

# Noel McKenna

## *Thoughts Covered in Moss*

September 6 – October 14, 2023

François Ghebaly is proud to present *Thoughts Covered in Moss*, Australian artist Noel McKenna's first New York solo exhibition.

Sydney-based, Brisbane-born painter and visual artist Noel McKenna has a knack for observation. Entwining nuanced themes of memory, personal history, and daily life, McKenna creates images—often animal-centric, always tenderly imagined—that enshrine the place of the continual observer and his companions. For his latest exhibition entitled *Thoughts Covered in Moss*, McKenna presents new paintings in a broad range of scales and subject matters, from intimate household scenes and patchworked still-lives to sprawling green landscapes, that together offer a sensitive view into the artist's world—one rooted in humble, insightful scenes of the everyday.

Dominating the far wall of the exhibition space, McKenna's title piece, *Thoughts Covered in Moss ..... H (2023)*, is at once a quiet, tranquil scene: Mirroring the location of the painting to the gallery, a tall bookshelf brimming with colorful titles occupies the rear wall of an otherwise spare living room; a figure plays on an upright piano at the far left; a gray cat waits patiently at the opposite corner, perhaps eyeing a mouse at the pianist's feet. Rounding the corner of the stairwell doorway, a serpentine brown dachshund proudly extends its squat legs and charming snout into the center of the space. Here, McKenna nods not only to the breed's friendly, domesticated reputation in places like the US, but also its original vocation, using its short legs and long frame to hunt for vicious badgers down burrows (a practice that still prevails in parts of Europe). With its whimsical design, the dachshund encapsulates a lighthearted sincerity that McKenna extends to his many representations of animals: cats, dogs, piglets, and woodpeckers.

Throughout the exhibition, pets and domestic creatures such as these take precedence over the human form—they live in their houses, scurry between their rooms, lounge in their courtyards. The interior and outdoor scenes featured in McKenna's paintings insist upon the home as a shared space, brought uniquely and indispensably alive by its animal occupants. "As an introverted child I found much solace and

comfort in my pets, and still do to this day. I've had dogs and cats as pets from an early age, and share the ancient Egyptians' belief that they have souls, all animals for that part. I try to give my subjects an important presence in my paintings, one that appreciates the complexity and wonder of animals."

Many of these ideas—childhood memory, belonging, recollection and return—are at the heart of McKenna's painting entitled *Remember to come home... Brisbane River (2023)*. The work features a waterway familiar to McKenna, a backdrop to many of the artist's early memories. Perched on the riverbank is a typical Queenslander home, a type of structure designed on "stumps" to allow cool air below and protect against the annual flood seasons in this region of Australia. Within the context of the exhibition, the river and its adjoining home become emblems of nostalgia and cyclical time. Even the artist's palette, muted greens, ochres, blues, and pale pinks, suggests a tender sentimentality towards time past.

Of another work, entitled *Mother's Eyes (2023)*, McKenna notes, "when working on this painting I began with an empty interior. The two clocks were the first thing to be painted in, which led me on a path of grouping in twos—the cats, the bottles, the shoes, etcetera." For the familiar viewer, the clocks in question are quickly recognizable as a conscious nod to 20th century artist Félix González-Torres's seminal sculpture *Untitled (Perfect Lovers) (1987-1990)*. In light of the exhibition's recurring ideas of human-animal interrelationship, the clocks become powerful touchstones in McKenna's exploration of companionship and the tandem experiences of love, caretaking, and grief. Moreover, this slow, methodical approach to reference and composition characterizes not only the painting at hand, but most all of McKenna's image making, and guides us to seek out details, whether everyday effects or small marvels, hidden in plain sight: a mouse beside the legs of a table or a wedge of moon creeping from behind window curtains. "I usually begin with a very open, almost blank sheet, just a loose idea, and the painting mainly reveals itself as it goes along, until the final composition appears." So too do McKenna's gentle, meditative images gradually reveal themselves to the viewer.

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**Noel McKenna** (b. 1956 Brisbane, Australia) studied at the University of Queensland, Brisbane College of Art, and Alexander Mackie College. His recent solo exhibitions include *mother's tankstation*, Dublin and London; Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney; The Watermill Center, Water Mill, New York; and *Ten Cubed*, Melbourne, Australia. McKenna has been featured in recent museum exhibitions including the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney; National Art School Gallery, Sydney; City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand; and Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, Brisbane. His work is held in many public collections including the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; the QUT Art Museum, Brisbane; and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney.