



Large
Print

**Jock
McFadyen RA:
Tourist without a Guidebook**

Weston Rooms

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Jock McFadyen RA: Tourist without a Guidebook

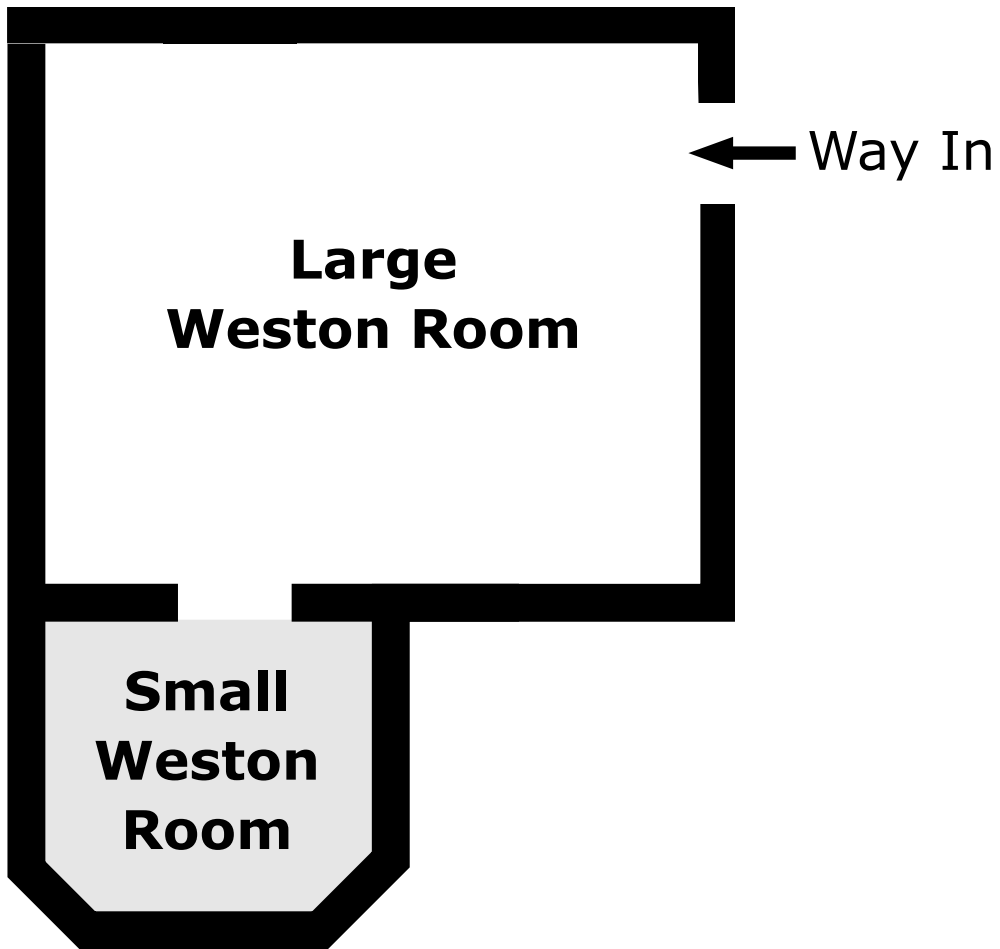
Weston Rooms

5 February – 10 April 2022

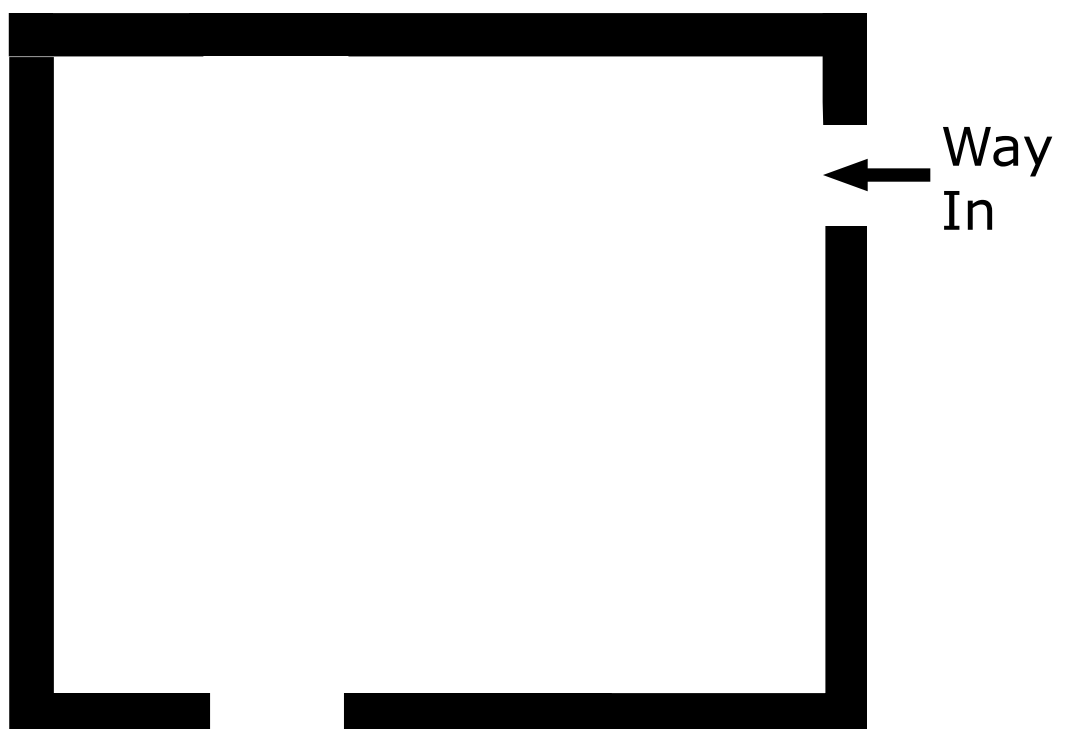
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Large Weston Room

Jock McFadyen RA: Tourist without a Guidebook

Jock McFadyen RA (born 1950) lives and works in East London. For over forty-five years his work has included the urban landscape. This exhibition focuses on his London pictures, which capture a city in constant flux.

This is not London as seen in glossy guidebooks. McFadyen paints scruffy streets and dilapidated buildings, often as empty stage sets, devoid of their inhabitants but marked by visible traces of human activity: graffiti, litter, peeling posters and shop signs. More recently, figures have re-emerged in his work.

In 1991 the art critic Tom Lubbock described McFadyen as 'like a sightseer without a guidebook.' The phrase resonated for the artist: 'He had perfectly described my attitude to painting places, and since that time I have carried the words close to my heart.'

McFadyen's art may appear to invite social and political interpretation. In a culture committed to regeneration, McFadyen instead documents urban decay. But McFadyen asserts 'I have no agenda.' Trained at Chelsea School of Art by a generation of abstract painters, McFadyen points out: 'All painting is abstract. The subject of all my paintings is the paint.'

The artist invites you to approach the exhibition in the same spirit, unencumbered by explanatory text.

If you would like to find out more, you can read about selected artworks below.

Lois Oliver, RA Curator of Paintings and Sculpture

List of works (in order of hang - clockwise)

Pink Flats

2006

This local authority housing block enjoyed a view over the Grand Union Canal on the border of Hackney and Shoreditch before luxury new apartments were erected in front of it. Here, McFadyen transposes the pink flats to a new location with a view in the Lea Valley.

As McFadyen explains: 'The figures on the roof are residents who have woken up to an unfamiliar location and have gone to survey where they are.'

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

Bank

1997

To the casual London Tube traveller there would be 'nothing to see here', merely the scruffiness of a brick-lined station tunnel, where posters have been removed. McFadyen, however, finds the painterly possibilities in this palimpsest of urban life.

The triptych format is unusual in the artist's oeuvre; the Brick Lane studio that he was renting at the time was not big enough for a single canvas this size. Scale is important because it gives the viewer the equivalent encounter to standing a track's width from the posters, filling our visual field.

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

Cambridge Heath

2004

This BP petrol station is located less than a minute's walk from McFadyen's home, beside the raised railway track approaching Cambridge Heath station.

McFadyen's depiction encapsulates the loneliness of the metropolis at night. One attendant maintains a solitary vigil in the shop. The illuminated forecourt appears as a beacon for travellers against the twilight sky.

The dramatic lighting is McFadyen's invention; he likes to work from what he refers to as 'bad photographs', in this case an unremarkable daytime snapshot.

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

The Shore Ditch

2019

By picturing the un-picturesque, unremarked 'sights'/sites of London in a mode of detailed realism, McFadyen locates his viewers in places that people would typically hurry through. Here he depicts the old goods yard at Shoreditch, joining Bethnal Green Road to Shoreditch High Street.

McFadyen finds unexpected serenity in this location. The open sky fills four-fifths of the canvas and McFadyen organises the composition into calm horizontal bands: white clouds above and raised railway below. Three diminutive figures resemble actors on a stage set.

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

Blackmans Yard

2003

Graffiti eyes and gnashing teeth conjure up a human face or mask, with weeds replacing hair. The landscape and built environment appear to morph into one another, foreshadowing a future when the entire city has returned to nature. At Blackmans Yard in Bethnal Green the process of degeneration has visible vitality.

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

Tate Moss

2010

Tate Moss depicts an abandoned condemned factory on the site of the future London 2012 Olympics, steel-framed windows broken, blue sky visible through its brick shell and a plastic chair dangling upstairs. The spray-painted slogan 'Tate Moss' could be an ironic comment on the intersection of art museums and fashion. The cryptic lettering 'IDST' stands for 'if destroyed still true.'

McFadyen painted this following a clandestine visit to the site of the future London 2012 Olympics with writer Iain Sinclair. They succeeded in bypassing perimeter security by entering in an inflatable kayak. Iain Sinclair lamented the impact of the Olympic 'regeneration' project on Hackney in his book *Ghost Milk* (2011).

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

Olympia 2

2011

Olympia 2 features two iconic structures of the London 2012 Olympics: the Olympic stadium and the Orbit Tower designed by Sir Anish Kapoor RA, but they are obscured by hoardings adorned with graffiti, one looping red scrawl laconically echoing the shape of the Orbit.

Ever alert to changes in the urban environment, McFadyen highlights the multiple competing forces that shape our cities.

Oil on panel

Courtesy of the artist

K.M.B.

2007-08

Charlie Chaplin and a companion stick figure stand as ciphers for the human activity evident in the graffiti tags, barbed wire, and fluttering hazard tape caught in a stunted tree.

The horizontal bands of (blurred) street and (static) sky lend a cinematic feel to the scene, as if glimpsed from a moving vehicle. The controversial motto 'Kill Matthew Barney' is obscured with black paint.

Although this painting appears to be a scrupulously concrete record of the bleak urban environment, it is in fact a composite of motifs. This is the Diploma Work that McFadyen chose to present to the Royal Academy following his election as a Royal Academician in 2012.

Oil on canvas

Diploma Work given by Jock McFadyen RA in 2014 following election as a Royal Academician

Elephant

1996

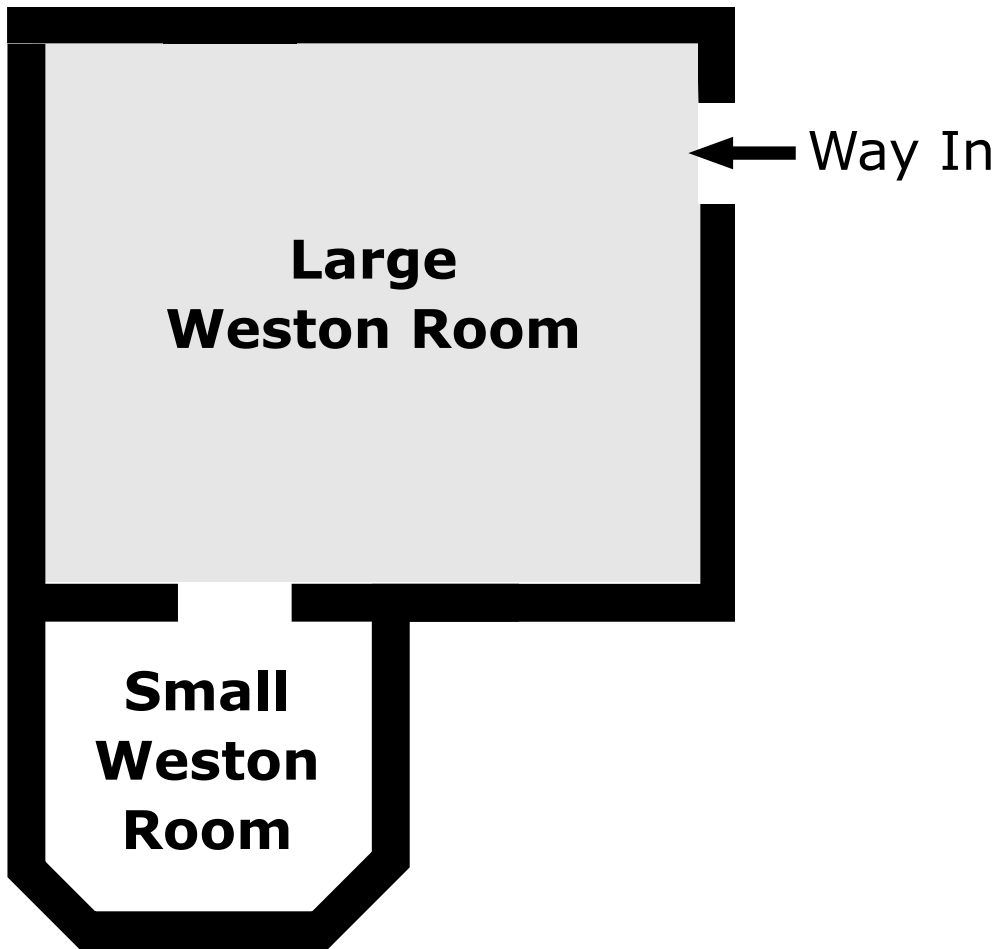
McFadyen asserts: 'All painting is abstract.'
Here, a deserted Elephant and Castle Tube station is the basis for a formal arrangement of squares and rectangles, with looping electric cables and a streak of lime green.

With a limited palette of greys and yellow, McFadyen explores a wide range of painterly possibilities: contrasts of matt and shiny paint, thick impasto juxtaposed with barely stained canvas. The two-dimensional surface is held in constant tension with the illusion of depth.

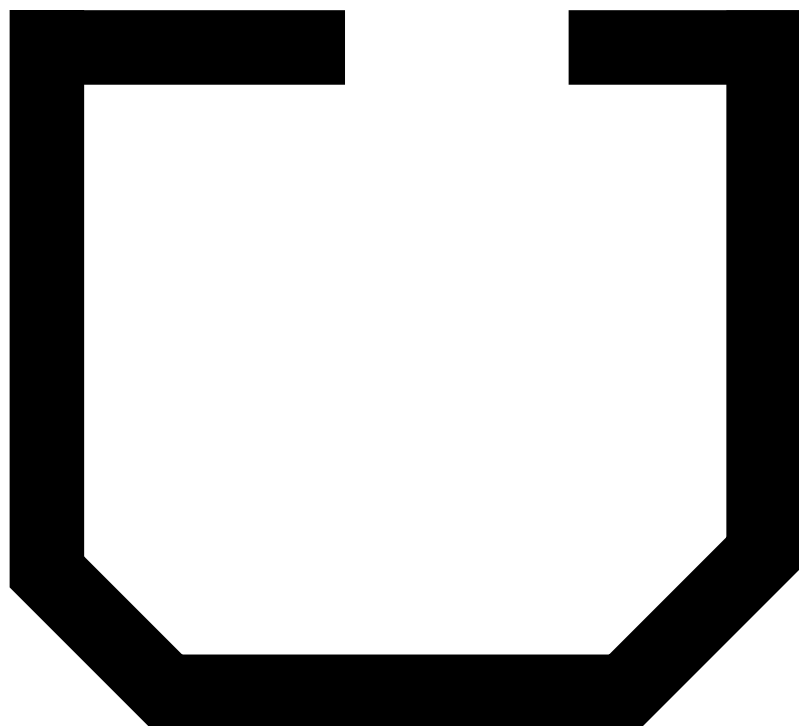
The whole composition is pulled into focus by the interjection of the red 'No Smoking' sign.

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist



You are in Small Weston Room



List of works (in order of hang - clockwise)

Roman Road 2021

2021

Roman Road, in London's East End, runs from Bethnal Green to Bow, following the route of the ancient Roman road that connected London and Colchester. It is familiar territory for McFadyen, who lives just around the corner and has depicted it many times.

In this night scene he explores effects of opacity and transparency, light and darkness, detail and obfuscation. 'I'm there looking for painterly opportunities. That's what I'm doing. Things that I can paint, with my obsession with surface, ground, refraction and light.'

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

Nightsters

2019

Oil on panel

Courtesy of the artist

Harvey 2

2018

Several of McFadyen's recent nightclub paintings feature 'Harvey', a reference to American actor Harvey Keitel, known for his portrayal of morally ambiguous and 'tough guy' characters.

Harvey 2 is also a self-portrait, features pressed close to the picture plane, the morbidity of the flesh clearly visible, a red gash on the forehead.

As McFadyen puts it: 'We've all been in those bars where we've split up with somebody and gone for a drink alone, and found ourselves in those situations, and that's what I was fishing for in these paintings.'

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

Hi

2019

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

Nightsters 2

2019

Oil on panel

Courtesy of the artist

Nightbus

2020

In the 1990s figures gradually disappeared from McFadyen's art, but they have recently re-emerged as a central focus. This was painted during the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020.

McFadyen asserts: 'In figurative painting, physical distortion is essential for expressing psychological truth.'

The disparity in height between these two passengers, and the space between them, also creates narrative tension. Do they know each other? Is this a confrontation? Or could they be friends?

This work reflects McFadyen's interest in the raw unsettling art of Francis Bacon as well as his fascination with L.S. Lowry's depiction of city inhabitants, who often appear in profile and physically separated from each other.

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

Goodfellas

2001

Goodfellas nightclub stands on the former A13 at Dagenham, occupying a building that was once an art deco cinema, its grandeur much faded.

It was presumably named by optimistic proprietors hoping to entice customers by vicarious glamorous association with Martin Scorsese's 1990 gangster movie. It promises a nightly fantasy escape from the suburban wasteland made apparent by the adjacent parade of shops with its mock-Tudor architecture, broken windowpanes, and shuttered shop front.

There is a cinematic detachment to McFadyen's depiction. The horizontal bands of street and sky imply a location seen from a moving vehicle, which has the effect of separating us as viewers from the (unseen) local inhabitants, while simultaneously simulating a sense of fleeting curiosity about their lives.

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

From the Greenway 3

2003

From the Greenway depicts the first office blocks that transformed the Isle of Dogs into the upmarket financial district of Canary Wharf. A sublime sunset glows orange behind the new, artificially illuminated glass skyscrapers, while a brightly lit commuter train crosses the middle distance on the right. The grandeur of nature is matched by the ambition of urban transformation.

Less salubrious in the foreground is the scrubland of the Greenway, the road that covers London's sewage outflow pipe, where assorted attempts at regeneration include a pathway across the marshland and a metal archway.

The contrasts inherent in this scene are matched by McFadyen's virtuosic display of different techniques: the liquid density of the clouds swept over a luminous underlayer; the scrubland rendered in thick impasto on a black gloss ground.

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

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InTouch  **at the RA**

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