

Richard McWhannell

b.1952

Diploma of Fine Arts: Ilam School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury

Richard McWhannell once said, “When I paint someone I simply concentrate really hard on how they look, and how the colours and tones are arranged, their proportions and disposition”. McWhannell is a realist painter. Realist painting has been described as “the challenge of dealing with what’s there”.

Twentieth century modern art saw the opening of many aesthetic avenues, all of them leading away from “dealing with what’s there”. Some historians have seen in this abandonment of the visual world a reaction to the invention of photography. When the photographic process was invented in 1839, its ability to capture images of reality led many to predict the end of painting, especially realist painting. McWhannell, invokes this history by painting his tiny image on a 19th century photographic plate holder.

Realist painting never went away entirely. While important innovations in art – Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Conceptualism – kept coming it could be ignored, but over the past several decades international contemporary art has become increasingly atomised; there has been no significant movement or development. The best realist painters – Lucian Freud, Antonio Garcia Lopez, Gerhard Richter, David Hockney, Rackstraw Downes – matter again.

McWhannell has been painting figures, portraits and landscapes for more than 30 years. His influences include Cézanne, Daumier, El Greco, Goya, Rembrandt, Rouault and Stanley Spencer, as well as New Zealand artists Toss Woollaston, Tony Fomison, and Colin McCahon. It is a list that spans several centuries and ignores most of the modern art that came after Cézanne.

With Woollaston as an early mentor, McWhannell seems to have decided that the Western painting tradition contained everything he needed. It was Woollaston too, who was fond of Rouault’s phrase “the favourable furrow” describing a painter’s devotion to a few ‘loved’ subjects he never tires of painting. McWhannell seemed to be echoing Rouault and Woollaston when he said: “At the moment, I am painting a number of pictures of (my wife) Donogh. It is hard these days to get people to sit because it is such hard work for them, too. I’m loving painting her and feel I could go on forever”.

The English portrait painter William Coldstream who, like McWhannell, was not interested in painting from photographs, reckoned that a worthwhile painting seldom came with fewer than 30 sittings with a model. So you can see what McWhannell means by it being hard work for the sitter. It may seem banal, but that is one of the main reasons that painters paint self-portraits.

In this 2005 self-portrait, McWhannell has used the oil paint thickly, building up the layers of flesh tone – from dark to light – over pale blue-grey. The paint is laid down fluently and without fuss. The face is tightly cropped, giving the impression that he is staring at the viewer through a kind of window. But of course, when the picture was painted, the artist was simply staring at his own features; staring with the intense concentration required to deal with what was there.

Gerald Barnett

Galleries and museums:

www.bakedbean.co.nz

www.brettmcdowellgallery.com

www.campbellgrantgalleries.co.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.johnleechgallery.co.nz

Articles:

Storr, R. *Modern Art Despite Modernism*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

For Rackstraw Downes:
<http://www.artnet.com/artist/5413/rackstraw-downes.html>

Web search:

Lucian Freud

Antonio Lopez Garcia

Francisco Goya

El Greco

David Hockney

Gerhard Richter

Georges Henri Rouault



Richard McWhannell | *Hey Mum* | 2005 | Oil on 4x5" film holder | 115x195mm