

Art historian Svetlana Alpers describes the painting *Las Meninas* by Spanish baroque painter Diego Velázquez as “one of the greatest representations of pictorial representation in all of Western painting”¹. It has also been lauded as “the theology of painting”² and “the true philosophy of art”³. Painted in 1656, Velázquez’ portrait of the royal Spanish court, *Las Meninas*, for centuries now has perplexed viewers and art historians alike, inviting numerous theories and interpretations of this magnificent work. Considered his utmost masterpiece, *Las Meninas*, with its complex and enigmatic composition, raises questions about pictorial representation and illusion. Velázquez is regarded as one of the most influential artists within Western art history. His explorations of pictorial space and his artistic approaches and principles have been acknowledged as contributing to the evolution of painting in the modern age. Following the Baroque era, many significant artists throughout art history have paid homage to Velázquez, recognizing his impact on the canon of Western painting. Édouard Manet, whose work was profoundly influenced by Velázquez described him as “the painter of painters”⁴. It is not surprising that this monumental painting and historically significant artist has captured the imagination of Saskatchewan artist Grant McConnell and is the source of inspiration for this body of work presented in the exhibition *Rogue Royal*, featuring paintings and mixed media drawings. McConnell in his own homage, borrows and alters the players in *Las Meninas*, not only situating them in settings of his own devise and reimagining new narratives for these royal personages within Canadian folkloric and historical contexts, but transposes them from 17th century baroque sensibilities and places them within the conventions of contemporary painting. McConnell positions Canada, “in all of its crude beauty”, as a new ground for these royal figures gone rogue “with a new purpose in the colonies”⁵, while his characteristic painting support of raw, fir panel becomes the surface for the narratives to play out on. Layers upon layers of paint drip and scumble across the rough wood surfaces of his paintings, creating a woven effect of figure and ground that results in a complex tapestry of imagery, oscillating between figuration and pure abstraction. The drawings in the exhibition are fresh in their rawness, not only allowing the viewer a glimpse into the artist’s creative and conceptual process but, in their varied approaches, reference the historical painting lineage that McConnell draws inspiration from, from Velazquez to Piet Mondrian, Francis Bacon, Pablo Picasso and Jasper Johns. McConnell, too, can be described as a painter’s painter. The visceral-ness of his surfaces interrupts the pictorial figuration and illusion, making the materiality of his medium and support always present and part of the engagement in his work.

Throughout his painting practice, McConnell has engaged in investigations of subject matter that relates to history, addressing Canadian historical narratives and Western art history in his depictions of still lives, urban and rural landscapes, animal life, and portraiture, as a means of examining memory, representation and notions of nationalism and collective identity. Previous series, like works presented in the exhibition *Memento Mori* (1996), referenced the Dutch tradition of vanitas still life painting combined with computer imagery and holographs to examine representations of the past from a fictitious future. *Rogue Royal* is an evolution of this concept; here McConnell references the great works of Velázquez within new contexts to place contemporary painting in dialogue with its past, while examining representations of Canadian identity and history through fictitious narratives. Curator Dan

¹ Svetlana Alpers

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⁵ Quote from the artist’s exhibition statement.

Ring has suggested that an underlying concern in McConnell's work is to "collapse orders of representation that we use to construct discourses about ourselves, nature and history", in order create a space where we might examine and question the notion of triumphal or established narratives.⁶ It seems fitting, then, for McConnell to feel natural inclinations towards the rogue-ness of Velázquez, who himself sought to upset established hierarchies of representation in the Baroque era.

Contemporary interpretations of *Las Meninas* suggest that the painting was Velázquez' means of convincing 17th century Spain that painting should be regarded as a liberal art, like poetry and music, and not relegated as craft. It is also suggested that Velázquez, who was the official court painter for King Philip IV, was seeking to claim his own social status as an artist, elevated from the position of being simply a craftsman.⁷ Velázquez wanted to prove that painting can engage the mind as much as the eye, creating a complex composition in *Las Meninas* that disorientates the viewer by shifting modes of representation. Questions arise regarding the subject being painted on the unseen canvas and what the source of the reflection is in the mirror on the back wall. Is the mirror reflecting the King and Queen as they stand witnessing the scene that is unfolding or is the reflection merely that of the portraits on the canvas in progress? Scholars have made cases for both scenarios. What is also captivating about this painting are the varying degrees or shifts of the gaze – the outward gaze of the artist, the Infanta (Princess) Margarita and other courtiers towards the viewer, the gaze of the royal couple in the mirror's reflection and the gaze of the viewer, which is implied to be the gaze of the King and Queen. As French theorist Michel Foucault surmised, the viewer is positioned in the space of the sovereign – we stand where the royals stand, and therefore are elevated to the status of royalty.⁸ Velázquez' acknowledgment of the presence of the viewer in relation to the pictorial space was one of his many rogue-like strategies that broke with conventional compositional rules and classical norms. His placement of the figures in *Las Meninas* does not follow the standard golden mean of composition. Instead of creating a poised portrait of royalty, he captures the royal court in a moment in time, as if in a photographic snapshot. Velázquez usurps the power of the sovereign by displacing the royal order, relegating the King and Queen to supporting roles, mere reflections in a mirror in the background and diminished in size, while the child princess and her entourage of servants are given centre stage.

McConnell, too, seeks to disrupt the established or privileged social order of these royals by taking them out of their 17th century, baroque context of the Spanish palace and displacing them within the urban and rural landscapes of Canada. Works, like *In the Cathedral, Forest* and *The Maids, The Firmament*, are majestic, even mystical in nature, in their presentation of the royals within the Canadian wilderness. *Infanta, Agency* presents the princess on horseback with a rifle, surrounded by a herd of horses on the prairie, conjuring myths of the Wild West. The players of *Las Meninas* become voyageurs, immigrants, pioneers, and even fictional characters within Canadian narratives. At first glance these figures, out of context and made strange, are playful and yet there are political undertones throughout this series of works that address Canada's colonialist history and question hierarchal, social structures relating to race, class and privilege. *Royal Tour, The Tenements* situates the Spanish royal court in a poor city neighbourhood surrounded by 19th or early 20th century tenements, the living quarters for many new immigrants in larger urban centres during the Industrial age. The painting, *New Crown Land*, with its depiction of the Infanta set within a painterly, Group-of-Seven-esque, winter landscape, offers a play on words, perhaps suggesting not only the role of European monarchs in endorsing the colonization of the

⁶ Dan Ring, *Grant McConnell & Brenda Pelkey: Memento Mori, LandScape: Placing Site/ Siting Place* (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 1996),p.6.

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“New World” but the role of our government as both a steward of the land and part of a colonialist structure. The Infanta, who represents aristocracy as a privilege of birth right, is stripped of this status in McConnell’s newly imagined contexts and is given a presence on equal footing with that of the viewer – a strategy inspired by Velazquez. McConnell takes liberties in his reinterpretations of the Infanta, not only recreating her settings and featuring her as a sole figure, but also assigning her new identities by changing her outward appearance. *Infanta Pareja* imagines the princess as the daughter of Juan de Pareja, a Moorish slave that served as an assistant in Velazquez’ studio. Pareja went on to become an artist in his own right and was eventually freed by Velazquez. McConnell’s painting of Pareja’s imagined daughter as royalty speaks to the value we all place on our children, regardless of background or social status. McConnell takes this notion further, adding a personal touch by transforming his own daughters into the Infanta in works such as *Dark Eyed Molly*. In these playful and yet poignant re-envisioned narratives, McConnell asserts that history, national identity and social class systems, are constructions discourses by those in positions of privilege and are there to be re-examined and re-interpreted.

McConnell’s strategy of revisiting and de-contextualizing these Baroque figures, not only within Canadian settings but within the conventions of contemporary painting, is also means of creating a space where art history can converge and dialogue with the present. These works assert art history to be a living thing that has relevance and can speak to our contemporary age. McConnell draws from painting’s ages, including Saskatchewan’s own art history that has a strong painting tradition, from European-influenced landscapes to minimalist abstraction. Throughout history, artists have looked to the past to inform their practice, to source ideas and approaches and draw knowledge and inspiration from artists that preceded them. In a recent online dialogue about artist appropriation, Saskatchewan artist David Garneau stated, “Every picture you make in your mind or on a canvas is informed by previous images. Art depends on borrowing, combining and reworking things already seen.”⁹

Since the baroque era, Velazquez’ work has been borrowed, combined and reworked by numerous artists. His work is regarded as influencing the dawning of modern painting, in its exploration of pictorial representation and illusion, its move from classically rendered surfaces to a more expressive brushstroke, his leanings towards flattened space and pure abstraction, and his acknowledgment of the presence of the viewer in relation to pictorial space. It is not difficult to trace direct lines of influence from Velazquez to many significant 19th and 20th century artists, like Gustave Courbet, whose masterpiece *The Artist in His Studio* was directly influenced by *Las Meninas*’ depiction of space and compositional order. Paintings by Édouard Manet, like *The Dead Toreador* and *The Fifer*, which are regarded as significant early modernist works with their flattened backgrounds, shallow pictorial space and simplified or abstracted areas of form and colour within the figures, are also attributed directly to Velázquez’ influence. Manet saw that Velázquez upset established hierarchies of representation by bestowing the same consideration towards servants of the royal court as the royals themselves. He, in turn, applied this strategy to his depiction of modern-day subjects. Impressionist painter Edgar Degas attempted to imitate Velázquez’ use of paint and how he composed his figures within his canvases to suggest the arrest of a single moment. Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali and Francis Bacon also paid tributes to the Baroque artist; Picasso created a suite of drawings in response to *Las Meninas* in 1957; Bacon’s *Screaming Popes* series is based on Velázquez’s *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*.

Painters, especially, are aware of the long and heavy history that their discipline carries with it. Paint is imbued with its own history; its visceral nature communicates its ancestry. Every brushstroke that a painter lays down references another from art history; a particular colour alludes to a work from the

⁹ David Garneau, Facebook, *A Few Thoughts on Inappropriate Appropriations*, posted May 15, 2017.

canon of painting - yellow oxide references the work of Van Gogh, burnt umber the work of Rembrandt. McConnell's work reflects his embrace of his painting lineage within a contemporary practice. His work is an infusion of traditional painting, drawing on still life, landscape and portraiture traditions from history, with abstract expressionism, working dark to light, like the chiaroscuro approaches of Caravaggio and Rembrandt, with layers of drips and expressive impasto. Like Velazquez, McConnell exploits the materiality of their shared medium. The use of raw, fir, plywood as his supports heightens the materiality of his paintings. Knots within the wood surface reveal themselves through the paint layers, while the roughness of the wood catches the paint applications, causing paint accretions, or what McConnell refers to as "pearls", to build up on the surface. The weaving of figure and ground, figuration and abstraction, and layers of drips and impasto all contribute to a viscerality that possesses a great presence and communicates eloquently. McConnell believes in the power of images and representations and invites viewers to participate in rewriting and re-envisioning the narratives we tell ourselves about our histories and how we position ourselves in our world.