

HYPERALLERGIC

What We Are Asked to See

We may choose to partake of the comfort that Sarah McEneaney's scenes of domestic tranquility have to offer. Or we may choose to probe deeper.

By Stan Mir

October 8, 2016

L O C K S G A L L E R Y



Sarah McEneaney, "When You Wish" (2015), acrylic on linen, 48 1/2 x 72 1/2 inches (all images courtesy Locks Gallery)



I was in a particularly turbulent mood when I visited Locks Gallery for Sarah McEneaney's current show, *When You Wish*, but her paintings, with their sleeping cats and dogs, calmed me. For McEneaney, animals are talismans, and she frequently includes them in her work.

In "Olive, Cole, Trixie" (2007), the dog in the lower right seems to be gazing at the viewer, while the other two pets are sound asleep. There is nothing otherwise special about the room, except that it looks homey. There are no titles on the books on the shelves, as if they are binders and journals. A world map hangs askew on a closet door near a bumper sticker that reads "CHOICE," with indecipherable marks indicating an unreadable slogan below. While there is much in McEneaney's painting that seems clear and straightforward, it's the mix of the mundane with the subtly ambiguous that draws the viewer in.

In her frequent images of her studio, which she does in acrylic on wood panels, McEneaney often includes streaks of paint on the floor, and this holds true for "Olive, Cole, Trixie," as well as "Studio 2013," (2013), and "Gesso Room" (2007). We might not notice these haphazard marks when they are on an actual floor, but on McEneaney's wood panels, they become an integral, and at times dominant, element of the composition.

600 Washington Square South
Philadelphia PA 19106
www.locksgallery.com
215.629.1000



Sarah McEneaney, "Gesso Room" (2007), egg tempera on wood, 36 x 48 inches

In some of the studio paintings, like "Gesso Room," it seems as if McEneaney will return to continue working at any moment, in contrast to others, such as "Studio" (2015), where she is an animated presence. In these works, McEneaney often makes viewers feel as if they've been invited not simply to watch the artist paint, but to experience the pleasure of visiting someone's home. This lends her work intimacy and displays an admirable sense of trust.

In the late 1990's, McEneaney was raped in her home and within six months began making paintings about the experience. The rapist was never caught. As she says in an interview with Jennifer Samet for Hyperallergic Weekend, paintings such as "My House, Summer, '98 (1999), which is not included in the show at Locks, became a "way to reclaim [her] place."

McEneaney often includes paintings within paintings in her work. In her interview with Samet, McEneaney mentions that this motif stems from her love of Matisse's "Red Room." It also points to her interest in the formal aspects of painting, which she considers more important to her than the psychological. But it also suggests a rich inner life.



Sarah McEneaney, "Studio 2013" (2013), egg tempera on wood, 36 x 48 inches



Sarah McEneaney, "Olive, Cole, Trixie" (2007), egg tempera on wood, 16 x 24 inches

In "Studio 2013," the paintings seemingly in progress include pastoral landscapes and domestic interiors, along with a larger work focusing on The Rail Park, one of McEneaney's significant civic interests. McEneaney is the President of the Board of Directors for this ambitious project, which aims to convert the disused Reading Railroad viaduct, which runs from Northern Liberties to Brewerytown in Philadelphia, into a park. That painting, "When You Wish" (2015), also on view at Locks, offers a vision of that park, a birds-eye view with two tiny children swinging from the overhead steel beams of the rail line. If the children at play impart an air of makeshift fun, the empty streets beyond the greenery of the park have an end-time feel, and these are the only children who remain.

At the close of Samet's interview with McEneaney, Samet asks the painter about the autobiographical elements in her work. In the context of the current show, McEneaney's answer is intriguing:

My paintings are totally and purposefully autobiographical, but are also edited, embellished, and fantasized. It is not true documentary in any way. There are things I am really out there about. I have made work about traumatic events in my life. But there are also things that are private, that I don't paint. Even when I am doing a landscape or cityscape, the paintings are autobiographical. An anecdote or story is the impetus to make the painting. But I like to think that people read into the work the way they want, that they can enter and even change the story to suit them.

These comments bring me back to "Olive, Cole, Trixie," in which McEneaney emphasizes the word "choice" while leaving the rest indecipherable. The obvious message of the bumper sticker is pro-choice, but given the key into her work that the artist provides in the interview, the choice could simply be whether to participate in the kind of looking that McEneaney is asking of her audience. In their depiction of the everyday, her paintings seem to hold up a mirror to our own lives, and we may choose to partake of the comfort her scenes of domestic tranquility have to offer. Or we may choose to probe deeper, uncover the trauma from the fantasies, and ask ourselves whether we really want our wishes to come true.

Sarah McEneaney: *When You Wish* continues at Locks Gallery (600 Washington Square South, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) through today.





LOCKS GALLERY