normal layout of a bourgeois house would be very gendered, the ‘female’ space would be the boudoir, situated off the bedroom, and then the ‘male’ space would be the smoking room which would be off the dining room. But in Eileen Gray’s house, the studio connects directly to the bedroom. There is no ‘male’ space in the house, even though it was nominally designed to share with her then lover Jean Badovici . If you look at something like Art Nouveau, which is of course so visually arresting, once you get to visit the spaces you realise that what’s actually important there is its use of steel and interior lighting and air and, actually, much better conditions for servants. It’s interesting to think about houses that have these borders between staff and private spaces.

Villa Ooievaar, Oostende, 2016. Photo: Kristien Daem.

The house in Ostend was divided in two—it was partly taken over by one of the children of the family and converted—so in the half I own you don’t get the experience of the full house as it was when it was made. Nevertheless there are design solutions that are intentionally odd: for instance in the principle bathroom, if you lie in the bath and you open the door you are looking out into the big main hallway, a semi-public space. Knowing the family and how traditional they were, that seems like such an unusual break between an extremely intimate and feminine space—a bathtub—and a hallway. Little things like that might seem minor but they’re very important because they relate to thresholds.

And after Art Nouveau there was the Secession movement in Vienna. Where you have the interior as a location for male expression, as an avant-garde space. It is so unusual in the history of art for the interior to be a male

experimental space, like the Casa Balla in Rome—the home Giacomo Balla made with his wife and daughters.

Casa Balla, Rome.

I'm doing a project this year in Turin at the Pinacoteca Agnelli, and in that city you've got those two local male hysterics Carlo Mollino and Gianni Agnelli. I've looked through all the coffee table books of Agnelli's houses and private art collection, and I can find pictures of him with his family and with his wife, but I can never find him depicted alone in his house. He and Mollino obviously used design and interiors as a form of personal expression, but had to use women as proxies (Mollino photographed sex workers in his interiors) to not feel emasculated. It was the job of Agnelli's wife to embody that side of him, and express the wealth and taste of the family. All very *The Theory of the Leisure Class* by Veblen.

Backdrop mural for the display of statues (detail) (2023) acrylic and oil on canvas, 300 x 870 cm (2 x canvases, 300 x 550 cm, 300 x 320 cm). Image Credit: Useful Art Services.

As for me, I live and work in the same house. It's a permeable space, in that I have a lot of people passing through and living here for extended periods. I had Ukrainian refugees living with me for 9 months last year—I've usually got someone living in my guesthouse. It's a private space, it's an intimate space, but it's also my place of work. It's semi-commercial, in that people come to showroom events in my studio. I feel so lucky to be a woman in this time—you have that whole legacy of domestic space being a kind of

prison, or the only space of expression for women, which began to change with Modernism. People like Coco Chanel or Eileen Gray made their house part of their persona, and they invited people in.

Counter Jumpers (2021-2022) acrylic and oil on canvas, 4 parts: 400 cm x 211 cm, 400 cm x 317 cm, 400 cm x 317 cm, 400 cm x 311 cm. From the exhibition 'Buildings in Belgium, Buildings in Oil, Buildings in Silk', La Verrière, Brussels, 2022. Photo: Isabelle Arthuis.

I found that several women from the Modern period chose map murals for their walls. In the salon of the house of Elsa Schiaparelli there was a big map of the Basque Country, the designer Madeleine Vionnet had a map in her home of Fontainebleau where she lived, Eileen Gray, in her house, had a map of the West Indies. So the home is never a cage, you are always connected to the outside world. I spend a lot of time at home. Even as a child I used to crawl around in the dark, just feeling the house. Encountering those other beautiful spaces—whether that's the rebuilding of the Mackintosh Macdonald house at the Hunterian in Glasgow or the Palais Stoclet or this house in Oostende, or the Alhambra, or the Parthenon—produce very intangible, sensory feelings, like, *oh shit*, this space is kind of perfect. I try to bring a bit of that sensitivity and feeling to every exhibition I make.

Elsa Schiaparelli, 1934.

EFFECTS: Something I'm drawing out of what you've said is how you analyse the oppositions that are buried in interiors. You talked about interior

space divided between worker and employer, masculine and feminine. You talked about the oppositions to interiors themselves: maps and murals, public space etc. I apologise if this is a bit too obvious, but I see in your work something of the logic of deconstruction—the way you look at opposites or binaries and then work in the space between them, to reimagine, to re-fictionalise. Does that make sense?

LM: I think so, yes. The original impulse came from seeing artworks in private collectors' homes, and understanding how that could activate art differently. And that got me thinking about the different criteria within art. Those wall works that I mentioned that I grew up with around my parents' place—and which I now have here in my own house—at least one of the artists that made them went on to make public artworks. So now I look at them with fresh eyes, and I see them as kind of embryos for public artworks.

McKenzie studio Brussels, 2023. Photo: Lucy McKenzie.

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There are different criteria when an artwork is made for, say, a public space or a semi-public space like a private club or something (like the May of Teck club), different kinds of stresses. I've done a few different proposals for public artworks—and always there are restrictions on materials and subject matter and timescale. How the work is shaped by those restrictions is interesting. I want to be flexible enough to be able to handle and respond

to different types of context - commercial, public, permanent, no budget, big budget.

Pleasure's Inaccuracies (2020) Sudbury Town station. Commissioned by Art on the Underground. Photo: GG Archard.

We're in a moment now where in certain parts of the art-world artwork is being judged for its political fitness rather than its aesthetic qualities. It's hit a point where students now are submitting activism as course work. Being a Gen Xer myself, I see plenty of—especially—guys my age complaining about that. But I don't have a problem with it, because I know that people would have looked at someone like Diego Rivera and seen it as tainted because it had an ideology behind it. I love art that was made in the Soviet Union. It's wonderful when you go to somewhere like the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, and see the variety of work and all the different ways that artists dealt with their political situation. And that's been so kept out of the line of art history because it's seen as compromised. Somewhere like East Germany had an art criticism ecosystem where, of course, the political dimension of works was discussed, but not only. I have complete respect for work that is not centred on aesthetics, even though it is for me, aesthetics and craft. Interiors are a part of that, but in the end it came out of being interested in art, and thinking about interiors as a necessary expression of that, because you're never working in a vacuum.

EFFECTS: Yes fascinating to think about how exteriors—public spaces, even political imaginaries—find their way into domestic interiors, and what happens formally when they do, but also how those imaginaries have been excluded from a very formalist art history.

LM: You mentioned Adolf Loos earlier—he's a really important person in

all this as well. You could say that his celebrated texts on modernism are the perfect example of how aesthetics are used to justify violence such as colonialism and patriarchy. He was a very weird guy, which of course I love, and I think the interiors are beautiful, but the only reason he was not convicted of child rape was because of his celebrity. We're living through this interesting moment where people are having to grapple with the idea that no one is just a good or a bad guy, and the questions that generates. I love that interiors can do that.

Installation view, *Something They Have To Live With*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2013. Central work: *Loos House* (2013) oil on canvas on wood structure, dimensions variable. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij.

EFFECTS: You've hit on something there that I really value in your work. Whilst I absolutely love the more straightforwardly politicised artwork you mentioned—and I agree, I think the early Soviet Union saw one of the greatest flowerings of aesthetics in human history—I do find the complexity and contradiction in your work fascinating. I feel there is an anxiety today about authenticity: you see it in design with an obsession about 'rawness' and materials appearing 'natural'. I think there is something concomitant in art, namely a return to a kind of 'expressionism' in which art is seen as an organic byproduct of an artist's essential being (and to be valued that essential being must be deemed morally good.) Whereas in your work, your identity is scattered and refracted through your different approaches and media. I see that not as an abdication of politics, but the reverse, because we are never simply ourselves. For a collectivity to emerge we would have to take stock of how our individuality is constructed through otherness. And the way you are drawn to, and highlight, the problematics, perversions even, of artists and aesthetics is a part of that. Rather than conveniently dismissing anything that is seen as tainted, you lean into complexity and contradiction.

LM: You mention perversions. If you are a feminist, or even just on the left, you have to acknowledge the way that sexuality works in ways which aren't politically correct—they can be completely wild, and they can go against all your ethics. I've been listening the last few days in the studio to the podcast *Bad Gays*—they do a really good job of having those kind of discussions within the queer community about how sexuality works. Being a feminist who worked on the edges of the sex industry as a young person... and how that then reflected being in the art world—these are all things that I've thought about so much.

I've recently had a discussion with my good friend, Reba Maybury. She's an artist from London who works as a dominatrix and we're publishing a text together. One of the things we share is that we come from, and believe in, subculture. But certainly as I get older, I get more and more aware of the conservatism within subcultures, how they existed in the ones that I moved in as a young person. And at the same time, my awareness of the absolute perversion and the weirdness of mainstream culture is much more fascinating to me! Coming from a background of music and self-organised projects and everything to do with transgression, you then realise that mainstream culture is actually much darker.

So it's more interesting to me to work with those more conservative kinds of aesthetics. *Trompe l'oeil* painting—you don't get much more conservative than that! But as you said there's a kind of tension between those worlds. I like to give as an example of one the film *The Servant*, by Joseph Losey which stars Dirk Bogarde and James Fox.

Still from *The Servant* (1963) directed by Joseph Losey.

EFFECTS: I love that film.

LM: The original story was written by Robin Maugham, Somerset Maugham's nephew, who was an aristocrat. He was unashamedly gay, he loved young, working class men. And at the same time as loving young working class men, he also campaigned against trafficking. So he also understood the kind of pitfalls of being in say, the Marrakesh gay subculture. The short story of *The Servant* is written very much from this upper class point of view. But then you have Harold Pinter come in to write the screenplay, who has a lot of latent homosexuality in his film scripts and in his plays. And he and Dirk Bogarde give much more depth to the working class character than the original book offered. So it's got exactly this strange calibration between exposing the hypocrisy of the aristocrats, but also this fear of the working class and all the sexuality therein. For me, it's absolutely perfect, sweet and salty, hot and cold.

EFFECTS: Have you seen *The Night Porter*?

LM: I have. In the bathroom in my studio, I have a film poster of Ralph Fiennes in his role as the Nazi officer in *Schindler's List* and sometimes people come out saying: *Why do you have a picture of a Nazi in your bathroom?* If I had a poster of *The Night Porter* in the toilet, there would be no problem.

McKenzie studio Brussels, 2023. Photo: Lucy McKenzie.

EFFECTS: Oh you think so...?

LM: Of course! The argument by people like the writer Laura Frost is that the use of Nazi imagery by 'bohemia' is a sign of a fit democracy and of an elastic and free exchange of symbols, whether that's Siouxsie Sioux wearing

a swastika or Kenneth Anger or all those pornographic films in the seventies like *Salon Kitty* or, yes, *The Night Porter*, which, of course, is an important film. But the fact that somebody made *Schindler's List* and cast Ralph Fiennes and Liam Neeson and all these gorgeous actors as Nazis and shot it to look like a perfume advert—that, for me, is utterly bleak and perverse. *The Night Porter* is already tied up with a bow, it's nice and safe.

EFFECTS: Yes I see, the perversion is packaged up with *The Night Porter*...

LM: A toilet is a space you can put dark things. It's not like putting things in the window. It's semi-private, like posters on the inside of your locker. For me, Adolf Loos is in exactly the same Venn diagram. When Sarah Everard was raped and murdered by a police officer in London year before last, I found myself compulsively seeking out cop porn to watch, which I know might seem like a strange way to process anxiety. Like so many I'm drawn to depictions of domestic violence on TV. My mother worked in domestic violence her whole life, and I've been in personal situations that have informed my feelings about it. 'Wellness' is not straightforward. That all goes into the paintings—even when I'm painting a door moulding.

Walnut Wainscot (2007-2008) oil and varnish on paper, 100 x 150 cm. Photo: Michael De Lausnay.

EFFECTS: It brings to mind the rethinking in contemporary psychoanalytic theory of the idea of the 'death drive' (the idea that we have an unconscious compulsion towards pain and trauma) as—if not a positive force—something which at least allows us to go outside of ourselves, to allow the subversive qualities of desire to pull us in stranger directions than the conscious ego might allow, to 'die differently'.

LM: And the space of the studio is somewhere to do that. And if not there then where? This is what we're supposed to be doing as artists. It's important as an artist to engineer a situation that allows you to go further. I love the anecdote about Patricia Highsmith when she wrote for comic books in that golden era that was then depicted in Pop Art. She was spending all day writing about nemeses and mortal enemies and disguises and cat and mouse games, and then she would go home and get drunk and she would just start writing. Because she'd been writing all day and she'd been steeped in these subjects she could take them somewhere in a way that other people couldn't.

The Heap (1942-1948), a comic-book sometimes written by Patricia Highsmith.

EFFECTS: There's so much perversity in a shop window display, in a comic book, in mainstream films...

LM: The thing that me and my friends are obsessed with at the moment is the Chippendales. That is something that we would never have looked at when we were younger, because we were all so punk. But now you look back and you realise a very special social space was created within mainstream culture. And of course it got retroactively talked about as feminist, which it wasn't, or that wasn't the intention at least. The thing I find the most inspiring about the history of the Chippendales is the guy that started it had zero understanding or appreciation of its cultural and social significance. I find that very hopeful—that you could be doing something and you've got no idea what it means at the time. I'm sure when Truman Capote wrote *In Cold Blood*, he didn't realise he was kickstarting the engine of true crime literature.

EFFECTS: I want to return to *trompe l'oeil* if I may. You are a *trompe*

l'oeil painter who also looks deeply at the history of modernism and I wanted to ask you about their vexed relationship and where *trompe l'oeil* is at now. *Trompe l'oeil* was a popular mode of interior decoration, as well as art, that was supposedly vanquished by 'high modernism', but returns in machine-made forms such as Formica in the 50's and 60's. Painted *trompe l'oeil* reappears in the postmodern era in the 80's as a luxurious form of interior decoration, as well as in art. And then in the 90's and 00's there is a return to 'less is more' and *trompe l'oeil* disappears again. But now, in our era, new kinds of *trompe l'oeil* are all around us: the faux concrete on the cladding of buildings, faux wood floors, the vacuum-formed brick in a Pret A Manger, on screens with their 'skeuomorphic' interfaces. Amidst all of this illusion, what do you think the place of painted *trompe l'oeil* is today?

Faux brick.

LM: I don't have a huge online life so I'm still thinking about the way you actually physically experience it, whether that's Fornasetti fake bookshelf wallpaper or the fake brick in a Greggs. To be honest, at this point I've gone so far down a very specific route of my own production that it doesn't get too affected by these kind of changes. But I'm certainly interested in recent adaptations to way we relate to our interiors—how covid has made us more 'cottagecore' and bourgeois, beautifying our homes and buying all this shit. In this climate, the modesty and simplicity of the way Francis Bacon lived is like a much needed bucket of cold water.

Francis Bacon's studio at 7 Reece Mews, London. Photo: Perry Ogden.

I spoke to someone recently who's active on Grindr and he noticed that it's a thing to have nothing in your house or flat—just a mattress. It signals you're a certain kind of modern, especially gay man. It's very masculine to have nothing, just your little prison. Did you see that Kanye West built himself a sort of prison room, like a cell, in the middle of a stadium?

Kanye West's bedroom inside Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium. Image source: @KANYEWEST/INSTAGRAM

In terms of *trompe l'oeil*, though... I don't know. There are practical things, like I have a fashion label with my partner Beca Lipcombe called Atelier E.B, and we have tried—and failed—to put fake marble on fabric, on clothes. It doesn't work. When it comes to textiles, you do want truth to materials. I have an archive of fake brick wallpaper—have I ever put it up in my home? Of course not! My teacher at the decorative painting school, Van Der Kelen, told me that the thing with fake marble is that it becomes popular because it's rare, then all of a sudden it's everywhere and it's done really badly and it's in, like, pizza restaurants, and so it goes away again. She says that wave is about 20 years, from novelty to saturation. I'm sure that wave will be getting faster and faster as everything else does.

EFFECTS: If I may offer a reading of your work, it seems to me that in mixing *trompe l'oeil* and modernism, making illusory images from modernist source material, you are retroactively injecting illusion back into an aesthetic paradigm whose goal was to vanquish it, to expunge it. I see your use of *trompe l'oeil* as a way of making new fictions out of a movement that was trying to create an aesthetics of truth (explicitly flat images, medium specificity, truth to materials etc.), opening up new possibilities that might have been foreclosed. To me, this is in keeping with what we were talking about earlier: how your 'true' identity is refracted

through fictions in your work. It shows that everything is in some way fictional, or has the structure of a fiction.

LM: Very well put, though I wouldn't say *everything* is a fiction, but certainly a lot of art is a fiction, especially art that's trying to claim a certain kind of truth. I was of a generation that was reacting against movements like 'relational aesthetics' and how fake their claims of audience participation seemed. In my case, having grown up in Glasgow in the 80's, I was looking back to an earlier era of figurative painting. It was helpful to revisit that earlier era, the waves of style and taste. Instead of leaning into the figurative side of those eighties art styles (which is now extremely popular—it's so funny to see art by young painters that looks like Steven Campbell or Adrian Wiszniewski now) I was more fascinated by 80's interiors and people like Richard Haas, the *trompe l'oeil* mural painter from America, or postmodern bar interiors. I wanted to do this obvious fiction as a slight riposte to the perceived authenticity of the generation before. So yes, you're absolutely right. I even want to undermine the expectations of *trompe l'oeil* itself—I've even done paintings where I don't even paint some elements, instead of painting all the text on a letter I just stick a piece of paper on! I want to undermine the expectation that hours of labour equal value.

Quodlibet XLVI (2015) oil and collage on canvas, 60 x 90 cm. Photo: Galerie Buchholz.

Realism itself is also being somewhat reappraised. I'm going to be in a group show next year where they are going to talk about photorealism's role in legitimising photography as an art form. Before photorealism only black and white photography was seen as art. So there's all these intersecting narratives, as you say, between *trompe l'oeil* and modernism. In my own case, all this is done with the potential to maybe one day completely undermine it and go and do something else. But I'm still

building a certain kind of formal language to then deconstruct and go somewhere else.

EFFECTS: So your deconstructive tendency is even at work against your own practice. Placing the real piece of paper in the painting where you would expect to see an illusion is almost a cubist move—so, in a counter direction, you also allow modernism to disrupt your *trompe l’oeil*.

LM: Never let them catch your tail! Always keep moving. Keeping things a bit under the radar means I can say a lot. I always make a comparison with the Dana Schutz painting of Emmett Till and the kind of furore around that. The best critique of that came around painting itself, the way it was painted, and the function of painting. It made me think about my choice to, say, make a painting of a fascist interior mood board. The difference is that you can talk about something violent and visceral—but you bounce the image through a set of mirrors, so it’s never about being shocking or using the attention economy. Instead you try to do it the way that literature can, by going a more subtle way, which I find more personally affecting.

EFFECTS: I love your ‘quodlibet’ painting in which we see works by a famous designer, artist and philosopher, all of whom—though your painting doesn’t let on—are either paedophiles or defended paedophilia...

Quodlibet XL (2014) oil on canvas, 60 x 120 cm. Photo Kristien Daem.

LM: That was a really important painting for me—in that work I tried to see how far can you pull that elastic tension between form and content until it breaks. You’ve got the most invisible, conservative form—the *trompe l’oeil* ‘quodlibet’—and the most horrible subject matter, which is the legitimisation of child abuse through artistic genius. From time to time, I

make a work where the ideas are all contained within the frame, like the one of the women eating in front of the painting of the pornographic cartoon image. From time to time, usually I need a whole room to get my point across.

Copy of 'Untitled, 2005' (2015) oil on canvas, 200 x 250 cm. Photo: Mark Blower.

EFFECTS: My final question is about the way a lot of the strands we've talked about are feeding into a major project of yours—the house you bought in Oostende, the Villa De Ooievaar. It sounds like it will be something of a *gesamtkunstwerk* for you, as you are renovating and working into this already fascinating building. It seems like another example of you being drawn to aesthetic and political complexity and contradiction—the house is aesthetically avant-garde, but was designed and owned by Nazi collaborators. I've heard you talk about how even the aesthetics themselves are contradictory, parts of the house being relatively conservative, while other parts are very avant-garde. I would love to get a sense of what your interactions so far have been with the building, how you inhabit it, what your plan for it is?

Villa Ooievaar, Oostende, 2016. Photo: Kristien Daem.

LM: The house is going to shut up from the winter for the renovations, finally. In the time between acquiring it and getting the permissions and beginning the work, it's been a place for artistic residency. A Cuban artist

lived there for six months to work on a film. A Flemish artist made a project there. Artists have filmed there, have photographed there. But not to any great extent because it's not in good enough shape to be open to the public for events yet. One day it will be! I'm using it as a pretext to do a lot of research, especially into the politics of the period, coming to understand a bit more about the context of the Belgian collaboration with the Germans, and the long tail of all that into Belgian culture now.

One thing about the house is that very little is known about the architect and the family who lived there are very private, which gives space to think about, to imagine, these fictions. I'm reading about the history of houses from the same era that were also caught up in the politics of the time. If you think about the transformations that happened to somewhere like the Villa Müller in Prague by Adolf Loos—after it was seized, the woman who had lived in the house was forced to be the housekeeper for the Communists who used it as their office. There's all these stories... I'm reading a lot of fiction, as well as doing research, and taking note of things that happened around the time that the house was made. So it becomes a pretext to know more about who and where it came from, how it came to be. I research the colours, make furniture and paintings in the style of the house, I do bits of renovation... I'm spending time trying to imprint a new story on it, that's the important thing. But never pin it down—is it a historic house? Is it a recreation? Is it an artists house? Is it a public space? I've got no obligation to pin it down.

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