

Quarterly journal
\$19.00 (incl. GST)
£21.45 (incl. GST)

Vol. 42 Summer
No. 2 2004

art

& Australia

Dale Frank
Simryn Gill
Sally Smart
Euan Macleod
Australian artists
in London in 1961



MACLEOD

EJAN

The relationship between the human figure and the landscape continues to be Macleod's primary concern



Euan Macleod, Tattooed man, 1999, oil on canvas, 188 x 137 cm, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand.

In 1998 Newcastle Region Art Gallery presented an extensive retrospective of Euan Macleod's landscape paintings dating from 1981 to 1998. In the catalogue for the exhibition I noted that: 'the dominant theme [in Macleod's work] is the figure in relation to its environment. However, the relationship between the two may be ambiguous, and the possibility is ever-present that a figure may represent many things to the artist.'¹ The relationship between the human figure and the landscape continues to be Macleod's primary concern.

Macleod's larger-than-life figures are imbued with the strength and gravitas of giants or supermen. So often in his work it is impossible to decide whether man is the central subject, or whether the paint-encrusted landmasses and atmospheric effects, of smoke-filled skies and water-drenched rock platforms, are the painter's focus. What, the inquisitive viewer might ask, is the origin of this matter?

In Macleod's imagination the land and the figure, whether united or separated, enjoy an ambiguity of meaning. Macleod has suggested that his works contain numerous stories and that there are many ways in which they can be read. While his paintings may present a figure or a group of figures within the landscape, no image is purely literal or autobiographical; each painting may contain a multitude of subjects and stories, along with the artist's own memories.

Macleod is a New Zealander by birth and his family home was in Christchurch, at St Martins, over the Port Hills from Lyttelton. Born in 1956, Macleod cannot recall a time when he did not draw; drawing quickly became second nature for him and a preferred way of expressing himself. As the artist has explained:

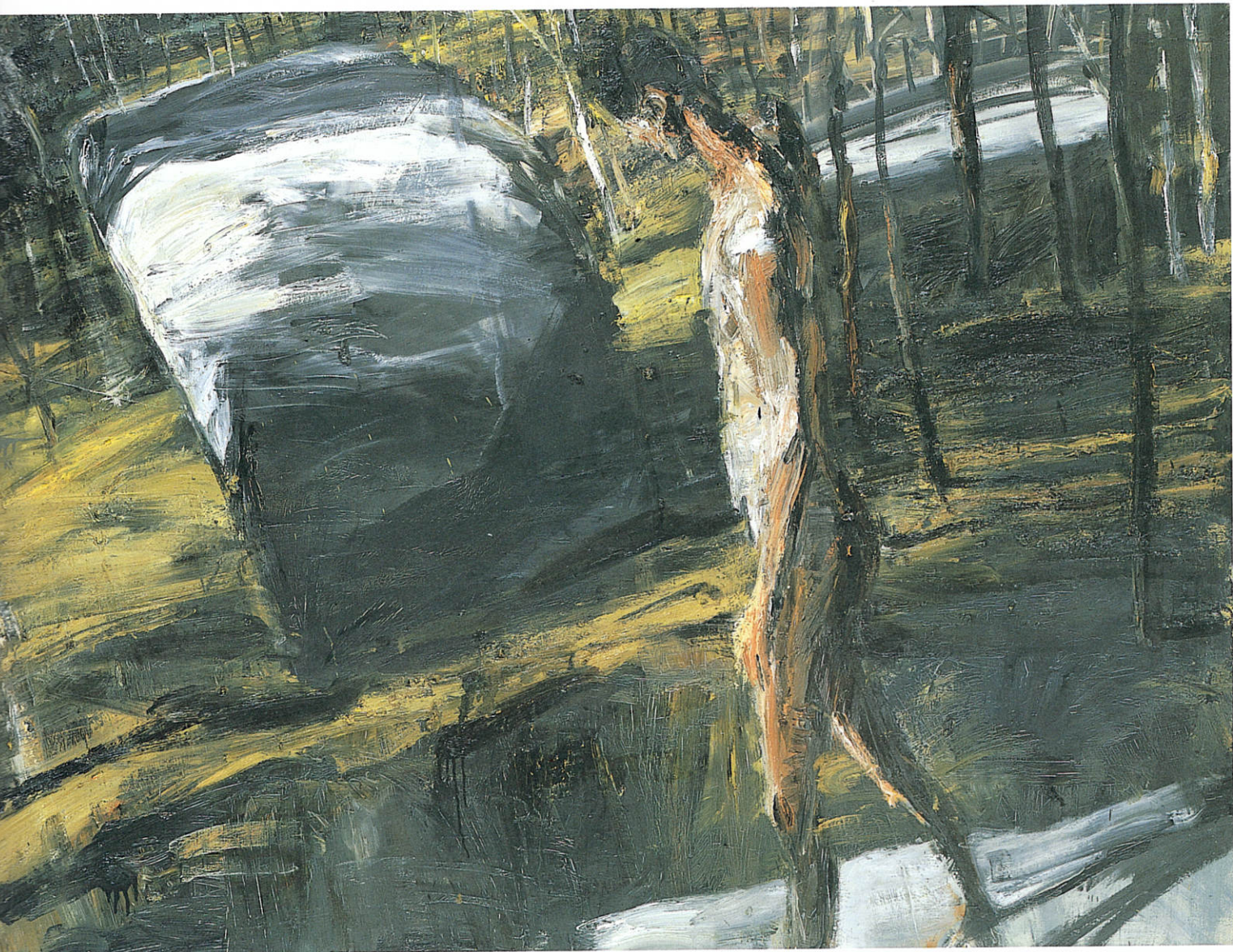
I think it's one of those circular things, where because you like doing it, you get good at it and you get acknowledgement for it, which encourages you more ... and it was one thing I was good at. I always drew rather than painted, and for a long time I was much more comfortable drawing than painting.²

Educated at the Christchurch Technical Institute and Canterbury University, Macleod was a draughtsman before he became a painter. He continues to approach his canvases as evolving works in progress, returning to them in periods of high energy. When asked if he was a lively child, he replied in the affirmative:

I think I was pretty energetic, yeah. The kind of energy in the paintings now was always there. You know, that sort of rushing at something ... I am someone that probably smashes against the door to open it, rather than trying the lock!³



Euan Macleod, *Room with clouds*, 2002,
oil on canvas, 84 x 120 cm, private collection.



Ian Macleod, Dark Moonbi figure/landscape, 1991.
Oil on canvas, 137 x 183 cm, private collection.



Macleod moved to Australia in 1981 and held his first Australian exhibition in 1982 at Watters Gallery in Sydney. The group of paintings in the Watters show, which depict figures in austere rooms, established the figure in relation to its environment as a theme in Macleod's work. However, Macleod is equally interested in the formal qualities of painting, as well as the depiction of space.

A further underlying theme in Macleod's work is transition and change. As the boy is to the man, so with the passing of the man the youth will assume his role. Macleod's paintings from the early 1980s, which mostly depicted two male figures in interior spaces, may represent the artist and his father. These works were followed, in 1984, by an exhibition of single male nudes. The assurance of these paintings, and their large scale, attracted critical attention and generated a following for Macleod's work. His intense concentration on the figure in this period enabled him to advance as a painter.

With hindsight it is also evident that Macleod's intensive study of the human figure led him, in due course, to locate the figure in the landscape. By the late 1980s he had come to see the Australian landscape as a subject in its own right. In large-scale paintings such as *Dark Moonbi figure/landscape*, 1991, exhibited at Niagara Galleries in Melbourne in the year it was painted, figure and landscape exist in equipoise.

Macleod acknowledges that the figure remained his primary interest until the late 1980s, when the Australian landscape began to creep into his work as a stage for the figures. Having lived away from New Zealand for ten years, Macleod was also ready, by the early 1990s, to draw on his own memories in his work. This was liberating for the artist, who discovered in himself a new appreciation for the extraordinary scale and beauty of the New Zealand landscape. Once he had a sense of the landscape as an entity, rather than merely a backdrop, Macleod became far more interested and involved with the New Zealand landscape, particularly Lyttelton Harbour, than ever before.

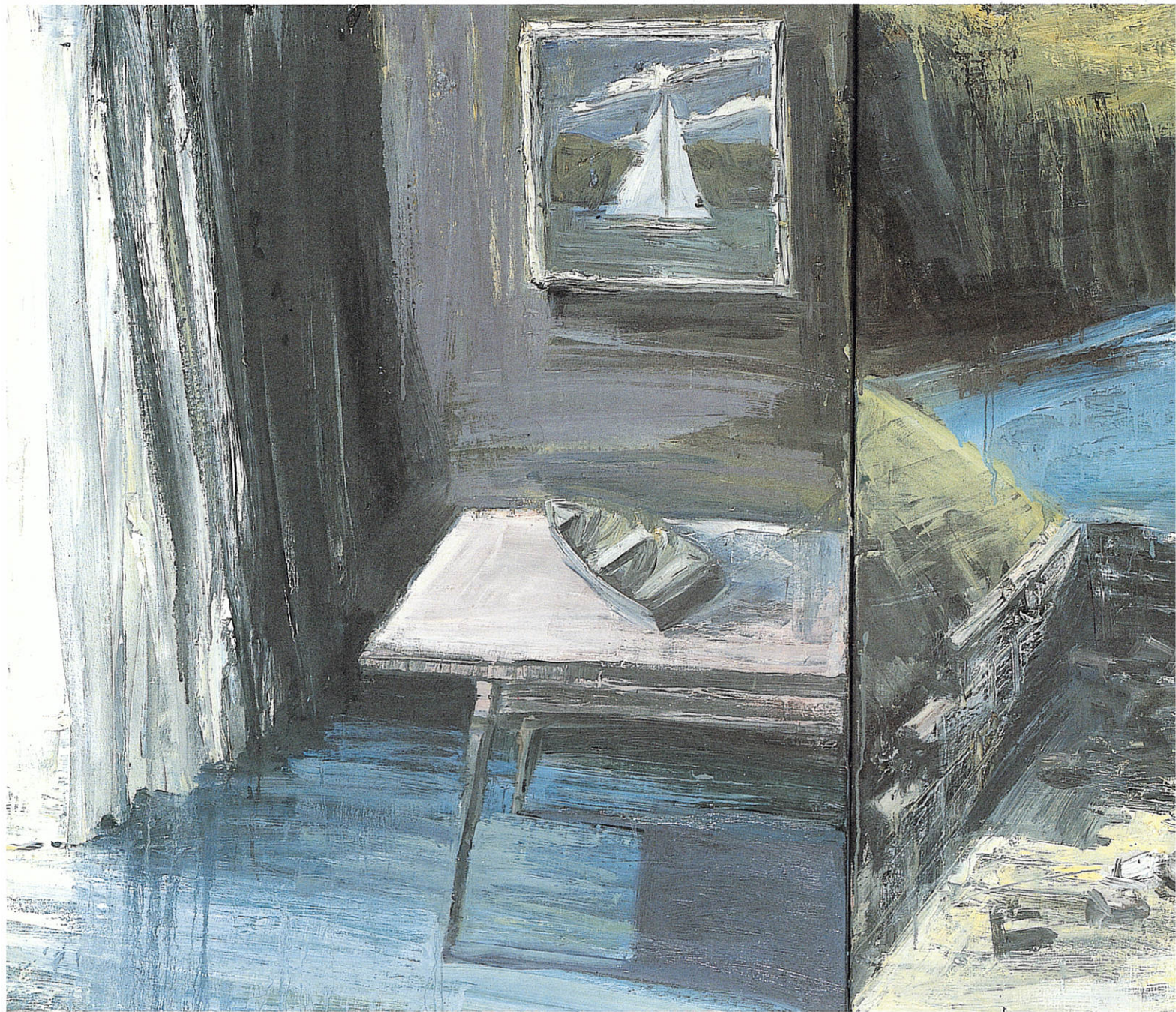
To understand the grandeur of the massive forms in Macleod's paintings and to interpret his densely modelled paint-encrusted surfaces, one has to experience at first-hand the huge and dramatic landscape of the artist's native country. Godley's Head, for example, where Lyttelton Harbour meets the open sea, is a huge volcanic rock form, its multilayered strata clearly visible beneath a cover of green turf. The rock platforms nearby are regularly drenched by sea-spray, while veils of water teem down from the cliffs high above. This landscape is the source of the natural grandeur and vast scale found in so many of Macleod's paintings.

Macleod is very much at home in and around Lyttelton and some of his most imaginative and intriguing works relate to the juxtaposition of man and the

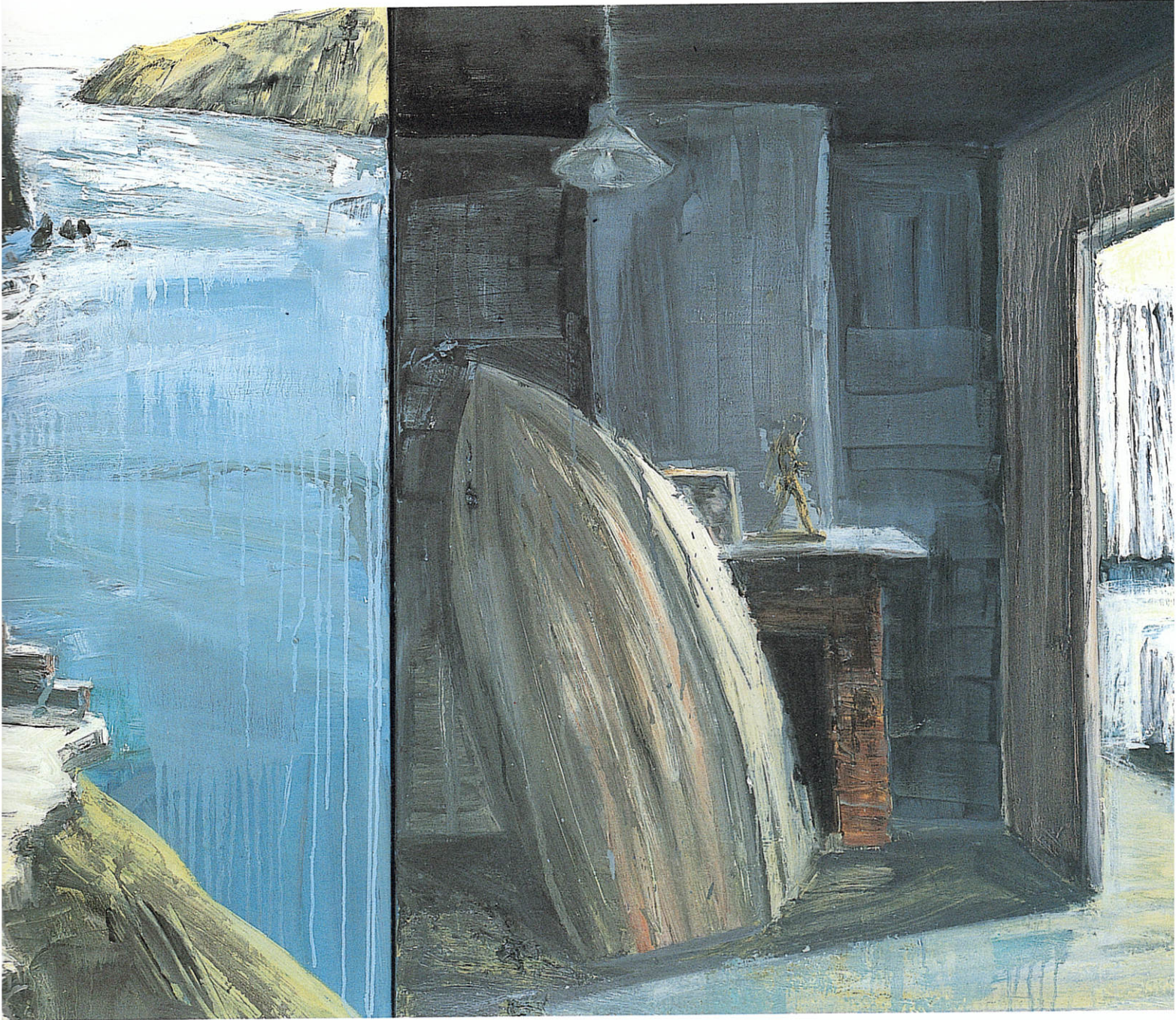


left
Euan Macleod, *Edge*, 2003,
oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm,
private collection.

right
Euan Macleod, *Rain man*, 2002,
oil on canvas, 180 x 100 cm,
private collection.



Euan Macleod, *Exterior between two interiors*, 2004, oil on canvas, 90 x 223 cm, private collection.







harbour. Lyttelton Harbour carries the weight of years of individual and family memories for Macleod. In *Large Lyttelton 2 (heads)*, 1994, for example, what might at first be read as a seascape of blue beside a rocky coastline, is transformed into the monumental head and shoulders of a man, balanced against a dark landmass on the left. Macleod is fascinated by opposites in nature, such as light and dark, water and land, life and death.

In recent related paintings, such as *Rain man* and *Thor*, both painted in 2002, Macleod takes a single titanic figure as his central subject. The huge eerie figure stands the full height of the canvas, its wraith-like shape and indistinct face suggesting that it is a spirit being, perhaps suffering in a state of stasis or thralldom. In *Rain man* a small male figure strides from left to right; both he and the rocky landfall of the horizon are utterly dwarfed by a Titan-like figure who seems to possess elemental powers. The large, dominating figure appears to have been created from the rain itself and fused with storm and cloud. His muddled form and indistinct facial features merge his body with the rain and land, and also with the enigmatic smaller male figure in the foreground. The Titan and the smaller walking man are inextricably linked.

In his 2002 exhibition at Brooke/Gifford Gallery in Christchurch, Macleod exhibited remarkable paintings in which he played with our expectations about interior and exterior space. In *Room with clouds*, 2002, a multi-paned window overlooks the hills behind Christchurch harbour. However, one is immediately unsettled by the hills, which advance through the window panes and into the room. The room itself is filled with fissured landforms – cracked, tumbled and overlaid by water. Behind this extraordinary psychoscape, a framed painting of a more conventional Macleod mountain landscape hangs on the wall, suggestive of calm and domesticity.

Macleod's continued interest in the human figure in the landscape has served him well. The strength of his oeuvre to date has been based on extending himself in those areas he knows best and through which he has developed his artistic practice.

1 Tony Palmer, introductory essay, in *Euan Macleod: Painting 1981–1998*, Newcastle Region Art Gallery, Newcastle, 20 June – 2 August 1998 (unpaginated).

2 Statement made by the artist to the writer in April 2003.

3 Statement made by the artist in an interview with the author, 17 March 2004.

Euan Macleod is represented by Niagara Galleries, Melbourne; Watters Gallery, Sydney; Bowen Galleries, Wellington, New Zealand; and Brooke/Gifford Gallery, Christchurch.

Euan Macleod, *Large Lyttelton 2 (heads)*, 1994, oil on canvas, 137 x 183 cm, private collection.