

Lingeresque



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front cover image: *Light Box: Desperate Situations*, 2012; lacquered wood, transparencies, light source; 49×11×18 in.
back cover image: *Light Box: Pluto, Neptune, Uranus, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Earth, Venus, Mercury, My Eyeball*, 2012;
lacquered wood, transparencies, light source; 49×11×18 in.



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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Cherry, Maralynn, 1949-

Lingeresque / Maralynn Cherry, author ; Leita McDowell, editor ; Sean McQuay, artist.

Includes bibliographical references.

Catalogue of an exhibition held at the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, Bowmanville, Ont.,
from Mar. 4 - April 1, 2012.

ISBN 978-1-926772-11-0

1. McQuay, Sean, 1956- -Exhibitions. I. McQuay, Sean, 1956- II. Visual Arts Centre
of Clarington III. Title.

N6549.M334A4 2012

709.2

C2012.902676-X

Sean McQuay
at The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington
March 4 – April 1, 2012

Lingeresque

Sunday Panels.

Well, paintings actually. Sunday paintings.

Installed on Sundays but painted on Tuesdays.

Tuesday mornings because that's the only time I have to carry out my plan.

Procedure: I make my way down to Cranberry Marsh, locate a favourite entry point and begin to walk.

I'm a quick walker usually but in the woods you have to slow things down.

You want to breathe, take in all the details.

Walk slowly. Check my watch. Five minutes. Stop.

Focus on that part of the vista that is focusing on me.

Begin to paint. Give it an hour.

Give it an hour then retrace my steps.

Time to get back to the other life.

It's Tuesday morning again. Again and again.

Each time I pick up where I left off.

Another slow five minutes, another focus.

Farther and farther into the woods.

From
Sean McQuay



Intervals (into the woods), 2012; oil on panels; 8×40 in.

“Once I had the idea nothing could stop me”

“ONCE” could be the eternity of every moment, where time spent, lingers. The profound wit of the poetic present is always in a state of becoming. Sean McQuay’s magic is his ability to retain the essence of such moments. Wandering, walking, standing, waiting, listening, gathering and playing are the actions (verbs) of this bard child/man. For McQuay, long drawn-out spaces, between the skin of things, retain the mythic stillness of reality. Child’s play lingers close to the first corridors of pure perception. No wonder this artist is constantly grappling with the mystery of language, in all its transformative states. The essence of translation, for McQuay, is a layered cosmology: a nursery rhyme, a soliloquy from James Joyce, lines from Seamus Heaney or the distilled sounds of bird song carried through the mountain mists. Waiting in the landscape began for McQuay, long ago, on a farm bordering Whitby, Ontario. The migrating journey of his family from Scotland and Ireland transplants the Celtic seeds of a distant terrain. Migratory legends of wandering and stories of generations live in the silence, waiting to reappear.

In this exhibition, McQuay sets up what could be called play stations or gathering sites. Each view or linguistic phrase becomes humorous thresholds. Our existential musings about the still point of being alive on a spinning planet are transformed into the sheer joy of wonder – not far from the physics of a child’s imagination.

“When I find a place or situation that stimulates my senses I am reluctant to depart. I dally with the details, slowly deciphering it’s intrigue.”¹

- 4 For this artist, details of place stage the task of setting, in code, a language to decipher intrigue. There is always something of the linguist lurking behind McQuay's lingering. While imagery becomes animated, phrases arrive, acts of speech conjuring lived moments. Letter codes encrypt the pictorial here. *Walk Away Quietly* depicts all the letters flattened, one on top of the other. Light box #4 *Your Escape* positions each letter, layered like a three dimensional apparition, as if the phrase pushes through space. *Steal Away the Dark Hours* is a set of 21 framed dots-and-dashes of Morse Code. Single letters of "VOX" are centrally-placed, woven branches in a triptych of oil paintings. "ONCE" is etched in stone. Language, as marker, is reminiscent of works by artists such as Ian Hamilton Finley. Monuments and gravesites are rife with messages, symbolic of something that lives beyond, or outside the site alone. There is, for McQuay, the illusive side of language that cannot contain, within its own formal truth, all the dimensions of lived experience. The positioning of such phrases defers to moments where words and visions seem nonsensical before the kaleidoscopic views of reality. One feels caught in a Wittgenstein dilemma.

"My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright... What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."²

Aging Backwards – Fire Dog, is a whimsical, performative installation. A piece of archival videotape is retrieved from an early interview of McQuay in the 1980's. (Robert McLaughlin Gallery archives) We see a youthful artist, sporting a large beard, on the video monitor. The voice



Aging Backwards - Fire Dog, 1982/2012; audio-video, wood, acrylics; variable dimensions

6 of the artist is transferred into a wooden dog with a speaker head. This dog is engaged in a one-sided conversation with a bonfire (made of painted tree limbs in collaboration with the artist's Durham College students). Sounds of a random, sitcom laugh-track emanate from somewhere inside this bonfire. Nonsense is indeed afoot. Does aging backwards "to the self as a young artist" afford new insight? Talking about painting, school and studio practice, through the dog (speaker-head), shifts McQuay's cryptic words to a witty play on the human voice. Once again, we are caught in the foil of language to remotely shape what this artist knows. Perhaps the magic is in the play, or in how we manage to stretch time out so all moments collapse into one.

"Quiraing" is a site on the Isle of Skye that McQuay has visited while creating a series of pleinair studies. Between the paintings, *Quirang* and *Peak*, is positioned the phrase "Once I saw this from here". "Here" becomes a ruse arousing the ever-after quandary of time and place. His views become our views. The landscape of Quiraing is a landslip site. The earth is always moving. Roads are in a constant state of disrepair due to topographical shifts. McQuay walks, stops, gathers and muses. He seems to navigate beneath the surface, gathering the energy of the place, fluctuating like the terrain itself.

There is the sense of an underlying structure to all this wandering and waiting. McQuay unravels a kaleidoscope of wonder before our eyes in his poetic struggle to place us within the magic of his framed experiences. He positions 6 Light Boxes on tables, at a child's viewing point. Each box reveals a layered menagerie, an unfolding duration. We are spellbound, caught in a speechless pulse of seeing. A small image of the artist, looking through a pair of binoculars, floats on the wall above them.

Truly we are caught in a carnival of pastimes as richly layered with Proustian memory as with the beauty of finely structured game boards. In the third

floor loft space, Sean McQuay's installation, *Playground* references the complex structural lattices children hopped through in their school yard "hopsotch" games. Three white matrixes, made of wood, are carefully placed upwards inside a white circle painted on the loft floor. The fine tuning of this refined work makes one think of Russian Constructivism's "form and function", or the clarity and underlying movement in Sol Lewitt's wall paintings or sculptures. Just outside the circle, a projector casts a view of McQuay's old school yard wall, where he and his friends played "Topsies" with favourite card collections. You can almost hear the voices of children screaming and laughing through the rafters.

A symphony is orchestrated by McQuay: past site works from Scotland, field notes, Light Boxes, Morse code, stone words, conversations with a dog and fire, or the inspirational musings of a teacher with his students. For Sean McQuay, there are no boundaries between the artist, the teacher or the poet. His way is a way of sharing that becomes as infectious as laughter itself. Whether we stand looking at Quiraing peaks, or remember the playground chalk lines of hopsotch games, McQuay's poetic becomes what Seamus Heaney refers to as "an Advent silence".

"Nonce Words"

The road taken
to bypass Cavan
took me west,
(a sign mistaken)
so to Derrylin
I turned east.

Sun on ice.
white floss
on reed and bush,

8 the bridge iron cast
in an Advent silence
I drove across,

then pulled in,
parked, and sat
breathing mist
on the windscreen,
Requiescat...
I got out

well happed up
stood at the frozen
shore gazing
my first stop
like this in years,

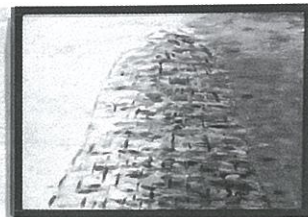
And blessed myself
in the name of the nonce
and happenstance,
the *Who knows*
and *What nexts*
and *So be its*.³

Endnotes

- 1 From the artist, Sean McQuay.
- 2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Translated by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (Routledge Classics)* (NY, 2001) propositions 6.54 and 7, 89.
- 3 Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (Faber and Faber, 2006) 44–45.



Once I saw this
place from



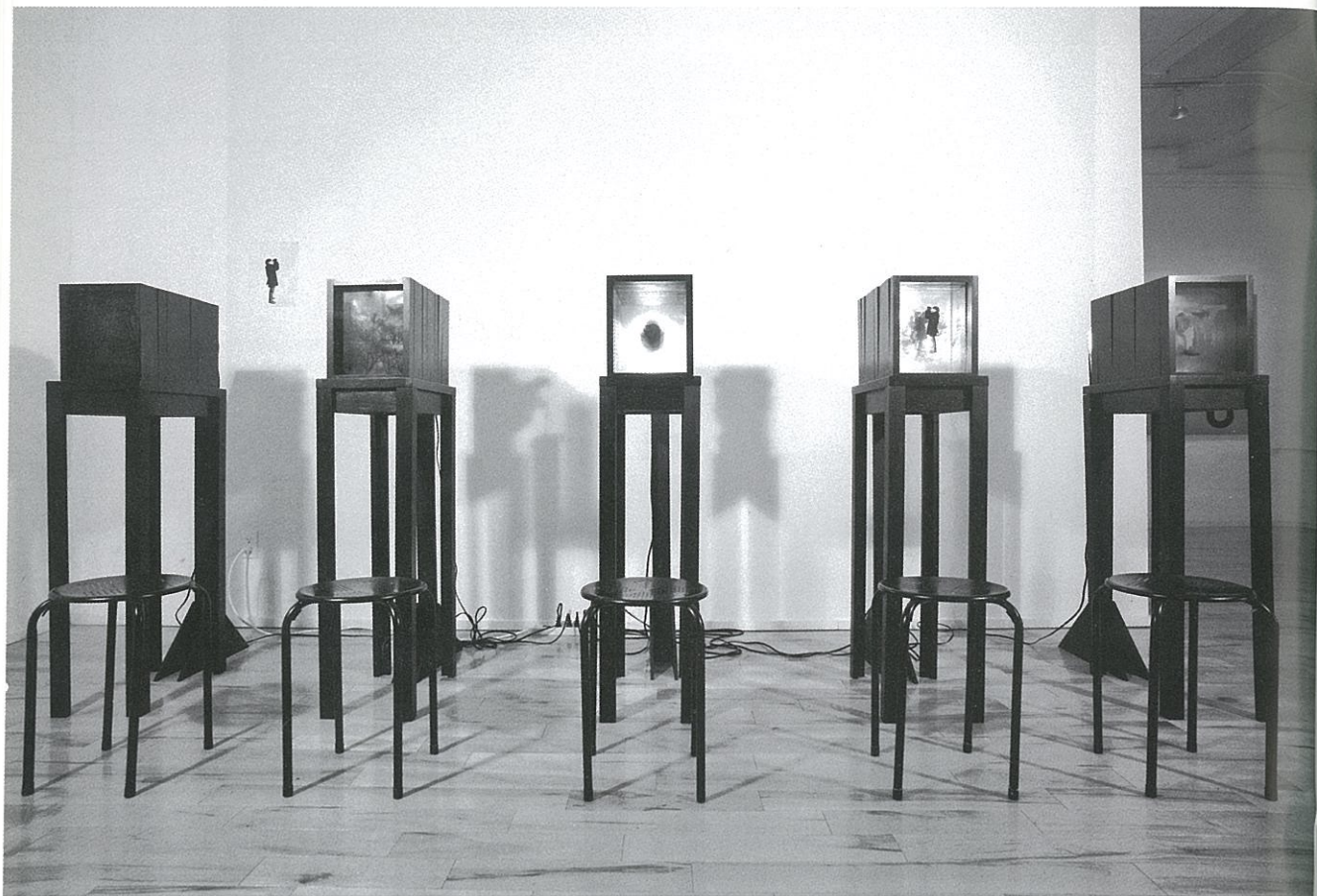
Quiraing (Once I Saw This From Here), 1991; charcoal powder on paper – oil on canvas, vinyl lettering; 30×147 in.

Light Box: Me in Trees, 2012; lacquered wood, transparencies, light source; 49 x 11 x 18 in.





Playground, 2012; wood, latex, hinges; 120 x 120 in.



Light Boxes (installation), 2012; lacquered wood, transparencies, light sources, stools; variable dimensions

"It's all about layering." And lingering. And gathering. And remembering. Sean McQuay recalls a professor from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design reiterating the preceding quote. Layering of paint, or layering of floating images on clear acetate sheets within sequential frames, lit from behind; we experience both in *Lingeresque*. In the light boxes of this exhibition, layering is achieved with simplicity of technique, yet with magical results. Exhibition Curator, Maralynn Cherry, observes "Each box reveals a layered menagerie, an unfolding duration."¹ It is an intoxicating menagerie; floating planets, careening cars, intertwined trees whose branches meander like blood vessels, and over-laid letters suggesting cryptic instruction.

The concept, the idea of layering image upon image, letter upon letter, reaches far into Sean's past. Long ago, Sean was part of a four person exhibition at Dalhousie University, curated by former Visual Arts Professor and head of Sculpture at The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, John Greer. A piece Sean conceived, for the show, began with a stove; a functional stove. The artist painted its exterior as a subtle evening sky. An aquarium was purchased, and on its glass face, and on some 15 successive glass sheets that were placed in sequence within the aquarium, paintings of randomly placed 'UFO's' danced across the glass. The aquarium was placed in the stove, back-lit by the oven-light. Sean hoped to have the electric burners on full, glowing red during exhibit hours, however safety considerations prevented this; fluorescent orange paint sufficed in the end. Sean's first light box. The genesis for choosing this particular receptacle for his inaugural light box reaches back to Sean's childhood on the family farm in Whitby; he recalled the excitement that permeated

- 14 the house as a new stove arrived in the kitchen, while he witnessed as a wide-eyed, five year old.

Why, one may ask, extraterrestrial vessels flying within this oven? This too harkens to earliest memory. Roughly at the time of his birth, Sean's father and brothers stood in the fields of the family farm watching a meteor shower. To their astonishment, one crashed to earth nearby. The meteorite was located, and after cooling, was brought into the farmhouse. It is 'the family Meteorite' to this day. A first family stove and a family meteor: enchanted memories that remained with Sean, to be revisited and made tangible years later, in a Halifax art gallery.

Sometime after Sean's return to Whitby from studies in Halifax, he and fellow Durham artists organized 'Art Fest'. Sean and his colleagues had access to the abandoned Alger's Press building in Oshawa to exhibit works. While being given a tour of the building, he came upon a copy of the Winston Illustrated Desk Dictionary in the basement. His eventual contribution to the show came to him as he leafed through the book. The small, simple illustrations, accompanying definitions of particular words, became source material. One night, Sean selected illustrations from the dictionary, one for each of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. The illustration for 'acorn' was projected and painted on the wall, and so on to the letter Z. The paintings were done one on top of the other. In front of the finished piece, the dictionary sat open, upon a small podium.

In the painting *Walk Away Quietly*, part of the VAC exhibition, the very letters of the title itself are layered, "flattened, one on top of the other"², as Maralynn describes. Within eyeshot of this painting, the first of the exhibited light boxes, *Your Escape*, utilizes precisely this approach as each of the ten title letters is placed on sequential sheets of acetate and lit from the back of the box. The font in both light box and painting are identical, and from common source; it is the uppercase font of American

Typewriter, a typeface style created in 1974. The words themselves reveal more as to source; these were encrypted codes delivered as instructions to undercover agents in the field.

This exhibition presents six of Sean's light boxes. Kitchen appliances are no longer employed. The second light box he created, *Clearing*, was conceived some eight years ago. On a tall, simple, black table of his design (the prototype for the five remaining light box supports), twenty-seven black frames are adhered to one another in perfectly aligned sequence. Within each is an acetate sheet revealing meandering, intertwined branches of tree after tree, painted on the acetate with ink.

These trees were observed as Sean walked, and lingered, gathering visual impressions to be reinterpreted later. As our eyes take us into this realm, from sheet to sheet, tree to tree, back-lit by distant blue light, the individual branches fuse into ghostly mist, a forest melts into fog. The branches seem to recede into infinity, as when we stand between juxtaposed mirrors and gaze into endless reflection. With no representation of ground to provide the stability of roots, the interwoven mass of branches seem to float in some form of aqueous humour. In this light, the branches illicit another identity, that of veins, arteries, or perhaps twisting dendrites, nerve endings suspended in a preserving fluid: the twenty-seven connected frames as exhibit, or holding box, for specifically gathered organic specimens.

Creating the illusion of depth within multiple, or single images, reaches as far back as 1838 to the genius of one Charles Wheatstone, with his remarkable creation called the 'stereoscope'. Simply described, this device involved 'separating' the vision of our respective eyes to achieve the illusion of three-dimensional space from 'flat' images. The observer would look into a hand-held or table-mounted device. Each eye looked into a separate mirror set at ninety degrees one to the other.

Light Box: My Eyeball Like the Setting Sun, 2012; lacquered wood, transparencies, light source; 49 x 11 x 18 in.



Each mirror revealed an identical image placed in slots, on either side of the observer³; each eye saw the same image, separate from the other. When perceptually combined within our brain, these 'separate' images fuse, resulting in a remarkable illusion of three-dimensional depth.

The light boxes, however, are three-dimensional. They are sculptures. The sequential sheets do carry us into a measurable space. Perhaps the 'illusion' in these pieces achieves its apex as the viewer does something he or she could not do with the stereoscope. With Wheatstone's innovation, precise positioning of the observer was required: "the stereoscope also required the corporeal adjacency and immobility of the observer."⁴ Sean invites this immobility (if a viewer so chooses) by providing small stools in front of each box; however, unlike the stereoscope, a static position is not required for the boxes to work their magic. Sean observes that the images within his boxes, "when viewed from different angles, assemble and reassemble in as many different points of view."⁵ We, as viewers, can wander around each box, lingering, if we wish, at any particular assemblage of multiple images coalesced by our particular viewing angle.

The planets in his solar system assume individuality as we view them from right or left of the box, from slightly above, or from a distance. Space is amplified between tree images as we view certain boxes from varied angles, and again, from a distance. Sean carries us into the woods, layer by layer, as he first explored them. In his words, "A lingering build into the image." Here, perhaps, is the 'duration' to which Maralynn alludes.

In the five light boxes that followed *Clearing*, frames and acetate sheets are reduced to ten; the perceptual effect, however, is not diminished. Also, in contrast to *Clearing*, a camera captures the image, rather than brush and ink. In *Me in Trees*, and *My Eyeball Like the Setting Sun*, the trees are photographed during Sean's wanderings in and around the Whitby marsh. The digital photos are then photocopied directly onto the acetate sheets.

18 In another box, nine familiar planets take us into the 'sun'. We approach from outside our solar system, in correct sequence from Pluto to Mercury, and eventually our sun. When we look into Sean's vitrine, the exhibit case containing varied source material for exhibition pieces, we see a small astronomy guide book open, circular cuts revealing where images of Uranus and its planetary partners were cut from the book to be carefully levitated on the acetate within the box. The sun, however, did not come from this book; it is, *literally*, Sean's eye. During an eye examination some eight years ago, he enquired as to how one might go about getting one of the remarkable images made possible by technology that capture our entire eyeball, revealing any abnormalities or causes for medical alarm.

"You can get them for ten dollars", was the technician's response. In this light box, the tenth and final sheet, the sun, is one of these photos. Blood vessels assume the guise of raging solar storms.

In *My Eyeball like the Setting Sun*, the final five sheets are repeated images of Sean's deep red ocular orb. Five images of trees precede those, the glowing red 'sun' visible through them. Sean stood in the woods, photographing the sun through the veil of trees, lingering, in that place, for precisely the right moment.

In *Desperate Situations*, published illustrations once again provide image source, or at least a portion thereof. Alternately placed with the repeated image of Sean with binoculars, we see various illustrations of scenes of calamity: an antique car careens into the abyss, an aerial disaster as ropes snap and figures fall to their doom from some form of dirigible, men struggle to lift a fallen comrade off the tracks as a locomotive bears down upon them. The artist appears to be calmly observing these disasters with his uplifted binoculars. These images were taken from "Chums", a British boy's illustrated serial periodical published in London from 1892 to 1941, featuring ongoing adventure stories. During an Eastern Canadian journey,

Sean acquired an entire basket of these, like the photos of his eye, for ten dollars. A 1908 issue is visible in the vitrine.

The artist juxtaposed with scenes of calamity; was it a bad day in the woods for him? He once recounted to me a long walk in a remote part of the Scottish Highlands that suddenly snuck into evening. His pathway back was uncertain as night fell, and temperatures dropped, A Desperate Situation while wandering the woods. The road to safe haven was eventually found, but not before considerable duress. Is the box a testament to that day, or simply a tongue-in-cheek placement of the artist's figure within these century old adventure illustrations, affectionately remembered while he wandered, and lingered; perhaps, it is both.

Wandering, lingering, noticing and gathering: parts of Sean's essence so noted by Maralynn; an essence that is later realized in his work with wonder and humour. The light boxes embody these elements. They do so through simplicity of means, visual allure, perhaps a little mystery, and the hypnotic power of memory.

Endnotes

- 1 Maralynn Cherry, from her essay in the exhibition catalogue for *Lingeresque*: Sean McQuay.
- 2 Maralynn Cherry.
- 3 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1992) 129.
- 4 Jonathan Crary, 120.
- 5 From the artist, Sean McQuay.

A very warm thank you to everyone at the VAC for all their help before, during and after the exhibition! Maralynn Cherry and James Campbell: Maralynn, thank you for getting me out of the woods again, for your great heart, your patience, your encouragement; James for your keen insights and sincere interest in the work, and to both of you for your astute words and wisdom. To David Gillespie for his great installation prowess, and to Linda Ward and Rachel Bird...for all your help and keeping an eye on everything and of course the gallery's board of directors for hosting the show.

A tremendous thank you to skilled friends: Darren Fisher for his amazing technical wizardry; Dan Nettle and David Holmes for their extraordinary craftsmanship and fabrication abilities; Dale Thissen and Stafford Monuments for their etching expertise, Allan Walkinshaw for his sensitive photographic assistance, and Herb Klassen for helping with some important aesthetic decisions.

To **all** of my fine arts students for their generous collaborative participation and especially to Molly Cross and Sarah Brooks for installing the firesticks!

To Jean-Michel Komarnicki and my sister Mary-Ellen McQuay for their brilliant installation photographs.

And, as always, thank you to all my friends and family for your ongoing support and interest in what I do!

Publication to accompany the exhibition *Lingeresque* at the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, from March 4 to April 1, 2012. The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington is supported by its Members and Donors, the Municipality of Clarington, the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Ontario Arts Council.

Photo credits:
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Editor:
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Catalogue design:
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Printer:
Moveable Inc.



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