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THE ARTIST SAM MCKINNISS ON CAPTURING LORDE IN THE TWILIGHT

By Jia Tolentino | 24 March, 2017



Last year, the twenty-year-old New Zealand singer-songwriter Lorde contacted the Brooklyn-based painter Sam McKinniss through mutual friends. She came to visit his studio in Bushwick, and then went to see his exhibition “Egyptian Violet,” which featured, among other works, a life-size oil painting, rendered with Symbolist intensity and high-classical technique, of Prince on a motorcycle. Soon after, she asked McKinniss if he would paint a portrait of her for the cover of her forthcoming album, “Melodrama.”

At a time when pop music and mass culture are analyzed with feverish determination, Sam McKinniss’s work offers an alternative. PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN ALLEGRETTO

The two artists are well suited; Lorde’s sonic palette is moody and electric, and she absorbs influences across genres and media; McKinniss bases his uneasy, romantic oil paintings on photographs, most of them pulled from Google Images. (The painting of Prince, for instance, was a copy of the “Purple Rain” album cover.) For Lorde, he set up a shoot at a friend’s apartment, on the forty-second floor of Frank Gehry’s twisting silver skyscraper just west of the Brooklyn Bridge, putting colored bulbs on a lighting rig and hiring a friend to take photos while he directed. Lorde came to the apartment on a cloudless afternoon in mid-November. The space

was all windows; at dusk, blue light flooded in. Lorde changed into a vintage negligee. “She was just ready for it,” McKinniss recalled recently. “She told me, ‘I want to be a teen-ager in my bedroom after a long night, at daybreak.’”

The shoot lasted a couple of hours. McKinniss had brought bundles of fresh flowers that they ended up not using. “We’d thought of making it even more operatic, sort of Pre-Raphaelite, but we both knew we already had it—it was all in her face in the bedroom,” McKinniss said. He made two paintings from the photographs he took, the first of which is steeped in a deep, nearly iridescent blue glow, with a warm flush on the singer’s cheek. For the other, he changed the lighting; the colors are paler, sweeter. In both, Lorde is lying on her side in bed, tucked into a cloud of comforter, curls splashed across the pillow. On March 2nd, the release day for her single “Green Light,” Lorde Instagrammed the first painting, writing, “this song is the first from my sophomore record, Melodrama. this is the cover, painted by sam mckinniss. welcome to the new world.” For the past three weeks, McKinniss has been

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receiving messages from Lorde fans, mostly teen-age girls, who sometimes re-create his painting of her in fan art or makeup demonstrations.

The cover for Lorde's forthcoming album, "Melodrama."
PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENDAN WALTER /
UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP

On a recent afternoon, the less famous, pastel Lorde was sitting on a high shelf in the studio where McKinniss works from 11 A.M. to 7 P.M. on weekdays. McKinniss is thirty-one, fair-haired and delicately handsome. He wore glasses, a white shirt, blue jeans, and fuzzy Ugg boots. He showed me a stack of the photos he's recently painted: the two Lorde's (his paintings were strikingly faithful to the original images), a floral still-life by the nineteenth-century French painter Henri Fantin-Latour (he paints these at regular intervals), and a stock image of two swans forming a heart shape (he told ARTnews that "Swans are celebrities"). In another stack were the images he was considering as possible subjects: Paris Hilton, draped in silver on her twenty-first birthday; the girl-on-girl kiss from "Cruel Intentions"; a still of two Dalmatians nuzzling. "That's Pongo and Perdy," McKinniss said, almost maternally. "That's from '101 Dalmatians,' the Glenn Close one."



McKinniss explained that, "as a soft rule," he prefers images taken from cultural phenomena from his own lifetime. He peeled a tiny tangerine and offered me another one, which was sitting on his desk, next to a photo of Li'l Kim and a copy of "Death in Venice." He has a way of appearing simultaneously deadpan and deeply sincere. There's an offhand, nearly Wildean beauty to his manner and articulation; I found it hard to imagine him ever being old. "I think it's political, in a way," he said, as I took in another image—a generic screen-saver photo of a plump, dappled loon—trying to understand its appeal. "These characters are under some sort of duress. All this stuff—these animals, these landscapes—seem at risk." That particular loon, he explained, was shot in a way that gave it compositional impact. He pointed to its feathers—"there's a nice staccato in his black-and-white coloring"—and to its rippled reflection.

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A clean, pastoral green cropped up repeatedly in McKinniss's selections—in stills from "Jurassic Park," a photo of Frank Ocean's hair, an Instagram of the Northern Lights, posted by the U.S. Department of the Interior. "Green's a little *sick*," McKinniss said, pleasantly. He dragged over a medium-sized canvas that had been hanging on a wall—a study of the Instagram shot, the sky thrumming with acid light. "I'm going to make this one really huge. I just thought, the aurora borealis and the night club are the same thing." We got our coats. As McKinniss was locking up, I stopped to look at a canvas of Pongo drying on the wall. The Dalmatian, painted in close profile, with a bird perched on his nose, looked brave, and somehow on the brink.

McKinniss is often likened to Elizabeth Peyton and Karen Kilimnik—painters of vivid, lush portraits who draw from pop culture and embrace pastiche. He also points to Maureen Gallace and her deceptively ingenuous New

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England landscape paintings as another influence. “Her work is almost uncool, except that it’s cool,” he said. At a time when mass culture is analyzed with feverish determination, McKinniss relishes images so ubiquitous that their substance has become invisible; he refuses, in a way that feels romantic, to move past the initial pleasure they provide. The lack of irony in his work can itself seem ironic.



We had taken the L to a bar called Soft Spot, on Bedford Avenue. It’s his local—a dark, quiet room with a two-for-one special—and the attractive bartender handed him a whiskey-and-soda almost as soon as we walked in. At a table in the back, I asked him about his involvement with kitsch. “My answer on a professional level is that kitsch is a gay universe, and Jeff Koons is just kicking our ass right now, taking victory lap after victory lap, and I kind of resent that,” he said, stirring his drink.

“White Roses (After Henri Fantin-Latour),” oil on canvas, 2016.
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“But my other answer to that question is that, within my personal life, I am probably somewhat regressive,” he said. “It doesn’t occur to me until much later that certain ideas are in bad taste because they’re wrought or delivered from notions of popular romance.” He added, “I’m not ridiculous—but there are just certain fantasies that don’t seem unattainable to me. There were certain images that I saw, and I reacted to them the same way someone centuries ago would have reacted to a painting of Jesus: here is how you are supposed to live.”

McKinniss grew up in Connecticut. He cites watching “The Little Mermaid” in the movie theatre as his first heightened experience of visual art. “It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen,” he said. “I understood instinctively that what I was looking at was a series of drawings, of paintings.” The night before his first day of kindergarten, he stayed up for hours making drawings of Ariel and Flounder to give to his teacher. He sold his first painting, a self-portrait, at an art contest at his public high school.

McKinniss’s father was the pastor of the evangelical church next door to their house, and so, as a child, McKinniss spent plenty of afternoons and weekends in church. He also read art books, “all within the Western canon—gods, saints, martyrs, angels.” He was attracted to the Italian-American and Puerto Rican neighborhoods in town. “I always related more to Roman Catholicism as a more decorative way of understanding God,” he said. “There’s an overlap between Catholicism and diva worship, almost—the Virgin Mary, with the snake underneath her heel.”

McKinniss started the life-size portrait of Prince months after the musician’s death, working on it for three weeks during the run-up to his solo exhibition. The gallery refused to sign off on its inclusion until the painting was finished. “When I proposed the idea, they told me, ‘Either this will be a very important painting, or it’s in the worst possible taste,’” he said. “It was my opinion that it would be unforgettable.” In a review of “Egyptian Violet,” the writer and musician Johanna Fateman wrote that, while the work of artists such as Elizabeth Peyton “profits from a certain ‘off’ glamor . . . McKinniss is simply good—well-trained, confident, displaying an uncommon facility with paint, punctuated by controlled moments of jolie laide sophistication.”

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McKinniss took a smoke break. The sky was darkening—the odd March blizzard was coming—and we got new drinks and sat in our coats. A sulky, lustrous Goldfrapp song was playing. “I wanted my paintings to operate on a level that could compete with MTV, or Abercrombie & Fitch,” McKinniss said. “That quick, heady gestalt, that immediate rush, is formal. It’s about light contrasting dark, saturation and brightness, a requisite attitude infusing those formal attributes.” When McKinniss remembers an image with this attitude, or when he finds one, he has a sense of intense recognition that is accompanied by a kind of fatalism. He works quickly, as if the image will degrade if he doesn’t get it down fast. When he’s close to finishing, which is often on the same day he started, he sometimes starts trembling. “It goes back to the Bible,” he said. “How light is a miracle, but it inspires fear. Being attuned to this tender fear that comes as a result of light—being aware of the thrill it makes available to a sensitive viewer—I can’t get over it. When something runs into that category, producing fear and inspiration simultaneously, then I think, This is the picture. This is the visitation I’ve been waiting for my entire life.”

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