

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