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Elizabeth Schambelan, "Lucy McKenzie," *Artforum*, November 2005, p. 250

REVIEWS

NEW YORK

LUCY MCKENZIE

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The press release for Scottish artist Lucy McKenzie's New York solo debut curiously asserted that one of the five series of works on paper in the show consisted of "studies of Tintin from life." Created in 1929 by Belgian artist Hergé, Tintin—preposterously cowllicked journo-adventurer who moved, Zelig-like, through most of the mid-twentieth century's geopolitical hotspots—is, of course, a cartoon. But there he was in McKenzie's show, fleshed out with eerie naturalism in a group of colored-pencil portraits that depict him posing rakishly in plus fours and trench coat. In fact, McKenzie's subject in these works was her boyfriend, dressed up in Tintin costume but substituting a brooding intensity for the original character's perpetually callow mien, as if the dismal and antiheroic trajectory of modern history had finally sunk in.

A trio of giant, colorful ink-and-acrylic works on paper—*Lucy and Paulina in the Moscow Metro (Ploschad Revolutsii)*, *Cheyney and Eileen Disturb a Historian at Pompeii*, and *Simon in Fort Greene* (all 2005)—neatly invert the modus operandi of the Tintin portraits: Instead of depicting a cartoon made flesh, they show McKenzie's friends reimagined as cartoons. Rendered with a graphic flatness that recalls *ligne claire*, the influential illustrational style that Hergé pioneered, Paulina whistles (or rather, emits a musical note in a speech bubble) as she strolls beneath the Stalinist-baroque vaults of the metro station; a professorial type in a brown suit does a double take as he spies Cheyney and Eileen behind him in a fresco-filled interior; and Simon gazes moodily at the sidewalk on a nocturnal Brooklyn street. Also on view were a group of droll black-and-white illustrations McKenzie contributed to a self-consciously twee Edinburgh broadsheet called *The One O'Clock Gun*, matted and framed with pages from the paper; a number of languid, seminude pencil studies of the artist's female friends; and big chalk-and-charcoal abstractions that transform rubbings taken from urban pavements into grisaille de Stijl grids.

Since arriving on the scene as a Beck's Futures nominee in 2000, McKenzie—perhaps best known as a painter, though her practice might be understood as a nonhierarchical set of activities that also includes writing, curating, event organizing, and generally embodying a persona that seems part Edith Sitwell, part Lydia Lunch—



Lucy McKenzie, *Lucy and Paulina in the Moscow Metro (Ploschad Revolutsii)*, 2005, acrylic and ink on paper, 11' 4" x 8' 4".

has revisited the styles and iconography of a number of twentieth-century avant-gardes, from Suprematism and Constructivism to post-punk club culture. The works in this show evoke the zeitgeist of European bohemia in the pre-World War II years—W. H. Auden's "low dishonest decade," during which the best dabbled in free love and socialism while the worst busied themselves getting fascism off the ground. The interplay of diverse but connected works set off a series of ricocheting slippages, not only between art and commercial illustration but between fiction and actuality, pictorial and architectural space, erotics and intellect, history and lived experience. One senses that for McKenzie this kind of cultural excavation is a high-stakes game—not an exercise in elegiac pastiche, but part of an effort to realize art itself as a medium in which the subjective, the local, and the private can open out, finding agency within the historical, the collective, and above all, the political. Traversing this show's unstable temporal and representational terrain, McKenzie's subjects inexorably linked our own low, dishonest decade to the earlier one, but floated the possibility that perhaps, having inhabited this particular history, they will not be doomed to repeat it.

—Elizabeth Schambelan