

Standing Up in a Boat

Anxiety and Generosity in Euan Macleod



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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 six-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 the parts of which 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 Painter in the Painting* 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' does not 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 fairy tales, 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 as a boy loved comics and superheroes. Indeed one way of taking in this show, with its recurring characters and knobbly motifs, is to connect the images as panels in a wordless graphic novel.

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

My previous casual and sporadic encounters with this artist's paintings had him pinned comfortably inside reflexive notions of 'darkness' and 'unease'. All those spectral humanoids moving around blasted places, their bodies merging with shadow, melting into black pools. I remember seeing a work in Maurice Gee's house in Nelson and thinking, 'Of course'. But now I think Macleod's painting is as kooky as it is

stately, deeply felt but also playful, and constantly freshened by the effort both to confound the over-earnestness of the Everyman figure and counter the potential shut-out of confessional work.

There is a detail, for instance, in the lower right corner of *Out of which arising* which saves this big thing and paradoxically confers its schlocky grandeur. Our eye is drawn to the hands of the smaller figure which are behind its back, gripping the boat in a steadying or balancing effort, while the larger figure stands up. Standing up in a boat is hard to do and also hard on the other person in the boat. Such a wonderful piece of painterly attention alerts us to similar moments in many of these works which at first glance look to have arrived at their forcefulness through broad smudges and scrapes, lunges and flicks but then focus with particularity on surprisingly eloquent zones. Macleod is a brilliantly subtle painter of human calves and the arches of feet, backsides and hunched necks—his physiology manages in its sketchiness to suggest not just movement (he is a great animator of bodies) but a kind of psychology. These are action paintings of relentless thoughtfulness. But what are they thinking?

The fact that *Out of which arising* is of White Island, just off the local coast, and the work was painted nearby in Waihi, may have raised the regional stakes in terms of the TAG's programming, yet as with most of Macleod's work, the real-life settings are a small part of the story. His astonishingly vivid apprehension of certain land forms, and his quick communication of contour and colour, are partial achievements since there is seldom a landscape for Macleod without a person, a volcano without an



(opposite) EUAN MACLEOD *Out of which arising: White Island* 2014
Acrylic on canvas, 12 panels, 6000 x 3600 mm.

(right) EUAN MACLEOD *Desert, Painter, Painting* 2008
Oil on polyester canvas, 1200 x 840 mm.
(Collection Wallace Arts Trust)

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 does not know if he can carry on. We steel ourselves for the moment. And then the son kills himself. The rest of the novella is an account of the pain this causes the father, describing in excruciating detail his efforts to bring his son's body back to town. The other stories detail the pain his father's suicide causes the son, which is the autobiographical truth for Vann.

I thought of Vann's book when considering Macleod's various depictions of the father-son relationship; not for the suicide angle—Macleod's father died of complications arising from Alzheimer's—but for the resourcefulness of his imagined scenarios. This pair is always swapping roles. Sometimes the boy is standing while his father rows the boat. The emotionally powerful *Two in a Boat (one standing)* (2007) manages to be simultaneously accusatory and forgiving. Parenting looks as tricky as being parented, an unfinished business of 'remember when' and 'this is going to hurt me more than it's going to hurt you'. And across the show, as we add up these variations on a theme, Macleod's art looks more and more involved in a kind of endless redistribution of blame or pain. This swapping charts with great tenderness the circulation of contradictory feelings:



'will there ever be another intimacy like that?' versus 'but did I really know him?' I find all this role reversal generous and affecting.

One further literary analogue occurs to me: Donald Barthelme's postmodern novel *The Dead Father*. The 'plot' of this book involves a huge being called the Dead Father getting dragged along by a cable. This father, while dead, yet manages speech. And his son, one of the draggers, has things on his mind:

The father is taken aback. What he usually says, in such a confrontation, is 'I changed your diapers for you, little snot.' This is not the right thing to say. First, it is not true (mothers change nine diapers out of ten), and second, it instantly reminds Sam II of what he is mad about. He is mad about being small when you were big, but not, that's not it, he is mad about being helpless when you were powerful, but no, not that either, he is mad about being contingent when you were necessary, not quite it, he is insane because when he loved you, you didn't notice.¹

This idea that people in a family might not have noticed each other is peculiarly haunting in Macleod's

(opposite) Euan Macleod working on *Out of which arising: White Island* at Waihi, September 2014
(Photograph: Gregory O'Brien)

(above)
EUAN MACLEOD
Two in a Boat (one standing) 2007
Oil on canvas, 1000 x 1240 mm.
(collection Frank Watters, Sydney)

(right)
EUAN MACLEOD
Bridget Arundel Street 1988
Oil on paper on canvas, 640 x 770 mm.
(Private collection, Sydney)

