

The Art House

# ***Everything Is Still Floating***

Jill McKnight

29 July – 04 September 2021

There are drowned villages in reservoirs where houses lie intact beneath seemingly calm bodies of water, and occasionally in times of drought a bell tower might rise mysteriously above the surface. In this evocation it is freshwater that submerges a way of life in order to supply the means for another, whereas it is saltwater, and specifically sea water, that is present in the work of Jill McKnight. Nonetheless, the idea of a home viewed through the distorting lens of

water, whether reservoir or sea, is a pertinent framing for this exhibition. McKnight's new works, produced during their residence at The Art House, Wakefield, emerge like lost artefacts from iridescent pools. Sculptures, drawings and prints chart specific memories from the artist's upbringing, creating characters and props that go on to explore labour history, social reproduction and the ways creativity and art histories are manifested in working class homes.

The exhibition title references Max Ernst's 'Here, Everything Is Still Floating' (1920), a collage in which the components' meanings shift with observation. The artist's maritime heritage is also a major influence and motivation; in particular the ways in which salt water both corrodes surfaces, but also deposits minerals and animals like barnacles, that create something new from what has been submerged. The former and latter are exemplified in 'Roker Pier, Cat & Dog Steps (After Guernica)' (2021); inspired by a reproduction of Picasso's Guernica (1937) by the artist's father that hung in their home growing up, McKnight had asked their father to paint a version for inclusion in this exhibition. Having spoken about McKnight's current interests, the painter instead produced a seaside scene of Roker in Sunderland, where coincidentally L.S Lowry had holidayed, hence the stick figure walking along the front. Realising that Guernica would have to be reinserted somehow, figures from the famous painting were copied, cut out and added to the foreground, as if struggling amongst the waves. On discovering that J.W.M Turner had in fact used the same technique to introduce dogs into his own work, McKnight's father was reassured about its artistic legitimacy. Through this painting and the story behind it we can see how

particular artworks and artists become deeply intertwined with everyday life, creating a personal or familial canon which is then folded into or measured against one's own creative endeavours.

There is a clear symbolic language referring to household appliances, often emphasising the human dimensions of these items and how they scaffold everyday life. The body is spliced with different appliances in a number of works, whether washing machine guts or a multi-tasking hydra vacuum cleaner. The digestive system as a motif also appears in some of McKnight's new prints, overlaid with line drawings of Sunderland lustreware, signalling domesticity and industry. The artist's hand and a faithfulness to commonplace, or 'poor' materials is demonstrated when chicken wire peeks out from underneath plaster bandage, and these factors come together to suggest narratives with mythic and universal dimensions at the same time as representing personal and familial experiences. In some works unvarnished surfaces suggest skin in their porousness, whereas elsewhere hard resin lacquer encases phrases and scattered debris in permanent puddles. This interplay between personal histories and myth, as well as the meshing of domesticity and industry is characterized by

'Ladder Clotheshorse' (2021), which references the artist's father's personal labour history, of building ladders for ships in Sunderland which was his first job from the age of 16. The sculpture is 'ladder-like' in structure and colour, but stands with three sides in the form of a clotheshorse, drawing an unambiguous parallel between labour in and outside of the home. Prints that show the artist from the back, in a child-like crouch, are varnished in order to hang or lean with a degree of solidity. This, combined with the clotheshorse's ladder-like proportions places the viewer in diminutive relation to it, also emphasising the way memory distorts scale and the home is experienced very differently from each member of the household's perspective.

This sense of distortion is also present in McKnight's works on paper, often explored through superimposition. An important part of McKnight's residency with The Art House has been working with print seriously for the first time. As such, many of the works on paper included here are products of experimentation with new techniques, and while holding their own as artworks, can also be read as documentation of the artist's recent development. In their proximity to McKnight's sculptures these works on paper reiterate the

artist's concerns with labour history and family mythology, picking up certain objects or symbolic assemblages and turning them around to consider from different angles, or in relation to something else. There are also a number of drawings included, which evidence the origins of the other works on show, and are an example of McKnight's desire to 'show the working' in general, and especially in the context of this residency. Thinking through art making as a form of labour, the history of work songs is evoked in new sound pieces where lyrical songs have been composed apace with the production of physical works. These are shown as captioned films chronicling the construction of sculptures, which is one way that the increasing importance of writing in McKnight's practice is presented here. Words and phrases, rich with significance, are inserted sculpturally into the space; 'shafts of light' references not only the lighthouse it is in proximity with, but also the oil lamp in Picasso's Guernica and 'Shafts of Light: Mining Art in the Great Northern Coalfield' by Dr Robert McManners OBE and Gillian Wales, founders of the Gemini Collection of mining art. While words and phrases are displayed brashly at scale, or preserved in resin, speaking and singing are invoked more subtly and accessed through headphones, or an old-fashioned telephone

receiver handset, creating an individualised experience amidst work that in many other ways speaks to the communal, the common and the shared in all its mundanity and profundity.

### **Lauren Velvick**



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