



STIRRING THE ASH

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Euan Macleod
& Andrew Merry

A poem by Gregory O'Brien

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

Bathurst Regional Art Gallery
5 June - 25 July 2021



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

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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



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.

I

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.

II

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.'



ANDREW MERRY *Stirring the ash* 2018, archival pigment print, 42 x 59.4cm.



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

III

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

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

of the moon. As it was
from your easel

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



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.





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

V Tripod and easel

Where fire builds its
 dark and brightest house, such coal-blackness

best rehearsed and rendered
 underfoot, in shadow,

in the fathomless pond of the painter's eye or
 in the mirrored dark of the camera.

Broken limbs of the canvas stretcher and
 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

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.



EUAN MACLEOD *Little fireman with blue sky* 2019, acrylic on paper, 38.5 x 58cm.



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

VII Waitemata

Watching sailboats trip across the wave tips
off Torpedo Bay, I was out on the edge

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

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

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



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

IX Yeats

Together we waded through the pond
 that is painting, in which

all manner of life had been extinguished—
 unidentifiable, expendable lifeforms

in this lake of turps
 and oil. The rickety easel a long-legged fly

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

incendiary brushstrokes of a dying day
 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.

X

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.



EUAN MACLEOD *Stepping into painting* 2019, acrylic on paper, 38.5 x 58cm.



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

XI

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

a stacked, flaming pyre,
signal or marker,

an alarm raised. Be it a resting place
traversing long hours

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

set on fire as soon as
setting sail. Be it celebration or commemoration,

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

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

THE ARTISTS



ANDREW MERRY

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.

EUAN MACLEOD *Andrew reflected* 2019, oil on polyester, 53.5 x 66cm. Collection of Andrew Merry.



EUAN MACLEOD

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

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.

ANDREW MERRY *Euan reflected* 2019, Hahnemühle Photo Rag Metallic print, 42 x 59.4cm .

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.

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