

*Title: New Arrivals audio interview*

*Duration: 23:43*

*Contributors: France-Lise McGurn and Chief Curator Lucy Askew, National Galleries of Scotland*

### *Transcript*

#### *Lucy Askew*

France-Lise McGurn is a Glasgow-based artist whose work is underpinned by an intuitive approach to making. She's become recognised for her vibrant and lyrical paintings, populated by archetypal figures drawn from her imagination. As well as painting on canvas, she frequently paints directly onto the wall to create a whole environment.

I'm curator Lucy Askew. Welcome to New Arrivals, a series of podcasts introducing the artists behind some of the recent additions to the modern and contemporary collection at the National Galleries of Scotland.

Well, it is an absolute pleasure to be here with you in your studio, France-Lise, and a delight to be surrounded by some of your works. We're going to be talking today about *Bachelorette*, the painting that's in our collection.

*Bachelorette* is a large-scale painting in two parts – that is, it's a diptych, with two panels hung side by side. Made using layers of oil and acrylic paints, as well as marker and spray paint on canvas, it has a striking colour palette, including a fiery orange-red contrasted with more muted tones. Its composition of figures and entwined bodily fragments emerge from abstract

passages of colour and form to create a painting full of energy and atmospheric charge.

I just wanted to start off by talking about when you made the work in the spring of 2020, not long after the first COVID lockdown had been instigated and knowing how you used the stimulus of the outside world. What did that mean to you, what was the impact of the pandemic on making the work?

*France-Lise McGurn*

Isn't it funny to go back into that vortex of time. So I was working on a bunch of paintings at the time. I think *Bachelorette* was quite early on in this bunch of paintings I was making for a show in Switzerland.

For me I use bodies to study in terms of watching weight and figures in terms of exactly how I am going to draw and in a wider way how I am going to think about being around people, intimacy in my work. So, *Bachelorette*, because it was quite early on, I feel like it is one of the first works that feels like it has a slightly more linear narrative. It is more contained. And I think that is what is really happening, there's a centre. To me there is a beginning, a middle and an end to *Bachelorette*. It doesn't spill off the canvas in the same way. It's very much a painting and that is partly because it was a diptych so I felt that there was something already happening between the canvasses. But I think it was also to do with this lockdown thing which was happening at the time which meant, not that things were becoming more introspective, but I guess things were being more fully formed in the studio rather than leaking in and out of the studio door, if you know what I mean. Being around people, being in a café, being with family, going out and then coming back to the studio, it's

studio, home, studio, home. Everything is being contained in the painting in a different way if that make sense.

*Lucy Askew*

So when you were making *Bachelorette*, you were making a number of works at the same time. So moving from one painting back to *Bachelorette* and so on day by day. And is that also looking and seeing what the paintings are doing together as well as in and of themselves, especially this moment of isolation being very much in the studio.

*France-Lise McGurn*

At the time I was a relatively small studio for the size of the work, I mean, the work was made exactly to fit my largest wall, as big as I could go and still be able to get in the door. I had works building up in a way and I would shift them all around, drag them across and re-feng shui it so that I could get a different angle of them. Sometimes three or four different views of the same situation so they all inform each other. But that's not to say that then I see them as living together always or that the wall paintings are always necessary. But it's like anything. If there's a group of people in the room, they don't only exist together, they then go out and then they're in a different formation. So it could collapse and be something completely different or they could be shown on their own. You know, it would be like saying someone only exists with the group they're in.

*Lucy Askew*

That's really lovely that you see them as people, the people that are populating them and I want to ask you about the diptych and the two panels. That is the first time in *Bachelorette* that you've used that idea of bringing two panels

together. Could you say something about the choice of that for the moment and how that's sort of involved your work?

### *France-Lise McGurn*

It's a little bit like framing works for me, I started wall painting before I started making canvasses, I started painting on stuff before I started making canvasses, I came to making canvases quite late. Way after both experiences at art school and I think I did a couple in my MA but not many. So to me, I think I struggled, you know, a lot of people do, certainly I saw that a lot at art school with this formality and history of the painting surface so I think I'm always looking for ways to free it up, to be less severe and so the diptych was like a way of at least there would be like a movement between the two or it felt like something could travel between the two, the same way it can travel from the wall to the paintings to the floor, whatever the installation is normally. And so that, also I really just needed to be able to make big works and get them out the door. So that was like a way of being able to scale up that at times I was desperate to do. And it's really hard to go back. I end up making my own paintings, but it's just so exciting to get bigger and bigger because my figures are often almost life-size, not far off. So there was that and it's also a slight reference to the classical painting that I am interested in as well. You know, even the term 'diptych' or 'triptych' to me has a kind of like foundation there. I've gone on to make quite a few diptychs or triptychs.

### *Lucy Askew*

I love when you're talking about a sense of freedom. And I think that within *Bachelorette* there is this sense of bodily freedom, but also containment. It's almost a kind of polar of these two things as one body that's very monumental when you look at the painting on the left and then there's a more fluid sense of

movement in the right hand panel. Could you say something about that? Is that a tension, the sense of movement, capturing it in stasis? I'm just interested in how you kind of explore that in the process of making.

*France-Lise McGurn*

I think it is exactly what you're saying. I see them like people that I'm splitting up. And then also in the same way my figures are almost unfigurative to me because I see them like personifications of a feeling or of a thing rather than a person or character or anything that I know exactly. There's not a muse. And that's why I guess I study gestures and forms and shorthands from magazines so that I get the feeling of familiarity. So I know it's a figure, but that is not an exact thing. And so in *Bachelorette* specifically, I feel like there's quite a personal, lived, how it feels to be in a body side of it. And then then maybe on the left hand side is more to do with the kind of almost archetypal, archetypal figure to me, like more a statue or more like a figure that you would recognise from art history – I never liked this phrase – the exact artist that might have a more familiar territory. And then on the right hand side there's something quite human happening, there's that's much more and it's a lot to do with the kind of like ideas around female sexuality and how that's viewed or something which we'll probably speak about, but it feeds into the title.

*Lucy Askew*

Maybe as we're talking about it, we could talk about the title and the and the way that you use words. Actually not on the canvas itself, of course. But as we look down the side of the panels, we can see notation, maybe a note to self,

maybe something that refers to the title itself, the title is one side. Maybe you want to talk about that.

*France-Lise McGurn*

Titling is really important for me, titling takes like I mean, I start titling when I start the painting and it will be a process all the way through to the end so it may have ten different titles by the end of it in my head. So I often write them down the side. Or ideas. And some of them will later on be the title of the show or another work, I guess they're sort of phrases that I'm sticking with while I'm making all the work. And so, yes, sometimes I do them in a very light pencil and sometimes I really feel very strongly about it and it just depends how I'm feeling about the words but yeah, there's normally three or four options for a title down the side of them or sometimes there's a title that I don't have balls to put.

*Lucy Askew*

And the title *Bachelorette*, it conjures up lots of different potential meanings and different people will bring different perceptions of what that word might mean to them. The bachelorette party. But down the left-hand side of the painting in lovely cursive pencil script, which is possibly easy to miss, you've written 'stripped bare by Bachelorette' and I can't resist but to say, you know, the reference there being to Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors* and what you were talking about in terms of the female sexuality. Is there a feminist perspective and angle that you're bringing in by playing with that.

*France-Lise McGurn*

Yes. Because I guess when I was making *Bachelorette* and I'll talk about it in specifics to that painting, and this is quite a common way I guess I would work, but I would want a title that has many readings and that is open. I think this there was a slight tongue in cheek reference initially with the Marcel Duchamp thing because I sometimes utilise the language of certain male painters. It's very recognisable as something that I can compare and sort of or almost accused actually. And I think that's quite funny because I don't think that that thing runs out once people do it. But so that title, I guess, from an early age is something I learnt about that piece so early on when we learn about art. And so as anyone who has studied that particular piece by Duchamp would be figuring out it's like the riddle of what it means and everything like that. So I thought it was sort of good or interesting to start to feminise it. 'Bachelorette' the word is adding the 'ette' on to something feminises it or it becomes a feminised word. So that came from... *Bride Stripped Bare* was kind of a reversal of power. *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors* is so violent and horrible an image and so it was simply a reversal of that initially. And then it became kind of the hilarity of the word bachelorette is actually as you say, first conjures up an image of the bachelorette party, which is this kind of pantomime of femininity and sexuality. Actually, these kind of like blow up, you know, whatever. And it's also an American term, it's not what we would use. So it had a few different readings, I guess, but it was sort of a reversal.

*Lucy Askew*

On the other side of the panel, you can read 'Eurotrash', 'hen do' and 'safer' and 'sex' is also there. And they're written in different hands.

*France-Lise McGurn*

'Hen do' is there, yes. And I think because that painting to me is like quite like a party, you know, there's a lot going on and there's a lot of flailing limbs and there's like one of the more specific unions of a couple that I've ever put in a painting, like I often have limbs overflowing and embraces. There is a really distinct two figures in that painting. For me, they are quite distinct. And I also was just playing around with this archetype, this idea of going out and these old structures of marriage and then women going out, or men, bachelor, bachelorette, and these kind of explosions of archetype, if you know what I mean. It is to me quite an interesting phenomenon, you know.

*Lucy Askew*

And also, again, you will see this because of the way that the two panels above, but that babysitter, Mel and Olay. and I just want to let you know, they speak to a whole other sort of role of the woman as carer. And so there is a sort of sense within your work and the way that you're portraying. So your focus has recently been on the female body.

*France-Lise McGurn*

Yeah. Which has been a significant change... I never really used to see. I mean, I think this is still true actually but I start, as I was saying, as much as they are



figures, that changes halfway through sometimes. A female body changes. And I don't see it being a representation as such. But yeah, the babysitter is a kind of motif or figure that I carry through a lot of the work. I mean, I'm a big fan of 'B' movies and I almost exclusively watch old films from the 70s, 80s or whatever. Because I quite often paint when I'm watching films, or I paint from films. I think that comes from that a lot. It's interesting to hear them actually, because I think that the babysitter one was probably just starting there. I think that's probably written on a few canvasses, oil of olay. It's just to do with the fountain of youth. It's a processing of how you go from the Virgin Mother praying through these processes of womanhood. Was it historically the virgin mother praying and now it's bad babysitter, bachelorette. That's what we're in contemporary format if we are in those rigid terms.

### *Lucy Askew*

We touched on this a little bit, but I'm interested in exploring the ways in which the figure is obviously a big part of the way that you paint. But actually there's huge amounts of abstraction and abstract gestures in your paintings. And if you cast your eye over *Bachelorette*, there are exquisite moments of colour, of gesture, of form. And I'd just love to hear you talk about what that relationship is to you when you're making the work, how you're kind of tussling between the figure in the form of the figure, but also with these ideas about abstraction that sit within twentieth century art history.

### *France-Lise McGurn*

It's funny because as much as I am a figurative painter, I mean, that's the summation of how I would describe it, I really do find that I have more to talk

about with abstract painters than I do with figurative painters because I feel like the way I paint is impulsive and to do with colour. More intuitive than impulsive, I mean. The decisions and the battles happen on the canvas. I don't have a preconceived idea of what a work will be like. I have a feeling, you know, and I have maybe something in a bank. You know, that's where the compulsion is to make things of course. But I am working with the colours and working with what's already there and trying to keep a kind of ephemeral or trying to keep it moving effectively. And so when I was making *Bachelorette*. Because, yeah, I think it was quite like a battle – my first diptych - and it was quite a new way of working. It was also the first time I was working with what I use quite a lot now, which is ways of layering and things like that was the first time I was kind of doing that. There was so much to do actually. So much to kind of push and pull with in *Bachelorette* I felt like. And especially because the figures, as I said, are more distinct, are full body. They are basically more full body, they have all the parts in the right places, more than some of the other works. I guess that is the way I want the work to be experienced, you know, I don't want someone to go in and decipher, you know, I don't want this idea of there's the muse and there's the figure. And who is that and what are they symbolising or what are they representing. And I want someone to feel they're in a familiar experience or something... you know, how it feels to actually be around figures or how it feels to actually be intimate with somebody. And I guess that's why I use I don't build a room for them to exist in because then it's a view into something but using colour and stuff. And it's just the way I work to keep it rhythmic and, I don't know, I listen to a lot of live music when I'm painting as well. It's responsive in that way. I've always been interested in the figure so I look more at figurative artwork and I look more at figuration in magazines and things like that. So I don't think I could ever let go of the figure

but sometimes I can feel the figure is really 10 minutes of the however long the painting took, you know, because it's the lightest and the most, you know, it depends obviously, that's the whole thing, isn't it? That's the battle that goes on. It's time. How do you pull and push the time, how does one colour slip across the canvas really quickly and you make sure that the other colour has a more congestive feel of time. So that they have a good relationship to each other, so that the figure is dancing over something that felt tight. That to me represents the way you process going about things or the memory of something maybe. You know, which is maybe more true. It could be anything. I've talked a lot about clubbing and nightlife. It's something that I always go to because I think it's a really good way of describing, like, how it feels to make a painting rather than be like, oh, I love partying and that's what it's about, I think it's a good way of like describing being in a room full of music and uninhibited-ish, at what point are you really ever uninhibited? Dancing and there's music is the closest way I can of how it actually feels to make a painting to me.

*Lucy Askew*

When someone comes and encounters *Bachelorette*, what do you hope they might feel?

*France-Lise McGurn*

In *Bachelorette* there is somebody who is intertwined and the person is turning round to confront the viewer, which is something that I really specifically wanted in that painting. As I said there was quite a lot of new things happening to me for me in that painting. You know, there's really quite a shift. There was a shift in the world that was the pandemic. It was maybe a shift for me in terms of thinking of myself as I have always thought of myself as a painter, but it was

a painting. Is it really a painting? And it wasn't going to be part of something necessarily spilling onto the wall at that moment. It was on these two things. I wanted to get everything to work and battle with it on that surface. So it has a lot in it. There's an inside and an outside, an interior and an exterior. The figure on the left is almost thus exterior figure, and so I want it to feel personal. That's what I would like people to feel. I think I think I would like them to feel really personal.

*Lucy Askew*

Thank you so much for speaking with us today. It's been such a joy to spend this time with you and talking about the painting. Can't wait to see it on the show at the Gallery and for people to be able to experience it for themselves.

*France-Lise McGurn*

Thank you Lucy. This is so lovely to be able to sit and just chat about all the things that we've, you know, we've been chatting about along the way. So it's really lovely and I'm just so thrilled. I can't wait to see it in its home and it's yet to be part of the collection.

ENDS