

Fragile ghosts in a landscape

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ON first viewing Euan Macleod's paintings, they seem to be a fair reflection of New Zealand Celtic sensibility. They are dark and brooding works, with gashes of rock countering depths of water found on the bleak South Island coast.

But Macleod has lived in Australia since 1981 and the misty lakes of the central coast of NSW are as much a part of his imagining as the windblown fjords of New Zealand.

The technique, of course, is pure 20th-century academy. The viewer senses that this man learned from an early age how to lay on the paint thickly, with a trowel. There is a trick, however, to Macleod's landscapes and it is this that distinguishes his work from that of his colleagues. They are all inhabited by figures.

Historically, the term "landscape with figures" is used to describe the device used by painters when they want to give a sense of scale. Shepherds and Aborigines are often nothing more than measuring rods to make the world share artists' visions.

Macleod's figures are not there for calibration. Rather he places them full size, under the paintings, so that they emerge as fragile ghosts, defying any scale the artist may have used for his cliffs and valleys.

The most impressive of these paintings, *Seascape through Figures*, gives a sense of a land inhabited from time immemorial, a place for listening to the voices of memory.

The exhibition begins in Macleod's early Sydney years with figures in isolation, shadowing each other. These are works of great intensity, where opposites combat each other. It is the challenge of the naked versus the clothed, the purple versus the orange.

Then there are the slightly odd, definitely sweet studies of family and child. These are clearly based on photographs but he is no photorealist. The tones are too harsh, the slashes of pink and white are more about the texture of paint than the feel of flesh.

There is a sense in these works of the late 1980s and early 90s that the artist is gradually disrobing, stripping away to



Intensity: Euan Macleod's *Sassafras Gully*, 1988

his essential self, moving to nature.

In a piece of inspirational hanging, the suited *Striding figure*—*Hyde Park* has been placed next to the naked *Figure in Moonbi Landscape*. Both are male, head bowed, both are walking. But the hurried clothed man appears to rush to nowhere, while the figure freed in the bush landscape can move towards becoming one of the shadows that are the substance of the land.

The most recent series of paintings play further on this notion of material and immaterial reality, of figures emerging from encrusted paint, of multiple layerings of histories. Not all these last paintings are successful. Some of them look forced, as though the artist is pushing himself towards a particular result but is not quite sure whether he wants to go so far.

In the most resolved work in this new series, *Anniversary Five Years*, the confusion is largely resolved and the influence revealed.

Macleod's Sydney dealer, Watters Gallery, is also the agent for James Gleeson. While on the face of it there are few connections between Gleeson's

fluid interpretations of fantasies and Macleod's rough-hewn imaginings, this work shows how deeply the younger artist has been studying the older.

There is the same sense of lyrical beauty with a changed purpose, the same use of mythical figures to create disturbing emotions, the same understanding of the power of the sea and memory.

Because the time frame of the exhibition does not fit into the conventions of artists' retrospectives, and because it is being held in a public gallery, I was left with the impression that Macleod is very much at the aesthetic crossroads.

From this point, there are so many directions in which he could move. There may be intense, crusty landscapes where the viewer can sense the tactile pleasure of paint, or perhaps the figure will reassert its dominance over the sense of place. But will there still be ghosts?

Euan Macleod: Painting 1981-1998, at the Newcastle Region Art Gallery, to August 2.