

Uneasy echoes amid the Port Hills



Euan Macleod, left, trained at the Canterbury School of Fine Art and recently returned from Sydney for a period at the school as Artist in Residence. Two concurrent exhibitions show that this stay in his home town has been productive. JUSTIN PATON meets the man and surveys his work.

A circle closed when Euan Macleod returned to the Canterbury School of Fine Art two months ago. Twelve years back, Macleod left here, embarking on that risky migration from the coddling quarters of the art school to the big pond of the art economy. Now, at 38, he has come back as the school's visiting fellow, completing the arc from upwardly-mobile student to tough-skinned careerist. The return has yielded rich rewards.

Back then, Macleod was coming to the fore as a young painter of great fluency. Raw painterly flair wedded to an acute sense of psychic tension, has become a hallmark of his art since then. For a time in the mid-80s that fluency led him into repetition, but of late he has been ringing the changes with new vigour, as can be seen in his show at the Brooke/Gifford Gallery. They are edgy scenarios, these new works, landscapes and interiors whose spaces simmer with unease, and they must place Macleod among the best New Zealand expressionists of his generation.

Macleod is diffident about his art, but he allows that his time here has been fruitful. "If you had asked me a month ago I would have said 'terrible', but it seems to have been productive." The evidence for this is all around you in Macleod's studio — rugged, gutsy paintings lean against the walls, their juicy oil surfaces pushed around by the blunt spatula Macleod favours. In among them are the also-rans, a necessary by-product of Macleod's instinctive working method. These works have been wiped right back, leaving thin swipes of colour as the only trace of Macleod's tussle with his subjects.

Though his vowels don't betray it yet, Macleod has lived and

Painted in Australia for more than a decade now. He moved to Sydney in 1981, propelled as much by good old curiosity as by any artistic motives, but the shift was good for his art.

Though painting of Macleod's lushly brushed kind is still lodged in the blind spot of official culture in New Zealand and, to a lesser extent, in Australia, he has had a measure of success; most recently, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York purchased a work.

Macleod found the move from New Zealand — with its close and incestuous scene — into Sydney's more expansive and inclusive art world, liberating. There was less of the contempt that familiarity breeds.

Macleod is more interested in painting than yakking about it, so he welcomed the relative anonymity of that city. "It leaves you

I wanted these paintings to be particularly Canterbury. That was the big challenge of coming here.

Euan Macleod
artist

free to do what you want to do, and you can just develop in your own way."

He has kept cross-Tasman contact, though, bringing himself and his work across the ditch for occasional solo shows in this city, and in Wellington. His current double-banger, "New Paintings" and "Works in Progress", timed to coincide with the last weeks of his residency, is his first showing here since 1992.

Place counts for a lot in Macleod's art, and the shift back to Christchurch has been clearly registered in his art. "I wanted these paintings to be particularly

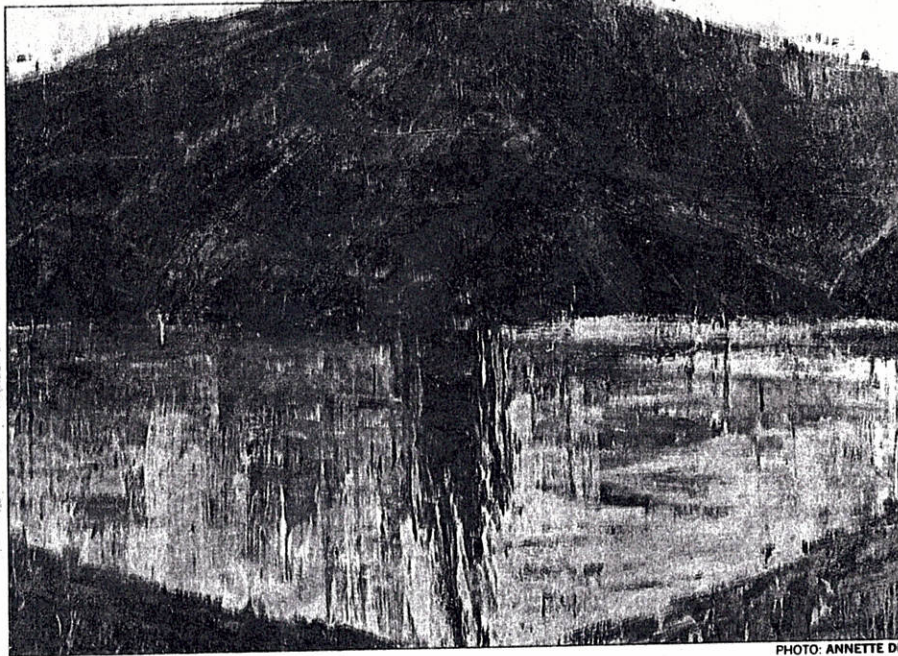


PHOTO: ANNETTE D

Figure against the Lyttelton landscape, from "Works in Progress".

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Absence, presence, memory: these themes eddy in his latest works. Macleod has wrought his usual tensions to a new pitch, suffusing the paintings with an elegiac mood (they have titles like "Remembrance"). In the recent Australian works, the figure, for so long a graphically defined element in his art, has begun to dissolve into the forest it strides through, leaving only an echo.

In one recent work, the dense, brooding mass of the Port Hills has become backdrop for a universal drama — a stage for the final act. It's real primal-swamp country. The tall thin figure rises fluidly up before Lyttelton harbour, as if acting out that final line of Allen Curnow's "You Will Know When You Get There": "Down you go alone, so late, into the surge-black fissure."

It helps when looking at these works to remember that Macleod, like any contemporary figure painter, is making art at a time when most of the old certainties have crumbled. These paintings reverberate with art-historical references — Mantegna's painting of the dead Christ, say — but

different geography from the Australian bush that is the stage for most of his dramas, with its serried ranks of gums and its violent shadows.

More than anything, the Ilam residency has let Macleod return to old memory-sites. He grew up here, and his return has led him to ponder the pressure of that past on his present, and to work those thoughts through in his art.

"There's the idea of the presence of a figure, and that idea of memory," he says of one work. "That's why it is so good coming here, because it's where I grew up. So there's that idea of absence,

and that sense, when you're in a landscape, of other people having been around — a sense of absence, presence, memory."

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update that imagery for an e with fewer illusions. Wh Macleod takes on funerary im gery, all comforting beliefs see to have been stripped awa leaving only the body, bare a anonymous on its slab.

For Macleod, art is deeply fe or not worth making at all. "Y have to have some persor motivation to do it. In paintin which deal with death or AIDS any weighty issues, if they're r actually felt, I think you can s through it immediately."

He is addressing some of the big themes here, and you have respect the bravery of t attempt. He has taken the wor to the edge of melodrama, wh they balance without the safe net of irony. "I admire work tha on a knife edge like that."

It is a big risk. The danger that the work will become ma lin, melodramatically creepy, merely grim. The good news that the paintings, in the ma stay honest, sounding unus depths of feeling. It is not comforting vision, but it is compelling one.

"New Paintings" at the Broo Gifford Gallery until June 10. "Work Progress" at the School of Fine / Gallery until June 17.