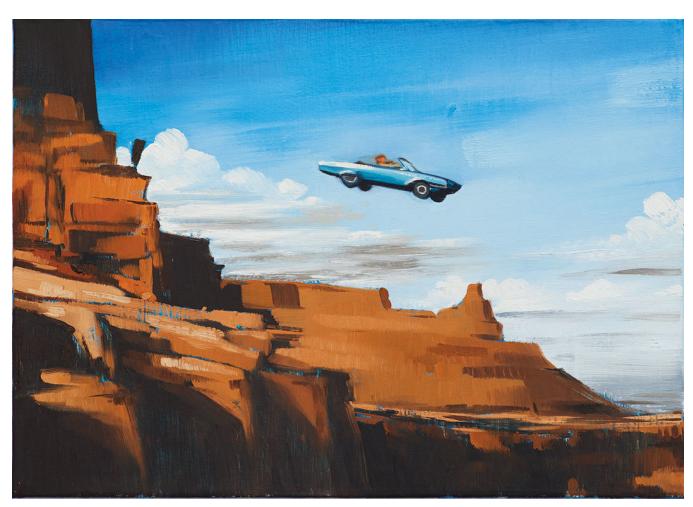SEPTEMBER 2019

# CLAIM TO FAME

Gary Indiana on the art of Sam McKinniss



Sam McKinniss, *Grand Canyon (Study),* **2018,** oil and acrylic on canvas, 12 × 16".

**ABOUT SAM McKINNISS:** He is so out of the ordinary, and so unusually well-equipped to write about himself if he cared to, that writing about him feels presumptuous. And

truthfully, most of what's been written about my own work, including by me, has always seemed alien to what I had in mind. How something is made, and why something is made, is a matter that often gets lost in the public reception of that thing. Quite often, artists forget why they made something: It just seemed like the thing to do at the time. Nothing is ever about one single thing, and impressive works of art are often about nothing at all except the process of making them, though I think McKinniss has said his work is about . . . I've forgotten now. Something and power. Discomfort and power? Beauty and power? Power, at least, plus something else. He works with images that have inbuilt cultural power, there's that; he makes them . . . more powerful, more expressive, more ambiguous. At least some of his work is about America and its sensory ambience, its compulsively spun narratives, and "the darkness at the edge of town": e.g., his *Sandy*, 2016; *Death Valley*, 2017; or *Ranch Life*, 2018.



**Sam McKinniss,** *Swan II,* **2016,** oil and acrylic on linen, 60 × 48".

McKinniss's paintings, nearly always derived from found photographs or JPEGS, range from the size of a piece of copy paper to the imposing dimensions of a royal portrait; he renders them freehand, without using grids or projections. Close up, his figures and faces shed their resemblance to the source images and break down into mottled patches and veils of color, legible brushstrokes, the overt paraphernalia of illusionism. Often the subject nearly fills the entire canvas, with a spare, indeterminate background space setting it off. McKinniss invests faces with high drama; they are suspenseful in that the viewer naturally imagines the next moment, and the moment before, and can't quite define the vaguely troubled emotional flavor of the moment at hand. Eyes do a lot of work in McKinniss's paintings; so do hair and spiky things, like the daisies in Drew Barrymore's hair, the white stitches of Catwoman's costume, Edward Scissorhands' hands and hair, the garish feathers surrounding Marilyn Manson, or the crypto-Bowie of *Brian Slade*, 2016.



**Sam McKinniss,** *Brian Slade,* **2016,** oil and acrylic on canvas, 30 × 24".

McKinniss's work arouses thoughts about the Leibnizian fuzziness between fiction and documentary reality, about concealment and revelation, about forms of masquerade, the mutability of memory. His paintings evoke a waking dream where figures of fiction, on furlough from their narratives, have real metaphorical force. Celebrities are fictional, whatever else they are; McKinniss's pictures of them are layered in artifice, approximations of "perfect moments" in the careers of certain images.



**Sam McKinniss,** *Joan,* **2017,** oil and acrylic on canvas, 30 × 24".

Power requires the acquiescence and complicity of multitudes. The cultural power of McKinniss's subjects is much like that of Josephine in Kafka's story "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk." Although Josephine has no singing talent whatsoever, her social function is the same as that of Rihanna or Winona Ryder or the characters in *Star Wars,* i.e., as a cynosure of public attention, a casting of spells, a spray of bedazzling, mixed messages. Josephine holds the mouse folk spellbound *because something has to.* The ritual

space she occupies can be occupied by almost anything, from the most excellent to the most gruesome and tawdry, but it can never be vacant. This is more or less the raison d'être of the culture industry.



**Sam McKinniss,** *Still Life with Primroses, Pears and Pomegranates (after Fantin-Latour),* **2018,** oil and acrylic on canvas, 30 × 24".

Henri Fantin-Latour (1836–1904), whose flower paintings McKinniss frequently copies, has been called "a traditional painter with avant-garde sympathies," which could apply to contemporary artists like Dike Blair, Maureen Gallace, Billy Sullivan, and McKinniss, who are realist painters of no discernible school, very different in style, innovators in subject matter and formal design. Alex Katz might fit in here, too. However traditional their techniques, their works are recognizably of our time, informed by the convulsive history of modernism and the wider movement of current events. Even McKinniss's atmospheric copies of Fantin-Latour have a Pierre Menard kind of postmodernity; we see them through

the filter of the past hundred years. (I like the knife on the table that features in *Still Life with Primroses, Pears and Pomegranates (after Fantin-Latour)*, 2018—how criminal!)



**Sam McKinniss,** *Prince,* **2016,** oil and acrylic on canvas, 96 × 84".

What Fantin-Latour represents for McKinniss is something close to perfection in paint, the apogee of particular skills and sensitivities that McKinniss also has in abundance. I could be mistaken, but I think McKinniss's embrace of Fantin-Latour is also his way of telling us he isn't running for flavor of the month. Both artists are intoxicated by music.

**Sam McKinniss,** *White Roses in a Short Glass (after Fantin-Latour),* **2016,** oil and acrylic on canvas, 9 × 12".

"Who am I? If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I 'haunt.' " André Breton begins *Nadja* (1928) by invoking, and slightly disowning, the "ghostly part" he plays in the twilit labyrinth of marvels that follows, in the streets of an enchanted city. "Who am I?" is an unreasonably cosmic question, though making art can be an extravagant way of answering it, or posing it to other people. Artists are more defined by what they do than most people. *Haunted* may be too passive and filmy a word for McKinniss's relationship to the pictures he makes, though they're full of manufactured ghosts, phantoms with fan bases, screenshots. One feels the artist greets his images with orgiastic enthusiasm rather than melancholy. They come from a different sort of labyrinth, with no fixed or physical location, a cull of pop culture from its virtual storage space. Real people in masked situations, sort of, theatrical animals and landscapes, a very picky harvest of stuff preserved on the internet in JPEGS, stuff current in the recent

past, or newsy the day before yesterday. Like *Nadja*, McKinniss's art is a search for the marvelous, investing pieces of the cultural commons with their due grandeur.

## McKinniss's paintings evoke a waking dream where figures of fiction, on furlough from their narratives, have real metaphorical force.

Time moves much faster than it did before "personal" computing. Everything in our lives has accelerated. Some things in mass culture have sticking power, others do not, but we carry in our cells a terrific amount of eidetic residue from every trip we've taken, every movie we've watched, and, though it really ought to be unthinkable, everything we've ever seen on television, computer, or phone. Not whole memories, but sunspots. McKinniss is a gleaner of sunspots from the refuse heap of collective memory.

Sam McKinniss, *Princess Di,* 2017, oil and acrylic on canvas, 12 × 16".

McKinniss's recent paintings suggest a deft, saturnine, facetiously sincere autobiography of taste and tastelessness that reveals less about the artist than about the spectator, though in this case, the artist is the spectator, too. These paintings—in shows, where there's more than one—are really unlikely things, samples from the blazing horror vacui we inhabit as alleged global citizens, ergo very familiar, but suffused with pathos, even suffering, as well as with flash and comic incongruity. They suggest an unarticulated aesthetic argument, though one that is pleasurably, purposively imprecise; their personae feel connected in elusive ways, like frames snipped from a movie at arbitrary intervals. They speak of the odd simultaneity of everything that's happened, the collapsed time of the past ten or twenty years, and the speeding shuttle of celebrity culture that enfolds JonBenét Ramsey in her beauty pageant bijous and Princess Di's crashed limo along with Joan Didion and Flipper (or, as Johnny Mercer put it, "anyone from Shirley Temple to Aimee Semple"). Because we recognize the figures in McKinniss's paintings, our initial reaction—i.e., whether we "like" them or not—is also the most trivial, since these images have passed through us repeatedly, even when we weren't aware of them. Anyway, what's not to like? These are filaments of consensual reality, elements of a public sphere that has shrunk to the size of our iPhones. In another sense, it doesn't matter at all where they came from.

ALMINE RECH



**Sam McKinniss,** *Catwoman,* **2016**, oil and acrylic on canvas, 16 × 12".

Nearly everything that has ever been pictured, created by one process or another, is reproduced somewhere on the internet, tucked into informational crevices, sprinkled on websites, grouped with similar pictures. McKinniss exfiltrates the ones that make sense to him, that give him a rush, that reflect emphatic ways of being in the world and indirectly echo his personal repertoire of moods and mental weather, reporting haze, cloudy conditions, drizzle, lightning strikes, sunshine. He uses images of people and things we consume on an ongoing basis, images we have already seen, though not at all in the same way, reconstituting little JPEGS as if releasing them from compressed previousness, like paper flowers that bloom when you drop them in water.

McKinniss is a gleaner of sunspots from the refuse heap of collective memory.

For me, the best of McKinniss's paintings express exuberance and dread in equal measure: the very large *Swan II*, 2016, where the elegant, backlit form of the bird is its only visible aspect, centered in a dwarfing expanse of gliding, possibly toxic, nighttime riverine colors, and the strangely sublime *Flipper*, 2016, in which this lovable aquatic mammal, completing a dive, leaves a trail of spectacular bubbles and looks both joyous and—what we unavoidably bring to this picture—doomed. McKinniss is well aware that any depiction of innocence, in our era, immediately evokes the prospect of violation, which gives a painting like *Lamb*, 2017—an adorable lamb sniffing a jonquil in some high grass—a certain desperate edge.



**Sam McKinniss,** *Lamb,* **2017,** oil and acrylic on canvas, 18 × 14".

There are surely private conversations between the works McKinniss puts in his shows. His paintings throb with a telltale-heart urgency that is drastically sincere and archly ridiculous. Many famous people, actors, singers, in McKinniss's paintings look stressed out, apprehensive, frozen at a fraught moment in the drama of being constantly seen. Everything is just what it looks like, just how we remember it or don't, but amplified and dramatized, given weight, taken seriously. This is Prince on his great album cover and motorcycle. Here is Snoop Dogg with sinuous braids and a ferocious profile. Lana Del Rey in a pensive longueur with pink roses. Beck, famously clear-eyed and extraterrestrial from Scientology. Michael Jackson, or part of him, standing in the shadows. Whitney Houston in a pause during "The Star-Spangled Banner." The actors are usually identified by the names of their characters in whatever movies, *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Batman Returns* (1992), *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), etc., and logically so, as nicely removed from their real identities as the artist is from his paintings. Usually their faces are framed in close-up, or medium close, though one very funny piece is a painted long view of Thelma and Louise's 66 Thunderbird whizzing off the rim of the Grand Canyon, into the abyss that awaits us all.

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