

# Surviving a bolt from the blue

Euan Macleod has come a long way since the intense scrutiny of his Archibald win.

## VISUAL ART KATRINA LOBLEY

WHEN Euan Macleod seemingly burst out of nowhere to win the Archibald Prize in 1999, it must have seemed like every artist's dream come true.

Until that point, Macleod had never won any sort of artistic prize for his heavily textured figurative works, which often feature an ambiguous "everyman" figure hovering in bleak landscapes, inside houses and, of late, around boats.

Macleod, who moved to Australia from New Zealand in 1981, took out the portrait prize with his *Self-Portrait/Head Like A Hole*. Yet on the day of the announcement, as the media pack relentlessly pushed him across the Art Gallery of NSW, even he had little inkling of how this bolt-out-of-the-blue success would affect him and his work.

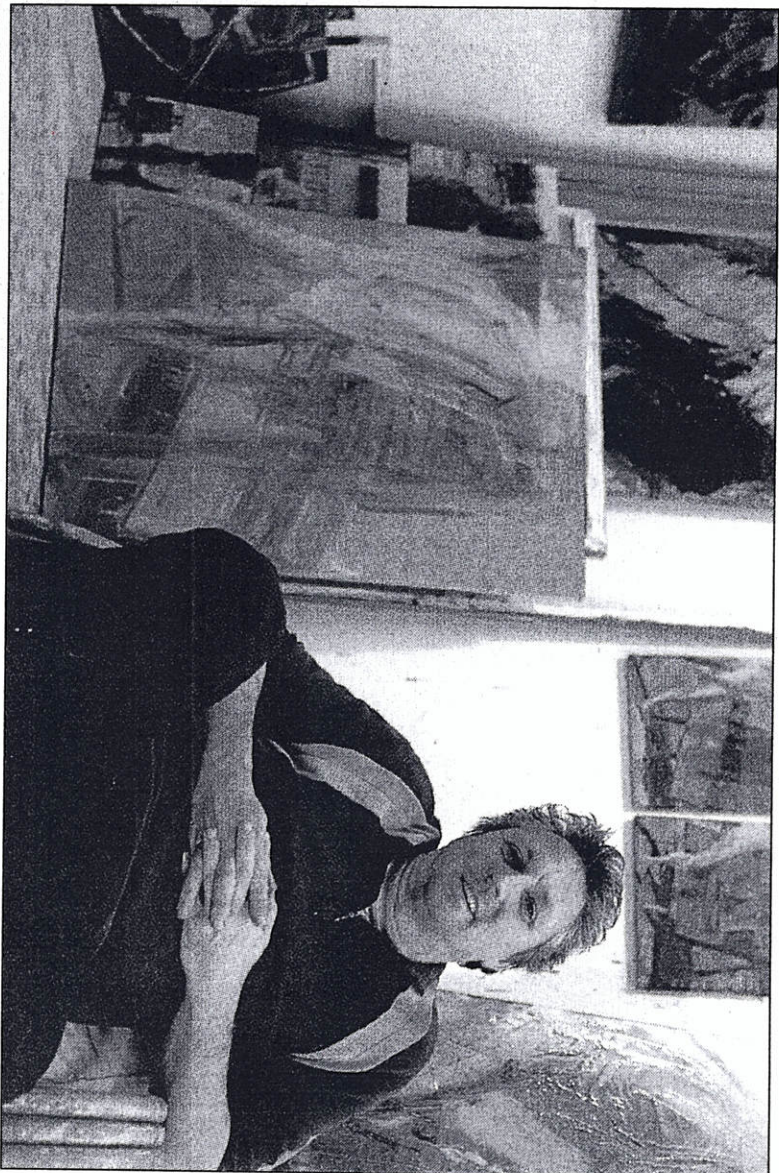
"The irony, it seemed to me, was it kept me out of the studio for quite a long time," the 51-year-old says, reflecting upon the win. "To create the mental and physical space to get into the studio just seemed impossible for almost a year."

What Macleod was most unprepared for back then was the flood of commentary his self-portrait generated. "The fact you're in the Archibald and your painting is on the wall allows people the opportunity to be critical and incredibly harsh," he says. "I found that difficult, particularly because it was a painting of myself."

"Of course it's criticism of the painting but it feels like they're being critical of you. The Archibald is such that the level of scrutiny is abhorrent, really, it's just vile. I felt it created a level of visibility that I think is incredibly unhelpful to producing paintings."

Of course, not everything about the experience was negative. "The thing about the Archibald I really did love was that there was a lot of support from other artists - not all artists, some of the other artists who were in the Archibald were very unsupportive," he says. "They felt I was an interloper who usurped their position. I came out of nowhere and won it. I hadn't done my time."

"There was a lot of antagonism from other artists who felt they should have won. I wasn't one of the favourites to win it because I'd never been in it before. They'd been in it a few times and they felt



Mental and physical space ... Macleod in his Sydney studio.

Photo: Sahlan Hayes

"Maybe it's my year this year" and all of a sudden this prick from nowhere comes and steals it out of their grasp and they hated it."

Today, he says, he can barely stand to look at the painting that brought him all this attention. "I've grown to find that painting almost impossible to look at because it makes me cringe now," he says. "It was reproduced so many times and so much was said of it."

He certainly doesn't plan to repeat the experience any time soon. He's entered the Archibald only once since then, as a favour to the family of his subject who became ill. "The thing that was most lucky was that I got in and got out," he says. "The awful

thing seems to be that people come quite close to winning it and then they get obsessed by it - it sucks people into it."

When Macleod - who had attended art school in New Zealand - arrived in Sydney, he landed a job making exhibitions for the Australian Museum (he continued working there until 2005) and in 1982 had his first exhibition at Watters Gallery in East Sydney.

He still shows at Watters, where a new exhibition opened this week, and is full of praise for his gallerist, Frank Watters. "He responded to the work, he liked the work," Macleod says. "That's the wonderful thing about him and

about Watters really is they didn't want to see a CV and didn't want to know what I'd done before - all they wanted to look at was the work, which is such a rarity now.

"To have someone believe in you like that, you do feel a sense of loyalty. Right through that whole Archibald thing, they were really fantastic because rather than trying to screw as much out of the Archibald as they could, they actually shut it all down and slowed it all down. They saw the Archibald as being an aberration and a kind of unfortunate blip."

*Boats And Other Paintings* is on at Watters Gallery, East Sydney, until June 21.