



Private Myth

Euan Macleod's *High Water*

HAMISH CLAYTON

In March this year I visited Bowen Galleries in Wellington to see Euan Macleod's latest paintings, in an exhibition called *High Water*. I had heard via a friend there was one piece in particular I might be especially interested to see. It was called *Wulf Study*. Apparently it had been painted partly in response to *Wulf*, the novel I had written only a couple of years before. That afternoon I saw Macleod's extraordinary treatment of a world I had not imagined myself into for months. It was carefully done, subtly done; a figure is seen seated in a small boat, heading towards an island where a fire burns on the shore. The fear and foreboding of the figure in that boat; the tension in those elbows as he inches back, gripped by his trepidation of that island; it was uncannily familiar to me, for it seemed to strike at exactly the mood of the words I had written—or at least at the mood I had been aiming for. Even more distinctly, more uncannily, was the feeling that something I'd tapped into and tried to spin to new ends—a tenth century Anglo-Saxon poem translated into a pre-colonial New Zealand yarn—had entered another phase of mythology. Something I'd once thought of as mine was now being spun in a new direction, steered by the act of another's mythologizing.

At the time I knew Macleod's work more in passing than in detail; ten years earlier I had spotted my first Macleod in the flesh, a work on paper, framed and hanging on the wall of a friend's house. Though I did not really know his work something about that painting grabbed me right away. I remember a figure on the point of vanishing, standing against a colour-field of pale yellow, almost green. Whatever was happening—if anything even *was* happening—was suggested only obliquely; yet there was this subtle, compelling factor of suggestion: definite and tangible, but almost deliberately withheld. The details are lost to me now, but it is the suggestion of that painting that has stayed with me.

Now, having become more familiar with Macleod's work, I guess the painting I saw dated from a period around the late 1980s or just after; Gregory O'Brien mentions in his beautifully written and compiled study of Macleod's life and career, *Euan Macleod: The Painter in the Painting*, extensive exhibitions of the artist's works on paper, in both New Zealand and Australia, during the early '90s. The piece I remember held something of the somewhat cooler palette, the less violently expressionistic verve, which characterised Macleod's work prior to his full coming to flower. My friend corroborates this hunch, telling me that the painting was bought sometime in the '90s,

from a gallery that has now passed out of existence. The work itself has been passed on—though not sold—and now sits tantalisingly just out of my reach, beyond immediate empirical investigation, consigned to memory. Perhaps, though, it is fitting that I cannot check on the details of the painting, for so much of the appeal of Macleod's work lies in that quality of something concrete perpetually slipping from grasp, and with it the sense of some final knowledge that is, paradoxically, both present and unattainable.

You could almost describe him as an old-fashioned painter; as one whose settled, mature mode of expression harks back to a range of seemingly more heroic times, channelling the romance of Turner's heavy-handed impasto with the occasional flashes of Bacon or Kiefer. The heroism implied by the aesthetic is delivered, too, in the content. By now the set of Macleod's recurring motifs will have become familiar to many. The dinghies and the oars, the solitary striding figures, the piles of heaped earth. Many of these draw from a personal history; it seems Macleod's father, Roy, was the original boatman who now populates so many of the son's canvases, while the solitary walker through those landscapes, by turns desolate and teeming, but always elemental, recalls the artist's time spent hiking and walking in the hinterlands of New Zealand and Australia.

Other devices and themes seem more difficult to fathom—what are those figures, repeatedly digging and eating the earth, who or what is it they are driving at exactly?—and yet they point even more surely to a profound sense of the mythological underlying the artist's work.

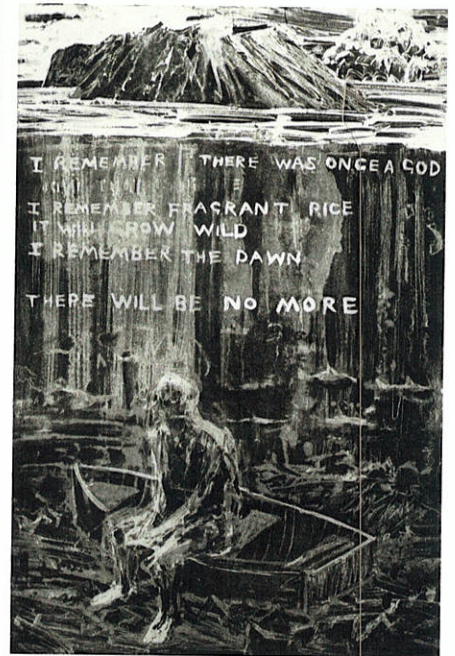
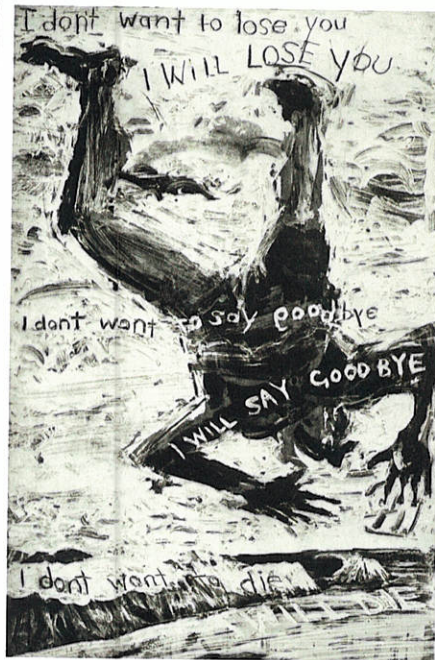
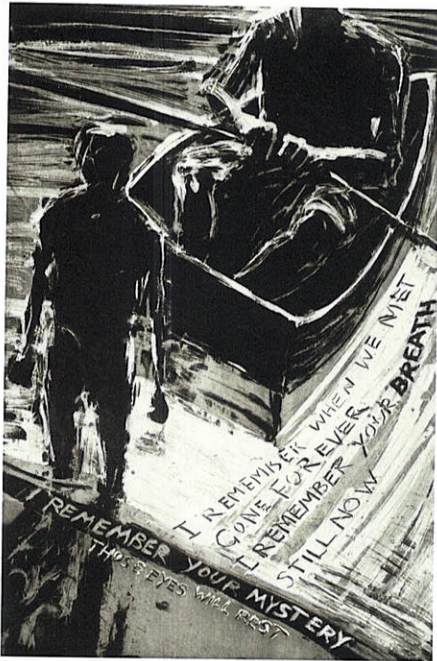
Macleod's private mythology, composed of primal landscapes and strident, often lone figures has a depth and a range that is extraordinary, given its apparent refusal to cohere into an easily understood narrative, for equally the paintings so often carry the impressions of myth, of ur-story. Figures are

un clothed and featureless, depicted as figures only and therefore, it would seem, intended to be understood as types above all else; not as characters with individually rendered psychologies, but as the protagonists of universal allegories. They stride with purpose into and out of frames; or they hunch on all fours beneath the weight of desert skies. Sometimes they stand in their boats like Charon, the ferryman from classical Greek mythology, or else they row their faceless passengers across what could be ancient waterways.

Yet for all which seems so purposefully implied, the paintings also trade on an equal and opposite tendency to retreat from absolutist meaning, revelling in the possibilities of ambiguity and open-ended interpretation. Perhaps this twinned tendency—this simultaneous movement both towards firm meaning and away—finds its most trenchant purchase in those paintings where motif and landscape collide in an almost surreal fusion that deepens the mythological connotations. Giants inhabit the familiar and primal landscapes of New Zealand; one pushes a wheelbarrow of heaped earth along the South Island, another sits on the Port Hills, cooling his feet in Lyttelton Harbour in a time before inhabitation. Still another reclines in what could be a smoking volcano crater. These figures seem Promethean to me. They are giants in a pre-human landscape; solitary, mythical and heroic, but workmanlike too, champions of stoic humanity. Their bodies, thickly sculpted in grey-blue paint, could have been moulded from clay or lime, recalling Prometheus' act of original creation when he formed man from the earth. Of course, this is nothing more than my partial response—perhaps the Prometheus myth had nothing whatsoever to do with Macleod's original conceptions—though it seems valid to me, for these paintings seem deliberately to court just such attention, even as they resist clarification.



(opposite) EUAN MACLEOD
Wolf Study 2012
Oil on polyester, 560 x 760 mm.
(left) EUAN MACLEOD
Diver Above Figure 2012
Oil on polyester,
840 x 1200 mm.



within layers of representation, or from a meditation on the importance of layering to MacLeod's paintings, interpretations here need not be made to jostle for dominance, but can be allowed to build upon one another, to reside one upon the other, like layers of paint, like undercoats shining through to the surface from beneath brighter, heavier overcoats.

With all this in mind, Macleod's recent collaboration with Townsville printmaker Ron McBurnie and Wellington writer Lloyd Jones, *Hearsay*, was bound to be an intriguing prospect. Launched in June at Sydney's Watters Gallery, this month sees the limited edition's New Zealand launch at the Auckland Art Fair. Comprising ten copper etchings by Macleod, printed by McBurnie, and incorporating lines of text from a poem supplied by Jones, *Hearsay* is a haunting meditation on loss, memory, and brokenness. Jones' poem—chant-like, incantatory: 'I don't want to die. I will die.' 'I don't want to cry. I will cry.'—was conceived in relation to a story the properties of which tap the same mythical proportions as many of Macleod's paintings; in the course of the Dutch intervention in Bali, in 1849, desperate Balinese chose to commit mass suicide rather than be overrun. According to one version of the story as told to Jones,

men, women and children walked, in their hundreds, into the sea and drowned. The subsequent poetry and accompanying images are extraordinary. Rendered in monochromatic silver-grey, Macleod's etchings of underwater ghosts and drowning figures, of islands and seas, of lights at the ends of tunnels, both bear and erase Jones' text, embracing their meanings and yet obscuring them as well, letting them echo as if a series of soft elisions. This is a country, a universe, that feels like a place we know, and yet it is one that we who have travelled in various ways over the years with Macleod—as passengers in his dinghies, or as presences beside him as he has walked stridently through those raw landscapes of his sweeping terrain—have not quite been to before. Like many of his journeys, his latest is, at once, both extraordinary and familiar.

1. Gregory O'Brien, *Euan Macleod: The Painter in the Painting*, Piper, Sydney 2010, p. 8.

2. *Ibid.*

