



Margaret McCann

From Rome to Atlantic City

10.26 – 12.7.2012

Ruffin Gallery
McIntire Department of Art
University of Virginia



Detail of *What We Worry*, 20XX. Oil on linen, 40 x 90 inches

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Curated by

Megan Marlatt

Professor,
McIntire Dept. of Art, U.Va.

Essay "La Straniera" by

John Seed

Professor of Art and Art History
Mt. San Jacinto College

Covers

Detail of *What We Worry?*, 2010
Oil on linen, 40 x 90 inches

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Margaret McCann
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McIntire Department of Art
University of Virginia
P.O. Box 400130, Rugby Road
Charlottesville VA 22904

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Margaret McCann *La Straniera*

In 1985 painter **Margaret McCann**, after earning her MFA from Yale, left America to spend a year in Rome on a Fulbright-Hays grant. Her initial project involved studying Italian depiction of saints, but the scope of her interests, and her engagement with Italian art and culture, flourished unexpectedly. In the end McCann lingered an extra eight years. “The Eternal City feels timeless,” she explains, “even the Italian term for ‘I live here’ is ‘to stay’”. Among the great paintings she encountered there, those by Caravaggio, Fillipo Lippi, Morandi, and Mantegna were favorites. But ancient architecture tugged at her as well.

Living in the historical center and teaching at five American college-abroad programs, McCann passed by Rome’s monuments on her way to work. For her Trinity College “Drawing Monuments” class, she used an oblique view of the Temple of Portunus

Water Country, 2005. Oil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches





with crazy, counter-intuitive angles to teach perceptual measuring. She also assigned imaginative projects such as 'draw an object as a monument'. "Then," McCann comments, "I sort of wound up doing the assignments myself—an early still life-wannabe-cityscape painting was *Unidentified Monumental Object*. Eventually I added figures, placing them in the Colosseo, etc."

Seeing Italy as an outsider, McCann was sympathetically drawn to the "pittura metafisica" of the Greek-born Giorgio de Chirico, who painted the piazzas of Ferrara and Turin as dreamlike symbols of Italy's poetic decay. McCann felt a certain resonance with the decadent 'ruins' of ancient Rome, having emerged from a dark period in her own life, but with time she also became fascinated by Italy's passionate political theater, and sensitive to the dilemmas Italy faced as postmodern culture

Bodysnatcher, 2007. Oil on canvas on Masonite, 40 x 30 inches



Storage 2010. Oil on linen, 30 x 30 inches



Monopolized Still Life, 2012. Oil on linen, 20 x 20 inches

encroached. "There's a lot of gravity here—Italians are philosophical and soulful but melancholic," she notes, "heavily burdened by their historical self-awareness. The film 'La Dolce Vita' has carefree aspects, but it's a tragedy."

Upon her return to New Hampshire in 1993 McCann was a very different artist than the one who had left on a Fulbright. She was seeing things through different eyes, and America was looking "a bit metaphysical—the contrast between the sublimity of Italian architecture and the levity of American was striking." McCann found herself yearning for Italian culture Rome's paradoxical mixture of human ambition and cultural dolor. "They say living many years in another country ruins you," she confides, "because when you're in one, you long for the other. But as problems go, it's an interesting one."

Believe it or Not!. Oil on linen, 50 x 50 inches





What We Worry?, 2009. Oil on linen, 40 x 90 inches

By the mid-90s McCann's paintings were transmitting a kind of enchanted strangeness. The giant nudes that appear in her oils exude an uncomfortable, insomniac awareness of the Lilliputian cityscapes and monuments that surround and contain them. Marked both by their vulnerable nudity and exiled by their enormity, they are outsiders, human colossi who activate their surroundings by implicitly begging the question: "What am I doing here?" What McCann felt in Rome as a *straniera* (stranger or foreigner) had opened up many philosophical questions and given her a central theme to carry forward: the notion that feeling the strangeness of things is a key to life's poetry, and a way towards life's richness and sense of possibility.

Detail of *What We Worry?*, 2009. Oil on linen, 40 x 90 inches





McCann's recent paintings are masterpieces of intense, compressed weirdness that allow her to ask metaphysical questions in fantastic, theatrical situations. Her 2009 triptych *What We Worry?* takes place on an oddball set of cubist piers; an M.C. Escher architectural fantasy re-carpentered by Gordon Matta-Clark. Atlantic City, where McCann lived for a four-year period and the setting of this and several other paintings, is her "anti-Rome". McCann explains, "Rome is all about endurance, and AC is all about ephemera—it's a caricature of American culture. AC has its R. Crumb-like elements, but unexpected beauty as well—sad, sweeping Antonioni-like vistas." As the painting's title tells us—an intentionally mangled and collectivized restatement of "What Me Worry," the motto of *Mad* magazine's goofball avatar, Alfred E. Neumann—nobody worries around here. Perhaps they/we should.

Detail of *What We Worry?*, 2009. Oil on linen, 40 x 90 inches



Above. *Sideshow*, 2012. Oil on linen, 48 x 60 inches

Right. *Ark*, 1991–2006. Oil on canvas on panel, 40 x 40 inches



The tide subtly rises in the background of *What We Worry?* and only when noticed does the vivid image reveal its full meaning. In fact, water plays a key role in many of McCann's recent works. Taking various forms—troughs, pools, waves and rivers—water serves as a metaphor for flow and passage. It suggests the power of nature, provides a home for various fishy characters, and gives McCann a reason to use a lot of blue in her palette. Then again, water is also the Jungian symbol of the unconscious, and the worlds that McCann illuminates are in-between worlds that bridge the gap between real experience and unconscious fears and fantasies. The feeling of otherness that took root in Italy, and then blossomed upon her return, has transformed the artist into a kind of seer.



Top to bottom. *Tempesta*, 2005. Oil on linen, 20 x 20 inches
Mountain Bar, 2009. Oil on linen, 36 x 48 inches



McCann has a mind like a tarot deck, jammed with meaningful characters that spill out onto her canvasses in eccentric troupes. She also has quite a mental store of settings on hand. In a surrealist series of self-portraits that date back to grad school, McCann has explored the warehouse of her complicated mind as subject matter. For example, in *Reconstructing Marge*, McCann depicts herself as Marge Simpson, complete with a Piranesi-like beehive hairdo jammed with an architectural fantasy/idea factory.

The cast of toys and doll-like figures that populate the skewed, rough planks of the Boardwalk in "Worry" are each distinct, each oblivious of all the others, each variously strutting, gesticulating, and smiling brainlessly. One, a tiny convict, does a flip. (McCann says the convict serves as her self-portrait and surrogate, "representing my artistic conviction among other things,"



Reconstructing Marge. Oil on canvas, 32 x 19 inches



Top to bottom. *Sphinx*, 1990–2005. Oil on canvas, 32 x 32 inches
Mister Donut, 2003. Oil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches



she quips. The convict also appears—well actually only the hand, holding a lit cigarette—in “Masterpiece,” a small 2007 McCann oil that is a loving spoof of Philip Guston’s late paintings.)

A number of figures borrowed from popular culture, including SpongeBob, Dumbo, Rat Fink, and Alfred E. Neumann, make cameo appearances in “Worry.” They are joined by some more serious presences including a pot-bellied, laughing Buddha, a sad Hemingwayesque fisherman figure, and a toy “Jaws” shark baring his teeth in a tiny pool. All will certainly be washed into eternity by the impending tsunami, as will the slot machines below that feed their economy. But they are too pre-occupied to notice; they have roles to play, and “time off” to enjoy.



Low Tide, 1997. Oil on canvas, 9 x 7 inches



"My favorite painter vision-wise is Brueghel," explains McCann, "He has a surreal, humorous view of human folly." Obviously, so does McCann. The playfulness of her work is counterbalanced by a nagging sense of foreboding. Our impulse to grab McCann's toys and become children again is thwarted by adult awareness and anxiety. Yes, McCann, like Brueghel, is a humorist. She is also tremendously interested in the function of art as moral allegory. In *Follow the Money*, the hoi polloi cavort in a still life-turned-beach-turned-Monopoly board, while Rich Uncle Pennybags dashes for a helicopter ladder.

Her years of living in Italy and her sense of cultural estrangement have given Margaret McCann a way of seeing that is incisive and prescient. She has created a visual language and a cast of characters that are both contemporary and timeless. She explains, "Italian archetypes—Roman gods, Christian saints,



regional characters of the *commedia dell'arte*—are individualistic and flawed.” Rome was apparently a wonderful place for McCann to consider human foibles with a very long view of history.

As odd as it sounds, McCann can look at a figure like SpongeBob and see him in the detached way that an artist or archaeologist in a future time and place might see him. If you can take in the strangeness of what you see around you—McCann can show you how to do it—your children’s toys will soon look much weirder, but also a bit more beautiful. So will the place where you live. Your ability to feel out of place, McCann seems to say, is a crucial element in your ability to be more completely alive.

Avalanche, 2000. Oil on canvas, 28 x 22 inches





Above. *Still Life Departing*, 2002. Oil on canvas, 20 x 26 inches
 Right. *Over the Edge*, 1999. Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches



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John Seed is a professor of art and art history at Mt. San Jacinto College in Southern California. Winner of a 2002 Society of Professional Journalist's award in art and entertainment writing, he has written about art and artists for Harvard Magazine, Maui No Ka Oi, Honolulu, Christie's Hong Kong, Yerevan, and Art Ltd.



L'Aventurra: Ecco Fanciulla, Il Sogno, La Paesista Grande, 2004. Oil on canvas, 10 x 34 inches



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University of Virginia
P.O. Box 400130
Rugby Road
Charlottesville VA 22904

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