

## THE BLAKE PRIZE, 2006

**EUAN MACLEOD (b.1956)**



Euan Macleod. Photograph: Tony Lopes, 2008

**For me 'home' is a mental place. I don't have anywhere else I feel that safety.**

**The Blake work is about me and my father. The figure is both of us. It is about being vulnerable and alone. This painting is one of the many that grew out of time in the West McDonnell Ranges near Alice Springs. Something about the harshness of it attracted me, a connection to something internal that I needed to discover. But I painted the series in New Zealand where I grew up, so it is about both landscapes together . . . .**

**After my father died (he had Alzheimers) I stuck him in the landscape - he was the landscape. He loved boating and his spirit was in the boat. His spirit was connected with boats and a lot of my paintings use the boat to represent him and our relationship.**

EUAN MACLEOD,  
INTERVIEW,  
NOVEMBER 3, 2008

Euan Macleod entered the Blake for the first time in 2006, although he had intended to do so many times before. 'It is the one exhibition that is historically important and relevant. I love the diversity of what people see as religion.'<sup>89</sup> Macleod describes most of his work as 'spiritual, in my own belief', in the sense that he addresses the big life question: 'What are you here for?'. He does this in paint on canvas, building up thick, tactile surfaces, sometimes with a figure which finds its own way into the painting, pushing aside the paint until it becomes the landscape itself, as in *Untitled Landscape with Figure*.

Macleod's work is figurative and expressionistic at a time in Sydney when abstraction, photography and installation hold sway. Added to this, he refuses to speak about his intentions in a period when exhibited works are often accompanied by storyboards which leave little to the imagination. 'I have to be careful talking about the meaning in my work,' he said. 'I want people to take what they want from my work. I want the work to be for the viewer.' He came to the 2006 Blake with prestigious galleries<sup>90</sup> and highly successful solo exhibitions behind him. In addition, he had won the Archibald Prize in 1999 with a moody, controversial self-portrait, and the Sulman Prize in 2001. Many see his work as 'dark' and shy away from it; others find in it a psychological space that is familiar but often difficult to revisit.

The 2006 judges were architect and installation artist, Richard Goodwin; Principal of the National Art School (the host gallery) and artist, Bernard Ollis; and the Warden of St Paul's College in the University of Sydney, Canon Ivan Head. Each was familiar with Euan MacLeod's work and sensitive to its spiritual dimension. Their joint statement was carefully neutral: '[The judges] after lengthy debate decided to award the prize to *Untitled Landscape with Figure*. They felt that this painting made a significant statement about the human condition, its transient existence and spiritual power within an eternal landscape.'<sup>91</sup>

Wider critical response was also guarded by use of abstract phrases. The Blake Prize is easier to talk about when the titles at least give indications of the religious meaning in the work. Faced with artists who deny that they are religious or believers, and whose work provides no hook for meaning, many viewers and some critics were struck dumb in front of what they thought inaccessible. The Blake boundaries had shifted inexplicably from scriptural narrative to 'spirituality', a word in common currency but slippery to identify and harder still to write about.

For Macleod, the spiritual is unreachable except through intense attention to what is before him. His paintings point to, rather than grab at, the mystery of existence or suffering or death. MacLeod's *Untitled* Blake painting

challenges critic and viewer alike to go to the edges of human experience and perhaps even to tap at the possibilities of transcendence.

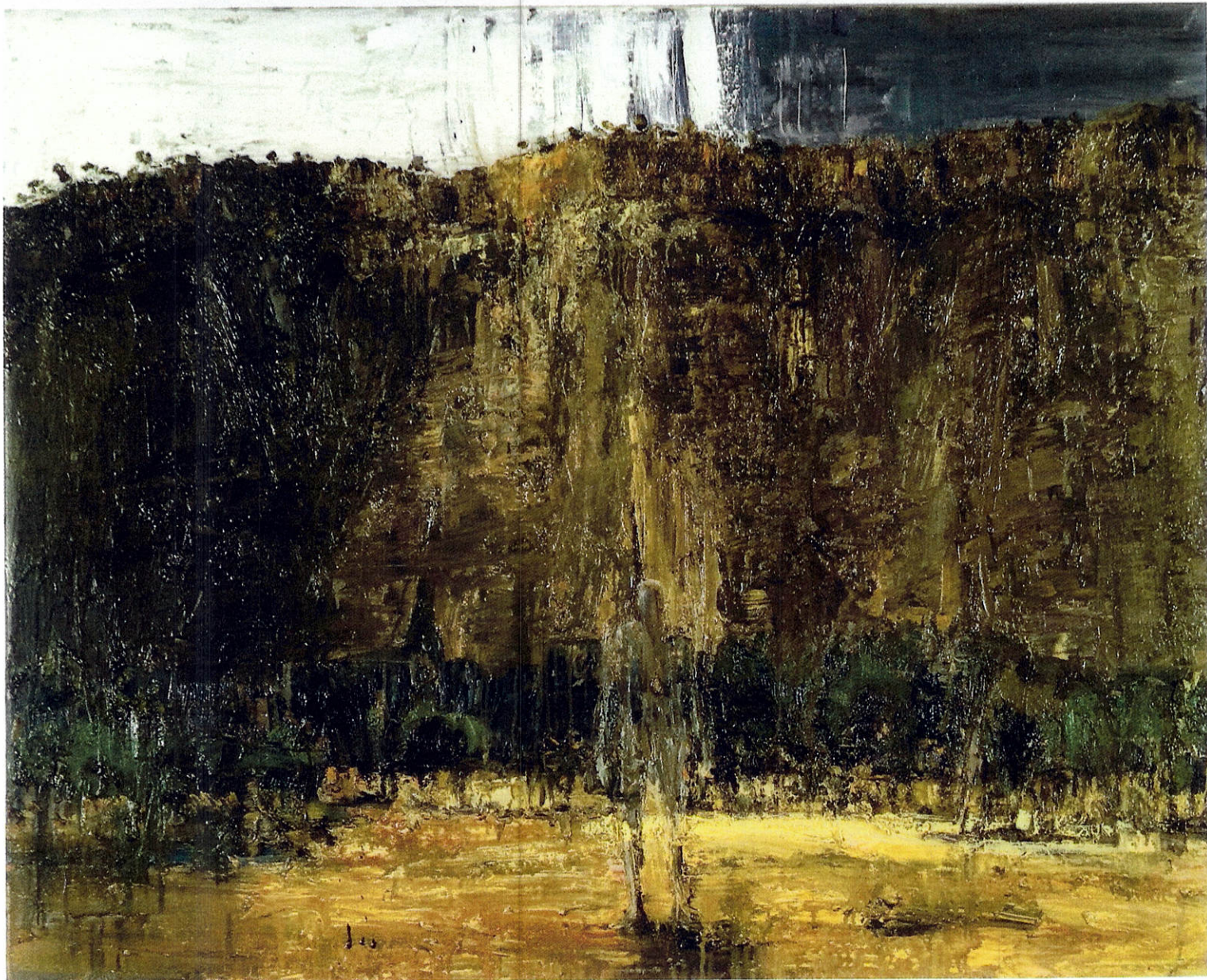
His persistence in doing this links him to a major stream of contemporary artists, including Anish Kapoor, Anselm Kiefer, William Kendrick, Louise Bourgeois, Mark Wallinger and, before them, Joseph Beuys and New Zealander, Colin McCahon. Within the Blake history, perhaps he stands closest to John Coburn in his later years, and to Louise Ripp (2006), Shoufay Derz (2003), Ann Taylor (198 and David Voigt (1976, 1981).

*My father was a boat builder and he used to build these boats in the lounge room and then sort of give birth to them through the windows when they were finished.*

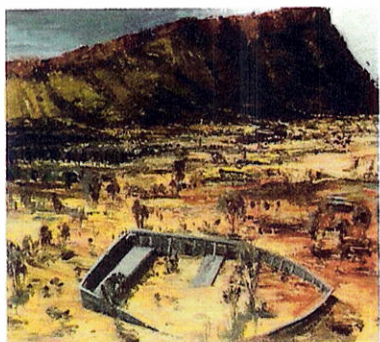
Euan MacLeod quoted in 'A spiritual metaphor', *The Courier Mail*, 2006



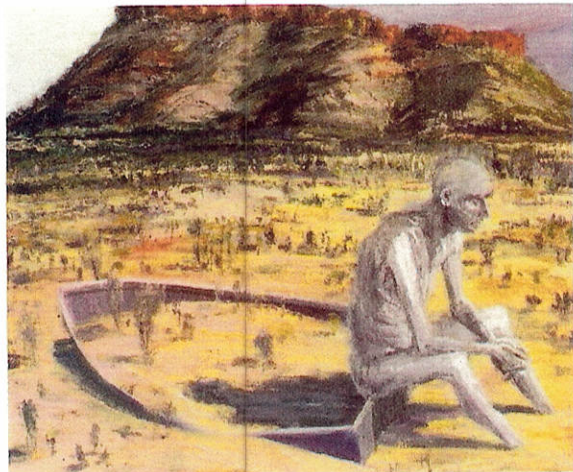
Euan Macleod, *Two in a Boat*, 2007 (non-Blake entry)



Euan Macleod, *Untitled Landscape with Figure*, 2006 (winner 2006)



Euan Macleod, *Dinghy in Desert*, 2007-08  
(non-Blake entry)



Euan Macleod, *Figure Sitting on Boat in Desert*, 2007  
(non-Blake entry)