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Jock McFadyen: The landscape with its clothes on

Exhibition 45
15 March – 23 April 2010

Cover image

Artist:	Jock McFadyen
Title:	<i>Tate Moss</i>
Date:	2008
Medium:	oil on canvas 200 x 300cm

Text: Nigel Frank

Our thanks to Jock McFadyen, and Susie Honeyman at The Grey Gallery

This exhibition has been organised by
Frank/Hindley Art Consultants for
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Works are for sale, please contact
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Clifford Chance Exhibitions



Jock McFadyen: The landscape with its clothes on



Artist:	Jock McFadyen
Title:	<i>Pink Flats</i>
Date:	2006
Medium:	oil on canvas 152 x 339cm

Lets propose that Jock McFadyen is a history painter, that once elevated but now maligned painting genre. And not just one of the few but, perhaps, one of the U.K.'s leading history painters, focused on the conflicting rhythms of the city, its growth, decay and rebirth.

In recent years, as the depiction of individual people disappeared from his canvases, the artist has brought the background to the fore, the fabric of the city, its buildings and arteries, its canals and roads, have become its characters. Where previously McFadyen might paint dissolute pub strippers or anomic youth, melancholic metaphors of the zeitgeist, today it's the city's ruins, monumental constructs surrounded by acres of barren wasteland. As the art critic John Ruskin argued nearly 150 years ago, in the *Stones of Venice*, architecture is a direct projection not just of our physical needs, but of our whole morality.

McFadyen's urban paintings have a distinct *loci*. He has made memorial works of Berlin, New York, Belfast and Edinburgh, but it is to London's East End, where he has lived and worked for the last 30 years, that he returns. The geography of his paintings reaches from the edge of the City, where decaying buildings of the East End rub up against the towers of Capital, past the aspirant Canary Wharf to the sprawling estuarial plain, to the flats of Dagenham now emptied of industry, and up into the Lea Valley, being rebuilt before our eyes with Olympian zeal. The architectural flux of London, its constant evolution, finds parallel in the artist's use of allegory; the flow of the Thames, the stasis of the canal network and the anticipatory mobility of the A13.

Someone once wrote that McFadyen was a painter of human unfreedom – but rather than being confined, there is a sense of the salvatory journey implicit in his work. McFadyen may look sympathetically, not to Baudelaire's 19th Century flâneurs who delighted in the banality of the urban life, but at their 20th Century filmic equivalents, the lone wanderers who populate the films of Wenders and Antonioni, pessimistic yet striving. Film also gives McFadyen a key schematic device; the cinematic format of his large-scale canvases. Cinema-scope and a distinct horizon line give the artist space to paint the sky – sometimes dark, often overcast but never dazzling – and to tackle what Turner identified as the true subject of painting – Light.

There is a lot of Art in McFadyen's work. He has called himself a realist painter - 'The only word I know that describes what I am aiming at' - but Realism should not be mistaken for photographic reproduction. As such he joins a distinguished roll call of painters of the urban, of bedsits and music halls, of factories and fairgrounds, as found in Sickert and Lowry.

The author Iain Sinclair has called McFadyen 'the laureate of stagnant canals, filling stations and night football pitches'. But this dwells on subject matter to the detriment of the process of painting. The import of which can be seen in McFadyen's treatment of graffiti. Each individual's tag is tenderly, almost reverentially, faithfully copied. He also likes the odd in-house art joke. The terrible *Tate Moss* pun found on a broken warehouse, or the *Kill Matthew Barney* stencil that re-appeared on a canal-side wall – Barney being a New York conceptual film-maker whose talent divides art world opinion.

The American artist Robert Smithson famously commented about the outskirts of New Jersey that they 'were a zero panorama (that) seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is, all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the romantic ruin because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built'. This finds echoes in McFadyen's paintings, in his *Landscape with its clothes on*. Buildings, even the most monumental, contain not only a past history, but also a future one. This thought may be melancholic, even dystopian but as Heraclitus noted 'Nothing stays the same, everything changes'.

Born in Paisley in 1950, Jock McFadyen studied at Chelsea School of Art. In 1981 he was Artist-in-Residence at the National Gallery, London and in 1992 designed the sets and costumes for *The Judas Tree* at the Royal Opera House. His paintings have been included in numerous exhibitions, most recently at the Whitechapel Gallery, and acquired by major museums in the UK.