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Rail Park activist's art is one of best shows to see in Philly galleries this month

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by Edith Newhall



Sarah McEneaney, *New Yard*, 2019, acrylic on wood panel, 30 x 48 inches

LOCKS GALLERY



Rail Park activist and cofounder Sarah McEneaney continues to draw on her everyday life for the paintings in her "Callowhill" show at Locks Gallery, named after the artist's longtime neighborhood. What's different here is that McEneaney is offering a longer, broader view than ever.

The studio and living areas in her house appear wider and deeper — and are observed from more intentionally eccentric perspectives. The city of Philadelphia is displayed more panoramically, as viewed from a tall building.

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Details in her paintings, always small, have become infinitesimal.

McEneaney sometimes paints herself into the scene, but in these works she's scarcely visible — even less so than in her last show at Locks, in 2016 — and when she does appear, she's at work, usually shown from a distance. Even the artist's cats and dogs, previously subjects of affectionate and uncanny portraits, are writ small.

The common denominator of this new work is its expansiveness, as in *Rail Park Winter*, depicting a bundled-up McEneaney on skis at the Rail Park with her dog, as seen from a building's high floor. A snow-covered Philadelphia spreads out for miles in front of her. It's a scene that recalls Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Hunters in the Snow*, with its sharp contrasts of light and perspectives, and minuscule figures.

The same expansion can be seen and felt in McEneaney's modest, optimistic springtime portrayal of her rooftop garden, *New Yard*, with a cat sprawling comfortably in the foreground and a watchful dog at the back. The tops of factory buildings peek above a wall, affirming the privacy of this urban oasis in a former industrial section of the city.

I was disappointed not to see closeups of the dog and cats, which McEneaney does so well. Maybe next time.

Through May 11 at Locks Gallery, 600 Washington Square South, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. 215-629-1000 or locksgallery.com.