

COVER: ANDREW MERRY Fire figure (Euan Macleod) no 2 2018 archival pigment print, 112 x 77cm.

STIRRING THE ASH Euan Macleod & Andrew Merry

A poem by Gregory O'Brien

Bathurst Regional Art Gallery 5 June - 25 July 2021



EUAN MACLEOD Stepping out of painting 2019, acrylic on paper, 38.5 x 58cm.

CONTENTS

Introduction Emma Collerton Curator, BRAG	XX
Written in ash Gregory O'Brien	XX
The Artists Joel Tonks Curatorial Assistant, BRAG	XX



ANDREW MERRY Metamorphosis (of Euan Macleod) no 6 2019, Hahnemühle Photo Rag Metallic print, 42 x 59.4cm.

For more than two decades, Sydney-based artist Euan Macleod has ventured out to the liminal landscape of Napoleon Reef, an old mining district some 15 kilometres east of Bathurst. There he has found inspiration in the harsh landscape, the scruffiness of the resilient natural vegetation scarred by the remnants of abandoned mine sites — tracks, trenches and deep holes.

Napoleon Reef is to Macleod what Mont Sainte-Victoire was for the French Post-Impressionist artist Paul Cézanne: a much-loved motif painted from different perspectives and depicting the nuances of the seasons and the diverse environmental extremes, from drought to heavy rain. "When you come to a place quite a lot, you get a sense of the changes," says Macleod.

Stirring the Ash emerged from a creative collaboration between Macleod and Blue Mountains-based photographer Andrew Merry, with the painter becoming an actor in documentarian Merry's evocative photographs. Using long exposures, Merry followed Macleod darting back and forth, painting the bonfire in the dead of winter. The resulting black-and-white imagery, with Macleod blurred and distorted, possesses a haunting Francis Bacon quality. In turn, Macleod wove Merry into his expressive en plein air paintings.

The collaboration between painter and photographer also alludes to the wrath of Mother Nature. Recently the Central West endured a long period of drought, closely followed by bushfires that ravaged the country from the NSW South Coast to the Blue Mountains and beyond; a thick blanket of heavy smoke extended from Sydney inland to Bathurst and up to Wellington. Yet from this bleakness and charcoal-burnt landscape emerged strength, resilience and regrowth. Initially horrified, upon reflection Merry viewed Macleod's decision to burn one of his expressive impasto canvases of Napoleon Reef on the bonfire 'like a metaphor for the Australian landscape, which is destroyed by bushfire, but then seemingly miraculously bursts back into new life,' He mused, "Hopefully, the audience will not be offended by the destruction of Art. Art is precious but ultimately everything is impermanent."

While fire has negative connotations of destruction, there is also the positive, as Macleod highlights. The dancing flames are a source of heat for warmth and cooking, they

INTRODUCTION

impart light to see and navigate, and they act as a cleansing agent of the land in agriculture and in cremation. The stirring of the fire's ash sparking embers to ignite, conjures up associations with energy and engagement.

Stirring the Ash is a partnership between three artists: a painter (Euan Macleod), a photographer (Andrew Merry) and a poet (Gregory O'Brien). On viewing the creative synergy between Macleod and Merry, New Zealand-based poet O'Brien — a close friend of Macleod — penned Written in Ash, featured in this publication. O'Brien's poem conveys the memories of the journeys he has travelled with Macleod, and of the newly produced work featured in this exhibition at BRAG.

BRAG is delighted to present this dynamic and poignant collaboration, and thank Euan Macleod, Andrew Merry and Gregory O'Brien for sharing their work with BRAG audiences; and to John O'Donnell and Katrina Daly for their hospitality at Napoleon Reef. BRAG also thanks Create NSW, BRAG Society Inc. and Bathurst Regional Council for their ongoing support.

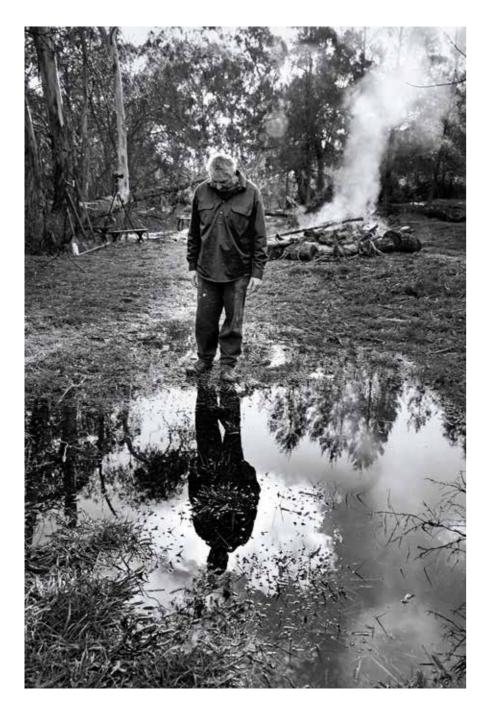
Emma Collerton Curator, BRAG



ANDREW MERRY Artist looking through a smouldering ashen window 2020, archival pigment print, 82 x 112cm.

WRITTEN IN ASH **Gregory O'Brien**

'The seasons are like a day, stretched over a year.' John Ash, 'The Burnt Pages'



ANDREW MERRY Euan in the House of *Elements (after Tarkovsky)* 2020, archival pigment print, 112 x 77cm.

We were rehearsing the end of the world, the paintings a necessary kindling. In the House of Elements, the table was

on fire; in the boarding-house of the sky beds were made, the roof raised

so high the sun fell beneath it, to rise next morning

on the third bookshelf from the ceiling, between In fires of no return

and The Burning Boy. Our blazing ornament. There isn't a word for fire,

I was told. All we have, at best, is an approximation. Fire burns all the pages

on which it is mentioned. And the moment you paint fire, it is gone.

Ш

The spark, on its brief trajectory, dreams itself a star's forever brightness—

wind-tossed, up-ended, more insect

than planet—it dreams a peaceful night's sleeplessness

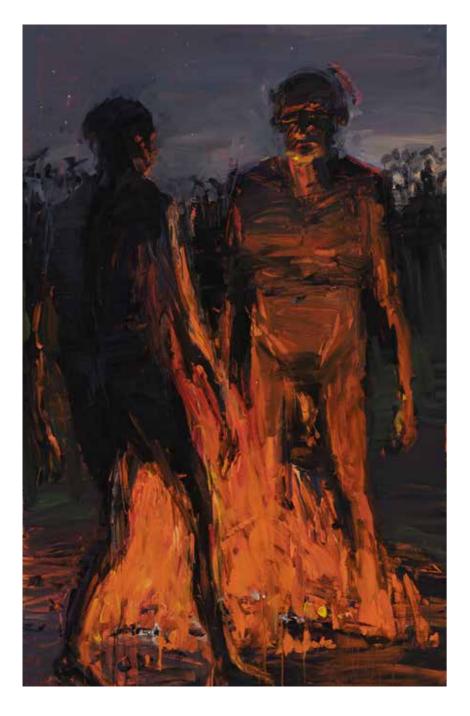
in its earthen cot. 'If you come into my garden...' So began

another fireside song. 'Before I was ash, I was aviatrix, fellow traveller,

a glimmer in a far-off eye. If you come into my garden, come into my garden,

this garden of flames, this garden beyond burning.'





Ш

Euan, we were half way back from Whakaari, our small plane like a floating ember

on its homeward loop. Behind us the volcano's well-upholstered plume. Next day I watched

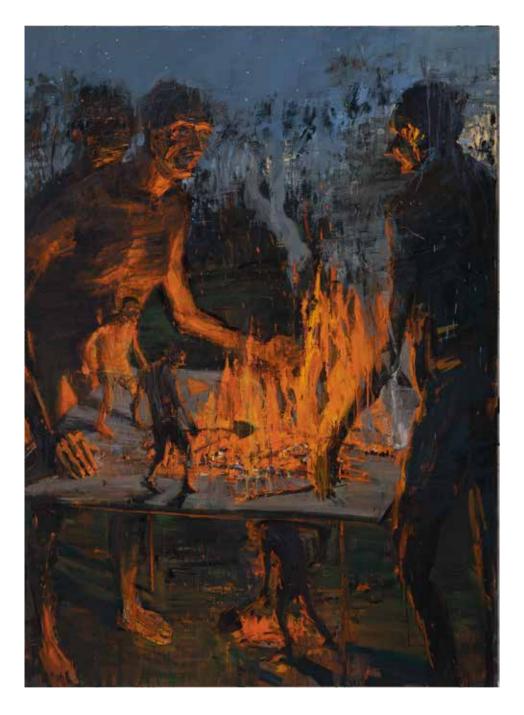
our northward flight in a satellite photograph of the eruption and

of the moon. As it was from your easel

where each canvas is measured by fire, tested, stretched beyond limit.

EUAN MACLEOD Figures across fire 2019 acrylic on linen, 213 x 133cm

its ashen cloud—an architecture of air and smoke and sulphur-clearly visible from the surface



EUAN MACLEOD *Large fire painting* 2020 oil on polyester, 250 x 180cm

EUAN MACLEOD Standing on fire painting 2019, oil on polyester, 76 x 56cm



IV

The camera lens as human eye, as inland sea, as dewdrop, as mother-of-pearl

earring. The camera lens as fish-eye or teardrop or millpond. The camera lens as eye

of the storm, as circular window in the end wall of the palais, as glass button

on a tawny jacket, as pupil of a sleeping teacher, as bottom of a well. The camera lens

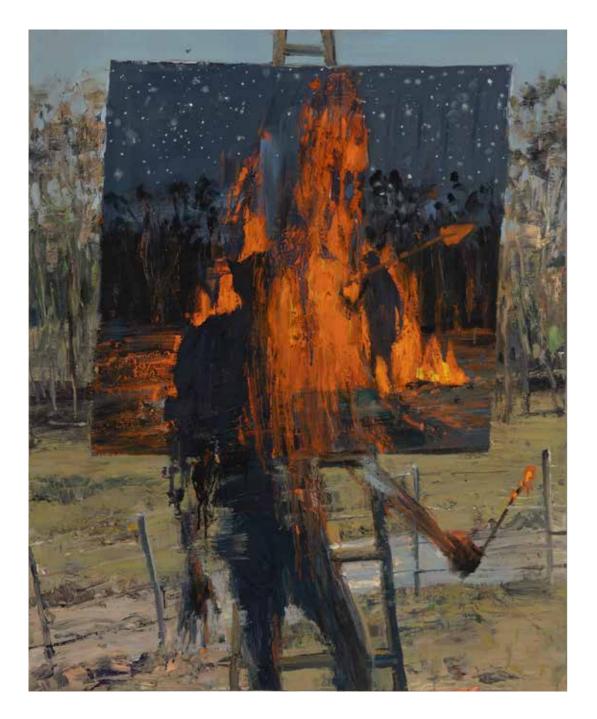
as evening lake in which a figure dives down to touch

the lakebed which is also the camera's bed, this lens in which all these years of accumulated light

are stored and in which the hours of a day are passed, in which this picture was taken.

ANDREW MERRY The artist's shadow reflected in the House of Elements 2020 Hahnemühle Photo Rag Metallic print, 59.4 x 42cm.





V Tripod and easel

Where fire builds its

best rehearsed and rendered underfoot, in shadow,

in the mirrored dark of the camera.

long-legged tripod—

both tread shakily on this earth, the stretcher

also a bed, the canvas a night's sleep, the painting a shipwreck or

burning building, the photograph the last panel of the end wall of the last house in this, the last town

EUAN MACLEOD Fire stick painting 2019 oil on polyester 24 x 100cm

dark and brightest house, such coal-blackness

in the fathomless pond of the painter's eye or

Broken limbs of the canvas stretcher and

VI

Driving north, a five-day mushroom cloud over Amberley

where local resident, Mr Grimmer, set fire to some 150,000 rubber tyres, all

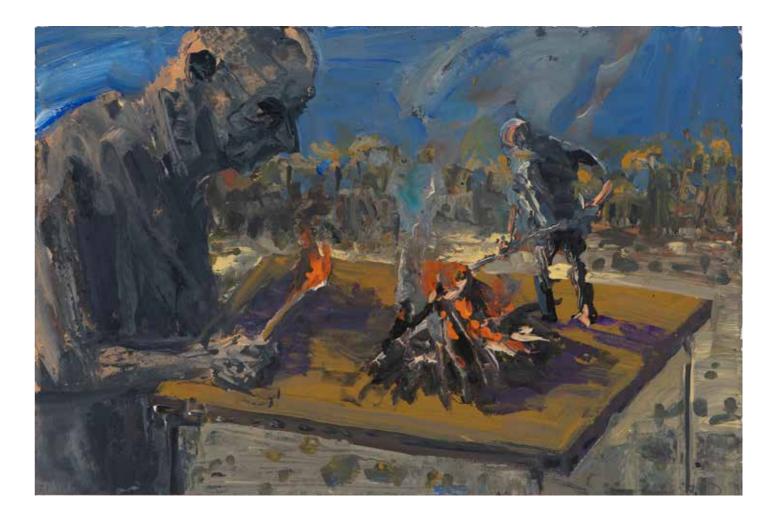
illegally dumped on farmland, not his. The plumes visible from Christchurch. Some fires

we have a say in, others seek us out. We were listening to The Fiery Furnaces

plucking their flammable instruments; behind us the ashen plume.

Later I wrote with my heel my name in burning sand washed

by a burning ocean, and cursed all of them, the appeased gods of Mr Grimmer, their burnt offerings.





VII Waitemata

off Torpedo Bay, I was out on the edge

of the Ring of Fire. The beams and acres of stretched canvas

consumed by fire or air or water, and those

left behind-dawn's fiery architecture, the radiant

insect-life, polished instruments and taut sails of a maritime afternoon.

Days without end, afternoons trailing off into the interior, and

none of these things outside the consideration of camera or paintbrush.

ANDREW MERRY Artist rehearsing the end of the world no 3 2020, archival pigment print, 42 x 59.4cm.

Watching sailboats trip across the wave tips

made me think of an artist's studio, and of those things

VIII

Before I was ash, bent as a branch, I was

a straightened gate or blackened forest, the years

like a canvas pulled taut over the stretcher

of my bones. Or, as the reflection of a man

in a pond, sunk deep into the camera's clear, blue eye

scouring the horizon for a signal or trace

of the pupil that attends its further, backward-facing window.

> ANDREW MERRY Fire figure (Euan Macleod) no 2 2018 archival pigment print, 112 x 77cm





EUAN MACLEOD Smoke shoveller and frame in puddle 2021 acrylic on paper, 58 x 38.5cm

EUAN MACLEOD Fire in hole 2021 acrylic on paper, 58 x 38.5 cm







IX Yeats

that is painting, in which

unidentifiable, expendable lifeforms

in this lake of turps

drawn alongside a stagnant pond—the sum of its wooden parts, a creaking and groaning,

extinguished in the glass, skyward eye

of the pond, seen from however high the long fly on its three-legged

perch, this world for the holding onto, this world for the burning.

EUAN MACLEOD Smoke 'n' mirror 2021 acrylic on polyester 213 x 133cm

Together we waded through the pond

all manner of life had been extinguished—

and oil. The rickety easel a long-legged fly

incendiary brushstrokes of a dying day

Х

In Paris, Yves on his deathbed imagines stars above the Pacific Ocean

falling like cinders, in slow motion. He writes from his ashen cot—in late morning

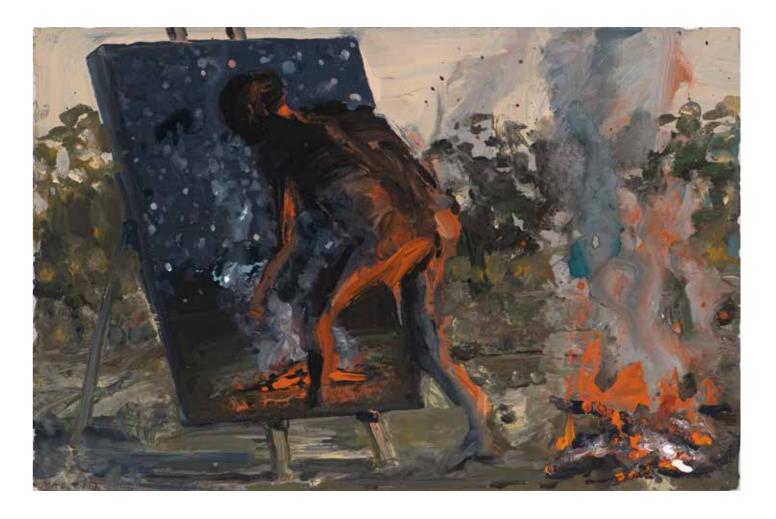
friends, former students carry his iron bedstead out into the open air. On the count

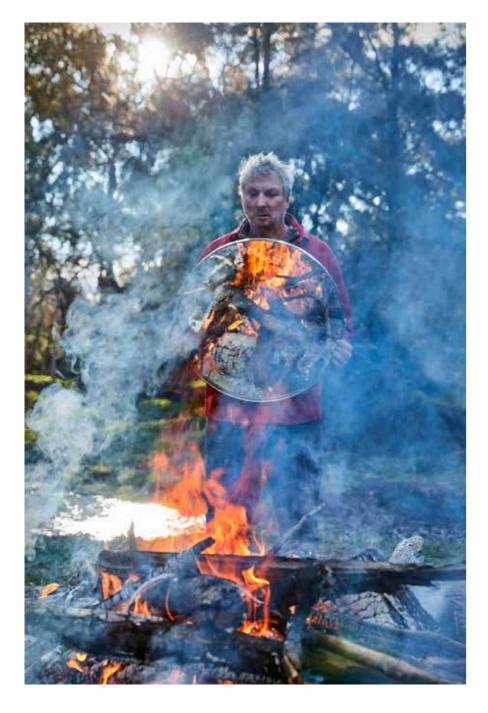
of three, he is hoisted high into the daytime Parisian sky in which is reflected

the moonlit, midnight sky of La Sud Pacifique. In an eye's blink he is no longer south or

north of anywhere. High above their heads, the bed is carried around the hospital garden. From here, I can see

the calm just behind his eyes and, not far off, the fiery bird perched in its flaming tree.





XI

Be it a hearth, or be it a warming bed,

a stacked, flaming pyre, signal or marker,

traversing long hours

of alien, hazardous night. Be it a currach or coracle, a stately vessel

set on fire as soon as

something danced around or walked upon. Fruit of the sawn branch, those things

consumed by fire and those Left behind. Watch over us.

ANDREW MERRY Euan holding a burning mirror in the House of Elements 2020 archival pigment print, 110 x 75cm.

an alarm raised. Be it a resting place

setting sail. Be it celebration or commemoration,

THE ARTISTS



Blue Mountains based photographer Andrew Merry was awarded a Master of Photography from the Australian Institute of Professional Photography (AIPP), and holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Queensland, majoring in Art History & Political Science.

He has been a finalist in major photography awards, including the 2019 Olive Cotton Award for

Photographic Portraiture. Recent projects include Edgewood: Aerial Photography of New Suburbia - an aerial survey of Sydney's advancing urban sprawl, as well as a dramatic documentary photo series capturing the rapid advance of the 2019 Blue Mountains bushfires.

Merry is a regular contributor to online editorial and stock photography communities, with

his photographs being used in major publications such as the journal Nature Climate Change and in advertising campaigns for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). He has been commissioned by The Museum of Australian Democracy, Federal Court of Australia and the Hydro Majestic.

ANDREW MERRY



New Zealand born artist Euan Macleod was awarded a Diploma of Fine Arts (Painting) in 1979 by the Ilam School of Fine Arts, Canterbury University, before moving to Sydney in 1981. He has won numerous art prizes in Australia, including the Archibald in 1999, the Sulman Prize in 2001, the Blake Prize in 2006, the New South Wales Parliament's inaugural Plein Air painting prize in 2008, the Tattersall's

Landscape Prize in 2000 and 2009, the Gallipoli Art Prize in 2009, and the King's School Art Prize in 2011.

In 2010 Piper Press, Sydney, published a monograph, Euan Macleod: The Painter in the Painting, written by Gregory O'Brien. Surface Tension: The Art of Euan Macleod 1991-2009. a Tweed River Art Gallery touring exhibition curated by Gavin Wilson, toured six regional



FUAN MACLEOD

Australian galleries. The touring exhibition Euan Macleod - Painter, curated by Gregory O'Brien, travelled to several New Zealand regional galleries between 2014 and 2017. In 2019 Macleod collaborated on High Wire, a book of drawings and words with Lloyd Jones, published in 2020.

Macleod is represented by King Street Gallery on William in Sydney and Niagara Galleries in Melbourne.

GREGORY O'BRIEN

Born in Matamata, **Gregory O'Brien** is a Wellington-based poet, art-writer, curator and artist. He has curated major exhibitions by artists including Fiona Hall, Rosalie Gascoigne, Noel McKenna, Jo Braithwaite and Euan Macleod. O'Brien's recent books include *Always song in the water--an oceanic sketchbook* (Auckland University Press 2019) and a collection of poems, Whale Years (AUP 2015). In 2019, he exhibited paintings, made in collaboration with Euan Macleod, at Watters Gallery, Sydney. Next year Auckland University Press is publishing a collection of his poems and paintings, *House and Contents,* and, in September, his extensive monograph on painter Don Binney. O'Brien exhibits regularly with Bowen Galleries, Wellington, and The Diversion, Picton.

ARTIST ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The artists wish to extend a special thanks to Katrina Daly and John O'Connell for their generous hospitality and to John for fire management. Thanks to Karen Burton (KB Art Projects) for the large exhibition prints, Martin Bass for drone video, plus all the support from the team at BRAG.

This catalogue is copyright. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced without permission of the publisher.

Published in association with the exhibition STIRRING THE ASH: Euan Macleod and Andrew Merry Bathurst Regional Art Gallery 5 June - 25 July 2021

ISBN 978-1-925008-44-9

Published by Bathurst Regional Art Gallery 2021 © Bathurst Regional Art Gallery 70-78 Keppel Street Bathurst NSW 2795 02 6333 6555 www.bathurstart.com.au Catalogue contributors: Gregory O'Brien

Catalogue Design: Emma Collerton and Jo Dicksen

Andrew Merry artwork photography: the artist; Euan Macleod artwork photography: Michele Brouet.

All dimensions are in centimetres, height before width before depth.

All artworks © the artist.

Andrew Merry images courtesy of the artist; Euan Macleod images courtesy of the artist and King Street Gallery on William, Sydney;



Bathurst Regional Art Gallery is supported by







BRAG STAFF: Sarah Gurich, Emma Collerton, Jo Dicksen, Julian Woods, Eloise Crossman, Joel Tonks, Kate Bywater, Lucy Smith, Robert Hirschmann, Tim Roebuck and Mike Allen.

