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Sarah McEneaney's paintings are quietly autobiographical.

by Roberta Fallon

In her first solo show in Philadelphia since her 2004 Institute of Contemporary Art retrospective, Sarah McEneaney creates a world that is brighter, more manic and far more whimsical than the world most of us live in—and for that it is absolutely loveable. Now on view at Locks Gallery, the accoladed local artist's autobiographical works are not a “true” or documentary picture of her life. “Absolutely edited, embellished, fantasized, and remembered” is how the artist characterizes her work. But the paintings are signifiers of what's truly important in her life—quiet, beauty, companionship, work and engagement with the greater world.

McEneaney doesn't work from photographs. These virtuoso egg tempera paintings—their saturated reds make them glow like jewels—are imaginings based on sketches of the real world. Her seemingly dead pan compositions are amazing accomplishments; They have the panoramic sweep of a Grandma Moses landscape and the architectural detail and skewed space of an Indian miniature. Seductive for their seeming simplicity, the works are complex narratives in the tradition of the old masters.

Like a good story, these paintings build through the accumulation of details. Take *Living Room*, a large new work. This homey portrait of the artist at rest reveals her to be a lover of art books (she's reading Maira Kalman's *The Principles of Uncertainty*) and movies (stacked up near the television are *Goodfellas*, *I Shot Andy Warhol* and more) as well as a supporter of younger artists. There's an Obama poster on the front door telling of her activism. The work is painted with brilliant colors, layered and scumbled and daubed and brushed on, to make it radiate with color and texture.



This and McEneaney's other odes to domestic bliss and to the life of the artist are in a long tradition of artists painting from their lives—from the Impressionists and Matisse to David Hockney. But McEneaney is winking and nodding at art history in a way that's thoroughly post-modern and cartoony. One can only attribute her wry self-effacing sensibility to R. Crumb, Art Spiegelman and other comic artists.

This is McEneaney's first solo outing with Locks and the works sparkle in the blue chip's large first floor space. Don't miss Ellen Harvey's big installations upstairs. The British-born, New York artist is showing autobiographical paintings and mirrored environments.