



Jess **MacNeil**

g bk

gallery | barry keldoulis

19 Meagher St Chippendale
Sydney Australia
www.gbk.com.au barry@gbk.com.au
+61 (0) 414 864 445



Jess MacNeil: Tenuous Ground

With good reason, painting engages Jess MacNeil, and many young artists, as a free and self-confident field for restless invention. Internationally, painting has new strength notwithstanding the newer mass-media directed technologies. Aside from sculptural installation, recent challenges to painting as visual 'language' have come from photography – be it chemical or digital, still or moving. Yet, intriguingly, since photography's invention in 1827, painting and photography have continued their intimate relationship, informing and validating each other.

Jess MacNeil's paintings draw on photography to generate the formal material of recognisable images in a way that requires commitment, action and great sensitivity to consequence. They also make apparent fundamental aspects of painting in a single unified field in their treatment of the photographic image – figure and ground, presence and absence, realism and abstraction. These elements are part of modernist painting's great tradition. *How* they are engaged is fueling painting's international resurgence. Intimacy of subject, vision and representational means are characteristics of much new painting. Thus painting remains a medium to explore subjective thinking expressed through vision, image, looking.

MacNeil provides, on one hand, minimal information for understanding the representational aspects of an image. On the other, she undermines or interrupts the photographic image's coherence by intruding the surface on which it is articulated. She makes paintings that rethink images collected in the world through her own camera. Unlike postmodern habits, she doesn't purloin existing images in public circulation or (post grunge) disarticulate common materials. She remains forthrightly within the material realm and practice of painting, using it for and against itself. This is the form of engagement on which her poetics is based.

The photographically-derived images that inform these works are of places where the artist has lived or has visited. If not local, they are intimate as memory-signifiers. They represent places that are familiar or remembered as special through her experience: the streets of Sydney's inner west, the new Norman Foster-designed entrance to the British Museum. Selective image-making through a slow, almost painful process of accumulation that can't be undone allows MacNeil to focus anew on a remembered place or its photographic record, with the extraordinary confidence of a tight-rope walker. Like life, the process of these paintings can only move forward and so, like life, the opportunity for correction as an informed afterthought diminishes as the work progresses. This self-imposed discipline contributes significantly to MacNeil's poetics. Unlike life, and to her great credit, there can be no spin, no rewriting of history, no better-informed or self-serving revision.

MacNeil embeds within the painting process the point of intersection between painting and photography. Therein lies a fundamental tension and intense interest in mediated memory and experience itself. Embedded also is a schism between the immediacy of the photographic record and the slowness of the process of painting's review of memory events; between repeatability and the unavoidable consequence of an action.

Overlaying all this is the private and indelible pleasure of painting. These are works of commitment that speak of something profound about MacNeil's engagement with painting as a way of thinking about herself and her place in a manner that allows others to follow and enjoy her thought processes beautifully laid out in paint.

Richard Dunn

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Opposite: "Portrait of a Landscape" 2003
Front: "Flux: St Peters wall" 2003
"Flux: Foster Renovation" 2003
Back: "Where did you go?" 2003
"Contested Ground" 2003
"Streetscape with delay" (diptych) 2003

oil and graphite on linen 183 x 122cm
oil and graphite on acrylic colour-canvas 91 x 137cm
oil and graphite on acrylic colour-canvas 91 x 137cm
oil and enamel on canvas 30 x 20cm
oil on linen 137 x 91cm
oil, enamel and aquadhere on canvas (each) 20 x 30cm

