

ARTFORUM

September 2019

LINDA McCUE

"Surfacing"

April 30th – October 31st 2019

GALERIE VERA MUNRO

Hamburg



Linda McCue, *Untitled*, 2018, oil and gesso on canvas, 44 x 60 cm

Linda McCue, a Canadian painter who lives in Hamburg, called her recent show "Surfacing" after the novel of the same title, in which Margaret Atwood, a fellow Canadian, probes questions of personal and national identity, gender, and memory - themes that recognizably play a part in McCue's work. Objects from the artist's childhood, whose images are stamped on her mind, surface in many of her works. Rather than figuring in narratives, however, these objects operate as a concentrate of sorts, embodying recollections and undergoing iterative variation with a focus on their formal aspects. Porcelain painting is one such recurrent theme, as are a wool blanket and wood slats from weather-beaten barns (see the magnificent *Untitled*, 2018-19). What sets these things apart is their tactile quality. If painting's domain is the surface, the show's title presumably also referred to the characteristic way McCue plays with planes, countering illusionism and representation with the reality of canvas and paint.

The chief source for the landscape motifs on porcelain plates in the typical style of blue-and-white tableware that feature in McCue's art is the classic Geneva china - featuring varied idyllic landscapes with mountains, trees, wayfarers, herdsman, and goats - designed for the British manufacturer Royal Doulton around 1910. Popular in its day, the series is no longer in production. McCue's paintings draw attention to these plates as a distinctive support medium for visual art, often using serial compositional patterns. She is interested in the tableware pattern as a stereotyped and simplistic adaptation of a centuries-long tradition which is translated and abridged into deep-blue monochrome. The narrow, portrait-format canvas *Places*, 2018, was among the variations on this theme in the show, with eight copies - rotated at apparently random angles - of the same small Asian genre scene in blue on white porcelain. The title proposes an alternative interpretation of what would seem to be a playful take on art-historical serialism: the picture as a sort of table, seating eight.

In *Landscape, Geneva*, 2016-17, McCue turns the device on its head. Once again working with the chinaware imagery, she now transposes it from a circular form onto a rectangular canvas. The landscape-format work shows a classical idyll bathed in a positively psychedelic blue: Trees, mountains, homes, a lake - all neatly ranged in a foreground and background - bring a stage set to mind. The reductionistic, decorative template is read as a closed surface, but then thoroughly reimagined as a masterfully executed landscape painting.

The Gatineau Hills, 2019; *Blanket*, 2016; and three *Untitled* works in various formats (from 2017 and 2018) were based on the painstakingly accurate painterly reproduction of a striped blanket. One picture singled out a detail, while another, in a large, wide format, was a full-size rendition, and a third showed the folded plaid as an object in profile. By painting textures on fabric, McCue here creates surfaces that paraphrase the textile nature of the support, some of which look like soft-focus renditions of stripe paintings à la Bridget Riley. In *The Gatineau Hills*, the almost pixelated imagery, nonrepresentational at first glance, is spellbinding in its eerily beautiful combinations of salmon pink, light brown, and a luscious dark green. The eye soon assembles a rudimentary mountain landscape from these parts. The picture is a sophisticated and abstract personal meditation on place: Its source was a label, measuring no more than a few inches across and bearing a machine-embroidered landscape motif - the manufacturer's logo, which depicts the foothills of the Laurentian Mountains in Quebec.

Jens Asthoff