



'Rabbincap', 2010, acrylic on linen, 112.5 x 152 cm. Finalist in the 2010 Wynne Prize at the Art Gallery of NSW

FOR THE LOVE OF ANIMALS AND TASMANIA

The island of Tasmania has produced some remarkable art. The paintings of Michael McWilliams represent the place and its emotions with astonishing accuracy. Profile by David Lake.

THERE is a Tasmanian intensity which abounds in the works of Michael McWilliams. Growing up in the island's northern midlands offered a particularly rich experience for the sensitive young McWilliams when it came to contact with farm animals, as well as an abundance of native and introduced fauna and flora, all of which are well represented in his paintings. The keen observational powers of the latent artist were to provide a constant inspiration and a source for his expression.

When it is suggested that Tasmania has the most likeness of anything which is "English" in Australia, what springs to mind are the northern midlands' hedgerows and rolling hills of pasture along with their sheep and cattle, often those suited to cooler climates. Also present is the quite dramatic backdrop of the winter snowcapped Western Tiers, the streams they spawn and vast expanses of forest. Such is the artist's environment and also his focus for concern – a concern often presented in his work.

His residence is a 1826 coaching inn situated on a no longer through road section of the once main route between Launceston and Hobart, Tasmania's first two cities. The studio, a sympathetic more recent structure behind the dwelling, faces an extensive meandering, well wooded garden – the softness of the place well reflecting its custodian.

The 20-year journey through the pictures of this self-taught painter shows a steady growth of substance and depth, quite apart from an advancing technical ability and a prolific output.

After completing teacher's training in 1977, a Bachelor of Arts (Visual Arts/Printmaking) and four years in front of a class, the still youthful McWilliams was seconded into his parents burgeoning antique business to buy, sell and restore its stock. At age 34, a table with spoiled surface became his first "canvas" and unwittingly he gave the ancient tradition of furniture embellishment new momentum – an aspect of his work to be often visited. To this day he spends some time in Longford Antiques, now jointly owned with a partner, the shop remaining a source for the occasional spoiled piece destined to be appreciated with artful rendition.

McWilliams's gentility exudes in his work, manifesting a perfect replica of his preference for that which is mellow and peaceful. An underlying concern for the wellbeing of his St Franciscan friends, as well as for their habitat, provides the central theme for his pictures. The delicate balance of the environment is continually depicted, loss represented and an appeal for humankind to honour the relationship with all which has life. His work leaves one humbled and respectful of the natural world.



'The Chip Snatchers', 2010, acrylic on linen, 111.5 x 152.5 cm



'The Hay Jackers', 2007, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 140 cm



'They and the last Hamborgh', 2009, acrylic on laser pine panel 35 x 29.5 cm



'On the Boardwalk', 2009, acrylic on canvas, 110 x 120 cm

All this is portrayed in paint with a sometimes humorous theme. There exists theatre, sometimes touching on vaudeville, the company of great and celebrated painters is occasionally employed, as is the fantastic, with much delight. Not only is furniture painted, but it is also painted upon. Objects become beings and occasionally fly, inviting the viewer's thoughts to elevate in the name of fun. Observations of life are portrayed with layers of refreshing clarity, the resulting work manifesting in a variety of shapes and forms. A cigar box shows a communion of magpies (*Early Morning Get Together*); a 180 x 240 cm canvas entitled *Don't Call Me Daisy* depicts a Hereford cow of unsure gender, almost life-sized in a home town environment; a smaller native timber panel with finely



'Taking a Stand' (detail), 2009, acrylic on linen, 100 x 120 cm

decorated border depicts Bey, an Airedale terrier reclining in luxury on an upholstered Edwardian chair with companion – *They and the last Hamborough*; an antique kauri pine cabinet is enriched with panels of a bush pond scene with surprising and even alarming inclusions – *Down at the Frog Pond* ... The range and variety is enormous, photographs of his works filling weighty albums.

Recent works typically show the evolution of his dexterity in the craft. His entry for the 2010 Wynne Prize is a 112.5 x 152 cm canvas entitled *Rabbitscape*. Inspired by a breeding season true to its species (the studio surrounds assuming a somewhat Beatrix Potter resemblance!), the painting depicts rabbits, viewed at their eye level, at a greatly magnified scale. The eyes see the viewer, the work is full of anticipation and depth. Noses and whiskers seem to twitch, while a wallaby and a sheep peer through this colony and beyond, as if to reassure the viewer that 'we are still here'. With the signature Tasmania Tiger deep in the distance, the picture is again uniquely Tasmanian. As an example of McWilliams' skill, it displays a softness, unquestionable depth and levels of dimension.

Though *The Glip Snatchers* captures a universal scenario, it still shows the clarity of the Tasmanian shoreline, a familiar wooded verge secreting the characteristic Tasmanian shacks, and in the foreground, a beach little trodden. Again, it is a ground level view; however it's also painted from a viewpoint

'The Thin Line', 2009, acrylic painted top on antique red cedar table, diam. 133 cm

of empathy, the quality that lends so much of the richness in McWilliams' work. *The Glip Snatchers* cast comprises seagulls, it resonates with their squabbles and squawks, and their flapping of wings, all of which is in stark contrast to the calm of the water. The dimen-





'Down at the Frog Pond', 2007, on haori pine cupboard, c. 1889



'Don't Call Me Daisy', 2007, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 240 cm



'Early Morning Get Together', 2009, painted cigar box, 16.5 x 22 x 3.5 cm



'Night and Day', 2009, painted lid of antique commode, c. 1860, 43 x 50 x 50 cm

sion of sound is captured and cleverly amplified.

As a finalist in the 2010 Glover Prize, his painting *Above the Trees* shows again the Tasmanian Midlands landscape from a hot-air balloon viewpoint. The picture's colour is now familiar, the geography carefully reproduced. The scene is full and serene, the painting offering a fresh look at his home environment.

McWilliams' first significant prize was in 1996 as winner of the Eskleigh Foundation's Tasmanian Art Award. In 2004 he won the inaugural Glover Prize for Tasmanian landscape, one of Australia's richest landscape awards. John Glover, a contemporary of both Constable and Turner, emigrated to Tasmania, arriving in 1831 to settle nearby in the small town of Evandale, which now hosts the quite remarkable Glover Prize. In both 2005 and 2008 he won Adelaide's prestigious Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize – which in 2005 took him to the UK and Europe to visit some of the great art museums, inspiring a series featuring some of the iconic masterpieces as the backdrop for a humorous recording of the fictional travels of the Airedale Ikey.

McWilliams has work in important private and public collections, including Parliament House Canberra, The Powerhouse Museum (Sydney), The Museum of South Australia, The National Trust (Tasmania), Queensland Art Gallery, Lauraine Diggins (Melbourne) and Devonport City Art Gallery (Tasmania). With an enthusiastic local following his work will be found in many residences around Tasmania and Australia. Indeed, there exists 'a waiting list', his most recent exhibition selling out prior to opening.

An exhibition of new paintings will open at Lauraine Diggins Fine Art in Melbourne in August this year. This opportunity to view the works of Michael McWilliams (pictured) should be taken and savoured. The time spent will reveal timeless aspects of the Tasmanian landscape and its dwellers; the rich recording of a fine mind.

David Lake

David Lake is an exhibiting artist based in Longford, Tasmania and a 2010 Glover Prize finalist along with Michael



McWilliams. A Portfolio of his work was published in *Crafts Arts International* issue No. 78.

Michael McWilliams is represented nationally by Lauraine Diggins Fine Art, Melbourne – www.diggins.com.au Ph: +61 3 9509 9855