



*Installation view of the exhibition Projects 88: Lucy McKenzie.
The Museum of Modern Art, September 10–December 1, 2008*

projects 88 lucy mckenzie

A Conversation between Christophe Cherix, Beca Lipscombe, Lucy McKenzie, and Bernie Reid

Christophe Cherix: We are with Lucy McKenzie, Beca Lipscombe, and Bernie Reid to talk about the installation of this show in progress, *Projects 88*. We decided to do this exhibition after acquiring a number of works by Lucy McKenzie—two paintings and a group of prints. Lucy proposed to commission an interior design company, Atelier, for the exhibition display. So, Lucy, can you tell us a bit more about your work and your relationship with this company?

Lucy McKenzie: Well, even though the exhibition shows a series of my prints and paintings, the scenography of the show is conceived and executed by Atelier, which is a new interior design company by the three of us. It was started last year as a way of making work outside of our particular disciplines (Beca is a textile and fashion designer, Bernie an illustrator, and I'm involved in fine art). Through a certain kind of dissatisfaction and also the idea that some things can only fit within the frame of this label of "interior

design"—or "interior decoration," which is probably more applicable—we thought we would design a very classic display for the exhibition that would show the work at the best advantage and suggest something about the way the work is, to begin with, displaced. A lot of the posters that are being shown were made as advertising posters for events a long time ago, and by over-determining the installation we underscore that they're fish out of water: they're not in their natural habitat.

CC: How did the three of you meet? In your work, Lucy, one sees a lot of staging, backdrops, display, and it seems almost like a logical idea to create this company. But how did you get together? Did you meet on a former project?

LM: Well, we've worked on loads of things before.

Bernie Reid: Beca asked you, Lucy, to model—

Beca Lipscombe: Initially, yeah

BR: —for a fashion story I was illustrating.

BL: And that's how we became friends, and then it's morphed into many different things: Lucy as a model, myself as a model for Lucy, and Bernie assisting Lucy. It goes on and on, doesn't it? It's been about ten years that we've known each other.

LM: So this is the first time with Atelier that we've done something which is a complete three-way—

BR: —split

LM: Before I would be employed by Beca, or Beca would be employed by me, and now it's really about the enjoyment or pleasure of bouncing off each other.

CC: Would you say a few words about the former projects with Atelier as this is your third commission? The first was at Daniel Buchholz Gallery, and the second was for a nightclub in Glasgow. Could you explain how those works were different from this one?

BL: Well, obviously the club has to function as a club, has to be durable, has to have lots of bums on seats, has to be—

LM: —vomit-proof

BL: Absolutely vomit-proof. It's important! So, that in mind, Bernie used car paint on the floors because it's very durable. There's a steep staircase going down into the club, and we painted it in the style of a close, which is the entrance hallway in tenement buildings in Glasgow. We did it in the same sort of style with the Charles Rennie Mackintosh tiles. And then the dance floors had the brief that it had to be like you'd been to the pub, you came home from the pub, and had a party in your flat. So we had to create a—

BR: —it had to be a quite scummy flat—

BL: —yeah, with a bad landlord so you had drippy walls with, you know, mold emerging and bad rugs and carpets on the floor—

LM: —tea and toast—

BL: —yeah, tea and toast, which is a part of the club.



Above: Installation views of the exhibition Atelier: Lucy McKenzie, Beca Lipscombe, Bernie Reid. Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, September 2007



Above and right: Views of Atelier's installation at The Flying Duck nightclub, Glasgow, 2007



LM: And because it was in a basement there was this huge supporting pillar in the middle of the dance floor where this box was built. So we made a fake slum landlord's huge wardrobe in the middle of the dance floor because those wardrobes are so redundant. Everyone has one of those IKEA modular pieces.

BL: Yeah, nobody wants them but no one can move them.

LM: So those horrible wardrobes are like coffins, and the idea of them being plunked in the middle of the dance floor, we couldn't resist.

CC: The decor was designed for a limited amount of time, or is it a permanent installation?

LM: Until they choose to change it, I suppose. Although it was our first job and we had to learn a lot about making things durable with varnishes and car paint and making sure the wallpaper was perfect, you know, "pick-proof," so we'll have to see how long it lasts. We hope as long as possible!

BR: I think if it gets a bit crappy that'll be part of the effect of the, sort of, "bad landlord."

CC: How did you start working on this installation?

LM: Well, Bernie had made a lot of rugs for the floor, these stenciled rugs, which actually come from an old Russian tradition—

CC: —to paint fake rugs—

LM: —to paint carpets on the floor from stencils. "Carpets for the poor," they're called.

BR: Cheap and effective.

LM: And of course we're interested to see the effect of—I don't know how many people come through here a week—but to see what effect that has on the linoleum. And Beca and I have a shared interest in the history of fashion and its collaborations with art, all those great instances where exhibitions have been designed, or fashion has been shown in museums. We wanted to re-create something of that classic moment when textiles met art.

CC: But what's surprising in the installation as it's being created is the eclecticism of the sources. You mix Bauhaus with Art Nouveau and Neogothic. Is it something that you value as a statement, or is it something that happens spontaneously?



*Above: Installation view of front gallery in Projects 88:
Lucy McKenzie*

LM: I personally believe that interiors—especially private ones, but in general interiors—shouldn't be overly engineered and self-conscious, and I like the idea that things come together just naturally. What bind them are the pure love of decoration and the history of decoration in all its forms, which isn't meant as a kind of postmodern sampling. We love all the fabrics and patterns that we're using, and they all have a kind of personal significance to where we're from. It's not trying to be too self-conscious. We're really just going with a desire and we're not sure how it will look.

CC: Bernie, would you say something about the motif of the fake rug that you've chosen, where it comes from and why you chose that specific carpet?

BR: Well, Lucy kind of led. She's interested in the Neogothic style, and I just took one of her books on children's ecclesiastic Neogothic decorations and picked my favorite motifs and designed the rug from that. I mean, for me I'm kind of driven by the desire not to do what I used to do with my illustration career,

which is very street credible, hip-hop-based kind of stuff. So my interest is basically in not doing that, and as soon as I get a chance to do something like this, I enjoy it a lot more.

CC: How do you feel about working in a "fine art" context like The Museum of Modern Art?

BR: It's great for me. I just went back to art school, so you couldn't ask for much more as an art student. I'm studying painting, so it's great to be able to walk outside of this room and see the Philip Guston paintings.

CC: And Beca, can you say a few words about how you chose the textiles you're going to feature in the show? What's the relationship between them? Could you give us some context for those works?

BL: Textiles and fashion are notoriously hard to exhibit, to show off, and there are traditional methods and ways. I researched images that had used textiles in an interesting way, like rugs on the wall and drapes, but not a drape that's coiffeured and buffed—instead, something quite minimalist and stingy. I looked at various ways that people had used textiles and sampled what I could relate to. And they're all from different eras—Neoregency [pointing at the raw silk textile with gold additions], or this one [pointing at the screenprinted raw silk textile] is a screenprint that's supposed to be like block print from the Bauhaus, and the other is a faux-suede blue with a very simple opaque white pattern on it that's supposed to look like Jasper Wedgwood. None of the eras match or don't match; they're just how I referenced textiles and how to display fabric, and these three were the strongest ideas that I wanted to put together.

CC: Do these textiles exist as unique works or are they something that you can multiply as well?

BL: Unique works. This [pointing at the screenprinted raw silk textile] is going to be a rug, but it turns into scarves if it's cut down. So I have scarves for the museum shop, for instance, in the same print but with different fringing. This fringing isn't suitable to wear because it's made of paper whereas the fringing on the scarves is made of wool. Again, fashion versus interiors—slightly different materials used, but they can swap into one another.

LM: I guess very cynically we thought that to do something at The Museum of Modern Art is the best piece of advertising you could possibly have [laughing], which definitely deals with the relationship of commerce and art from a different angle. We're here as artisans to do something for you.

CC: It's a big step to go from the commercial gallery system to an interior decoration company.

LM: It's a completely different paradigm: the way your work and skills are valued, what you can expect to be paid, the way that it's judged purely on its merits rather than being supported by a system of art magazines and collectors.

CC: You had to update your training as well.

LM: Yes, I recently completed studies in a school in Brussels called Van Der Kelen, which has been running for 125 years and teaches techniques in decorative painting, friezes, ceiling painting, fake wood, fake marble, gilding, advertising, lettering—all from the nineteenth century, the golden age of decorative painting. It was an incredibly intense course and a fantastic experience, and I learned much more about paint than I did at art school, that's for sure.

CC: Is it for you a form of rejection of the art school training?

LM: Not at all. I just think that there's a way to be interested in the traditional skills that isn't about being conservative or rejecting modernity or critical thought. But we can somehow use the language of decoration and the idea of art being decoration. It's permanent and people have to live around it; it's tested in a different way. You don't have to revert to conservative language. It's not about returning to traditional painting.

CC: At the same time you could read Atelier as part of a conceptual tradition, artists creating a collective to distance themselves from authorship and at the same time trying to integrate society in a different way.

LM: We definitely see ourselves as a company rather than a collective. I think also the term "collective" has been very flippantly abused or misused in the last few years.



Above: Installation view of rear gallery in Projects 88: Lucy McKenzie. The Museum of Modern Art, September 10-December 1, 2008

Below: Atelier. Untitled. 2008. Screenprinted faux-suede curtain. As installed with one print by Lucy McKenzie in Projects 88: Lucy McKenzie

CC: Would you explain what kind of social space you would like to create, what kind of interaction you would like to encourage?

LM: My absolute dream would be to decorate a bar. That's the ultimate place to have an interior.

CC: Why would a bar be a better place for such an interaction rather than some place else?

LM: Just because of the history of the way bars have been decorated to seduce, such as the nineteenth-century bars with crystals in the mirrors to make you completely forget if it's day or night. My own love of bar interiors has had a huge effect and influence on my work. It's not like restaurants or private clubs; a bar is that non-space where everybody meets. But I'd also love to do swimming pools, hospitals, and community centers.

CC: Would you say a few words about the techniques you used for the trompe l'oeil paintings, because your part of the show was to design a large backdrop on which the prints are hung.

LM: I wanted this room to be a kind of Arts and Crafts space, maybe on the edge of Orientalism, so the woodwork has these small squares. I was thinking maybe a slightly mean Presbyterian opium den [laughter]. It could be a library, or it could also be the walls of a club—a space that could be private or semi-private. I wanted to underscore the fact that the majority of art that is bought is hung in private rooms, but we see it in museums on white walls shown to beautiful advantage. I've been very impressed by how

good certain things look that in other circumstances I would never really have thought about. I wanted to show my own work in this over-determined room, as I said, to underscore that the prints and paintings are out of their original environments. But they're meant to be decorative, and they're meant to be lived around, and they're meant to be shown on people's walls. The techniques used are very traditional oil paint techniques to achieve wood and marble, and we used gilding and painted shadows so that everything looks three-dimensional. When the exhibition is finished I hope to keep the paintings. I'd like them to be used for things like film sets, or I want other artists to borrow them as a portable context to show their work.

CC: Will each of keep a separate career—for example Bernie as an illustrator, Beca as a fashion designer—or is Atelier basically going to take more and more of your time?

BR: We'll have to wait and see. For me, I'd like it to take more time. Eventually I'd like to move on from illustrating—but don't tell my agent [laughter]. We'll just see what happens.

LM: The main thing is that we have this kind of shared ethos. We're all interested in being self-sufficient and accountable for what we do and using the easiest materials at hand. We have an interest in indigenous culture in Scotland. I live in Brussels now, but I'm still very close to Glasgow and Edinburgh and painfully aware of the whole structure that we're a part of. We want to keep our autonomy and freedom. That's why we're friends and that's why we work together.



Left: Atelier. Untitled. 2008. Oil on canvas with copper leaf additions. As installed with two prints by Lucy McKenzie in Projects 88: Lucy McKenzie

*The exhibition is organized by Christophe Cherix,
Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books.*

*The Projects series is made possible by the Elaine Dannheisser
Projects Endowment Fund and by The Junior Associates of
The Museum of Modern Art and the JA Endowment Committee.*