

INTERVIEW SERIES: SARAH MCENEANEY
A Philadelphia luminary discusses her art and life in the city.

By Leigh Werell
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L O C K S G A L L E R Y



Trestletown, 13th and Noble, 2012, acrylic on linen, 48 x 36 inches. Image courtesy of Locks Gallery

Entering through the tall metal doors into Sarah McEneaney's large front garden, one is greeted by three lounging cats who bask in the enclosed, sun-dappled space – unless disturbed by a small black and brown dog named Mango. Through the kitchen is a large, bright studio with a table and walls covered by sketches and works in progress. One painting captures her living room, including Mango sitting on a chair and walls adorned with works from her large art collection (including work by many local artists). Another, larger painting depicts a view of Philadelphia from above, the abandoned train tracks near her house sketched in red and green.



Sarah McEneaney in her studio

McEneaney's name has resounded throughout the Philadelphia art world for many years, and her paintings shout back from the rooftops, echoing the history and character of the city through personal narratives and her distinct perspective. Her recent exhibition at Philadelphia's Locks Gallery was an earnest and attentive ode to her Trestletown neighborhood, her home, and her pets.

McEneaney came to the city from Larchmont, New York in 1973, attending Philadelphia College of Art (now University of the Arts) and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Her colorful egg tempera and acrylic paintings tell her story through direct and sincere marks that chronicle the routine of her life at home and in the neighborhood, as well as her trips to residencies all over the world. McEneaney is on the board of Vox Populi and has also been a great force behind the development of the currently under-construction Rail Park project, an elevated greenway being built on the Reading Viaduct which runs through the Chinatown North/Callowhill neighborhood where she lives. We sat down at her dining room table to discuss her life in Philadelphia and the work that has come from it.

Leigh Werrell: When did you buy this house, and how has the neighborhood changed since you've lived here?

Sarah McEneaney: I purchased this property in 1979, right when I was finishing at PAFA. The Vine Street expressway hadn't been built yet; the viaduct still went across Vine Street. So, it was sort of industrial - busy during the day, but totally desolate and empty at night. It has changed, although it took a little while to change; it didn't really start changing



Night, 2008, egg tempera on linen, 48 x 48 inches. Courtesy of Locks Gallery

until the late 90's. I must have been here almost 20 years before it changed significantly.

LW: I've been seeing the change even just in the last few years.

SM: Yeah, in the last few years it's changed a lot - the last 10 years, and even the last 5 years.

LW: Can you speak a little about what the art scene was like when you graduated from PAFA, and how you've seen it evolve throughout the years?

SM: When I was still a student, I joined a new artist co-op that was called 3rd Street Gallery – it still exists on 2nd Street. It was originally at 3rd and Bainbridge, and it was originally a women's co-op. I joined that and had my first show the fall after I graduated from PAFA. I really liked being a part of that and getting to show quickly; it was really important to me. [PAFA] does a lot of student shows... [including] the end of the year shows, but they also encouraged us to apply to regional shows, so you got used to putting your work out there early. You might get in and you might not, and you get used to rejection.

LW: So you went into 3rd Street Gallery and then what happened?



Trestletown from the Wolf, 2016, acrylic on wood, diptych, 35 3/4 x 95 5/8 inches. Courtesy of Locks Gallery



SM: I had maybe three shows there, over a period of five years, something like that, and then I had a Fleisher Wind Challenge show in '85. After that I joined the Charles Moore gallery; it doesn't exist anymore, [but it was] on Walnut Street for years and years. It was a strong gallery, mostly representational painters. Some sculptors.

Right when I got out of school I was in – it was then called Marian Locks gallery – I was in her [annual summer] show called “New Talent”, but I was doing things like showing in little cafés. I was just sort of doing whatever I could to get my work out there.

LW: So have you seen a big change in the way that people think about art in Philly in the transition between those galleries and the new galleries?

SM: Well, I would say that the artist collective scene has grown exponentially and become very strong. Like when 3rd Street Gallery started, Nexus was already in operation, and of course Nexus ended a couple of years ago, but they had a good long run. I think that's the way these things tend to go, they sort of have a life span. Vox Populi is going to be 30 next year, which is interesting to think about. The presence on the scene varies, like 3rd Street Gallery doesn't have a huge presence on the scene but I'm sure it provides an outlet for artists. I think the artist collective scene has grown in really good, strong ways, and the commercial gallery scene is probably not that different from what it was back in the day. You know, I think it's always been a bit of a struggle in Philadelphia for commercial galleries.

LW: Have you seen the art actually change though, because of those galleries?

SM: I don't know that the gallery scene has anything to do with how art changes. I think the kind of art that's getting made is related more to a much bigger world. You know, what's happening in the rest of the country and the rest of the world, especially today with everything being so accessible.



LW: Do you think it's important for Philly to have a diverse set of galleries- in terms of commercial, co-op, or those in-between galleries?

SM: Sure, I definitely think that makes for a healthier scene, healthier environment, but I think at commercial galleries it's really hard. You know, you have Locks, which is great, a sort of blue chip standard, and then you have galleries like Gross McCleaf, but it's unfortunate that galleries like Gallery Joe don't have a physical space anymore.* It's hard, the commercial scene.

Our museum scene is strong, I would say, and that's getting stronger with the Barnes being in town and doing contemporary shows as well as the collection, and the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art)...

LW: So what do you think that that does for artists in the community, to have that diverse set of spaces?

SM: Well I think it's important for a lot of things. For one, I think that one of the jobs of an artist is to see everything that is going on, and to be out. So the more there is to see, from commercial galleries to collectives to museums, the better. It's great that there's a lot to see and engage with.

LW: To many in the Philly art scene it seems clear that there has been a recent influx of artists and collectors from different places into Philadelphia. Do you believe that this will impact the artist community that is here already?

SM: Yeah, I guess it would have to. I think it's great that people move here because they see this as a good place to live, work and show as an artist. I'm not familiar with new collectors coming to town but I'm thrilled to hear you say that!

LW: Well, I do think that a lot of people with money might be moving to the city..

SM: Exactly, people moving to the city, and younger people starting out, and because there are opportunities to become a collector on a starting level because of these artist collectives. People are really "do it yourself" getting their work out there. That's a really good way to build or grow collectors.

LW: You've been showing at Tibor de Nagy since 2005. What's the most outstanding difference you've noticed between the New York community and the one here?

SM: Well, the sheer number of galleries is something, and collectors, and because there are more people there are more artists in New York. I think more work sells in New York, but in terms of the sort of dialogue and community of artists, I don't think it's that different - and that's a good thing. I see a lot of conversation between Philadelphia and New York (and Philadelphia and other cities) among artists. I think that the artists



are really fluid in terms of how they move around in different cities and worlds. The economy of New York is so different than Philadelphia. I don't know that Philadelphia would ever catch up in terms of collectors and art sales.

LW: It's clear that your environment is very important to your work. Can you tell me about how the city of Philadelphia affects your paintings as opposed to other environments you've worked in such as Ireland or Texas?

SM: So even when I was a student, I was starting to make autobiographical work by sort of looking around me and painting say, portraits of fellow students in their studio - as well as self portraits of myself in my studio - and the things happening in the school. Then, when I graduated and was just working in my home studio, I continued that for a while - like visiting other artists in their studios. [Eventually,] it became more and more focused on the world that I live in. My home, my studio, my neighborhood. So then over the years I realized, oh, I'm really doing something here that's specific, but I also see it as something like - it's a story that has similarities to other people's stories, and people can bring their stories to it.

When I do residencies I do the same thing, but it's for a short term so it's different in that way; it doesn't have the sort of history behind it. It's kind of like a snippet. A chapter. Whereas, what I've done with my own life in Philadelphia, you can see the changes - like in this neighborhood - painting the neighborhood over the years, painting the progress on the rail park... I think of all the work as being connected, and that the travel and residencies are kind of like chapters away.

LW: Some of your most recent visions of the city include the abandoned railway line that runs through your neighborhood. You've been a driving force behind the upcoming construction of the rail park. How do you feel this park will affect the local neighborhood and artistic community that is already here?

SM: Well, I'm super excited, and looking forward to the park opening. Now it's supposed to open in December, this first small section- it's only a quarter mile of the whole three mile vision. But I think it's going to be great for the neighborhood because this neighborhood has more and more residents - more and more people out walking their dogs like I do several times every day. It's going to be a gathering place, and I also think it's going to draw people from other parts of the city and visitors to the city. In terms of artists specifically, I don't know, I mean there's going to be art happening on and around the rail park. That's been our goal. In fact we [the Friends of the Rail Park] have already been working with mural arts on some temporary things that happen near the site to help draw attention to it and talk about its history. For instance, in phase one there's going to be a 1% for art project - Brent Wahl and Laynie Browne - he's a sculptor, she's a poet; they're collaborating on a piece, it was through the city's 1% for art program. Through a series of jurying they got the commission. Even the Incamminati school at 12th and Callowhill contacted us years ago saying that they wanted to do plein air painting out

there, and that was when it would be illegal to be up there. But they thought about it as a way to raise funds, so we might revisit an idea like that - why not? You know... have a day of painting on the rail park.

LW: What paintings are you working on now?

SM: I'm, working on a large neighborhood painting, from one of the last neighborhood buildings that I hadn't gotten on the roof of. And I'm working on an interior of my house and a couple of exteriors of the yard. There was one painting that started out with snow in it and now it's a spring painting because I couldn't hold on to the snow in my head.

LW: Where is your next exhibition?

SM: I'm going to be in a two person show in Los Angeles at Zevitas Marcus in the fall with an artist named Ann Toebbe, who also recently started showing with Tibor, whose work is really interesting.

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