

BERGGRUEN

GALLERY

Berggruen Gallery Interview with Tom McKinley

Berggruen Gallery: I like to begin these interviews with a brief overview of your process. How do you approach making a painting? Where does your inspiration come from?

Tom McKinley: It's always fraught with fear because even though I've done different types of paintings, each one is a little bit of something I've never done before. I have a hard time coming up with the next painting because the older I get, the more I've done.

I usually chase down imagery before I start. Each one has to be original, and so that's part of why it gets more difficult. I don't want to repeat myself because they have to be autonomous and individual. I feel like I'm loosening up now because I've done it. I think I'm getting more pleasure out of it than I used to because of that. I'm less inhibited by it. And usually, once I've decided what I'm going to do, there are maybe a handful of details that can go undecided, but it has to be firm when I start because I pencil it all in on the board and then I have to pretty much stick to my original decisions. I can't change it a lot because I've gotten pretty rigid.

BG: Is there a certain way you prepare the painting before? Once you get into that groove of, 'I found my inspiration, and this is how I want to paint,' how do you translate that idea onto the canvas or the panel?

TM: Well that's pretty easy, because it's such a formula, and so if I'm...a lot of my paintings involve some sort of photograph and some sort of imaginary imagery, so if I'm using a photograph, nowadays I tend to just, I use an iPad and I can expand the image to the scale I want and I trace the images I want onto tracing paper. I used to do it with...before technology I would have to get an image, trace it, take it to the copy store, get it enlarged. It was a hard deal, the copies...the bigger they got, the fuzzier they got, so they were so imprecise. My paintings got tightened up just because of that. At least that's my impression. I'm kind of an uptight artist. I worry about how clean it is. I'm never satisfied. They always feel rough and dirty to me, and imprecise, and messy, but that's because I start off working with big areas first. Then it all feels so possible, and its broad strokes. But then the closer I get to being finished, the more I have to focus on it. Then when it gets down to the details, I'm so close to it that it's like looking at your face in a magnifying mirror, because it looks so bad.

BG: You've been looking at it for so long, but you've also seen all that goes into it.

TM: It's true. I have very strong glasses too, so it's quite magnified. It's a neurotic thing. I think for people who painted detailed, realistic paintings, it's probably pretty common. I look at some of those paintings and they look so perfect. I've given up on trying to get there.

BG: I'm sure when you're so close to something, you have that perception, but when I look at your paintings, they look close to perfect.

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TM: Totally, but I'm used to it. Like I'm finishing a painting now. There's a lot of detail. But when I stand back, I'm very happy with it. I'm just accepting that now. And it can't be perfect. I think if I got what I think I wanted, I don't think the paintings would be as successful. A friend of mine told me that's what makes my paintings work—that they're not that real. There are imperfections and little scale things, but they're not that obvious. But friends of mine see paintings from the beginning to the end, and so they see how things progress and there are times where things look off. Then I'll tighten things up and a friend will say, 'Oh, that's where that was going. Now it works.' I fiddled with it. I adjusted things to the extent that I can.

BG: It's about aspiring towards something that's perfect yet knowing that you're never going to get there.

TM: Yes, but I aim for it to be as good as I can get it, because otherwise it won't be that great. Now, when I take my glasses off, I think they all look fantastic.

BG: Several, if not most, of your artworks feature a reference to art history or the contemporary art world, especially Abstract Expressionist or Pop Art works from the mid-twentieth century. For example, there is Andy Warhol's Self Portrait (1986) in San Francisco Gold, and you have also referenced Sam Francis, KAWS, and Tom Otterness in previous works. How do you decide which artworks from art history to include in your work? Do you see their inclusion as a statement of admiration, or do they connote something more symbolic? Who are your artistic influences, and do they correlate to what you place on the walls of the paintings' interiors?

TM: I have to use something I haven't used before. I try to use artwork that most people would be somewhat familiar with unless they don't know anything about art at all. Occasionally I'll use something by an artist that's not well-known because I personally like it. I [used to] depend on art for a source of strong color. And just to add another element that people can focus on. I think it draws people in if it's a substantial enough painting. The scale is good.

BG: Do you feel like there are certain corners of architecture that you find yourself gravitating to more?

TM: Well, it's pretty much strictly contemporary. I like a lot of Japanese architecture. I don't necessarily paint these things because they're more complex than I want, or they're too distinct. When I was painting all those houses, they're just a format to put all the elements in, so it's not like I'm painting specific houses. They all have the same feel. Every once in a while, I find something that I pretty much just straightforwardly paint from an actual house, but mostly they were just the stage, so-to-speak, to put pieces in, to plug into a landscape. A lot of my paintings, they're subtly theatrical. Not in the sense that they're dramatic. But they're fictitious sets, like a TV set.

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When people refer to my paintings as midcentury...to me, those houses are not midcentury for the most part. They're based on contemporary architecture. But because contemporary architecture depends so much on midcentury

BG: It's like a funnel, in a way.

TM: I never intended to paint midcentury houses. I wasn't referencing them necessarily, but there's just so many contemporary houses that have a lot of glass and all the elements of midcentury. I think it's gotten more sophisticated, architecturally.

BG: And what does your personal relationship with architecture look like?

TM: I grew up in very ordinary houses. When I was around ten, I started going around different towns and seeing different houses. I don't know how I became so interested, but I've always liked to see what's inside of houses. I was always curious about anything constructed. I loved watching buildings [be constructed], even if it was some ordinary apartment building. I was curious about the layout of the rooms.

There's also a lot about status in houses. The more you spend on a house, potentially the better the house you have, and the better the feeling you get from going inside and outside of it, the better the feeling you get moving through the house. If a house done well, it's like a piece of art. It's a great luxury to live in a house that's been seriously considered by a good architect.

Tom McKinley, August 1 – September 19, 2024. On view at 10 Hawthorne Street, San Francisco, CA 94105. Images and preview available upon request. For all inquiries, please contact the gallery by phone at (415) 781-4629 or by email at info@berggruen.com.