

TITLE MAGAZINE

Sarah McEneaney, "Trestletown"

November 18th, 2013, by Daniel Gerwin



Twilight, 2012, egg tempera on gessoed panel, diptych, 20 1/2 x 36 inches

Twilight (2012) is a Rosetta Stone for McEneaney's life as she lives and paints it: she is shown returning home on a spring evening, the Reading Viaduct visible beyond the walls of her yard. Inside are flowering irises and a white-blossoming tree, beloved by Van Gogh and the subjects of some of his most luscious pictures. Below the tree we find statues of Saint Francis, patron of animals, and Saint Jude, patron of impossible tasks. This single scene explains everything else in the show.

Saint Francis

Animal Thirst (2012) hangs on the gallery's east wall, directly across from *Carlton and Wood* (2010) on the west wall. Both paintings declare McEneaney's oneness with her dogs and cats through the common needs of their bodies. They drink, shit, and watch each other; they cohabit, coexist. If you have any doubts about the philosophical thrust of these images, take a look at *Red Cross* (2011). What happens when you replace the Son of God with the Daughter? McEneaney has painted a crucifixion, supplanting Jesus with herself, the cross with her bed, and the nails with her two cats bedding down for the night and pinning her arms. In place of the blood of Christ we have a warm

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Red Cross, 2011, acrylic and collage on paper, 48 x 36 inches

red bedspread and McEneaney's pajama bottoms: suffering becomes cozy slumber, companionship, and menstruation as cyclical life force rather than Christ's fatal bleed. This is a highly unusual painting for McEneaney, materially in its use of acrylic and collage on paper, chromatically in its relative darkness, and thematically in its overt use of the crucifixion, but for all these reasons I find it fascinating and revealing.

Saint Jude

The works not focused on animals are either about painting or McEneaney's principal effort as a community activist: the transformation of the Reading Viaduct into a public park. Art and activism are both mind-bendingly uphill tasks, which makes Saint Jude the perfect touchstone for McEneaney, who is as close to Jane Jacobs with a paintbrush as I can imagine. She has been a leader in the Viaduct effort for ten years, a mission that has gained

momentum since the success of the High Line in Manhattan. McEneaney has always been an autobiographical painter, so as her dreams come closer to fruition we see her joy in a series of related paintings.

Viaduct, West Poplar (2013) is the most infectiously uplifting, its luminous blue sky hosting a flotilla of cheery clouds under which McEneaney takes flight on a swing hung from a catenary, while her dog Trixie looks on. The train tracks shoot off to a one-point perspective future of great promise. *Trestletown, 10th and Hamilton 10th Floor* (2012) and *Trestletown, North from Goldtex* (2013) are tours de force of cityscape painting, and their titles identify the vantage points she used to figure out each drawing. Both paintings are accurate, lovingly detailed portrayals of her neighborhood that hum with bold color and geometry. To get the most out of the flat shapes of the city plan, McEneaney never paints cars on the streets, allowing roads to function as uninterrupted lines carving the urban scene into delightful triangles and rectangles.

Three other panels show McEneaney in her studio. Two of these place her among white walls and blank canvases, focusing attention on the artist and making them self-portraits. She appears confident, jaunty, and high-spirited, very much on top of a world that is turning her way lately. The paintings are filled with wonderful details: In *D and P Redux* (2012), she and her animals appear twice within the picture, in the manner of medieval narrative painting. In the foreground she points with her right hand to Trixie, as a medieval Saint might gesture toward Christ, or to the instrument



Viaduct, West Poplar, 2013, egg tempera on wood, 36 x 48 inches

of her martyrdom. Her left hand holds a small brush tipped with sanguineous paint held against the vein of her right arm, closing a circle between her blood and her paint, her life and her art.

The Return Home

Modernism made much of the separation between life and art, but I've never bought that line. One of today's hot trends is political or social activism as art, which is variously named social practice, social sculpture, or participatory art. Thinkers such as Jacques Ranciere and Claire Bishop have critiqued a lot (though by no means all) of this work as failing to achieve much aesthetically while also being ineffective politically. I find it compelling that McEneaney offers an entirely different model, in which she is deeply engaged in her art and in her community, just not at the same time. In a wonderful paradox, McEneaney does not keep her activism and her art separate, they are fully integrated while being completely different endeavors. And she excels at both.

Daniel Gerwin is a painter living in Philadelphia.