



FIONA MCMONAGLE

DO I LOOK LIKE I CARE



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LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art
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Curated by Dr Vincent Alessi

Contents

Foreword	
Michael Brennan	1
From loneliness to acceptance and back: the work of Fiona McMonagle	
Vincent Alessi	3
Images	8
List of Works	50
Publisher’s Notes	53



Foreword

It is not often that the medium an artist works in – and in fact, the form that it takes – so poetically and perfectly captures the mood of an image’s subject. Fiona McMonagle’s weeping watercolours cast a somewhat melancholic gaze back in time, recalling images of those who were just around – friends, family, others – growing up in the outer western suburbs of Melbourne.

McMonagle’s paintings are at once delicate and brutal. Languid colours and fatigued tones begrudgingly articulate friends and forms that sit awkwardly and uncomfortably under the frame of her gaze – paradoxically in the most natural of ways. Sometimes they are defiant. Sometimes they are in retreat. Occasionally they are both of these things at once. It is not a hesitance that can be seen in the marks made, but perhaps a kind of reluctance or apathy. Nothing is overworked and the pent-up energy in sketchy lines and bleeding forms evokes a self-restraint that is easy to project onto the individual figures portrayed.

What is even more arresting about McMonagle’s portraits is the way this quasi-articulation carries across to her feelings about these people. There is no judgement here, yet at the same time, affection is a bit of a stretch. Instead there is a bare honesty, and the space that is left forces us to confront our own experiences and prejudices.

I would like to congratulate the Curator, Dr Vincent Alessi, for his sensitive and thoughtful approach to this exhibition. The works selected delve into the history of McMonagle’s practice to draw out a narrative that is as delicately measured and balanced as the individual works themselves. Likewise, his catalogue essay extends

the understanding of McMonagle’s practice and comes at a time when deserving attention is being given more broadly to her work. I would also like to extend a sincere thank-you to the staff at LUMA who have worked tirelessly to bring this exhibition into being. To the lenders of works, I thank you for your vision and support. Without your early backing of McMonagle’s career and your willingness to see her work shown in this context, the important exhibition that we are presenting at LUMA today would not have been possible. And finally I would like to thank Fiona McMonagle for her enthusiastic embrace of this project. The honesty and sensitivity that she brings to her subject matter extends to all aspects of her practice and has made the process of realising this exhibition all the more rewarding.

Michael Brennan
Acting Artistic Director
LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art



From loneliness to acceptance and back: the work of Fiona McMonagle

He angled away into an oncoming torrent of pedestrians, all boiled faces and beetling sunglasses, a surge of elbows, phones, smoke-puckers and semi-syllables within a fug of sweat and watering perfumes. He yielded towards the road's edge where buses shuddered and gulped at the kerb. A skateboarder swept past. The street pulsed and roared as he fought for a bearing. Target, pharmacy, real estate agent, bank. Fuck, he was listing, yawning, hopelessly self-correcting. It was more than he could manage. Any second he'd capsize.

Tim Winton, *Eyrie*, 2013

Australian author Tim Winton has always had the capacity to write with equal parts honesty and poetry about his place, Western Australia. He describes the once working-class but now definitely upper middle-class suburb of Fremantle as “a philistine giant eager to pass off its good fortune as virtue” and “Leviathan with an irritable bowel”. A place that has “nursed its grievances and scratched its arse” while its better sibling, Perth, has spent its time bulldozing its past and burying its doubts in bluster.¹ While Winton's descriptions of Fremantle might seem derogatory and critical, a place that is inferior, uncultured and lacks confidence, he almost in contrast retains a sense of affection for the suburb. His characters – dysfunctional, desperate and on the

fringes of society – are lovable and good natured. They navigate their place – like Kelley in *Eyrie* – fully aware of the eclecticism that makes up the whole and regardless of their situation, faults and downfalls they are and always will be part of the author's tribe.

Like Winton, Fiona McMonagle has great affection for her tribe. These people are at the core of her practice, constantly appearing as the key actors in her majestic watercolours over her fifteen-year career. Similarly to Winton, McMonagle is honest in her depiction of those who have grown up “out West” but never with a judgemental eye. Her works are painted in the tradition of portraiture. However, while the sitters may be known to the artist they are always depicted as anonymous archetypes and as a representation of universal experiences.

Born in County Donegal, Ireland, McMonagle is the youngest of six children. Arriving in Australia as a young child she grew up in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. “The West” was considered then, as it is now, a part of Melbourne populated by bogans, the uncultured and uncouth, where teenagers become either dropouts or very young parents, spending their time roaming the streets making others feel uncomfortable. Houses are either dilapidated or McMansions – enormous houses with too many bedrooms, a cinema room, alfresco dining and the obligatory Ford or Holden parked in the drive way next to the jet ski. Of course, these are all stereotypes and quite often unfair

and inaccurate. However, they have a function in defining the aesthetic and identity of a place, regardless of how accurate they might be. And for an artist like McMonagle, the West and its people are the bedrock of her artistic curiosity and pursuits.

McMonagle unashamedly acknowledges that her work is grounded in the depiction of “Westies”. While this is very much a pragmatic decision – it is where she grew up – the works are more universal in that they relate to the broader idea and happenings of the city’s suburbs. In particular, the dynamics of youth culture. McMonagle is not interested in portraiture but she is interested in people and the relationships and environments which define their existence. Describing the people in her work McMonagle declares that

they often find themselves in situations that wouldn’t be best described as happy moments. I’m not dealing with Julian, Dick, Anne and George from Enid Blyton’s Famous Five, its not all sunshine, adventure and lashings of ginger beer, it’s life growing up in the western suburbs of Melbourne, sometimes there’s not too much to smile about. But I do feel that I try and bring a positivity to most of the situations.²

This last statement is at the core of McMonagle’s modus operandi. She is not making any judgements about the people she depicts but likewise she is not sugar-coating their experience, in particular feelings of loneliness and solitude and teenage angst which is often driven by circumstance and environment.

This exhibition, *Do I look like I care*, does not seek to be fully representative of McMonagle’s career. It acknowledges and celebrates the artist’s relationship with the place of her childhood and youth and how this manifests in her artwork. However, while taking this broader view it aims to interrogate the notions of isolation and loneliness, teenage angst and the pursuit of claiming an identity in

a teenage world of confusion and white noise. It explores how these ideas, particularly that of loneliness and isolation, reside not only when one is alone but also how they exist within a group dynamic. It seeks to give a cohesive voice to the narratives that have run through the artist’s work and to shine a light on the deep humanity that is present in her practice.

Many of McMonagle’s works are given titles based on the subject’s name. However, they are never portraits. Instead the sitter becomes a representation of broader conceptual ideas. The small work Travis (2011), depicts the model’s bare back covered in a tattoo of angel wings. While based on an individual that is known to the artist the work speaks more broadly of the pursuit for identity and individualism through the marking of one’s body. Likewise, it suggests a need for acceptance by virtue of similarity. Tattoos, once the domain of outlaws and those on the fringes, are now part of popular culture and almost a right of passage for both young men and women growing up in contemporary society. This small work encapsulates both the confidence of youth but also their vulnerability. The tattoo, while now more a fashion statement than a mark of rebellion, still espouses an attitude of being different and perhaps more importantly that the wearer is young and not saddled with the weight and responsibilities of older, more respectable generations. However, it is also a symbol of wanting to be part of and accepted by a broader community: be that one’s immediate circle of friends or the larger demographic to which one belongs.

This sense of confidence as a mechanism to protect one from being left out and in giving one voice and identity is also seen in the work *Do I look like I give a shit* (2008). A brash and confident young girl, taking a drag from a cigarette, sits on a step staring directly at the viewer. Her head tilted slightly to the side proclaims her indifference to those who look at her. She neither cares about what we think or the

judgements which we might make of her. It also deeply intertwined in the almost expected dynamic between youth culture and adulthood where the young shirk responsibility and dismiss any idea of conforming. However, imbedded in such an attitude is a deep sense of vulnerability. A statement such as “do I look like a give a shit” is both a confident response to any who might question but it is just as much a front of bravado: a defensive reaction, an armour-like cloak, to protect against any form of criticism that may easily expose faults and weaknesses which potentially leads to being an outsider.

This idea of being an outsider is perhaps of most relevance to teenagers within the context of their peers and friendship networks. McMonagle’s works of groups of youths sitting around, lazing on a sunny afternoon, are as much about the need for support networks as they are of the fragile nature of them. *Saturday Arvo* (2008) is a snapshot of a readily visible aspect of youth culture: a group of young skater-boys sitting and standing around watching the world go by. There is no need for conversation, they are bound together by their indifference to those who view and most likely judge them. Each relishes the opportunity to be together, to be “a gang”. However, the work retains a deep sense of each being in their own world: each trying to find their own voice, their own identity. They are individuals navigating the fraught waters of teenage-hood, which while often experienced together, is very much a solitary journey. This is also seen in the work *Centre* (2007) where three young girls stare directly at us nonplussed by our existence. While cropped in tight together, suggesting a close bond between friends, they all seem to be occupied with individual thoughts and an ambition to be accepted by the other. There remains a pervading sense of fragility, that life is not always perfect, that growing up is fraught with danger and difficulties and that one is always on the precipice of being ousted to the periphery.

The antidote to isolation and loneliness is undoubtedly acceptance. Acceptance for who you are but more importantly an invitation to be part of a broader group. This idea exists in three works from McMonagle’s 2011 exhibition *The Ball*. Using the framework of the debutante ball – a long-standing Australian tradition where teenage girls debut as young women in a formal context – McMonagle explores how the event is both a rite of passage for Australian teens but also a marker of a time that is filled with vulnerability and exciting opportunity. Created as if viewing a photo album of the event, the works are a snapshot of both the camaraderie of teenage groups and the joyful nature of more intimate relationships. In both contexts, McMonagle’s work poetically presents and investigates the importance of being part of something greater: that even in a setting that can be awkward and unfamiliar, young people seek to be part of an event in order to belong. This is seen in the work *The Group* (2010-11) where friends are arranged formally as couples in their flowing dresses and tuxedos, posed to capture this momentous occasion for posterity. *Shae and Frank* (2010-11) and *Teena and Angelo* (2010-11), while focussing on the dynamics of couples, likewise, reaffirms the importance of being part of something greater, of being accepted. Moreover, they are snapshots of potential first loves and the exploration and excitement that this brings.

McMonagle is one of only a few contemporary artists who use watercolour as their medium of choice. Quite often thought of as a medium used by hobbyists, McMonagle has embraced its delicacy, difficulty and unforgiving nature. Declaring that she loves its immediacy and the fact that “each mark you make is definitive”, she also acknowledges its impact in solidifying her ideas.³ It also enhances the key conceptual concerns which underpin her work. The delicacy of the medium is often contrasted with the toughness of the subjects depicted. The commonly understood and accepted subtlety of watercolour is in juxtaposition to the brutality and even ugliness of the way that some of the figures are portrayed. This conflict between

the inherent qualities of the medium and the subjects which define McMonagle’s practice is synonymous with the key curiosities and ideas which are at the centre of her practice: angst and a sense of tension between confidence and vulnerability which defines those she portrays.

Billy Bragg, the great English songwriter known for his observations and support of the working class, has always really been interested in the human condition: love loss, loneliness and friendship. In 1983 he sang how he was “the milkman of human kindness”. Fiona McMonagle’s work shares a similar sentiment. She has drawn her inspiration from those who live in the suburbs of the West: people who have been defined in the public consciousness as, amongst other things, bogans and uncultured. And while her depictions are honest and real – she shows the awkwardness of teenagers at a deb, the bravado of youth turning a finger up at society and the reality of youth angst – she does so without any hint of judgment or criticism. Her work is honest but poetic, brutal but kind. It is generous and above all a celebration of the human condition in all its bright and ugly manifestations.

Dr Vincent Alessi

¹ Tim Winton, *Eyrie*, The Penguin Group, Melbourne, Australia, 2013, p. 5.

² Ashley Crawford, “Fiona McMonagle: Loud and Proud”, *Australian Art Collector*, Issue 53, July-September, 2010 p. 170.

³ Natalie King, “Fiona McMonagle”, *Art World*, April/May 2008, p. 118













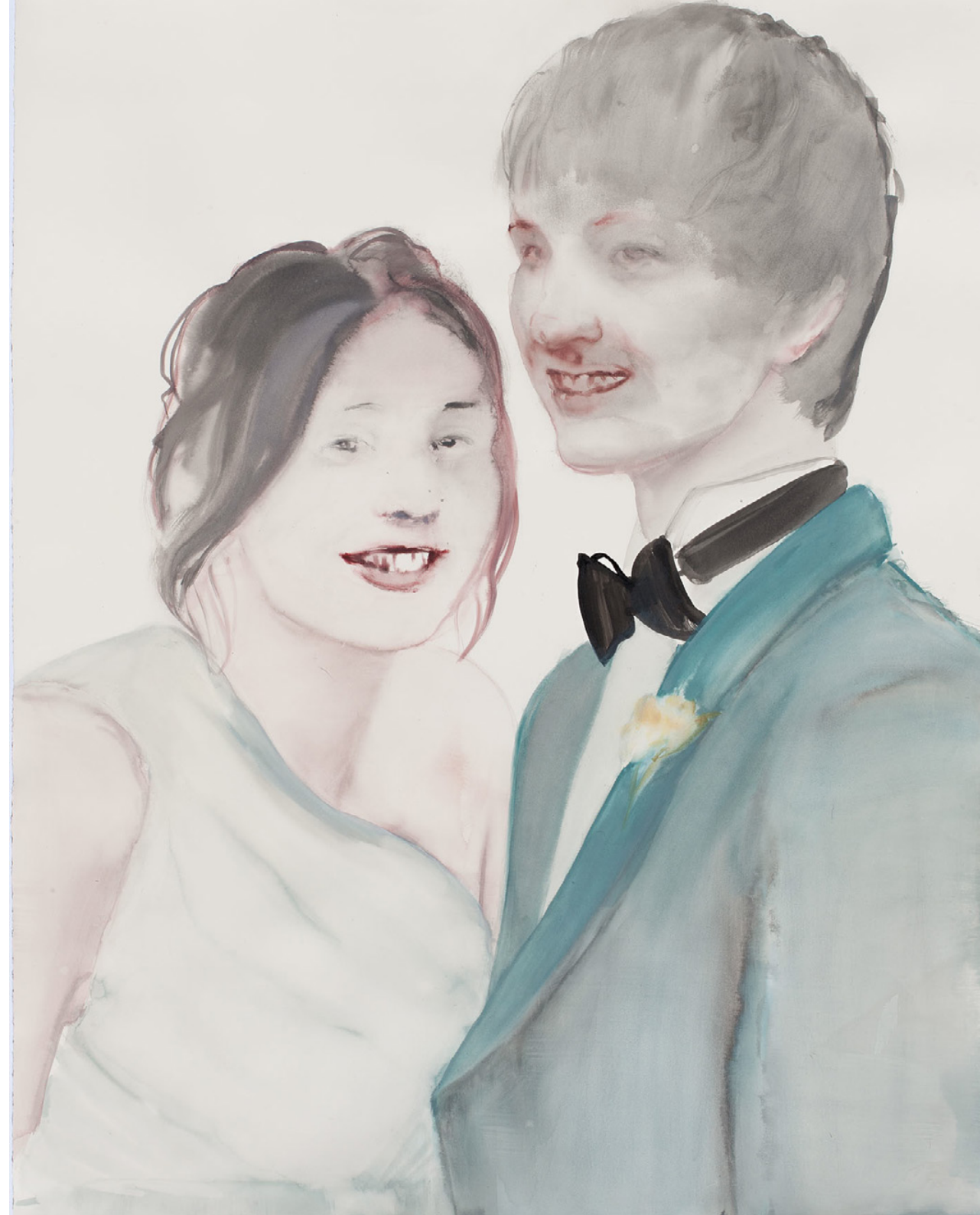


The Group 2010-11



Teena and Angelo 2010-11

Shae and Frank 2010-11



Amanda 2009

Chris 2009

Martin 2009





AKA #1 2011





AKA #5 2011





Do I look like I give a shit 2008



Untitled profile 1 2010



Untitled profile 2 2010









List of Works

Measurements: height precedes width in centimetres of image

All works courtesy of Fiona McMonagle unless otherwise indicated

AKA #1 2011
watercolour and gouache on paper
51 x 70

AKA #3 2011
watercolour and gouache on paper
51 x 70
Heiser Gallery

AKA #5 2011
watercolour and gouache on paper
51 x 70
Maitland Regional Art Gallery Collection

Amanda 2009
watercolour and gouache on paper
180 x 57

Benched 2007
watercolour and gouache on paper
110 x 90
Kirby Collection

Centre 2007
watercolour and gouache on paper
110 x 90
Kirby Collection

Chris 2009
watercolour and gouache on paper
180 x 57

Do I look like I give a shit 2008
watercolour and gouache on paper
95 x 94
Collection Weeden/Long

Every second Saturday 2010
watercolour and gouache on paper
182 x 95

The Girls 2008
watercolour on paper
125 x 114
Private Collection courtesy Olsen Irwin Gallery

The Group 2010-11
watercolour and gouache on paper
87 x 144

The Huddle 2007
watercolour and gouache on paper
110 x 90

I never knew my Dad 2009
watercolour and gouache on paper
67 x 59
Joyce Nissan Collection

It's my party 2008
watercolour on paper
81 x 60

Martin 2009
watercolour and gouache on paper
180 x 57
Collection Rex Irwin

Saturday Arvo 2008
watercolour on paper
118 x 114

Shae and Frank 2010-11
watercolour and gouache on paper
114 x 90

Teena and Angelo 2010-11
watercolour and gouache on paper
114 x 140

Therese 2008
watercolour and gouache on paper
120 x 100
Private Collection, courtesy Olsen Irwin Gallery

Travis 2011
watercolour and ink on paper
57 x 50
Olsen Irwin Gallery, Sydney

Untitled profile 1 2010
watercolour and gouache on paper
45 x 45
Olsen Irwin Gallery

Untitled profile 2 2010
watercolour and gouache on paper
25 x 45
Collection Jean Mostyn



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Images
Opposite p 1: *Every second Saturday* (detail), 2010
Opposite p 3: *The Huddle* (detail), 2007



