

# Belle Île:

Luke Sciberras & Euan Macleod





# Belle Île

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An exhibition of paintings by Luke Sciberras and Euan Macleod from their recent expedition to Belle Île, France: a journey inspired by the landscape and memory of the expatriate Australian painter John Peter Russell (1858-1930). Here, Luke and Euan found their own subjects and narratives within this dramatic and evocative landscape.

Curated by Katherine Roberts

**Manly Art Gallery & Museum**  
13 July – 2 September 2018



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# Foreword

Featuring the work of two significant Australian artists, Luke Sciberras and Euan Macleod, the exhibition *Belle Île* is presented by Manly Art Gallery & Museum. The inspiration for these paintings is a landscape far away, but one familiar to audiences of art history through the work of celebrated Impressionist Claude Monet and the Australian painter John Peter Russell. The dramatic and evocative landscape of Belle Île, the Pinnacles, Toul Rock, Goulphar Bay, is revealed through their layers of paint, their lines and colours. These locations were revisited by Luke and Euan as they made meaning of their shared experience and drew out the 'essence of place'.

The island of Belle Île lies off the coast of Brittany, France. Its coastline varies from sharp cliff edges along the southwest side, to gentle sandy beaches and harbours on the northeast. Once densely forested but now covered in rolling farm land, and measuring about 84 km<sup>2</sup>, Belle Île is a place that has been made famous through music, literature and the visual arts.

Luke and Euan's friendship and travels together over the past decade have created a strong bond between the two artists. Their shared passion for being in the landscape, observing it intimately and revealing its energy then becomes a deeply emotional experience for the viewer when standing in front of their paintings. Their mutual belief of the transformative qualities of the painting medium and their respect for each other's work is palpable.

This exhibition provides audiences with an opportunity to study the development of Luke's and Euan's Belle Île paintings and to follow their creative processes as they explore the landscape; from their initial sketches in pen, ink and gouache, to the larger oil paintings completed in their studios.

Regional public galleries provide a platform for contemporary artists to show their work to the general public and arts audiences, away from the commercial spaces and private collections. Manly Art Gallery & Museum staff are grateful to Luke and Euan for the opportunity to show this work so fresh from their studios and for embracing the project so wholeheartedly.

*Belle Île: Luke Sciberras & Euan Macleod* runs concurrently with the Art Gallery of New South Wales's exhibition, *John Russell: Australia's French Impressionist*. We are grateful to the AGNSW staff's generosity of spirit in supporting this project.

Katherine Roberts  
Senior Curator, Manly Art Gallery & Museum



Cover photo: *Belle Île* by Bruce Inglis, 2017

Inside cover photo: Luke and Euan at Belle Île by Bruce Inglis, 2017

Image above: Luke Sciberras, *Pinnacles between, Belle Île*, 2018, oil on board, 160 x 240cm

# 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 Île 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 Île 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 Île 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 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 Île'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



Luke Sciberras, *Back to the Sun, Belle Île*, 2018, oil on board, 120 x 160cm



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 Îleois 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 Île 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 Île 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 Île (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.



Top: Luke Sciberras at Belle Île, 2017, by Bruce Inglis

Left: Luke Sciberras, *Sketch of Russell's view, Belle Île*, 2018, pencil on paper, 29.5 x 42.5cm

Right: Luke Sciberras, *Sketch of Russell's view II, Belle Île*, 2018, pencil on paper, 29.5 x 42.5cm





Left: Luke Sciberras, *Sketch for Pinnacles between, Belle Île*, 2018, coloured pencil on paper, 29.5 x 42.5cm

Right: Luke Sciberras, *Bangor, Belle Île*, 2018, oil on board, 120 x 160cm





Top: Luke Sciberras, *Sketch for High tide I, Belle Île*, 2018, pencil on paper, 20 x 28cm

Left: Luke Sciberras, *Study of High tide, Belle Île*, 2018, gouache on paper, 60 x 85cm

Right: Luke Sciberras, *High tide, Belle Île*, 2018, oil on board, 120 x 160cm





Top: Luke Sciberras, *Study for Goulphar Bay I*, Belle Île, 2018, ink on paper, 29.5 x 42.5cm

Left: Luke Sciberras, *Study for Goulphar Bay*, Belle Île, 2018, gouache on paper, 56 x 75cm

Right: Luke Sciberras, *Goulphar Bay*, Belle Île, 2018, oil on board, 120 x 160cm





Left: Luke Sciberras, *Toul Rock, Belle Île*, 2018, ink on paper, 56 x 75cm

Right: Luke Sciberras, *Peninsula, Belle Île*, 2018, oil on board, 120 x 160cm





Left: Luke Sciberras, *Gull, Belle Île*, 2018, ink on paper, 56 x 75cm

Right: Luke Sciberras, *The weather turned around, Belle Île*, 2018, oil on canvas, 120 x 160cm





Left: Luke Sciberras, *Study for Up for over, Belle Île*, 2018, ink on paper, 29.5 x 42.5cm

Right: Luke Sciberras, *Up and over, Belle Île*, 2018, ink on paper, 120 x 160cm





Left: Luke Sciberras, *Study for Shelter from the storm, Belle Île*, 2018, ink on paper, 29.5 x 42.5cm

Right: Luke Sciberras, *Shelter from the storm, Belle Île*, 2018, oil on board, 120 x 160cm





Left: Luke Sciberras, *North facing, Belle île*, 2018, oil on board, 120 x 160cm

Right: Luke Sciberras, *High beam, Belle île*, 2018, oil on board, 120 x 160cm



Top: Luke Sciberras, *Study for High tide I, Belle Île*, 2018, gouache on paper, 56 x 75cm  
 Bottom: Luke Sciberras, *Study for High tide II, Belle Île*, 2018, gouache on paper, 56 x 75cm

Top: Luke Sciberras, *Study for Pinnacles between, Belle Île*, 2018, 60 x 85cm  
 Bottom: Luke Sciberras, *Study for Bangor, Belle Île*, 2018, 60 x 85cm

# Euan Macleod



Euan Macleod, *Sunset (Belle Île)*, 2017, oil on linen, 100 x 124cm

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 Île 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 Île as part of the lead up to the show. Curator Wayne Tunnicliffe 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 Île 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 Île I took acrylic paints, paper and a small fold-up table to work on.

While working at Belle Île, 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.

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 Île 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 Île. 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 Île 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.



Top: Evan Macleod pointing at Belle Île, 2017. Photo by Bruce Inglis

Left: Euan Macleod, *L'apothicairerie* 8/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38.4 x 58cm

Right: Euan Macleod, *L'apothicairerie Rocks/Sea* 8/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38.3 x 57.3cm





Left: Euan Macleod, *Port Goulphar Belle Île  
Figure on Track 9/5/17*, 2017, acrylic on paper,  
38 x 58cm

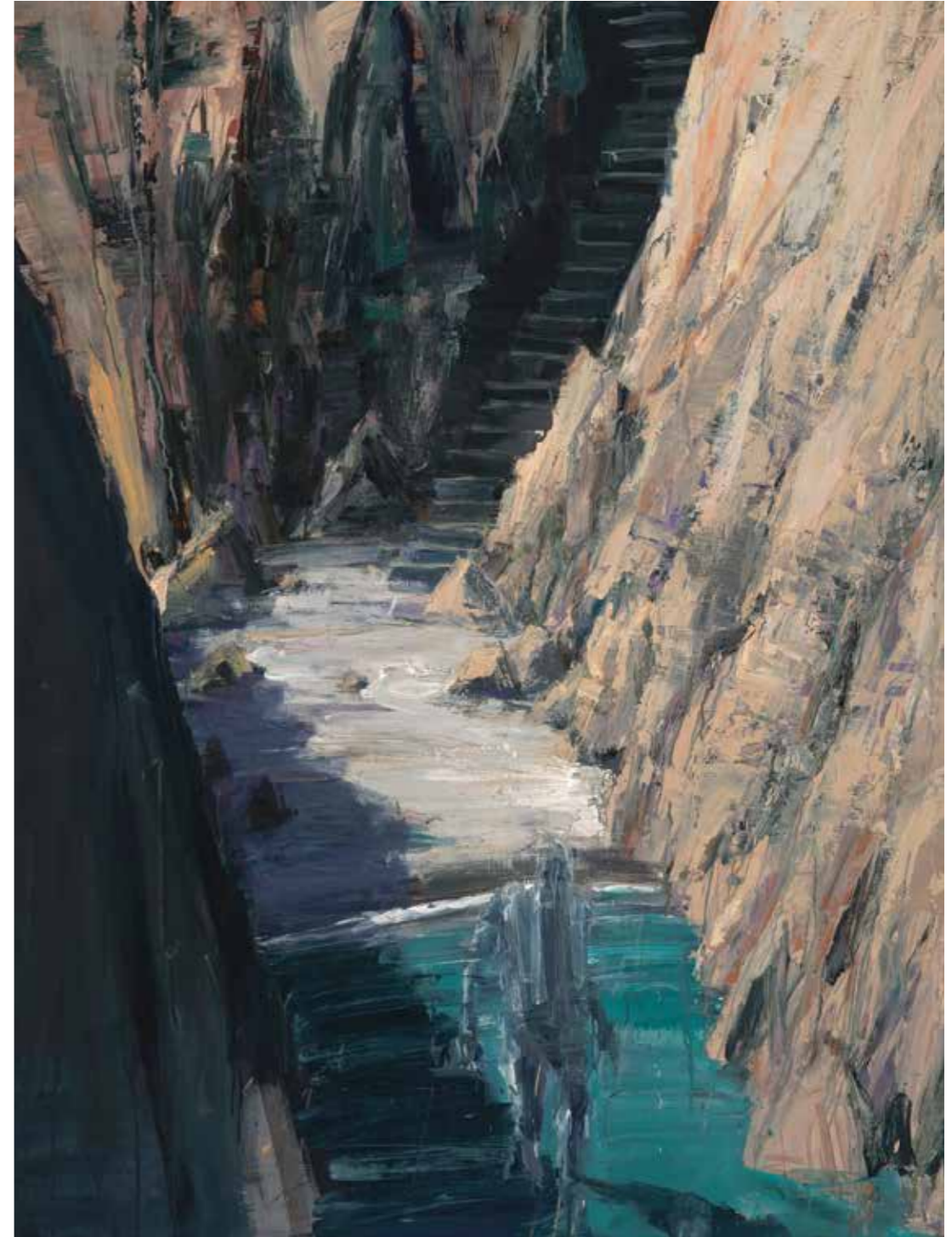
Right: Euan Macleod, *Needles*, 2017, oil on  
polyester, 216 x 122cm





Left: Euan Macleod, *Beach Study 10/17*, 2017, acrylic on paper, 37.6 x 28cm

Right: Euan Macleod, *Steps To Beach*, 2017-18, oil on acrylic on polyester, 180 x 137cm

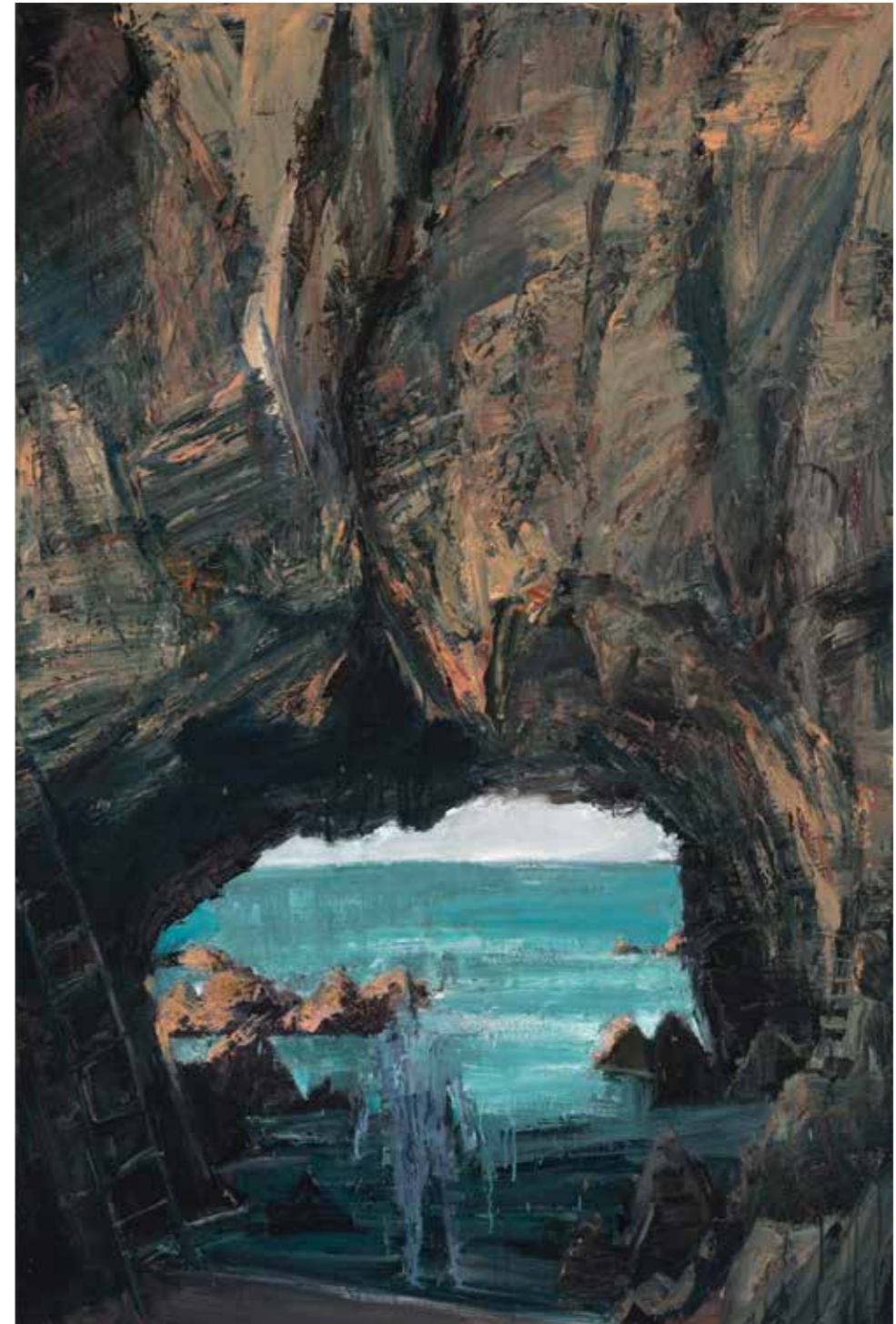




Top: Euan Macleod, *Small Cave Entrance*  
Study 11/17, 2017, acrylic on paper,  
28.5 x 38cm

Left: Euan Macleod, *Large Cave Entrance*  
11/17, 2017, acrylic on paper,  
58 x 76cm

Right: Euan Macleod, *Guillotine*, 2017-18,  
oil on acrylic on linen, 168 x 112cm





Left: Euan Macleod, *Belle Île Sea Cave*  
11/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 56.2 x 38cm

Right: Euan Macleod, *Sea Cave*, 2017,  
acrylic on polyester, 160 x 90cm





Left: Euan Macleod, *Belle Île 11/17*, 2017,  
acrylic on paper, 38.3 x 29cm

Right: Euan Macleod, *Vertical Study - Edge*,  
2017, oil on linen, 90 x 48cm





Left: Euan Macleod, *Study Figure in Cave*  
12/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper,  
38.9 x 27.6cm

Right: Euan Macleod, *Beach (Belle Île)*, 2017,  
acrylic on polyester, 120 x 84cm





Left: Euan Macleod, *Figures and Needles*  
9/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 37.3 x 28.1cm

Right: Euan Macleod, *Vertical Study with Needle*, 2017, oil on linen, 90 x 48cm





Top: Euan Macleod, *Needles and Luke Belle Île* 7/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38.4 x 57.5cm

Left: Euan Macleod, *Belle Île People and Needles* 7/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38 x 58cm

Right: Euan Macleod, *Self Portrait and Needles*, 2017 oil on linen 90 x 48cm





Top: Euan Macleod, Port Goulphar Belle Île Island/Headland 9/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38.4 x 57.5cm  
 Bottom: Euan Macleod, Nockie/Toul 10/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38.3 x 57.5cm

Top: Euan Macleod, Michael Painting Belle Île 12/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38 x 58cm  
 Bottom: Euan Macleod, Toul Rock (and MN on Right) 10/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38.5 x 57.5cm



Top: Euan Macleod, *Coast Port Goulphar* 12/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 37.9 x 58.5cm  
 Bottom: Euan Macleod, *Île en Oulan Belle Île* 8/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38 x 58cm

Top: Euan Macleod, *Belle Île and Needles* 7/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38.2 x 58cm  
 Bottom: Euan Macleod, *Hole in Rock Port Goulphar Belle Île* 9/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38 x 58cm



Top: Euan Macleod, Port Goulphar Belle Île 9/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38.4 x 58cm  
 Bottom: Euan Macleod, Rocks Steps and Tower Belle Île 9-11/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 29 x 38cm

Top: Euan Macleod, Needles, Figure Evening 10/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38 x 58cm  
 Bottom: Euan Macleod, Port Goulphar - Boat 11/5/17, 2017, acrylic on paper, 38.4 x 57cm

# Belle Île

Luke Sciberras & Euan Macleod

**Exhibition**  
13 July - 2 September 2018  
Manly Art Gallery & Museum  
West Esplanade Reserve, Manly NSW  
magam.com.au

**Curated by**  
Katherine Roberts, Senior Curator, Manly Art Gallery & Museum

**Documentary Film**  
Produced by Catherine Hunter & Bruce Inglis

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