

Jacki McInnes

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by **Johan Myburg**

From where she works in her studio in downtown Johannesburg, Jacki McInnes has a view of a large chunk of sky and the neglected exterior of the adjacent buildings. She works on the fourth floor, a couple of metres away from the building next door – empty save for pigeons inhabiting part of the space.

On the perch beneath a row of toilet windows across from her studio the pigeons are in clear view. McInnes observes them shuffling, eating, flying, copulating and dying.

This observer position implies a strange form of distance – the things she watches are so close yet so far.

McInnes aims her camera at the pigeons – birds not endemic to South Africa. Aliens. City pigeons. Birds that have long forgotten the branches of green trees and that have adapted to city living. Like the pigeons of New York or any other major city.

A main part of her new body of work titled *Alienation Adaptation* draws on observing these birds. Perhaps this

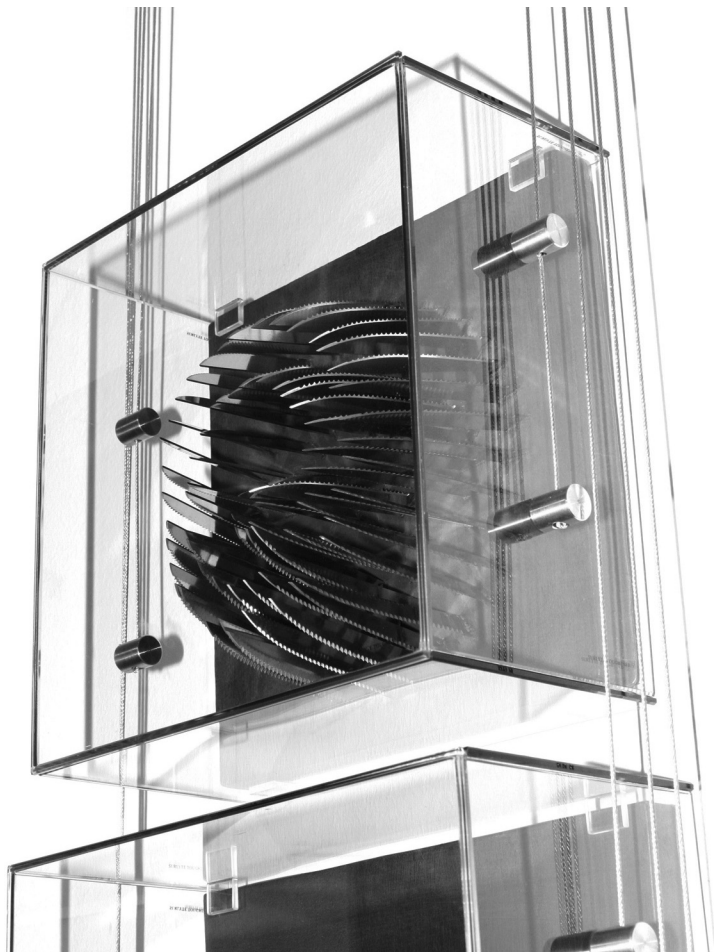


activity serves as a metaphor for what is happening in the city around her. If one ascends to the roof of the building where McInnes works, people in rows of flats become visible. Some of the windows are covered with curtains of cardboard, others are bare. Some of the rooms have been subdivided. People are living there. People in close proximity, yet so far.

In the last few years McInnes has focused on abstraction in her work, and while this mode continues to form part of her visual vocabulary, she is now returning to figurative work – reminiscent of work she did as part of her Master's degree at Michaelis in Cape Town. However, the preference for metal as medium has remained.

The birds on her current exhibition are labour intensive, sculpted pieces crafted from sheets of pewter. She portrays, among other things, a pigeon in flight, hanging from the ceiling on thin pieces of string. Next to it on the table is the stiff body of a dead pigeon, also in the lead-grey patina of shaped pewter. Two qualities of her medium are highlighted in these works – on the one hand the lightness and malleability of the sheets of pewter; on the other, the intrinsic weight of the material, heavy as lead.





In order to make the transition from abstraction to more figurative work, McInnes relies on drawing, an activity which has produced the more literal aspect of this body of work. She draws with what looks like charcoal, but is in fact the fine powder collected from burning rubber car tyres. McInnes applies the burnt tyre powder as is, but also mixes it with Vaseline so that it becomes a more textured medium. As with the pewter works, the drawings reflect both fragility and heaviness – a quality that has long been part of her visual language.

In her use of material (specifically in her three-dimensional works) McInnes has often made use of “heavy” metals such as lead and copper plate – metals that relate to her former profession as a radiographer. In *Untitled (Apron)* (2001), an apron made of a sheath of lead, she highlights the protective quality of this material in medical procedures but on a metaphorical level the work suggests vulnerability.

McInnes has always had a keen interest in the human body – in the breakdown of the body, in disease and death. In *Alienation Adaptation* the same interest manifests itself, now located in birds. These birds are as vulnerable as human beings. Pigeons dwelling in the centre of Johannesburg are to a large extent considered unwanted. Spikes are put

up on ledges and windowsills to discourage them from nesting; they are regarded by some as loathsome creatures; as scavengers. Yet they adapt to their hostile environment.

When McInnes presents a dead pigeon, lying on its back, wings lifeless and legs stiff, the quest for adaptation has come to an end. All that remains is the final alienation, the way of all flesh.

With the current spate of xenophobia sweeping Gauteng townships and parts of the Johannesburg inner city, McInnes's works take on a prophetic quality. Made prior to the recent acts of violence against immigrants from neighbouring countries, her work becomes even more poignant and relevant in our post-rainbow society increasingly characterised by intolerance.

In light of these latest developments, two earlier works, *Cut I* and *Cut II* (shown last year in Pretoria and also exhibited on *Alienation Adaptation*), gain in relevance. Several blades of steak knives, mounted and neatly patterned, are pointed at the viewer. Although presented behind safety glass the viewer is uncomfortably aware of his or her own vulnerability, of not being safe, of having nowhere to hide.

Jacki McInnes may observe from far off, but she offers a close-up view of what she sees in the distance.



Title: (pages 3, detail) CROSS CUT, 2006

Material: Knives in steel plate

Dimensions: 150cm x 120cm

Title: (page 5) ALIENATION ADAPTATION (PHOTOMONTAGE), 2008

Medium: photographic image, paper

Dimensions: 35cm x 25cm

Title: (pages 6, detail) CUT 1, 2006

Medium: Knife blades, wood, canvas, glass

Dimensions: 125cm x 110cm x 8cm

Title: (pages 9) UNTITLED (APRON), 2006

Medium: Embossed lead

Dimensions: Variable

Title: (page 11) ALIENATION ADAPTATION (PIGEONS), 2008

Medium: Pewter

Dimensions: Variable



Map - South Africa

PO Box 39
Groenkloof
0027

info@map-southafrica.org
www.map-southafrica.org

Artist: Jacki McInnes
Concept: Harrie Siertsema
Co-ordination: Abrie Fourie
Text: Johan Myburg

- ⊕ - Graskop
- ⊕ - Dullstroom
- ⊕ - Pretoria - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Irene - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Richmond
- ⊕ - Cape Town