

Jacki McInnes, De Magnete [<http://www.jackimcinnnes.net/>]

Ladies & gentleman, friends of the arts,

Let me begin by citing the barest essentials from Jacki McInnes's website: she obtained the BA(Fine Art) degree with distinction from UNISA in 2001 and the Master of Fine Art from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, UCT in 2004. She is very productive (which means hard-working and hard-thinking) artist with seven solo exhibitions and the same number of group exhibitions, in the seven years from 2002 to 2008. She was a finalist in the Spier Contemporary competition, winning the Sacatar-Spier Contemporary Fellowship Award of 2010 with a two-month residency at the Instituto Sacatar, Itaparica in Bahia, Brazil (The photographs of hazardous objects washed ashore at the high water mark were done in Brazil).

In a telling detail, Jacki McInnes describes herself as a freelance arts writer, also producing business writing for various medical aid schemes and PR companies. This suggests two things – first, in general, she has to support herself with a double career, like most South African artists; secondly, and more significantly, she is a person with verbal skills, one of those who can count their words, somebody who uses the minimum of words for the greatest effect, aware of the fact that words can have a persuasive impact and also make a profit in areas of commercial, industrial, legal and ethical ambiguity. And it is in these latter grey areas that she situates her visual works which, like her words, display formats of extreme concentration. They demonstrate the conceptual law of parsimony or succinctness, known as Occam's razor. Indeed, the critical edge of her pieces are razor sharp; they cut to the bone.

My remarks may be of help by offering you safe points of entry into Jacki McInnes's pieces, easing you, as her participants, into the imaginative games at play in her work. They invite us into imaginary but dangerous spaces and conceptual games. They are hazardous beyond the mere bodily lethal playing with the honed steel of about a thousand kitchen knives. Keep in mind that artworks are playing fields, they engage us into imaginative games – they invite us to play along, to enter often perplexing games, but they also play with us – at times we become the ones being played – especially when you notice yourself, your own image, reflected in the background among the cutting movements of the chains of steel blades in these carnivorous maws.

Let me to offer a few pointers regarding what is in play, or at stake, in this somber collection of rather forbidding metallic and impersonal works. The pieces are not happy or

upbeat — they rather serve warn us by forecasting a catastrophic destiny for our planet as a whole. In Jacki McInnes's own words, from an article in *Beeld*, her desire is to "somehow impede the speed with which the world is rushing inevitably towards an uncertain and frightening future".

The exhibition's title refers to a publication in Latin by William Gilbert from 1600 with the title: *De Magnete, Magneticisque Corporibus, et de Magno Magnete Tellure* which can be translated as "On the magnet, on magnetic bodies, and that great magnet the earth". At the time of the Copernican revolution when the heliocentric system was discovered, Gilbert was the first to put forward the proposal that the terrestrial globe has poles and that the earth itself is surrounded by magnetic force fields between the opposite poles.

De magnete refers most immediately to those delicate works with patterns created by iron filings in magnetic fields with the strongest points of attraction at the poles. We have to see the demarcated areas inside their frames as fields — not the usual pictorial field of a framed painting, but specifically as force fields. The force fields are registered here in two dimensions as flat patterns, but we know that the power around magnetic poles extends three-dimensionally in more or less spherical shapes and, furthermore, that these forces of attraction and repulsion, like the majority of energy forms, are invisible. Adopting invisible force fields which penetrate us body and soul as her basic metaphor, Jacki McInnes extends the significance of their impact beyond the physical level, into more remote, even cosmic, areas of meaning — social, climatic, ecological and geological areas. She summarises this expanding dynamic as follows in her own words from the catalogue:

A Leitmotif of the effect exerted by the magnetic field runs through my work, speaking to the concepts of the loss of our societal moral compass and to the binary opposing forces to which we find ourselves subjected: nature on nature; man on nature; man on man, and inevitably, nature on man.[One wonders, what about the women?]

These works operate in an indeterminate domain between sculpture and painting. The sculptural element involves the preponderance of metals like iron, steel and lead but, more importantly, the harnessing of natural forces and the expansive shapes of their effective fields. The pictorial element involves the framing and recounting of their imaginary resonance in social and ecological domains. She has launched several ongoing projects within this indeterminate domain.

We have pieces from some of these projects on the exhibition, for instance the pieces from a project called *Patterns of silence* (2006) in which she explores the inconsistencies which threaten women in everyday social realities. The patterns of kitchen-knife blades have the strange appearance of decorative but also relentless killing machines, calling to mind Adorno's proposal that nature's iron laws of survival and death return in the managerial organisation of people as human resources (slaves). Again, I can quote Jacki McInnes's own words from her website:

It is a supreme irony that we live in a contemporary scenario in which global culture, predicated on the notion of progress, is, in fact, entirely based on the relentless destruction of nature ... I interrogate the contradictions inherent in present-day human thought and behaviour, especially with respect to the disconnect between our material aspirations [comforts and conveniences, I may add] and their inevitable effect on our planet and ultimate future.

This remark explains her ongoing projects on *Hazardous objects*, including the beaten lead replicas of industrial and consumer cast-offs or recyclable trash like bottles and tins combined with organic objects and natural detritus. She combines these to evoke the destructive effects of ecological pollution and the devastation of the natural environment. On global scale the hazardous objects become continents moving apart from the original single Gaia entity. Earth quakes, tsunamis and volcanoes tell us something about the awesome power involved in force fields of these plate tectonics.

I'm not declaring this exhibition open in the usual fashion. Evidently these force fields already exist; they have been exercising their power over us since times immemorial. Furthermore, the games being played by these works are ongoing. Hence I close simply by saying: join in but take heed, take care of the works but also of yourselves.

Dirk van den Berg

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