

Euan Macleod – The Painter in the Painting

Tauranga Art Gallery, October 17, 2014 - February 22, 2015

The largest painting in Euan Macleod's terrific career-spanning show at the Tauranga Art Gallery heads for the ceiling and almost makes it. The 6-metre tall 'Out of which arising: White Island' (2014) dominates the entrance and sets up the involving, smoky, occasionally daffy psycho-dramas that play out upstairs.

'Out of which arising' is made up of 12 canvases, loosely jigsawing a single image whose parts will be familiar to anyone who has followed the trans-Tasman painter's work: a small boat, two figures (hairless, faceless, naked) in a relationship we rapidly convert to father-son, and a volcanic island. The island is erupting meaningfully—within the ash we see a giant figure who shares the features of the dwarfed boat duo. (Indeed there could be a number of these giants ghosting through the muck, or the single one repeating as the ash moves.)

The open staircase to level two, where the bulk of the show is, almost brings us eye-to-eye with this massive figure of potential reproach or judgement shaped from the volcanic plumes. We rise like the smoke to meet him. Yet 'eye-to-eye' doesn't quite work here since this spectre has his eyes downcast; Macleod's gods often look melancholic and worryingly disengaged, as if slightly resenting the call to witness the puny problems laid out below. I should note that for its depressed or simply stalled deity, I prefer the less epic 'Solitary Seated Figure' (2004), in which a giant sits glumly in a valley basin, coastal water up to his ankles. That earlier painting is also humorous—not a quality readily attached to moody, fraught material but something this show asks us to consider seriously. Ogres in fairytales, we recall, are not just tormentors but victims too, and prone to a mournful self-regard that can be touching and funny. And even this first and largest monster assembly can resolve into something a little winningly cartoonish. We should also remember that the painter loved comics and superheroes. Indeed one way of taking in this show, with its recurring characters and knobby motifs, is to connect the images as panels in a wordless graphic novel.

Going up the stairs creates another effect: a sense that we're now walking around inside that large domed head. Macleod's work, for all its outdoorsy bruising, its rocks, dirt and water, is quickly interior.

to pay attention to? That all of these creatures and their haunts are self-portraits? It wouldn't be inaccurate to re-title this show something like 'The Painter with Two Heads'; Macleod, a New Zealander who lives in Australia but returns frequently, clearly thinks about this as division as much as bounty.

At this point I'm reminded that Peter Schjeldahl has written about art writing, 'diagnosis is boring'. Besides, it turns out that the private language isn't hard to crack. Curator Gregory O'Brien usefully points out that the source of a lot of the recurring images lies in the painter's relationship with his father who died in 1993. Yes, Macleod senior liked to stand up in small boats. Paintings which strikingly and dreamily rearrange our outside/inside bearings, such as the repeating image of a boat in a living-room, turn out to be solidly traceable—Macleod's father built a boat in the family house. In O'Brien's essential book-length study, on which this show is based, there's a remarkable photo of the boat emerging from the window of the room, stuck in mid-air. Half in and half out, the boat feels both workaday—an engineering problem—and temptingly symbolic: Macleod's boats are not just homemade but somehow about the home. A boat can be a coffin carrying his father's body as easily as it can be used for fishing. This sense of confident blokey endeavour and troubled poetic search is a keynote in the work.

Still in the realm of diagnosis, there's a fairly amazing insight, this time from the painter himself, quoted in O'Brien's book: 'The paintings with seated figures are all about *stopping* . . . Anxious people don't want to stop—as soon as you stop the demons get you.' Once you have this in your head it underwrites plenty of the action in these paintings. Certainly a lot of the walking seems both strangely purposeless and intentional. Where are these people *going*? Under-employed except perhaps as dream matter, they nevertheless appear called.

Occasionally they have work to do. I latched on gratefully to the bloke in 'Barrow man' (2007) because at least he had his barrow. But his almost showy graft dissolves soon enough as we understand he appears to be moving a hill or some land mass into place down a strip of peninsula—the scale becomes clear: this is another giant whose cosmic work feels like a creationist joke. Naturally gods need wheelbarrows.

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In his novella 'Sukkwan Island', the American writer David Vann, whose father committed suicide, created one of the most striking gotchas in recent literature. Published alongside four other stories as *Legend of a Suicide* (2008), the centrepiece novella charts an expedition into the Alaskan wilderness by a boy and his father. The father—we know this from the other stories which also feature this pair—is falling apart, a suicide in the making. He weeps at night and tells his son he doesn't know if