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High Wire

Lloyd Jones & Euan Macleod

Review
JOE FROST

What kind of book might an artist and a writer create together, given free reign?

This is the question proposed by the *kōrero* series, a venture by Massey University Press enabling the artists and writers of New Zealand to explore the weaving together of words and pictures in published form.

While there is nothing new in publishers engaging artists to illustrate writers' works, either across generations (Matisse's *Poesies de Stéphane Mallarmé*) or between contemporaries (Louise Bourgeois and Arthur Miller's *Homely Girl*), the *kōrero* series aims to achieve something else. By inviting participants to collaborate

from scratch on a theme that is open to evolution, novelist and series editor Lloyd Jones has created the tantalising possibility of artist and writer starting at the beginning; not with a finished story to be illustrated. Jones describes it as 'a conversation across craft and discipline between artists in their approach to a shared topic,' with the hint of a softening of the familiar hierarchy that places word before image.

With *High Wire*, the first of the *kōrero* publications, Jones has set the ball rolling by pairing himself with painter Euan Macleod to produce a striking hardback book, almost entirely black and white, slightly smaller than A4 format. Reading

like a story but with leanings towards essay form, it is a highly personal rumination on art and memory through which both authors' preoccupations with their homeland is a defining theme.

Jones and Macleod have a history of working together and it is clear from the rawness of *High Wire's* content that their friendship has given them both the freedom to work unguardedly. The writer has not felt the need to clear the bodily fluids from his sentences, although mercifully it is spit and not shit (Jones's chosen issue in the novel *The Cage*) that is doused about, only sparingly, here. The painter has drawn prolifically and heedlessly, applying himself to figural



subjects that lie squarely within the range of his usual imagery, although the motif of the walking man has not taken to a tightrope before.

While on first viewing it is Macleod's pictures that establish the atmosphere of *High Wire*, it does after all seem to be Jones' text that is the skeleton of the work, setting specific points of reference that establish the scope of the narrative. From the opening page he addresses the painter and reader together, telling us how he invited Macleod to send drawings of bridges, then reminding him of the tightrope artistry of Philippe Petit, the young Frenchman who walked the line from one World Trade Center tower to the other in 1974. Broaching the grand, fantastical image of an emigrant's bridge spanning the Tasman Sea, Jones writes to Macleod as one of the multitude of Kiwis who, during the 1980s, made the crossing to reach Australia, and there is an implicit veneration of his friend as an artist playing for the large prize; seeking truth and staring down the freefall of failure.

For each passage of text, a full-page or double-page picture is offered in accompaniment. Many of them show a man just managing to stay on a tightrope, or in the moment of toppling off. Rapid pen sketches are interspersed with richly tonal etchings. There are also dark paintings: of the moon aloft and crowds watching eagerly for the tightrope artist to fall. (These darkest pictures appear to have been executed in ink or gouache, although unfortunately, no details of the medium, date of execution, or size of any of the reproduced works are given.) As Jones's story reaches one of its micro-climaxes, Macleod abandons artfulness of composition altogether, his tightrope walker commanding himself, manically: DO NOT FALL. DO NOT FALL. DO NOT FALL.

For all of *High Wire's* emphasis on the risks inherent in pursuing art, its making does not appear to have induced any anxiety in the authors over the form the work would take. The writer and the artist have produced a book that accords closely with

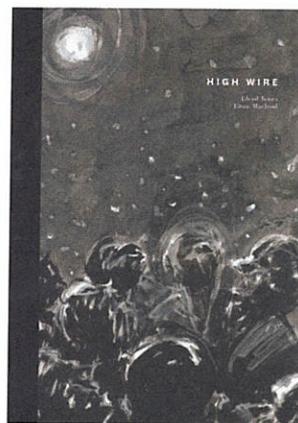
what could reasonably have been expected from them working together but ultimately apart; for this feels like a collaboration in which each has experienced the labour of creation alone. Those familiar with Macleod's pictorial world may find its location made pleasingly ambiguous by the references and reflections that Jones places beside it, while fans of Jones the novelist should enjoy the burst of visual imagery that Macleod provides. It is a book that their audiences will love.

By publishing it commercially for broad distribution, Massey University Press has taken the kind of project that might usually be found within the wonderful but enclosed world of limited edition books, and made it available to a much larger public. This may be the enduring achievement of the *kōrero* series, which will hopefully bring many more successful collaborations to light. ■



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High Wire
Lloyd Jones and Euan Macleod
Massey University Press, 2020
\$45 (NZD)

01 Euan Macleod, 2019, photograph Andrew Merry
02 Euan Macleod, *Highwire Study*, 2019, hand coloured aquatint, 32.5 x 25 cm
Courtesy the artist, Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, and King Street Gallery, Sydney