



EUAN
MACLEOD
SUMMIT
ROAD
2023

Above Taylors Mistake 2022
oil on polyester 56 x 76 cm

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ROAD
2023



MAY 9 -
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KING STREET
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10am – 6pm Tuesday – Saturday
177 William St Darlinghurst NSW 2010 Australia
T: 61 2 9360 9727 E: art@kingstreetgallery.com
www.kingstreetgallery.com.au

Published by King Street Studios P/L
Artwork Photography: Michele Brouet Photography
Artist Photographs: Andrew Merry, Brad Hammond
Design: Andrea Healy
ISBN - 978-0-6453728-9-2

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Taylors Mistake 2022 acrylic on polyester 100 x 124 cm

EUAN MACLEOD SISYPHEAN

The very real temptation to write of Macleod's work as portentous semiotics of environmental, cultural or psychic decline, or as confessional or autobiographical catharsis, is due to its overt but accessible use of symbolism. Macleod's longing, searching figures entice us to fill in the backstory, thanks in part to the figures' facelessness and the pictures' open-endedness. Boats, mountains, pits, lakes and flames are a well-established part of Macleod's visual lexicon, as is his approach to the figure, but there are some new and subtle elements at play.

While meditations on death and the impermanence of life have long been a theme of some of Macleod's most thematically and physically hefty works, it is important to note that in their melancholy is a sense of hope. I would like to dwell for a moment on the word 'big', which I think summarises both Macleod and his works quite neatly. Thinking about the word, how is it different from 'tall' or 'broad'? What does the word 'big' imply that other words don't? I posit that somebody or something can be tall or broad, but only when

they are both are they *big*. Bigness connotes mass as well as dimension, weight as well as form. Macleod's works, even in their smallest form as studies, feel *big*. These works are unlike those of your romantics, your Caspar David Friedrich, who often depict the conquest or mastery of their environs; this appears impossible in Macleod's work. These works are far more an aspect of a psychic landscape, mountain-as-metaphor rather than descriptor.

I am reminded of some of Albert Camus' early writings, himself no slouch when it comes to penetrating insights into the bleaker side of humanity and existence, which undercut his later, more famous works with an astonishingly bright framework with which to approach them. Where novels such as *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947) are widely understood as meditations upon the absurdity and pointlessness of life, I would argue that this is an oversimplification which can be proven by, particularly, his early writings such as *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* (1937) and *Nuptials* (1938), which temper Camus' existentialism with an energetic celebration of >



PHOTOGRAPH ANDREW MERRY



Looking Towards Alps 2022 oil on polyester 56 x 76 cm



Euan Macleod and mum, June Macleod on Summit Road, Christchurch, New Zealand.

PHOTOGRAPH BRAD HAMMOND

the simpler aspects of life, such as swimming, sunny weather and the changing of seasons. Where some may be surprised to read of Camus writing of such things, it makes sense on the context of the broader discussions at play in his work; even if one writes of the hopelessness of life, making the effort to write about it in part negates that very hopelessness. To not write, to not paint, would vindicate that hopelessness.

A recent and recurring subject has been that of Macleod's mother, old age and frailty contrasting dramatically with the harsh and craggy landscapes. This is a notable addition to Macleod's considerable oeuvre, which has been long populated with echoes of his father, who passed away some years ago, depicted in a manner more expressive than descriptive, as if exploring the idea of his father, rather than a likeness. The gesture of *Mum Walking with Distant Ship*, *Mum Walking Castle Rock* and many others is highly descriptive, elegantly portraying the delicate physical presence of the maternal subject. These are not the vast, gigantic forms of the subconscious, striding over lakes and emerging from mountain tops, but rather a figure if not diminished by them, certainly at ease within their majesty. Pieces such as *Above Taylors Mistake* are particularly interesting in this sense, with Macleod's mother partly obscured by mist or cloud, giving the effect of obliteration or fading. This is not exclusive to the *Mum* pictures, but a recurring motif of late. Figures intensely worked, additional before becoming subtractive, leaving only signs of their nonpresence. It should also be noted that the colour purple makes an appearance in many of these works, in the form of her clothing, purple her favourite colour. This is itself as much of a new addition to the oeuvre as Macleod's mother, and is surprisingly striking in its conspicuousness; I have seen drawings by the artist from the early '80s with a dash of purple, and not much since. For most artists, this would hardly be

worth mentioning, but in Macleod's case it is the repetitions and variations that bear fruit. Where many artists would carefully create a sketch or composition to work from before methodically approaching its execution, Macleod is much more comfortable smashing out multiple sketches, and multiple paintings, in a flurry of activity. That energy and dynamism is captured where others' dissipates, or fades, from their work. One final mention I would like to make in the context of the *Mum* pictures is that the mountaineering imagery of lifelines of recent works is, at least for the moment, gone — replaced with a trusty walking stick — an element as humble and domestic as the lifelines are heroic, even romantic. When considered in the context of her own connection to these dramatic, sublime vistas — a favoured artistic subject within her own paintings — these pictures are fitted with a suddenly profound register of emotional depth.

As ever, the artist seeks new places to visually explore. Brighton, Dubbo, Taylor's Mistake, Castle Rock, Magnetic Island; all evocative and unique in name and geography. The differences in Australian and New Zealand geographic iconography and language is always compelling in their extreme differences for such proximity, Australia's ancient bulk slowly emerging from the seas over aeons, and New Zealand's newer, volcanic forms, squeezed up and out of the ocean floor. It is easy to bandy about terms like 'antipodean' when it comes to Macleod's work. This is not a shortcoming of the writer, but a shortcoming of the language, with limited descriptors that can articulate such timeless drama and parable with a depth of feeling. We can bring our own stories, fill in the gaps in the visual narrative, but there is a more powerful dynamic at work beneath it all which lies somewhere between application and imagination, and this has been consistent in the narrative of both Australia and New Zealand since the days before colonization, both subject to fanciful and >

bizarre assumptions before even landfall. This between space is an internalised experience of the work, and in Macleod's case it seems to defy explanation. Each layer adds another dimension and aspect to a body of work that grows as dense with accumulation and variation as any of Macleod's canvases, but manages to maintain a contradictorily accessible character, in spite of its own mass.

Based on sketches made on site, executed rapidly in pencil and oil pastel, and then recreated subsequently in the studio, the works retain a crackling energy within their marks and gestures. *Pentimenti* operates on both the conceptual and the physical level of drawing, translating fluidly when Macleod moves over into the territory of paint. The term *Pentimenti* is used to describe a permanent line or mark that cannot be so easily erased, transforming the sketch to a finished work, an apt term to describe Macleod's approach, given the energy of the marks. The word itself is derived from the word 'repentance' and implies sorrow at the loss of the sketch itself, upon moving ahead from erasable, impermanent marks to a more definite and permanent series of decisions. The idea of repentance through drawing has an undertone of religious piety, and certainly the emotions of sorrow or regret can be found in many of Macleod's works.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus writes of the Sisyphian quest as a parable of the absurdity of existence, finding some kind of peace in the struggle itself, rather than its outcomes, thus damning Sisyphus (or in this case, the artist) to endlessly carry his boulder uphill. While hills are certainly prevalent in Macleod's work, here there is no boulder, but rather a void to fill. Instead of the typical 'emptying out' of oneself that we tend to associate with catharsis and prolific artistry, we see the inverse; figures filling in holes, graves, boats, ravines. This relentless work is not unlike Macleod's approach to the studio. An industrious artist, Macleod produces work

at an almost industrial scale. The treats on offer by the prolific artist today are twofold; we are spared the dandy, the operator, the player that is so prevalent in the contemporary art world, and we are allowed to go deeper than the surface layer, deeper than the didactic panel or wall vinyl will allow us to go. There is a generosity of spirit in allowing such insights that only a prolific artist can have, because there is no time for obscurantism, no time for games, because there is never enough time for the studio itself. There is a pace of the mind, or perhaps the heart if we want to speak in symbols, that the artist can only try to keep up with, *attempt* to reconcile, and this is where lies the Sisyphian rock.

I consider some of the great prolific artists, and their refusal, or inability, to reign in their output to cohesive, planned out units. The process of editing becomes as heightened, a reductive but essential part of the artist's process. Visiting Macleod's studio in February, I am shown dozens of works, all create for the exhibition, but all potentially excisable. Macleod typically brings in outside help, whether representatives from the gallery or artist friends, to assist in this process. This is a telling aspect of the studio process, that some distance or objectivity is needed to make such choices, which is almost impossible given the way this artist works: closely, intensively, quickly. Considering the vast body of work collectively, at least before a tighter selection can be made, there are notes of intense drama (as we expect), yes, but tempered with works that are more gently, rather beautiful melancholy, in the place that might normally be reserved for anxious brooding or a dark existential rage. Is this a reprieve after a period of tumult? Perhaps these works represent a tentative step toward a place of acceptance, or at least understanding, of the fragility of life and the profound depth of feeling that comes of reflecting upon these moments.

Jonathan McBurnie



Above Brighton 2022 oil on polyester 56 x 76 cm



Purple Mum Walking 2022 acrylic on paper 29 x 38 cm



Mum 2022 acrylic on paper 29 x 38 cm



Mum & Cave Rock 2022 acrylic on polyester 137 x 180 cm



Purple Figure in Mist on Summit Road 2022 acrylic on polyester 100 x 124 cm



June 2023 oil on polyester 120 x 84 cm



Taylors Mistake 2022 oil on polyester 56 x 76 cm



Cave Rock 2022 oil on polyester 56 x 76 cm



Mum Walking Double Fence 2022 oil on polyester 38 x 51 cm

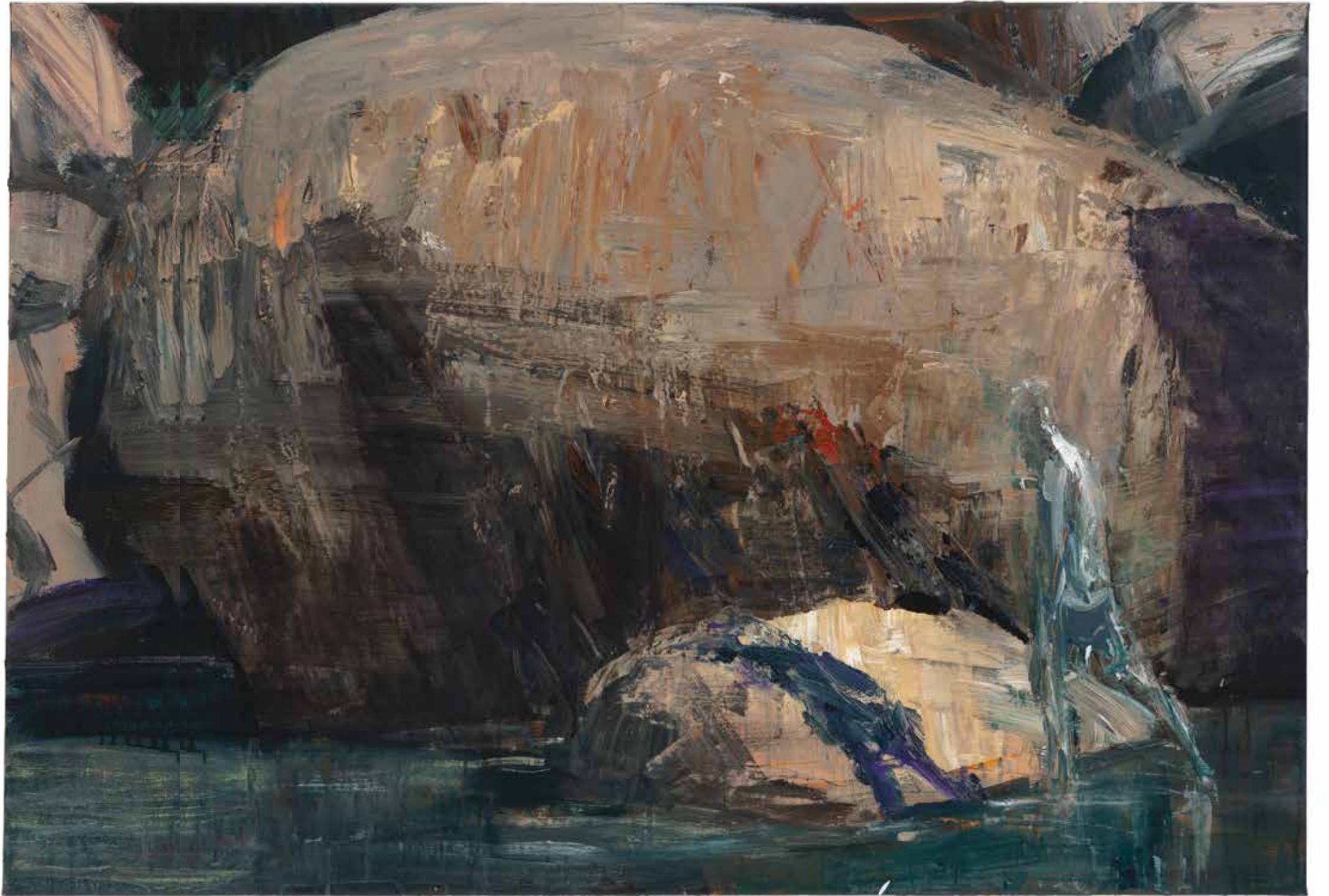


Mum Walking with Stick 2022 oil on polyester 51 x 38 cm



Mum Walking Winding Road 2022 oil on polyester 51 x 38 cm

Beach Scene Magnetic Island 2022
acrylic on polyester 84 x 120 cm





Magnetic Island Gap 2022 oil on polyester 51 x 38 cm



Magnetic Island Blue Togs 2022 oil on polyester 38 x 51 cm



Magnetic Island Horizontal 2022 oil on polyester 38 x 51 cm



Esplanade with Black Dog 2022 acrylic on polyester 100 x 124 cm



Split Rock Magnetic Island 2022 acrylic on polyester 100 x 124 cm



Magnetic Island Figure 2022 oil on polyester 96 x 64 cm



Summer Figures & Dog 2022/23 oil on polyester 84 x 120 cm



Jervis Bay Sunset & Dog 2022 oil on polyester 59 x 86 cm



Dog Beach Jervis Bay 2023 oil on polyester 56 x 76 cm



River Mouth Ashburton 2022 oil on polyester 56 x 76 cm



Moona Moona Creek Study 2023 oil on polyester 56 x 76 cm



Scarborough Study 2022 oil on polyester 56 x 76 cm



Scarborough 2022/23 oil on polyester 150 x 180 cm



Sitting on Hills Looking at Fire 2022 oil on polyester 56 x 76 cm



Burning Boat & Moon Man 2022 acrylic on paper 58 x 38 cm



Burning Boat in Lounge 2022 acrylic on polyester 84 x 120 cm



Burning Skeketon Boat 2022 acrylic on polyester 84 x 120 cm



Fire On Port Hills (Night) 2022/23 acrylic on polyester 150 x 180 cm



Fire on the Hill 2022 acrylic on paper 38 x 57 cm



Figures Moon & Burning Boat 2022 oil on polyester 120 x 84 cm



Contemplation Lyttelton Harbour 2022 acrylic on polyester 100 x 124 cm



Mum Walking with Distant Southern Alps 2022 oil on polyester 38 x 51 cm



Mum Walking with Distant Ship 2022 oil on polyester 38 x 51 cm



Mum Walking Dark Outcrop 2022 oil on polyester 38 x 51 cm



Mum Walking Castle Rock 2022 oil on polyester 38 x 51 cm

PHOTOGRAPH ANDREW MERRY



Full CV available at www.kingstreetgallery.com.au

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