

# STING IN THE TAIL

ABBEY McCULLOCH WANDERS SHOPPING MALLS TAKING THE PHOTOS SHE USES TO PAINT WOMEN SNARLING AT ONE ANOTHER OR TEETERING ON THE EDGE OF VIOLENT OUTBURSTS. TEXT BY **NATALIE KING**. PORTRAIT BY **MICK RICHARDS**.



When Abbey McCulloch was short-listed for the 2007 Archibald Prize, her portrait of actor Toni Collette was rendered with a dreamy candour. Painted at close range, vast expanses of flat colour and wide eyes stare beguilingly. McCulloch continues her investigation of youthful women in various emotional states in her latest offering at Schubert Contemporary Gallery. Her new exhibition, *The Sting*, is metaphorically biting as semi-naked girls snarl and sneer – luring us into a paranoid and tormented realm. Captured with an honest frankness, her signature wobbly lines also suggest a cute vulnerability that teeters on violent outbursts.

McCulloch's ambitious suite of 29 adjoining paintings unravel like a contemporary frieze. She described her episodic format as "like film stills or linked animation", which imbues the series with an emotional gravitas. Here are women in various states: "With this show, I wanted to portray women turning on themselves and each other. I visualised a streaming dialogue of relationships set out in multiple canvasses like a tapestry." This composite format allows for a loose narrative to unfold as encounters between her characters intensify.

This is McCulloch's third exhibition at Schubert Contemporary. Based on the

Below and opposite page top: both Abbey McCulloch, *3 Screwdrivers*, 2008, details, oil on canvas, 390 x 90cm.

Opposite page bottom: Abbey McCulloch, *The Sting*, 2008, detail, oil on canvas, 270 x 90cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST



## EDWARD COLLESS ON ABBEY McCULLOCH

### Art critic

"Abbey's got this very nice, loose, illustrative style that has that feeling of graffitied spontaneity to it. I think there's definitely been a tendency in the last five to 10 years in graphic design that's probably come over from graffiti art, towards depicting this sort of freestyle, gothic-style fantasy with this slightly sexy edge to it. Her work seems to have an affinity with that particular graphic style and I find it very exciting work.

"It's sort of confronting but slightly pop. It's not quite raunch culture but it has got that bad girl edge to it that makes it very attractive but also very punchy in a stylistic way today. It's quite individual and Abbey's got a very personal style compared to the work of a lot of other artists working in this manner at the moment.

"I think a lot of raunch culture comes from highly mediated images and so a lot of this work is really steeped in magazine iconography. I think Abbey tends to work differently, that her sense of empowerment or her interest in these sorts of images is not through a magazine culture but

seems to actually come from life, it's based more in experiences that are perhaps closer to her own sensation of the world than reiterating what's already out there in advertorial or paparazzi photos or anything like that. So if there's a sense of something edgy to her work it's not just the subject matter but also the way she sees that subject matter.

"Abbey's work has got a real elegance about it, for all of its explicitness, it's got a sort of fantasy side to it that's really nice. Her colour schemes, those combinations of pinks and yellows, flesh colours, tend to be muted, rather than hot synthetic colours. Her work is sort of waifish and childlike; you wouldn't call it innocence but there's an openness to her work and it takes an artist to do that. That's the difference between her and a lot of the artists who are using graffiti style quite fluently, and diving in and swimming quite comfortably through raunch culture. She does mark a distinction within that idiom."

Edward Colless is an art critic, essayist and author.

Jo Higgins





## ANTHEA POLSON ON ABBEY McCULLOCH

Director, Schubert Contemporary

It might have been the first time in 2007 that Abbey McCulloch entered the Archibald Prize (and found herself acclaimed finalist) but it would be wrong to call it beginner's luck. The Queensland-based artist has been exhibiting regularly in group and solo shows since 2000.

As Schubert Contemporary's Anthea Polson prophesises, "I think she's really getting talked about a lot, she's with good galleries like us, like Helen Gory Galerie, people that will further her career. I think to enter the Archibald for the first time and to be hung – and be very close to winning – shows how skilled she is. Once she enters even more prizes and becomes even more well-known I really believe she will be regarded as one of our foremost up-and-coming artists."

Demand for McCulloch's work is a constant thing according to Polson and those secondary market works that do come through the gallery are rarely there for long. "There is always demand for her work between shows and we always have her work in the gallery. It's not a situation where she brings the work in just for a show. We always have a selection of her works here."

Secondary market McCulloch works are often less expensive than current works because they are less complicated than work being made now, and many of them were done on board. Current primary market works, and works for her upcoming show will probably range from \$5000 to \$10,500.

Being an Archibald finalist hasn't affected her prices, though that particular painting, of actor-singer Toni Collette, did sell for a considerable amount, over and above anything she's sold before. Polson believes that as McCulloch becomes increasingly well known and her reputation grows, her prices will rise accordingly.

And that reputation is indeed growing. In 2007 McCulloch was also a finalist in the Gold Coast Prometheus Art Award and in 2006 she won second prize in the Redlands Art Prize at Redland Gallery in Queensland. *The Sting* will be her second solo exhibition this year, following an April show at Helen Gory Galerie, and if Polson is right, this show, like last year's, will be a near total sell out.

Jo Higgins



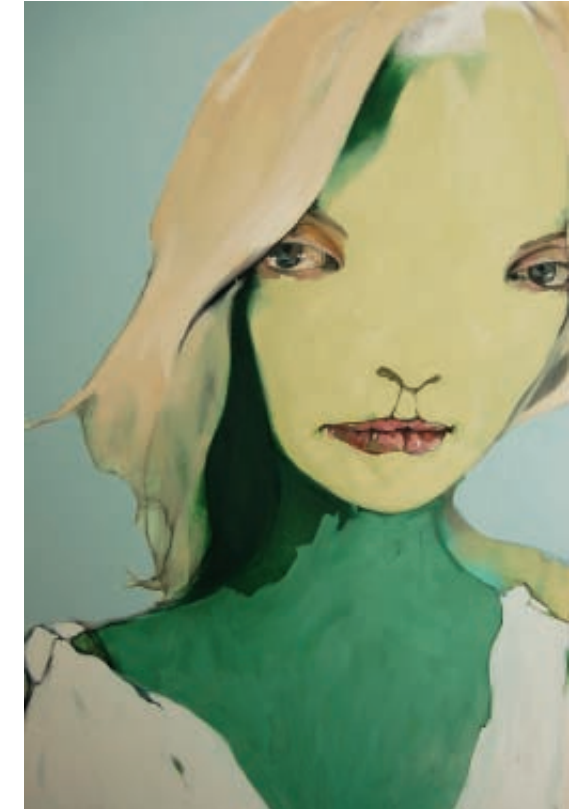
Gold Coast, she studied painting at Queensland College of Art, where she completed a Masters in Visual Arts. The wide appeal of her girlies has led to magazine coverage in *Vogue*, *Frankie*, *Oyster* and *Harpers Bazaar*. Her source material is diverse, ranging from tabloid magazines, fashion photography to television, as well as her coterie of friends. McCulloch has been influenced by photographers such as Nan Goldin, Ellen von Unwerth, Steven Klein and Lauren Greenfield.

For *The Sting*, she was directly inspired by a recent experience: "One evening I was lying in bed listening to two women fighting and screaming in my street. From their banter I gathered they were mothers, from their language I gathered they were drunk, but I was mostly struck by the hatred...I wanted to harness something unsettling about the whole experience." McCulloch lends an allegorical incarnation to this voyeuristic encounter. Dark and complex interactions emerge as her characters engage in tumultuous confrontations.

McCulloch depicts raw emotions with skeletal yet revealing lines. Often, she commences these linear compositions with charcoal sketches directly onto the canvas: "I like the idea of exposing the processes and, in doing so, the final product is left with a more restless conclusion." Her palette comprises ochre, gold and yellow tones gradually changing into a spectrum of orange, green and ending in bright blue. The overall effect is light transforming to dark.

We are reminded of *Marlene Dumas'* unabashed simplicity and scorching emotional candour. Both utilise gestures to uncover complex emotions. Cute and menacing, McCulloch's style is reminiscent of childhood sketches as her line drawings are filled in with wide expanses of paint. Accoutrements – umbrella, ball, black heels, swan, tiny cake – add to the charged frisson between her characters. At times sexual, she takes us into a garish world of shrill silhouettes where fantasy and reality merge. McCulloch deftly manipulates proportion and scale with exaggerated lines, giving her subjects a sinister charm.

Abbey McCulloch's new exhibition, *The Sting*, will be staged at Schubert Contemporary Gallery at Main Beach, Queensland, from 18 July to 8 August 2008.



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Above left: Abbey McCulloch, *The Pretender*, 2008, detail, oil on canvas, 90 x 1200cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND HELEN GORY GALERIE

Above right: Abbey McCulloch, *Toni Collette*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 120 x 150cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST

Opposite: Abbey McCulloch, *The Sting*, 2008, detail, oil on canvas, 270 x 90cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST