

No Ordinary Cats

BY MICHAEL BRACEWELL
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Lucy McKenzie's work as part of the collaborative fashion studio, Atelier, embodies the artist's enquiries into a romanticized past shot through with mythical meaning



'There are no ordinary cats,' wrote the French novelist and one-time music hall artiste, Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, better known as simply Colette (1873–1954), who would also make an appearance, more or less playing her own mythic self, within scenes of a weightless but windswept life-after-death in Jean Cocteau's film *Testament of Orpheus* (1960). For Colette, the cat was both companion and magical familiar, at once sensuous and sacred, possessed of divine knowledge (by way of its ancestry to the Egyptian gods) and therefore at once mysterious and beguiling, with 'a curved claw, borrowed from a rose tree'.

Here, then, is a contemporary drawing of a cat – whose piercing almond-shaped eyes might be half closed on the edge of sleep, yet might also be fixed unblinkingly upon an object of their speculation. The cat's face is a flare of softest fur that begins with the anthracite black of a small dab of a nose, midway between the abbreviated curves of the mouth. Magnificent whiskers contribute a flourish of dandyism, while the sharp, dark triangles of the ears can best be described as suave. All of Colette's belief in the archetypal and bewitching capacities of the feline are in residence in this modern cat's expression: the creature is coolly aware of its own admired singularity, too cool, in fact, to even bother to acknowledge the contract of our admiration ...

The INVENTORS of TRADITION



Beca
LIPSCOMBE

Lucy
McKENZIE

Edited by
Catriona Duffy & Lucy McEachan

Beca Lipscombe and Lucy McKenzie of Atelier and Catriona Duffy and Lucy McEachan of Panel, cover image from *The Inventors of Tradition*, 2011, artist book, 25 x 31 x 1 cm. Courtesy Cabinet, London; photograph: Edward Park

This cat, however, models human clothes – contemporary casual, elegant. And so it stands, paws casually dipped into the sagging slash-patch pockets of its light, high-collared, knee-length work-coat. Standing on two remarkably human feet, shod in little-girlish, round-toed pumps, the cat is wearing dark trousers of some fine material that taper beneath the ankle. In stationary repose, its weight rests on its right paw, the other lightly raised as though poised – relaxed, watchful, attentive, like a teenager en promenade. The luxuriant tail, neatly swept to one side, extrudes beneath the raincoat's hem.

Such is the cat, drawn in 2011 by Lucy McKenzie, that deigns to grace the cover of a recent publication – large portrait format, sand-coloured cloth-board covers, somehow reminiscent of a school atlas last seen in 1962 – which is dedicated to ‘The Inventors of Tradition’. It is both a term and a title which is appealingly authoritative and archaic (like the book’s design itself), and is described in its opening pages as ‘an independent project and collaboration between Beca Lipscombe and Lucy McKenzie of Atelier, and Catriona Duffy and Lucy McEachan of Panel, in partnership with the Scottish Screen Archive at the National Library of Scotland and exhibition designers Martha.’ There is a sense of both cast list and company report. ‘Atelier’ is further defined as an ‘original interiors company’, comprising fashion designer Lipscombe, fine artist McKenzie and illustrator Bernie Reid. ‘Panel’ is design curators Duffy and McEachan, and promotes ‘design and craft through exhibitions, events and cultural projects’.

Let us suppose we know nothing more of *The Inventors of Tradition* than this book before us. It is a publication of extraordinary cultural atmosphere – in its own way as distinct yet mysterious, at first glance, as its feline avatar. And yet a technical world opens up on its pages, time travelling to a history of fashion, textiles and garment manufacturing in Scotland as these things existed during the latter decades of the 20th-century – the middle distance of contemporary memory. It’s not the high-gloss world of contemporary fashion statement, all pose and pout and logo that we are browsing; rather, it is the nuts-and-bolts of the business, described through archive imagery and interviews – the processes, craft and industry of garment manufacture: its cultural and social history, in snapshots from its past – factory girls, drawings, retail design, catwalk photography, company history, weaving. It’s as detailed as any history of how an army of artisans, technicians and specialists created the magic of Hollywood musicals – the industrial kitchen of glamour.



Lucy McKenzie, *Untitled*, 2011, coloured pencil and pencil on paper, 30 x 40 cm. Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin

At the back at the book, pages are devoted to ‘The Inventors of Tradition Atelier EB Collection’ (2011). The clothes are gorgeously stylish, with a northern European freshness – knitwear, skirts, scarves, trousers, a bag, a silk bonnet, a Paisley Mackintosh and more. Accompanying the collection, yet clearly an intrinsic element within it, is the *Clydebank Room Divider* (2011): digital print on jute and oil and gold leaf on pegboard, ‘fabricated by Martha’. It also includes more clothes-

modelling cats by McKenzie, and a painting in oil on canvas from the same hand, titled *Quodlibet XI (Janette Murray)* (2011). It depicts, pinned to a corkboard, a map of Scotland, some knitting patterns, samples of thread, a ball of knitting wool and needles – the quotidian equipment of knitwear production.

And yet, it seems, there is something more: a pervading sense that this cultural history of garment manufacture – with all its overtones (ranging the frequencies) of gender politics, national identity, pop culture and the slippage between arts and crafts, delivered in the always-heady visual language of archive photography, vintage print journalism and film-stills, a hair's breadth from camp – is somehow intensely aware of its renewed identity within a contemporary context. It's as if these irresistibly evocative, decades old, photographs of pleasantly smiling fashion professionals, busily at work, or the interior of a first generation yuppie-chic concept boutique, or a portrait (from a 1987 issue of *The Scotsman* magazine) of Jean Muir, are somehow both what they appear to be and something else. But what? An answer might be found in Vienna; the European canon is here.

On a raw, damp night, shortly before Christmas last year, the pillars of the neo-classical Temple of Theseus in the Volksgarten Park, are bathed in white light. It's a historically charged location, for in his youth, Adolf Hitler, then a struggling art student, made sketches from the steps of this building – where then was housed Antonio Canova's impressive statue *Theseus Fighting the Centaur* (1804–19) now safely transported to the top of the ceremonial staircase of the Kunsthistorisches Museum. Some years later, this same Hitler, now briefly a military conqueror, would address a crowd of thousands in the neighbouring Heldenplatz. Here, then, might appear to be a meeting point of dark ley lines, burned in just beneath the surface of elegant Imperial Vienna – spiritual home of pop's New Romantics, a little over 30 years ago.



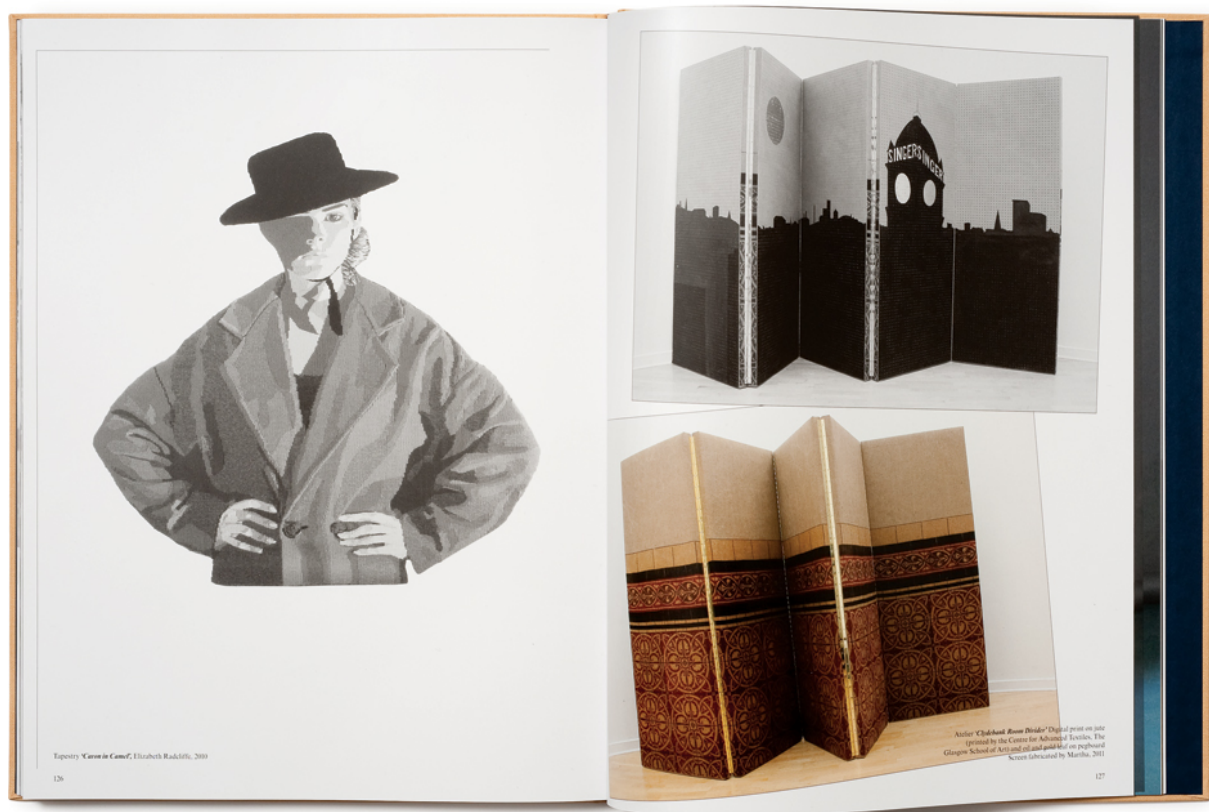
Atelier, 'The Inventors of Tradition', installation view, Cabinet II, London, 2011. Courtesy Cabinet, London

On this particular evening, however, the interior of the cold temple is also ablaze with light. Inside, on the left hand wall as the viewer enters the building, is a vast mural. The predominant colours are gold, ivory, rust and beige brown, in which are depicted ten heroically muscled men and youths, labouring in an allegorical landscape of industry and plenty. The men are either naked or dressed in loincloths; the style of the drawing recalls fascist propaganda at its most sentimental and bombastic –

ripe to be reprised as a high style of Modernism, kitsch but beguiling, 'important of its kind' in years to come.

But the mural in the Temple of Theseus depicts this landscape and these edifying labours as though they had been covered in graffiti of the most puerile kind: their private parts daubed with splodges of red and white paint, the worker heroes become participants in the low comedy of a botched gay orgy, their antics marked by leering speech bubbles; in the centre is the quintessentially Anglo-Saxon likely-lad exclamation: 'If it moves, kiss it!' (this is also the work's title). The painting is by McKenzie, based on a mural that appears in Stanley Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and originally made by the artist in 2002 as part of a bigger and more complex installation.

On the facing wall is a shoulder-height line of seven red squares; in the centre of each are two elegant calligraphic symbols that appear to mark the progression of an italicized F to the double lightning flash of the Nazi SS. Despite this seemingly sinister subject matter, these red squares with their letters are the polar opposites, visually and as semiotics, to the brutish mural. They have been described in a note by their creator, the late Scottish artist Ian Hamilton Finlay, which begins: 'In this sequence, the notorious Nazi-German organization, the SS, is equated with nature. That is to say, it signifies the ultimate "wildness" in a scale whose other "cultivated" extreme is the 18th century.'



Beca Lipscombe and Lucy McKenzie of Atelier and Catriona Duffy and Lucy McEachan of Panel, spread from *The Inventors of Tradition*, 2011, artist book, 25 x 31 x 1 cm. Courtesy Cabinet, London; photograph: Edward Park

Between them, sited with electrifying audacity in the epicentre of early Nazi history, as though both enshrined and debasing a shrine, McKenzie's mural and Finlay's wall painting interplay to create a force-field of cultural historical ambiguity – the point at which high Romanticism curdles and goes sour. The phrase 'Beethoven and Ultra-Violence' comes to mind, to quote from the original film poster for *A Clockwork Orange*. At the same time, the cultural hierarchies of sign and symbol, art and artisan craft (calligraphy, mural painting) are rendered both malleable and volatile – they have become double-agents, hard to predict, creating disarray: mischievous, malign, instructional, poetic and doubling as a further code.

But here might also be an answer to the Sphinx-like riddle of the suave cats and time travelling sensibility that attend 'The Inventors of Tradition'; and also to the meticulously poised manner in

which McKenzie – whose work is so schooled in the histories and capacities of Modernist elegance as the agent and bearer of meaning – has created, in one sense, an epic performance of herself as a mythic figure moving within an equally mythic landscape of high pop-cultural Romanticism. It is as though her art, gloriously, might reprise the sincerity and painstaking intensity with which a teenager converts their bedroom wall into a shrine to their idols and pin-ups – the household gods who watch over their breathless or bored excursions into the real world, on the other side of the bedroom door, where the magic kingdom ends.

In a note written describing the origins and greater context of *If It Moves, Kiss It*, McKenzie recounts a densely interconnected autobiographical and cultural historical narrative – the scenes, synaptic connections and characters of which might further comprise a richly atmospheric excursion into what Jean Genet described in his *Thief's Journal* (1949, published in English in 1964) as ‘the country of myself’. And it is deep within the layered symmetries of McKenzie’s cartography of the past, as a conflation of memoir, self-portrait and pop-cultural history, that the intrinsically literary core of art seems to reside. It is a territory of mythic personal identity, in which the Leftist politics of the social relevance of art and the pop-cultural anthropology of ‘style’ are refracted through a contemporary reclamation of Modernist-era European elegance, as once made eloquent through the highly crafted new goods in the newly palatial department stores and arcades of Berlin, Brussels, Vienna or Edinburgh; an intoxicating time zone, where the 1900s meet the mid-1980s.



Lucy McKenzie, *If It Moves, Kiss It*, 2002, acrylic on canvas, 2 x 3.1 m. Courtesy Cabinet, London

McKenzie’s presence within the collective of *The Inventors of Tradition*, therefore, might be seen as a continuation – a further chapter – in the literary accumulation of her art to date. The result is a both a genuine clothing line of consummate craft and elegance, opening radical ideas within the highly demanding (and highly conservative) terrain of fashion, and a new medium – a new territory – through which McKenzie extends her enquiries into the romanticism of a past shot through with mythical meaning.

A case could easily be made to position McKenzie as the most significant British artist to emerge since Damien Hirst. Her espousal of a European sensibility, her determined self-exclusion from the supposed ‘centres’ of contemporary art – exchanging Glasgow, London or New York for first Warsaw and then Brussels – be they geographical or institutional, her seeming pursuit of craft over conceptualism, her avowed, career-long belief in a network of largely mainland European and Scottish collaborators and her synthesis of fine art through an autobiographical appropriation of cultural history, have all conjoined to suggest an alternative to the philosophical pessimism of post-Koons, late Postmodernism. Her example has mothered new trends in cultural debate and cultural

production. It is laced with its own ambiguities, and the innocent bliss of its own cultural narcissism. But happily, there are no ordinary cats.

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