

An oil painting depicting a man in a dark, shadowed cave or grotto, looking out over a turbulent sea. The man is silhouetted against the bright, overcast sky. The sea is a deep, swirling blue-green, with white foam from the waves. In the distance, rugged, brown cliffs rise from the water. A small boat with several figures is visible in the lower right, struggling against the waves. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

# *Belle Ile*

Euan Macleod & Luke Sciberras

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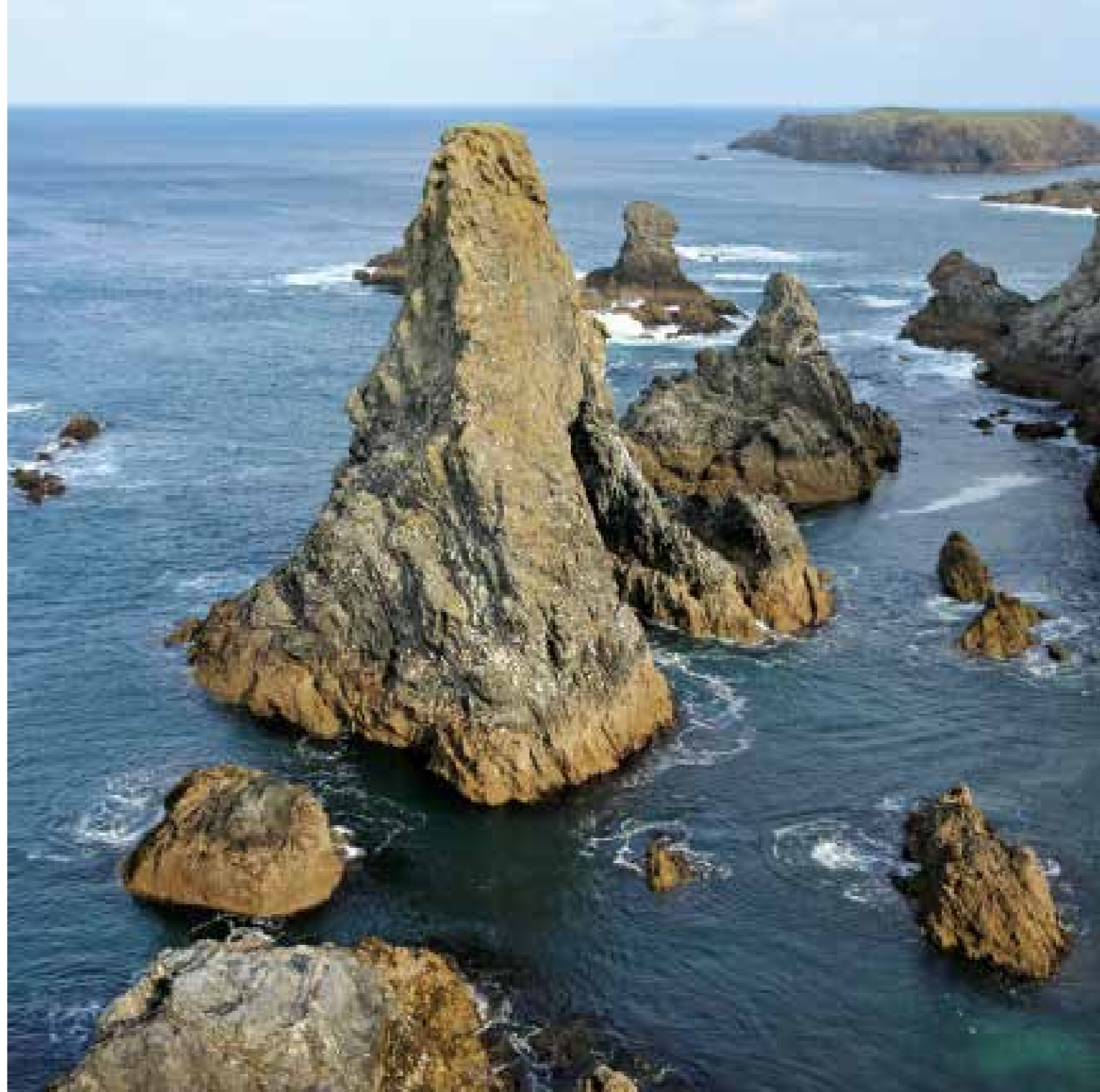
An exhibition of paintings by Euan Macleod and Luke Sciberras  
from their expedition to Belle Ile, France: a journey inspired by the  
landscape and memory of the expatriate Australian painter  
John Peter Russell (1858-1930).

11 June – 6 July 2019

King Street Gallery   
on William 



Front cover: Euan Macleod *Looking out sea cave Belle Ile* 2019 oil on acrylic on polyester 100 x 124 cm  
Opposite: Luke Sciberras *Back to the sun, Belle Ile* 2018 oil on board 120 x 160 cm



At the viewing point for Belle Ile's dramatic "needle" rocks, *les Aiguilles*, a precarious track, cut into the side of the cliff, leads to a thin cove 90 metres below. Within an hour or so of arriving on the island, which lies off France's north-west coast, Euan Macleod and Luke Sciberras were charging down it, ignoring a weather-beaten sign warning *Danger Mortel*. Safely at the bottom, Macleod set up his portable painter's table on the pebbly beach; Sciberras perched on a rock, his watercolour block across his knee.

The imposing rocks rose from the sea directly in front of them. Claude Monet called them 'terrifying' and painted them over and over. Henri Matisse was so overwhelmed by the Côte Sauvage, Belle Ile's "wild coast", that he left without making a sketch, though the following summer he was back. For the Australian Impressionist John Russell, who lived on the Breton island for twenty years, the "needles" were thrillingly "Dantesque". Faced with the ancient, tentacle-like forms – instantly familiar from famous paintings - Macleod and Sciberras began to work with urgency, as if anxious to make their own marks.

That was May 2017 and the very start of their visit to Belle-Ile-en-Mer, better known as Belle Ile – "beautiful island". Invited by producer and director Catherine Hunter, who has made films about some of Australia's most important artists, Sciberras and Macleod were taking part in a documentary about Russell - whose name, until recently, was little known outside of art

circles.<sup>1</sup> Our group included Wayne Tunnicliffe, Head Curator of Australian Art at the AGNSW, which last year held a major survey exhibition of Russell's work, as well as entrepreneur and artist Michael Nock, an avid art collector who owns numerous works by the Impressionist painter. I'd been invited because I was writing a book on Russell, who has been an enduring fascination of mine for many years.

For one lively week we shared a butter-coloured house within walking distance of his favourite painting subject, the Côte Sauvage. The news that, in 1897, Matisse had stayed in our cottage prompted excited debate: who had the famous Fauve's bedroom? It was another connection to Russell, who on Belle Ile had mentored the young Frenchman and encouraged him to chase colour. The Australian's influence on Matisse is one small but fascinating aspect of John Russell's remarkable life.

Born in Sydney, Russell studied art in Paris, where he met Vincent van Gogh and also a beautiful Italian, Marianna, who later became his wife. In 1888, craving the 'briny' and wide horizons, he moved his family to Belle Ile - then a backwater of hardy fisherfolk and sardine canneries. He built a stone house overlooking Port Goulphar, a remote natural harbour along the west "wild coast". "Le Château de l'Anglais", as locals called the large home, soon filled with racing Russell children and visiting artists, including the painter's close friend Auguste Rodin.

The artist began playing with dazzling colour, pushing his palette into Fauvism. He flirted with abstraction in astonishing paintings of foaming coves and exploding waves which are more about force and energy than form. This willingness to experiment is why Chris Riopelle, senior curator at London's National Gallery, considers Russell "the most aggressive, forward-thinking of all the Australian Impressionists". But the artist's extraordinary creative surge ended abruptly in 1908, when Marianna, 42, died of cancer. The "King of Belle Ile", as Russell had joyfully signed his canvases, later returned quietly to Sydney, where for many decades after his death his work remained unknown.

While the artist's house has gone, these days the Côte Sauvage looks much as it did in the late 19th century. It drops like a tremendous craggy curtain into the Atlantic Ocean, wending around coves with pure green waters and sparkling sand. During our stay on the island, we all searched the coastline for the views that Russell portrayed. Was that the right sea-scoured arch? The same sawn-off islet as in his painting? Filmed by cameraman Bruce Inglis, the artists worked in different ways. Macleod used acrylic paints, though he worried their plastic quality didn't convey the abrasive rock. Sciberras sketched in ink, his steel brush making fluid, lyrical lines.

Watching them and hearing them talk, I was struck by how hard they looked at the landscape – not just forms and light but also texture and friction. To an observer

there was little sign of struggle but for both artists, treading in Russell's footsteps was an inspiration as well as a dilemma. For Sciberras, a fan of the painter since he was a teen, the challenge was to move beyond being star-struck to 'feeling the pulse' of the place. Influenced by the Impressionists, Macleod found himself using brighter colours and had to reassert his own tonal palette.

That their interpretations of Belle Ile are so profoundly different is one of the strengths, and great joys, of this exhibition. From his ink studies Sciberras has produced finished works of shimmering colour which evoke the island in spring – sparkling blue bays and meadows pillowy with pink thrift and gold gorse. His Belle Ile is poetic, playful. Macleod, on the other hand, has captured the dizzying verticality of the coastline: the "needle" rocks have a volcanic energy; cliffs are darkly gouged with caves. His Belle Ile is "Dantesque" and dangerous.

Unlike Russell, the artists had only a few days to grapple with the landscape. Yet by pursuing their own truths, Macleod and Sciberras have created fresh visions of this island - which has special significance in our art history - through contemporary Australian eyes.

I think the "King of Belle Ile" would be chuffed.

**Sarah Turnbull**  
2019

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<sup>1</sup> *Australia's Lost Impressionist* screens on ABC iView until 27 July, 2019.



## EUAN MACLEOD

John Peter Russell has often been relegated to the status of an eccentric footnote in the history of Australian painting; an artist who was involved with figures such as Van Gogh, Matisse and Monet, but who, until recently, has not been properly acknowledged in his own right. While I was aware of Russell's work, it wasn't until I encountered some of his paintings in the Hong Kong collection of a friend, Michael Nock, that I took much notice. Seeing them in an unexpected context made me look at them in a fresh way. These were astonishing paintings of wild seas and sheer cliffs; my kind of subject. Finding out the details of Russell's life made me more intrigued. Here was an artist who didn't push himself in the market place, who stood back and promoted others whom he thought needed the recognition (and money) more.

Belle Ile is synonymous with Russell and most of his best works were inspired by this one place. The idea of going there was compelling - to understand what drove him and his work. Michael Nock had been in discussion with the Art Gallery of New South Wales in regard to lending paintings for the forthcoming retrospective exhibition and was aware that a group was travelling to Belle Ile as part of the lead up to the show. Curator Wayne Tunncliffe was being filmed on site by filmmakers Catherine Hunter and Bruce Inglis who were also hoping to make a documentary featuring Luke Sciberras. Also on the trip was author Sarah Turnbull, who had been researching Russell for a doctoral thesis and book. Michael suggested we tag along and do some painting.

Luke and I were already in France looking at WWI sites with another group of painters, so travelling on to Brittany seemed a perfect idea. Arriving there after the trip to the Western Front was a shock. I had found Flanders extremely depressing with graveyard after graveyard reminding me of the terrible loss of life that occurred on that flat, nondescript countryside. In contrast, Belle Ile was inspiring, with the verticality of the sea cliffs and huge rock towers emerging from the wild sea. I loved the way people were wandering around the edges of the cliffs with no barriers (apparently people fall off quite regularly).

At most places I go to paint, I try to get to grips with by painting what I see. The initial plein air paintings are direct and more or less representational. They are an attempt to understand a place. Although I prefer oil paint with its vivid colours and textural qualities, it is a difficult medium to travel with, especially when it comes to carrying wet paintings back home. With Belle Ile I took acrylic paints, paper and a small fold-up table to work on.

While working at Belle Ile, I felt that what I was doing was too dark and wasn't capturing the place. By comparison, Luke's work was full of colour and life. Now I realise that my expectations, after having looked so long at Russell, were of the kind of bright, colourful place the Impressionists had painted, but my works were abidingly dark and grey. Both light and dark are present at different times and, ultimately, each of us sees what we want to see.



*Sea cave* 2017  
acrylic on polyester 160 x 90 cm

On my return home, the plein air studies formed the basis for larger works, initially on paper, and then on canvas. I find that the longer I am away from a place, the harder it is to hold onto, and even though memory plays a strong part, the paintings become less specific in regard to place and more about an internal, emotional place. Distance gives you the freedom to push the paintings in other directions, even though the place itself and the memories of being there are the starting point.

Once the studio paintings have started, the work itself determines where it goes. Often other locations will creep back: the wildness of the coast and the interaction of land and sea at Belle Ile led me back to Banks Peninsula in New Zealand, where I spent much of my childhood and where many of my paintings have been based.

Hopefully the viewer feels something of the physical sensation of being in a certain environment. In the end, this may not have anything to do with the physical location that initially inspired the painting. Most people haven't actually been to Belle Ile. What fascinates me most is how, whether thinking of my own work or that

of John Peter Russell or Luke Sciberras, a place is reconfigured and revitalised by the different points of view that each artist brings to it.

The opportunity for Luke and I to show our Belle Ile works together at Manly Art Gallery & Museum was really special as although we've showed our works together many times, it is the first time just the two of us have had an opportunity to see our work side by side. We have painted together for years and I love the way he interprets the landscape and makes it his own. The energy and enthusiasm Luke brings to a project is totally infectious but this joie de vivre also hides a very serious and determined artist. The bright, joyous paintings are underpinned by a depth brought about by hard work and careful scrutiny of his subject. Usually a darker aspect lurks under the beautiful paint.

In my view it's an inspired combination of two very different interpretations.

Euan Macleod  
2018



*Belle Ile sea cave* 2017  
acrylic on paper 56 x 38 cm



*Port Goulphar Belle Ile* 2017  
acrylic on paper 38 x 58 cm



*Port Goulphar Belle Ile island headland* 2017  
acrylic on paper 38 x 58 cm



*Beach study* 2017  
acrylic on paper 38 x 28 cm



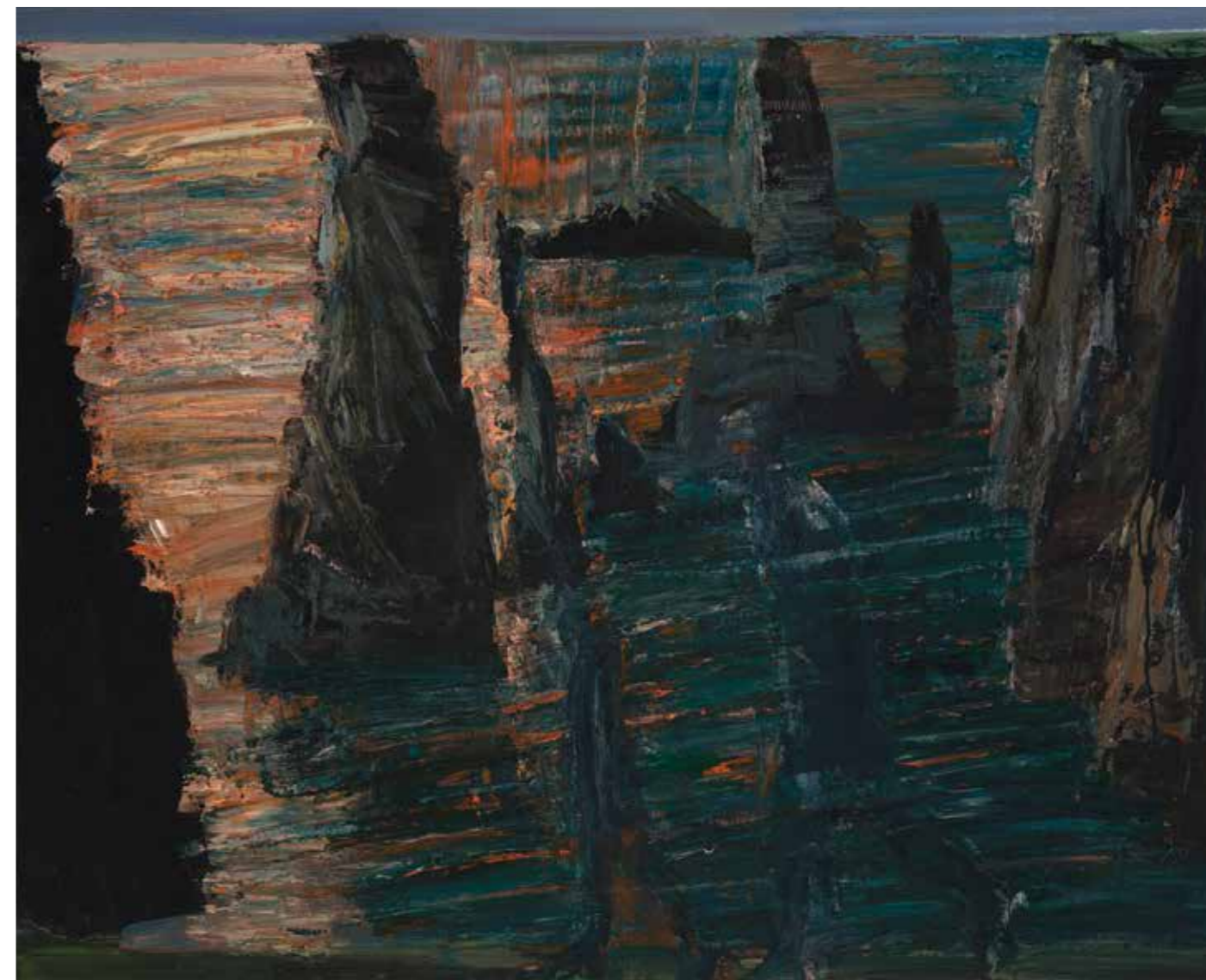
*Steps to beach* 2017  
acrylic on oil on polyester 180 x 137 cm



*Belle Ile* 2017  
acrylic on paper 38 x 29 cm



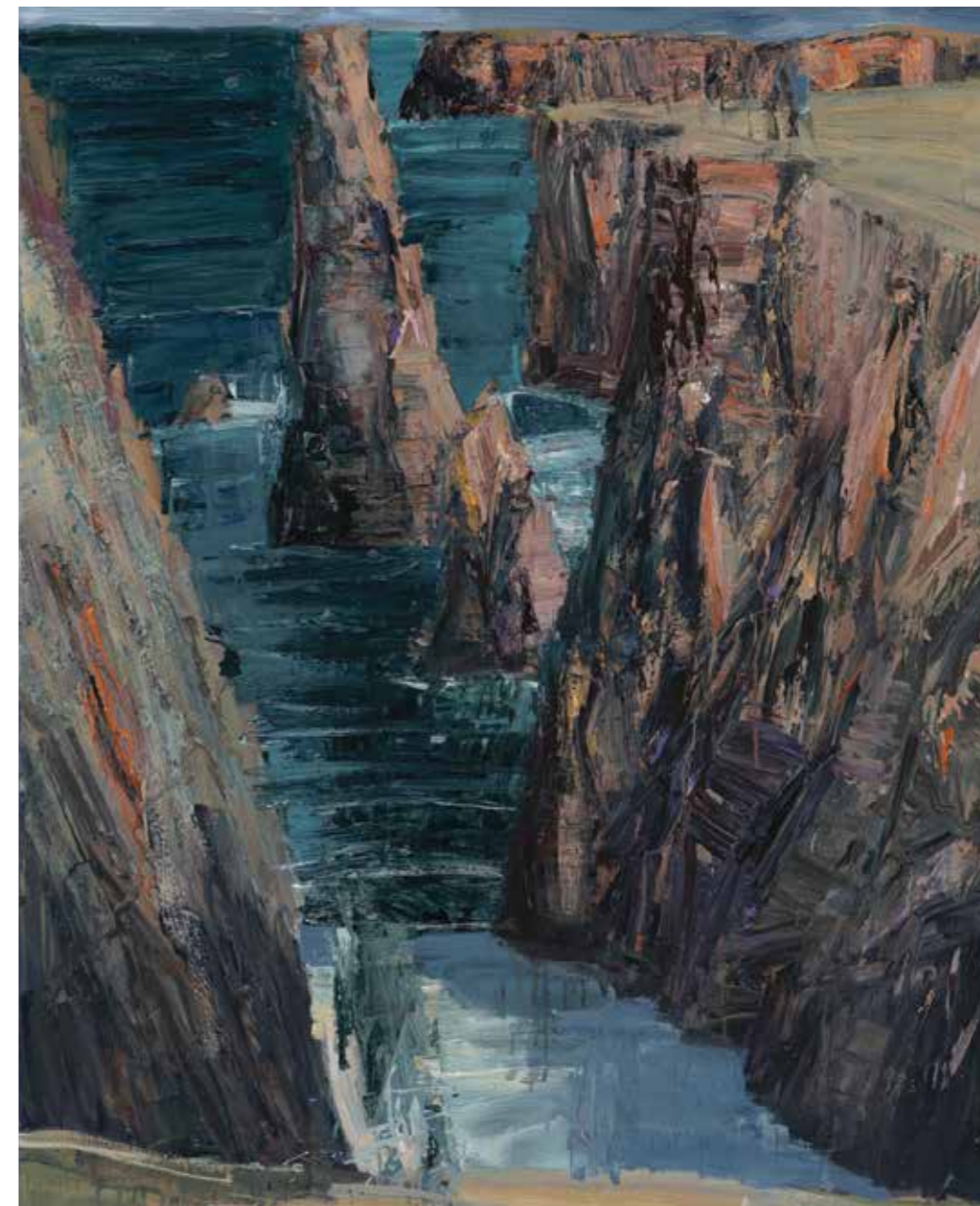
*Rocks steps & tower* 2017  
acrylic on paper 29 x 38 cm



*Sunset (Belle Ile)* 2017  
oil on polyester 100 x 124 cm



*Vertical study with needles* 2017  
oil on linen 90 x 48 cm



*Belle Ile - figure above beach* 2017  
oil on polyester 124 x 100 cm



*Belle Ile people & needles* 2017  
acrylic on paper 38 x 58 cm



*Hole in rock Port Goulphar Belle Ile* 2017  
acrylic on paper 38 x 58 cm



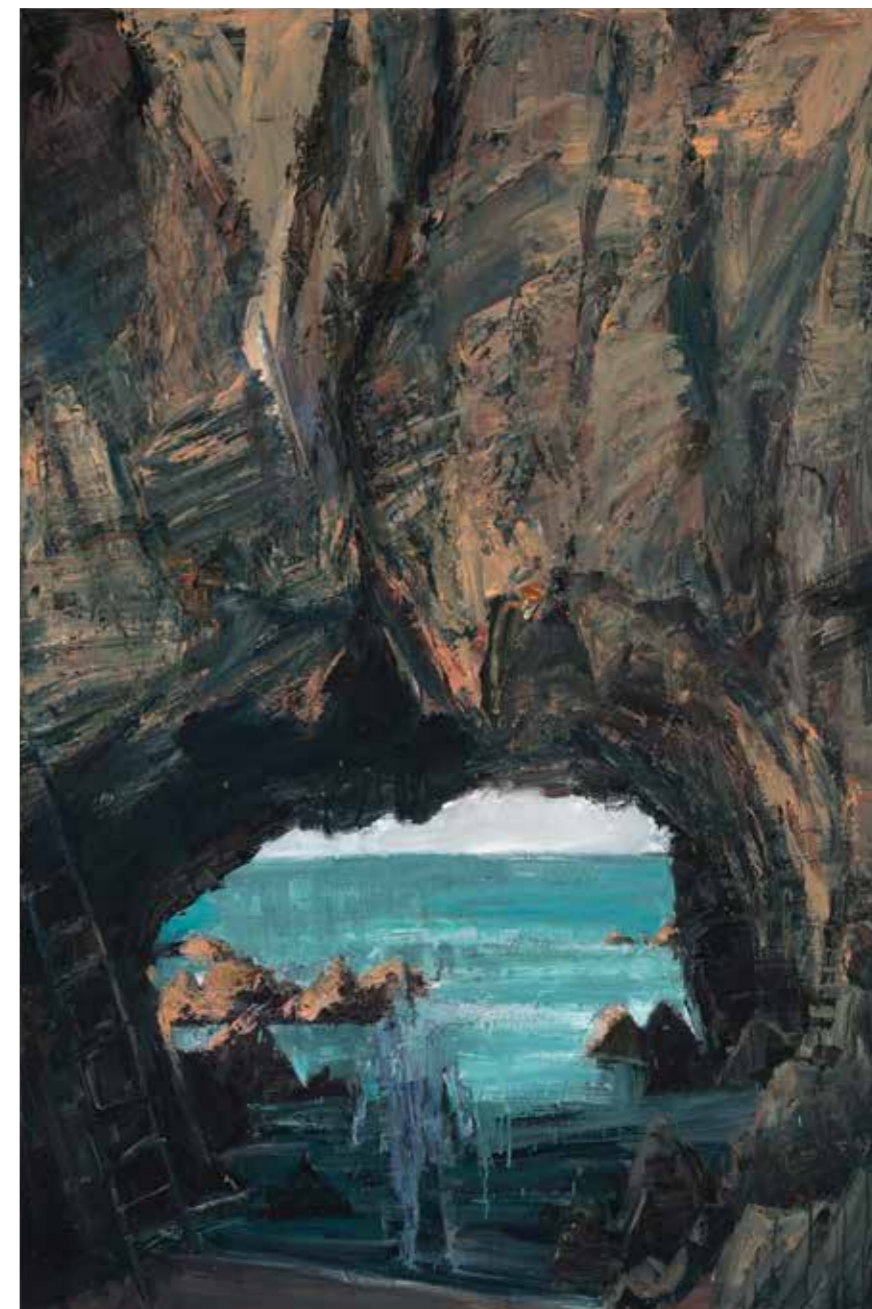
*Sitting above Port Goulphar* 2017  
acrylic on paper 56 x 38 cm



*Edge study* 2017  
acrylic on paper 58 x 38 cm



*Study for Guillotine* 2017  
acrylic on paper 58 x 38 cm



*Guillotine* 2017  
oil on acrylic on linen 168 x 112 cm



## LUKE SCIBERRAS

There are particular locations that hold an almost mythical significance in the history of Australian landscape painting, paradoxically one of them is off the coast of Brittany in France. Iconic paintings have been wrestled and wrested in the wild winds there by Claude Monet, Henri Matisse and most formatively for me, John Peter Russell, an Australian painter who set off from Sydney with his mate Tom Roberts in 1883 on a grand adventure that was to last the main part of Russell's lifetime and would change the trajectory of Western painting. This may sound as dramatic and extreme as the Belle Ile coast itself but in fact any art historian will attest to the notion that Henri Matisse's use of colour was directly influenced by Russell at Belle Ile and in a pivotal way.

Vincent van Gogh held his dear Australian friend as a maverick painter and in no sense a 'school-of' Impressionist. The great Rodin would always champion Russell as a pioneer artist and close friend and no other painter at the time stitched so many threads of perception across the equator as Russell did.

From the time of my mid-teens, I have been captivated by the enlivening contribution that John Peter Russell has made to the storybook of landscape painting, and most singularly the remarkable life he created in a landscape of glisten and gloom.

I remember asking the obliging staff at the Art Gallery of New South Wales to allow me private tours of the works

held in racks down in the store rooms, and it struck me then as a great injustice that these works that still fizzed with colour and energy were languishing with the old brown chestnuts from the mid-twentieth century. There, I was able to see brilliant windows into a world of friendships and glorious days in the landscape, of travels and stillness; the stories of Russell's family life, paintings, children, seasons and elements seemed to almost become personal memories of my own, as do the well described chapters of a favourite novel.

Not in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that I could actually go there, it seemed to me to be a floating world that the gods of painting took with them and left only the paintings behind, but the beaches do shatter with pebbles as every wave retreats and the abrasive rocks are there resisting the ever heaving tides. To have been there and seen the sea foam pouring and spilling off the boulders and the turquoise water swell into the dark caves of Belle Ile was as surreal as visiting a film set you feel you know so well: but in fact there, in front of you and all around you is the thrill of the real thing. There are vast flat meadows of tiny flowers, sudden plunging cliffs and a sea that takes long deep breaths: a magical world that is various and conflicted.

To make an attempt at drawing and painting such a place is at first incredibly daunting: where does one look, or start? But as in any landscape the moment one stops, there is the subject blinking at you. As in the central Australian desert or the vast coast of the



*Pinnacles between Belle Ile* 2018  
oil on board 160 x 240 cm

Kimberley, Gallipoli or any powerful landscape, the challenge is to harness an energy; some spirit that comes back with you to the studio, to slough the coating of expectations and anticipation and immerse the imagination into the moment. A mark appears, then another and for months to come there are a series of small studies, like found objects, which inform something with flesh, that is gestated over time.

The urgency of the 'notes to self' plein air works, gives way to a series of layered and painterly versions of a memory, rather a painting 'about' a place than an image 'of' one. In the studio, memories of Belle Ile's geology, geography, climate and tone come in to mind and without the distraction of gusty winds or screeching gulls the process of applying paint and time develop their own energy and each of the works here are my reflection of that trip, from within, out sideways.

Above and beyond my sentimental notions of Russell and his work, I found my own subject there, I feel, a place that gives and gives to a painter in that there are more textures, veils, lines and shapes there than anyone could possibly harvest in a lifetime. The jagged cliffs are as unforgiving and unfriendly as oyster shells or cow's teeth with waving zigzags of silvery scouring stone, but they vanish down into azure and emerald waters that have a menacing caress all their own. Only Russell or the local Belle Ileois could possibly navigate those inlets and caves in boats designed for their own habitat. The sea, 'the briny' as Russell called it, would be his pulse, his life-force. Having learned it in Sydney Harbour, lived

it on Belle Ile and in full circle died by it at his native Sydney Harbour, it seems to have been truly in his blood, a constant and his pictures seem to be painted with a brush dipped in the sea.

Here in these works of mine, a new inflection flings the story along and buoyed by friendships this exhibition sends a handshake across the borders of time and the hemispheres.

Over the last ten years Euan and I have travelled and painted together alongside some of the great landscapes of the world. To visit places like Gallipoli, Broken Hill, the Flinders Ranges, the Western Front, Italy and most recently Belle Ile is always a tremendous privilege, but added to that is the invigorating friendship I share with Euan who just happens to be one of my favourite artists.

We share a restlessness and a passion for capturing the energy of the moment, the things about a landscape that can't be photographed. Making works directly in the landscape is an itch that has to be scratched and there's an urgency about that instinct that we share. We have become quite close and talk a lot in between times, casting an eye over works in progress in each other's studios which is one of the greatest benefits of having fellow artists as close friends. Seeing Euan work at Belle Ile (or in any landscape) is as fascinating as seeing a famous scientist visiting a great wilderness, or like freeing a creature into its native habitat; he is a natural artist who has the elements of nature in his arm.



*The weather turned around, Belle Ile* 2018  
oil on board 120 x 160 cm



*Goulphar Bay, Belle Ile* 2018  
oil on board 120 x 160 cm



*Up and over, Belle Ile* 2018  
oil on board 120 x 160 cm



*High beam, Belle Ile* 2018  
oil on board 120 x 160 cm



*North facing, Belle Ile* 2018  
oil on board 120 x 160 cm



*Peninsula, Belle Ile* 2018  
oil on board 120 x 160 cm



*High tide, Belle Ile* 2018  
oil on board 120 x 160 cm



*Study for Bangor, Belle Ile* 2018  
oil on board 60 x 80 cm



*Study for Pinnacles between, Belle Ile* 2018  
oil on board 60 x 80 cm



*With special thanks to*

Michael Nock, of NockArt Foundation for his tremendous generosity towards the 'Belle Ile' project. It could not have happened without his support.

Manly Art Gallery & Museum for developing the exhibition Belle Ile: Luke Sciberras & Euan Macleod (13 July – 2 September 2018).



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Published by King Street Studios P/L  
Photography: Michele Brouet  
Peter Solness  
Design: Ella Burrett  
ISBN-13: 978-0-9925715-9-7



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