

Janet McKiernan



The Shell Game, 1987

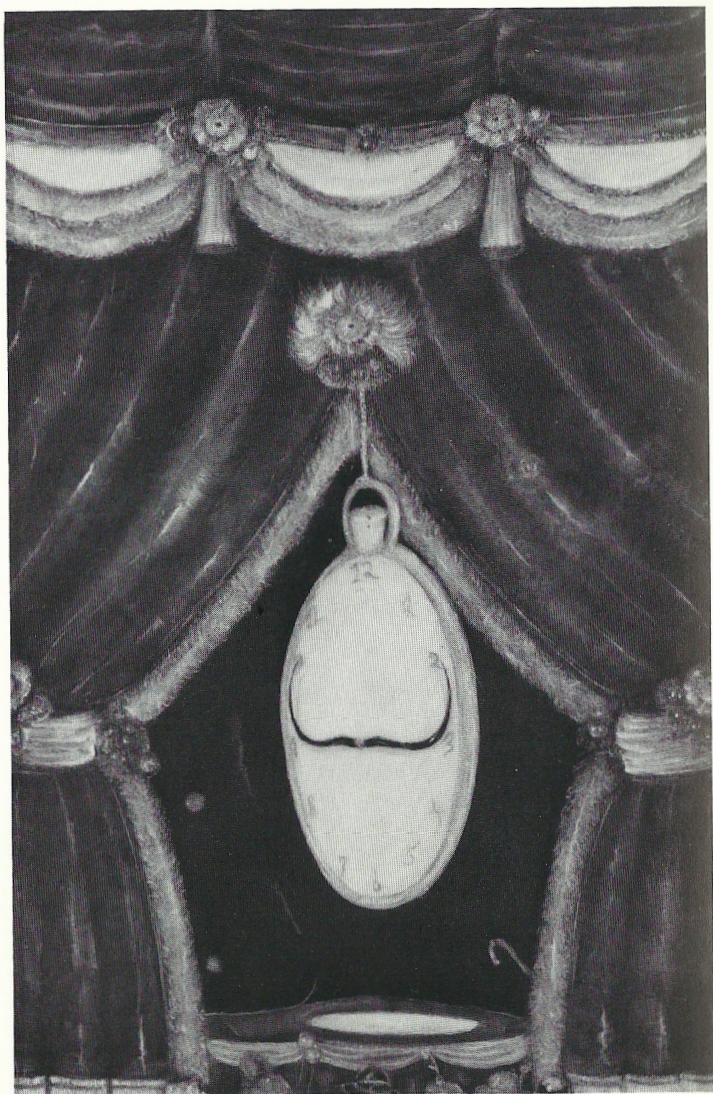


The Well Unknown, 1986



The Membrane, 1986

Janet McKiernan's Magic Theat



Dolly, 1987



The Split-Second, 1985

a t e r

The crystalline surfaces of Janet McKiernan's paintings bring to mind the reflections in a sorcerer's pool, beneath which stirs a spring of magical imagery. Innocence swims below the surface, coupling and uncoupling with wit and perversity. The disquieting quality of many of the paintings results from a fusion of a child's mimetic mind with a distanced, somewhat cynical outlook.

McKiernan's work has all the delicacy and whimsy of a Fabergé egg; whipped cream clouds, lacy ribbons of chimney smoke and ingenuous bluebirds skim across the skies of her landscapes. In *The Intangible*, a bird poised in a pale pink sky "plucks" smoke, which is thus transformed into cotton, from a brick chimney. On the one hand, we have a paradigm of the artist's alchemical role: mixing colors from tubes of paint and transforming them through application to the canvas, thus creating a world with its own set of rules and illusions. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, by making smoke palpable, McKiernan attests to the converse — that what we call reality is as diaphanous as smoke rings in the air.

In McKiernan's paintings, humans are often indifferent spectators to the sly animation of everyday objects. In *The Shell Game*, a man with pale skin, slicked back hair and an elongated nose removes his hat to reveal a spinning top on his head. With an expression as blank as a character in an animated store window display, the wheels of thought have literally escaped his head, leaving him a cipher.

In spite of their veneer of fairy tale pleasantries, these paintings hold the concealed intentions of an encoded diary, conjuring notions of Rasputin in Toyland. As a counterpoint to her juxtaposition of innocence and the darker subconscious, McKiernan's palette balances a range of pastel pinks, yellows and greens with engorged purples and reds. She will dress her windows and skies with chaste, sheer lace or engulf them in heavy velvets trimmed with ermine and peppered with tassels and jewels of paint, suitable for a spoiled Czar.

Many of the paintings feature the device of a half-drawn curtain, as in a carnival side show, seducing the viewer with the promise of a revelation of wonders, a defiance of the laws of nature. Before our very eyes, a clown juggles weightless bubbles and feathers. An egg hatches endlessly to reveal yet another egg within, presenting us with an

ersatz immaculate conception. A steaming teapot metamorphoses into the head of an elephant.

Masquerading as fleshy grapes, eyeballs clustered on a plate tempt us to sample their sweet pulp — a mordant reply to the expression "painting is a feast for the eyes." We are further mystified by the frequent and unexplained presence of a stratum of floating, translucent bubbles which drift aimlessly through the tableaux, as if linking each unique scenario to the next.

But, like the carnival magician, McKiernan is careful not to reveal too much. With faint insinuations of surreality lurking behind every rock, every cloud, every tree, her paintings stop short of being graphically surreal. She parodies the Surrealist showman who lacked such restraint in *Dolly*. In this work, a gigantic Dali-mustachioed watch face, suspended from a parted curtain, looms above the dwarfed audience. As in any vaudeville act, we are reminded that the proverbial cane is always waiting in the wings to remove a poor player who has outworn his welcome on the stage. The *Persistence of Memory* is thus reduced to the Persistence of Dali.

*I pursue the grasp of surreal mental twisters . . . Calculated to extend limits of perception and entice subconscious connections to the surface, the usual and familiar are exposed as ravishingly, thrillingly absurd.**

Entering McKiernan's veiled worlds is like stepping inside the "Magic Theater" in Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, where any transmutation is possible and all dreams may come true. As in *Steppenwolf*, admission is NOT FOR EVERYBODY — a superficial view will not disclose the images' darker purpose. The most insidious nightmare, after all, is one that poses as a detached parade of mundane objects and activities, building gradually toward the dreamer's unaccountable experience of anxiety. The price of admittance to her "theater" is no steeper than a subtle rearrangement of our perceptions regarding the decorousness of the commonplace.

— Barry Blinderman and Laurie Dahlberg

**excerpt from artist's statement, 1985*

Biography

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1987 University Galleries, Illinois State University, Normal, IL
Semaphore Gallery, New York, NY
- 1986 Semaphore East, New York, NY

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 1987 *Worlds Within*, Semaphore Gallery, New York, NY
- 1986 *Art for Money: A Benefit for Fashion Moda*, Art et Industrie, New York, NY
- The East Village*, curated by Richard Martin, The Galleries at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, NY
- Pictures from the Inner Mind*, curated by Dan Cameron, The Palladium, New York, NY
- Semaphoria*, Semaphore East, New York, NY
- 1985 *Getting Off*, curated by Carolyn Louise Newhouse and Dale Goodwin, Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York, NY
- Works on Paper*, curated by Bob Mendoza and Annie Herron, Semaphore East, New York, NY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Eleanor Heartney, "Janet McKiernan at Semaphore," *Art in America* (July, 1987), pp. 129-130.
- Roberto Olivo and Alfred Sturtevant, "Can't Stop Talking," *New York Native* (February 7, 1987), p. 49.

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- The Prudential Insurance Company of America, Newark, NJ
- The Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A., New York, NY
- The Progressive Corporation, Mayfield Village, OH

Catalogue of the Exhibition

The Well Unknown, 1986

oil on canvas
48 x 24"

The Split-Second, 1985

oil on canvas
36 x 24"

The Mind's Eyes, 1986

oil on canvas
36 x 24"

The Shell Game, 1987

oil on canvas
48 x 24"

Dolly, 1987

oil on canvas
36 x 24

Fragile Jewelry, 1985

oil on canvas
30 x 24"

The Continuum, 1986

oil on canvas
36 x 24"

Paperdoll Fan, 1986

oil on canvas
48 x 24"

The Closet, 1986

oil on canvas
48 x 36"

The Membrane, 1986

oil on canvas
48 x 24"

The Intangible, 1986

oil on canvas
48 x 24"

The Archaic Instant, 1986

oil on canvas
48 x 36"

On Cue, 1986

oil on canvas
48 x 24"

Photography: Charles Mason

Design: John H. Walker