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. Justn Paton meets the man and surveys his work.

A circle closed when Euan Macleod returned to the Canterbury School of Fine Art, twelve years ago. Twelve years ago, Macleod left here, embarking on the risky migration from the fringing 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 up-and-coming 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. Flaw painterly flair welded 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 Brooks-Gifford Gallery. They are edgy scenarios, these new works, landscape and interiors whose spaces simmer with unease, and they must place Macleod among the best New Zealand expressionists of his generation.

Macleod is d reflective about his work, he allows that his time here has been fruitful. "If you had raised this question in Macleod's studio — rugged, guby paintings lean against the walls, their juicy oil glosses pulsed around by the blustery sounds of the city — you would find that his work has evolved from his early years with a sort of" he says, and for the most part, that is true. His work has grown in complexity and depth, and he has taken the time to develop a sense of the landscape and its inhabitants.

He has kept close contact with his former teacher, the late Taranaki artist, who had a profound influence on him. His current exhibition, "New Paintings," is a tribute to his mentor and a celebration of his own contributions to New Zealand art.

Macleod's paintings are highly detailed and realistic, yet they convey a sense of mystery and unease. The landscapes are often dark and foreboding, with muted colours and a sense of gloom. The interiors are equally disturbing, with dark, cramped spaces and a sense of claustrophobia.

"I wanted these paintings to be particularly Canterbury. That was the big challenge of coming here. I wanted to explore different geography from the Australian bush that is the stage for many of his dramas, with its serried ranks of gums and its violent shadows."

More than anything, the theme of "New Paintings" is the struggle with memory, the burden of remembering the past and the desire to forget. The paintings are a reflection of the artist's own experiences and emotions, and they are a powerful reminder of the pain and joy of life.

"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, memory, presence, memory."

He has been drawing on his experiences in Sydney, where he lived for a time, and he has brought back this sense of urbanity and sophistication to his work. The paintings are a reflection of the artist's own experiences and emotions, and they are a powerful reminder of the pain and joy of life.

"I admire work that has a knife edge like that. It is a big risk. The danger that the work will be maudlin, melancholically dreary, merely grim. The good news that the paintings, in the main, are honest, sounding unsentimental depths of feeling. It is not comforting vision, but it is compelling case."

"New Paintings" at the Brooks-Gifford Gallery until June 10. "Work in Progress" at the School of Fine Art Gallery until June 17.