

# The Sydney Morning Herald

CULTURE ART &amp; DESIGN LUNCH WITH

## When glacier climbing can be a metaphor for social distancing

By [Lissa Christopher](#)

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When the coronavirus pandemic started to shut down the world, Euan Macleod heard comments to the effect that there had never been a better time to be an artist, but he wasn't feeling it.

"I think there was this idea that with a pandemic, a big juicy crisis, artists would flourish and all these works would come out of it and it would be amazing. But it was sort of like a pressure and this is actually a very insecure time. I think to make work where you are pushing out, you need a bit of security," he says.



Euan Macleod lunches in his inner west garden on food from Lucio's in Paddington. JANIE BARRETT

"I was talking to an artist friend, Rodney Pople, and he said if he did anything now on coronavirus it would feel contrived and illustrative, and I think that's true. The things that come out of this will come out slowly. And besides, are artists little monkeys that have to respond to everything that goes on?"

Our socially distanced lunch is taking place in Macleod's vast and glorious inner west backyard, home to a gum tree substantial enough to support a rope swing, sculptures by Orest Keywan, Campbell Robertson-Swann and Dave Teer, and the airy studio in which Macleod paints. The soundtrack for the occasion comes in the form of some noisy miner birds and a neighbour's leaf blower.

Macleod has chosen takeaway lunch from Lucio's in Paddington because he has known its founder, Lucio Galletto, "for years" and appreciates the restaurateur's support for the visual arts. The order, delivered by Galletto's son, Matteo, arrives with a specially printed menu featuring Macleod paintings that appeared in Galletto's 2014 cookbook, *The Art of Traditional Italian*. On the front of the menu, Macleod's signature everyman figure pushes an outsize tomato in a pram. Our order, which includes wild boar ragu, balsamic roast duck and two serves of tiramisu, is printed inside. "That is a shitload of tiramisu," is Macleod's estimate of the dessert portions. He loves the stuff.



Takeaway ragu al cinghiale (fettuccine with wild boar ragu) from Lucio's. JANIE BARRETT

The digressive conversation that unfolds over lunch is dotted with out-of-the-blue exclamations of culinary appreciation from Macleod. Talking about the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, COVID-19 and the illusion of safety, he says: "All of a sudden you can't take for granted the ground beneath you. It bloody changes things, doesn't it. F---ing frightening. That duck is just to die for."

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***"And what else could I do? All my ego is tied up in this one thing."***

COVID-19 has quashed a gobsmacking number of arts endeavours, including Macleod's first exhibition with the King Street Gallery on William, which was scheduled for August. Even when galleries do reopen, there will be a queue of artists to be shown ahead of him.



Macleod was with Watters Gallery in Darlinghurst from 1982 - when he moved from Christchurch, where he was born and raised, to Sydney - until the gallery closed down in 2018. (Frank Watters, a huge supporter of Macleod's work, passed away after we lunched, at the end of May.) Macleod's inaugural exhibition with a new gallery is, he says, "kind of a big deal, really, and it might be in December or next year. I just have no idea."

Without the pressure of painting for an upcoming exhibition Macleod felt lost, even though the pressure to produce is not something he has always relished.

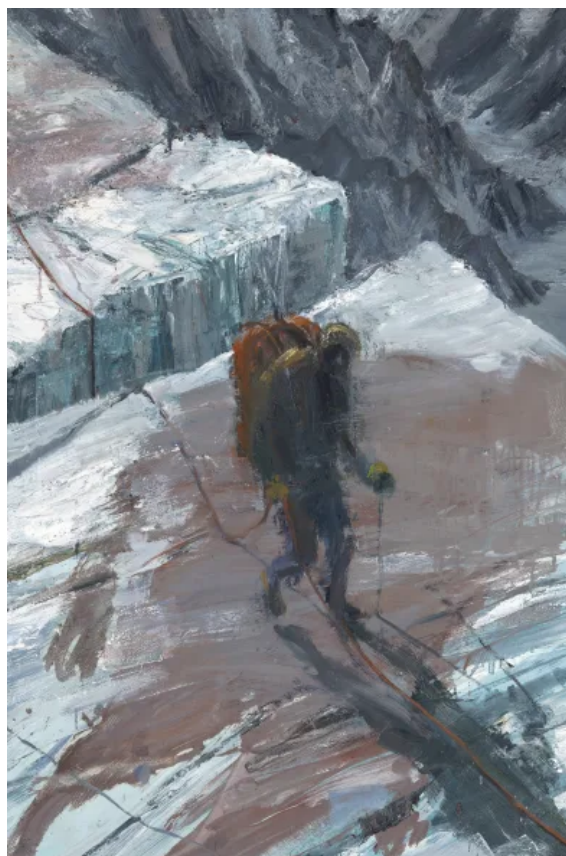
"You're always working towards an exhibition and sometimes the gallery will ask 'what will your show be about?' And you think: well, how the f--k would I know, I haven't started it yet, but it does get you to be focused. So at first I felt really weird. There was actually a period when I thought I'm not a painter. It's a disaster. What am I going to do instead?"

"And what else could I do? I mean, that's the terrible thing. You think all of my life has been totally focused towards this one thing and all my ego is tied up in this one thing. I am just totally f---ed if I don't do that. I'm just an empty shell."

Eventually, he just started painting.

"I just did stuff and tried really hard not to put a value on it. If you are painting towards an exhibition you think oh, this one is not good enough, this one has got to be good, so I tried not to do that. Galleries will often say 'we want a really good show, we want masterpieces'. And you think well, what the f--k do you think I'm trying to do?"

Landscapes are an important jumping-off point for Macleod's work and he was grateful to have recent inspiration to draw upon. In February, he was up on New Zealand's Tasman Glacier, an experience he describes as "just amazing ... unbelievable". He describes himself, on the other hand, as a "spoilt brat" for being able to take the trip, which involved helicopter transport and a guide.



Euan Macleod's Social Distancing (2020) MICHELE BROUET



The image on the cover of this week's Spectrum, its winter edition, is one of the paintings that emerged from the adventure and the reddy-brown shadow on the ice reflects real-life experience. Up on the glacier, Macleod had walked through red ash that had been blown across the ditch from the summer bushfires in Australia. "It was as if we were walking on both countries at the same time," he says.

Balsamic roast duck from Lucio's. JANIE BARRETT

In an email to Spectrum editor Shona Martyn to discuss the use of his painting, he wrote that he saw it "as a metaphor for social distancing. The figure is isolated but connected by the rope. Am I being an art wanker?"

Over lunch he adds to that thought. "Walking on the glacier, there's a sense of exhilaration, slightly fearful, but there you are and you have got to trust the rope," he says. "And we are all kind of connected but unconnected like that right now. You realise how important mobile phones are [when you can't be around other people]. You have to put your trust in the rope."

More of Macleod's glacier series, from smaller works on paper to large canvases nearing completion, are spread around his studio, which we tour after the main course and before we eat a shitload of tiramisu. His everyman figure lugs a pack, a laden sled or a timber boat across the ice, hangs precariously from ropes and stares into a fiery crevasse.



Artist Euan Macleod in his backyard studio. JANIE BARRETT

Macleod has won some of the country's most prestigious art prizes over the past 30 years, including the 1999 Archibald Prize. I get a sneak-peak at his entry for the postponed 2020 Archibald, a portrait of art collector Gordon Elliot. "I was pleased with it," says Macleod. "The day I started painting it I went 'ew, disaster', but no, I beat it into submission."

Macleod paints quickly and vigorously. "It's an attempt to get the energy and the emotion into the painting," he says. "I've been thinking about rock climbing [which he used to do]. Some people technically work out each move so they know



what has to happen. I'm not like that. I just go for it and probably fall off and then go for it again and throw myself at it and bash my way up ... It's probably not very smart. But a lot of climbers used to say they would get that upwards momentum happening and then all of a sudden it just flowed."

So robust is his approach to canvas that a buyer once returned one of his paintings because it had a hole in it, albeit a tiny one.

"She was this lovely woman and she said 'oh, I think there's some damage on it'. I said 'Let me show you how I work' and I got out a [palette] knife. I just really go for it. It's aggressive ... When you are painting you just want to resolve it, and at the time I don't care [about technique or how long the canvas will last], I just want the painting to work."

The problem is that paintings that are done quickly or carry fewer elements can be seen as somehow less valuable, in both artistic and dollar terms, says Macleod, who works solely as an artist these days after many decades of also doing what he calls "real" jobs, such as teaching.

"But is something that takes a long time better than something done quickly? Some of the things you do the quickest are some of the best things and you can wind up spending a lot of time just decorating them, decorating that little idea.

"If you do a great big canvas and you do a couple of lines on it, it might be utterly sublime and beautiful but people look at it and go 'well, I'm not going to pay \$30,000 for that'. It is a lot of money. I guess what I'm trying to say is that money is not a good bedfellow. It really isn't."

When the temptation to decorate his own work comes up, he relies on artist friends to talk him down. "They are really good to talk to because they will say 'no, that's really good. Don't do any more to it or you will ruin it'."

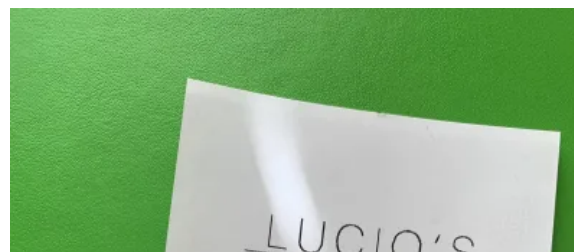
Critics, on the other hand, are not always so kind.

"I've never come close to stopping painting [in response to a negative review] but I've had some terrible reviews, absolutely shocking," he says. "Someone said I was the most overrated artist in Australia. I guess that's something, isn't it? You are it, mate. You are number one, when talking about overrated. But I was really hurt, of course."

Macleod has been horrified by the decimation of the Australian arts sector in the wake of COVID-19 and notes with envy Germany's willingness to include artists in its economic rescue packages. The sight of



A menu for the lunch featuring Macleod's "everyman". JANIE BARRETT



Australians queuing in April to buy bicycles left him nonplussed.

"You see everyone buying a bike, but wouldn't it be nice if everyone was thinking: why don't I buy that painting I love? Everyone thinks 'oh, you are a painter, you are fine, you can just do what you do', but no one is buying paintings ... and it's just terrible for some people. I kind of thought it would be really lovely if people got to appreciate living with art [during lockdown]. Some of my favourite things are paintings, and I mean other people's, not my own."



Lunch from Lucio's SMH

At the end of our meal there's a full serve of tiramisu left untouched in its container and Macleod encourages me to take it home. I politely decline but only a few hours later, when hunger inevitably returns, I regret it.

**Since our lunch, Euan Macleod's exhibition at King Street Gallery on William has been scheduled for September.**

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**Lissa Christopher**



Lissa Christopher has more years' experience as an editor and writer with The Sydney Morning Herald than she cares to count, and is now a print and digital producer for Traveller. She's a glamer not a camper and wherever she travels she likes to start eating as soon as possible after making it through passport control.

