Time past and time present
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past

Ben Johnson Paintings

Stephen McKenna Enclosures and Spaces

Exhibition 26 February – 26 March 1994
Admission Free

An exhibition using paintings, models and computer technology to explore the representation of architecture, featuring the work of Ben Johnson and Stephen McKenna.

The concept for this exhibition comes from a painting by Luigi Fitocamo in which a modern figure and a classical figure shake hands against a backdrop of classical Italian architecture; the past greeting the present, the present taking from the past, a timeless divide.

Ben Johnson's paintings explore the way we perceive the city in terms of space, light and architecture. Using computer-generated drawings as a basis for his work, he takes as his theme the conception, perception and realisation of space, and uninhabited, the paintings invite the viewer to step into the tranquil environment he evokes.

In comparison, **Stephen McKenna's** paintings have a dream-like quality. They hold within them a wonderful quality of light, architecture and landscape, creating a momentary illusion of a mysterious idealised land.

This is an exploration in painting, which pushes the boundaries of perception of an ideal environment.

An Introduction

Time past and time present
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T. S. Eliot

My initial interest was in presenting an exhibition of contemporary Italian architecture. On the cover of a guide to this subject by the Venice-based architect and publisher Sergio Polano is a wonderful painting from 1940 by Luigi Fitocamo, *Giovanni Muzio dialoga con Vitruvio,* in which the two figures are set within a backdrop of classical Italian architecture. I came across a similar quality of vision in paintings from the 1970s by Aruino Cantafora and Massimo Scolari. These paintings by architects and artists were for me more essentially at the core of a gallery presentation of visions of great architecture than the unfortunate drudgery of the standard 'architecture exhibition' consisting of drawings and models, which has become the norm.

Robert Tavernor of the University of Edinburgh's School of Architecture gave me a further background to the traditions of Italian architecture, and showed me what the University's Alberti Project had developed, including a computer model of the painting known as the *Urbino Panel*. In his words, "this perspective view of an ideal city has been an object of fascination since it was rediscovered by art historians in the 19th century. It is not known who painted it – though Piero della Francesca and Luciano Laurana have been suggested – when or why." Previously in London, I had seen Ben Johnson's contemporary painting based on this work, and was impressed by his recreation of a great tradition. There was a further connection in that Ben and Robert had collaborated on computer-generated drawings, which served as the basis for some of Ben's paintings. Later Ben suggested using the beginning of T. S. Eliot's *Burnt Norton* as a title for the exhibition, having himself quoted from the poem in the title of one of his own works.

Robert and I discussed the history of devices for capturing and projecting images, forerunners of our current technologies, which enabled the artist to create the illusion of 3D on a 2D plane. Devices such as the camera obscura and the camera ottica (an optical chamber invented by Alberti) are remarkable in their similarity to the lens of the eye. All these various devices, up to and including the computer, are tools, which can be manipulated to assist the design and creation both of individual buildings and entire cityscapes. Yet this illusion, this imagining, is perhaps closer to our dreams than to 'real', physical space. One aspect of the exhibition is the investigation of our spatial perception, and the way in which the medium of painting enables the poetic concepts to be realised. It will be interesting to see in what way future computer-based applications can increase our capacity to structure and control our environments in subtle ways.

Finally, Stephen McKenna's paintings have that wonderful quality of light, architecture and landscape where humans can live in the great beauty, which the Mediterranean tradition has afforded. These works engage the viewer in a range of pictorial images, which give pleasure through the artist's masterly balance of elements, articulating both wonder and mystery.

Graeme Murray, January 1994

Ben Johnson

Beginnings. My early training at Chester College of Art was a basic design course, a watered down version of the Bauhaus. I was introduced to architecture at evening classes and I remember buying Le Corbusier's seminal text *The Modular* simply for its beautiful cover. I was 18 when I was accepted for the Royal College of Art. You saw a tutor once a term but were given space and opportunity to work, and there were other painters around you. At the time I reacted against the prevalence of American abstraction, preferring to take my inspiration from German expressionism and making paintings based on violent subjects. On leaving the Royal College I had a show in a gallery in New York, which gave me the chance to see my work in a different environment and, therefore, more objectively. Although my home background was far from tranquil, I realised the extremes of my subject matter were alien to me.

Reaction. Although I left the New York exhibition with an order book full for paintings, I came back to London and worked on only two 6' x 6' paintings for two years, each day obliterating or adding to them. My previous paintings had been of people in domestic settings, now the settings became increasingly important until, eventually, the figures disappeared. I realised that some of the images I was working towards related to the Bauhaus architectural images I had seen at Chester, and I started looking at non-objective photography, the work of Moholy Nagy and the Russian Constructivists. I showed multiple views within one painting – the room would be in one perspective, the view from the window in another, and the view through a doorway yet another – very like the expressionist film set in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* and not unlike the surreal and heightened world of *Bladerunner*. Even now, on completing a painting, I am conscious of the hidden presence of the potential actor or character who could inhabit the space portrayed.

Distance. After two years and two incomplete paintings I started work on studies of simple objects and the platonic solids in space. Elaborating on

these, the drawings took on the appearance of architectural spaces. I was searching for a vehicle for experimentation with paint, and I found this amongst press cuttings of buildings I had kept in notebooks over the years. In my experiments I tried to remove the handwriting of my expressionist paintings, avoiding contact with the painting surface. I used paint rolls, threw or sprayed paint on – I was always at one removed, avoiding the hand mark, and becoming detached to observe better what I was going on.

Architects. The architectural images, which lay behind the paintings I exhibited at the ICA in 1973, happened to be the designs of obvious names like Mies van der Rohe, Philip Johnson, Walter Gropius. The images attracted the architectural press, and at that point I realised I could research my subject-matter far better by going straight to architect's offices. I couldn't afford to travel again and, again, I was lucky in that great architects like Foster and Stirling were working in London. I was able to work with their co-operation – they recognised my work as paintings in their own right and not illustrations of architecture, which nonetheless celebrated their achievements and brought them in front of a wider audience.

Studio. I am lucky because my paintings sell, and this allows me time for research and development and more help in the studio. I work with four assistants, but the studio is fairly small and simple. It's painted white and is very orderly – people say it's like a dentist's!

Process. Let's take one of the paintings in the show – the *IBM North Harbour*, which is in Portsmouth, from 1984. I spent four days photographing it, and selected four images to work from. Six months later I went back to the building and focused on one particular view, and established that the light would only be right when the sun was overhead at midday around midsummer's day. I came close to what I had hoped for, and enlarged the photograph back at the studio. The drawing process lasted about a month – I took a large sheet of film, put down a geometric grid and then imposed structural information from the photograph onto it. As the line image developed, I increasingly discarded the photograph so the drawing stood independent of the subject matter. I then transferred the line image on to canvas and the painting process started.

Obsession. Architecture is a coming together of art and science, the material and the spiritual. Over the last 22 years I've increasingly become preoccupied with architecture as an important subject and an appropriate vehicle for my exploration of colour, light and form. I am

obsessed with the process of painting, which is my way of orientating myself to the world. I use simple materials to achieve harmony and order, to try to transcend the material into the physical.

Ideal City. I was enthusiastic about making the painting *Footfalls Echo*…from the *Ideal City* panel, because I think it's a beautiful object. Its authorship is unknown, but it has been suggested that it is an architectural illustration. I feel it goes beyond that. There is clear evidence of collaboration – the patron was the Duke of Urbino, Alberti was the architect and possibly Piero della Francesca was the painter. Furthermore, Piero della Francesca had an apprentice working in his studio called Pacioli, whose mathematical systems were elucidated by Leonardo's drawings, and one of his contributions to society was a system of accounting for merchants – the same system of double-entry accounting on which IBM's success was based. Like the maker of the original painting, I was one of a number of collaborators. I had a patron, and worked with architects, historians and computer scientists. To go forward atr the end of the twentieth century we can't be concerned with celebrity, we have to ask about the quality of a product, about its integrity. The Urbino panel represents a meeting place – a city square and an environment where ideas can be exchanged. At the centre is a place for spiritual repose. It is an ideal city, not because of the hierarchal society it so clearly portrays, but because of the importance it places on our environment and its contribution to the maintenance of high ideas and ambition.

Interviewed by Sarah Knox in Edinburgh, January 1994

Stephen McKenna

Beginnings. I liked paintings I'd seen in museums and knew I wanted to do something similar. At 20 I gave up training as a regular soldier at Sandhurst, and got into the Slade School of Fine Art in 1959. I went there looking for a traditional training, but I didn't learn a great deal, and quickly became a modernist. It then took me four years to shake off the art school mentality of doing what's 'up to the minute'. The Pop Art climate was of little interest to me and, to put another system together, I returned to looking at the art in museums. I spent three years teaching at Canterbury and Goldsmith Colleges of Art, but by 1971 I had realised that I would be better off in Europe.

North and South. For eight years I lived and worked in Bonn where I could earn my living from painting – an inconceivable idea in Britain in the 1970s! By the late 1970s however, I was tired of being a provincial painter, and although I continued to exhibit in Germany and America, I felt I had to return to the 'art world'. The New 57 Gallery in Edinburgh and MoMA in Oxford were among the first to exhibit my work in Britain. Not intending to stay long, I moved to Brussels in 1979, but it was so near everywhere in Northern Europe that I stayed for six years. I have nearly always had two studios, and at that time I had one in Belgium and one in England. Since 1987, I have lived and worked near Arezzo in Tuscany, but I also have a home and a studio in County Donegal. There's a huge difference between Italian life and Irish life, and I tend to paint differently in the two countries. One of the reasons for going to Italy was the environment – classicism, and the combination of landscape and architecture. There's little architecture where I live in Ireland, so I paint the landscape and sea.

Mythology. In the1960s, I played with photography, film and theatre, but by the mid 1970s I realised that to be a figurative painter I had to work from nature. Working from the model was often coupled with looking at the Old Masters. I looked at the tradition of mythology as story, and as a means of representation, from classical sculpture through the Renaissance and right up to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Myths were a common language, but now that classical education has almost disappeared, people need the most basic pagan or Christian myths explained. My pictures are a starting point for learning. Mythology and the remnants of a classical education served me well between 1981 and 1985, but by the mid 1980s everyone was painting ruins and making classical references, and the water became too muddied. Over the last eight years the mythological references in my paintings have become more discreet.

Still Life. I set myself to work in all genres of painting, which relate to looking at objects. I always set up still lifes – the actual collection of objects becomes a sculpture in itself, which I then work from. I work on up to twenty canvases at one time. This is partly technical because oil paints take a long time to dry, but it also gives me time to reflect. Still life is the purest form of painting – it often has complex references or stories built into it, but I am undisturbed by anything outside the relationship of the objects to each other and the observation of this – it is a very concentrated activity.

Interviewed by Sarah Knox in Edinburgh, 12 January 1994.

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