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Belfast

Dougal McKenzie

the third space gallery

Dougal McKenzie's exhibition "Hot and Cool" explored both the continued significance of painting in an era characterized by the proliferation of screen imagery and the potential of history as a subject for painting. These concerns are neither new nor particular to McKenzie, but the show was notably forceful in its assertion of painting as a narrative form and inventive in its incorporation of other media, including collage and assemblage. Although the gallery space was dominated by four large paintings (all oil on linen, two also incorporating collage elements) the first work encountered was *Otl's Gift*, 2011. It consists of three elements, the first of which is a small circular linen canvas, bounded in dark brown and featuring octagonal forms rendered in dull yellow and brown, attached to a dress made from synthetic fabric printed with a brown and yellow geometric floral pattern. The other elements of *Otl's Gift* are a pair of collage drawings also incorporating the octagonal motif, intended as a reference to Otl Aicher, the designer of the Munich Olympics in 1972. McKenzie makes several other allusions to Aicher's work, for example, in paintings such as *People of the Future*, 2011, which depicts two Stetson-wearing men strolling past a succession of pictograms, and *The Temperature of Black (1972)*, 2011, where two overlapping octagonal forms of uncertain scale hover in the darkness.

In a press release consisting of four related propositions, McKenzie situated Aicher's theories of color within a wider exploration of hotness and coolness. The first proposition focused on Marshall McLuhan's classification of media according to temperature. According to him, "cooler" media such as TV and comics invite a more detached and conscious mode of participation by the viewer than, for example, cinema, which is characterized by absorption. The implication might have been that painting is also a "cool" medium, but McKenzie did not simply appropriate McLuhan's logic in defense of painting.

Instead, the remaining propositions highlighted the shifting meanings attached to ideas of hotness and coolness during the 1970s, in youth terminology, graphic design, and celebrity culture.

These cultural reference points converge in the painting *Through the Fog of History, Stumbling Metaphors Loom (Portrait of Lasse Viren)*, 2009-2011. The winner of two gold medals for long distance running at Munich in 1972, Lasse Virén was rumored (according to McKenzie's press release) to have used "blood freezing" (transfusions of blood that had been frozen, then returned to the body, to increase red blood cell levels) and so could be said to embody several notions of coolness. *Through the Fog of History* incorporates collaged elements, including a low-resolution color printout of Virén's face, which evidently served as a source image for the portrait, together with a smaller photographic image of two admiring female onlookers. Captured mid-stride, and surrounded by abstract forms that suggest rays of light or even lens-flares, the portrait depicts the runner (with a degree of humor) as both a staunchly independent athlete and a one-time media star. Virén is therefore a crucial figure within the logic of McKenzie's defense of painting as cool medium; like the long distance runner, the painter prepares in isolation, working for hours, days or even years before finally, and only when ready, entering the arena of public competition.

—Maeve Connolly