

Michael McWilliams TASMANIAN TAILS

2 October to 6 November 2010



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LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART

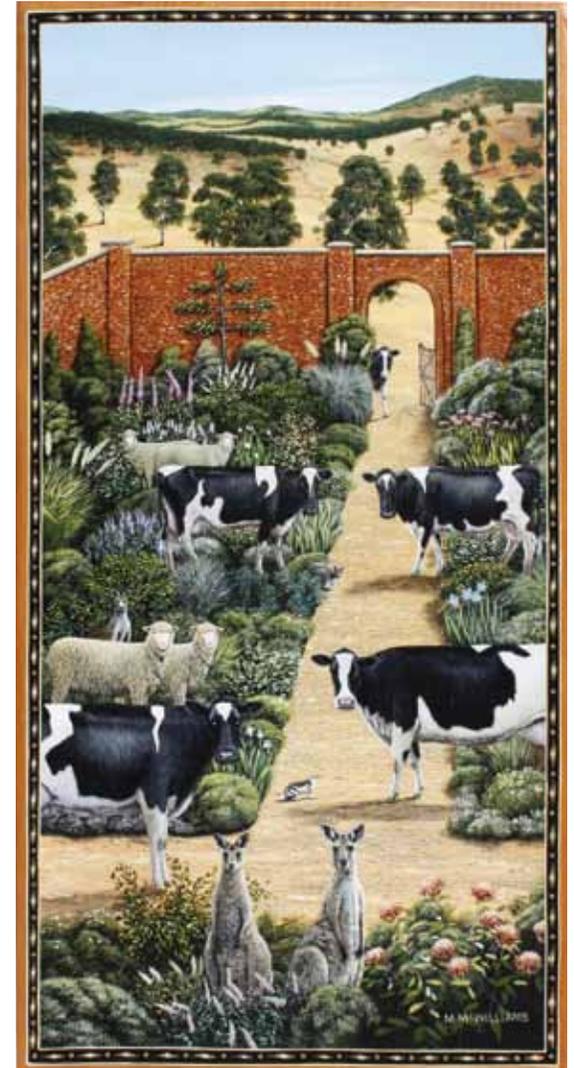


Far left
Hanna and the Gorse Bushes
 synthetic polymer on linen
 150 x 110 cm



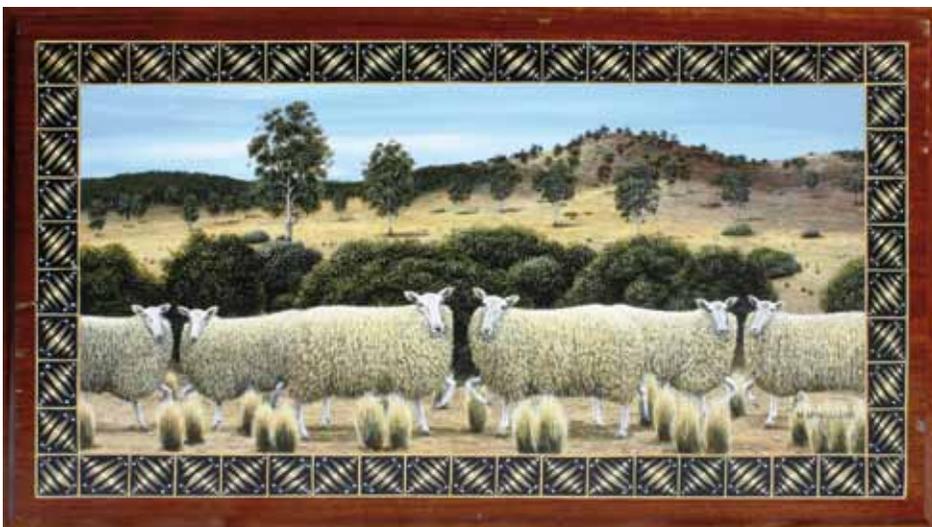
Left
The Open Gate
 synthetic polymer on kauri pine one door cupboard c.1900
 92.5 x 65 x 27.5 cm

Below
The Open Gate (detail)



Bottom left
Dancing in the Afternoon
 synthetic polymer on Tasmanian
 blackwood lidded box c.1920
 21 x 55 x 32 cm

Below
On the Crest of a Hill
 synthetic polymer on Tasmanian
 blackwood panel
 16 x 15.5 x 1 cm



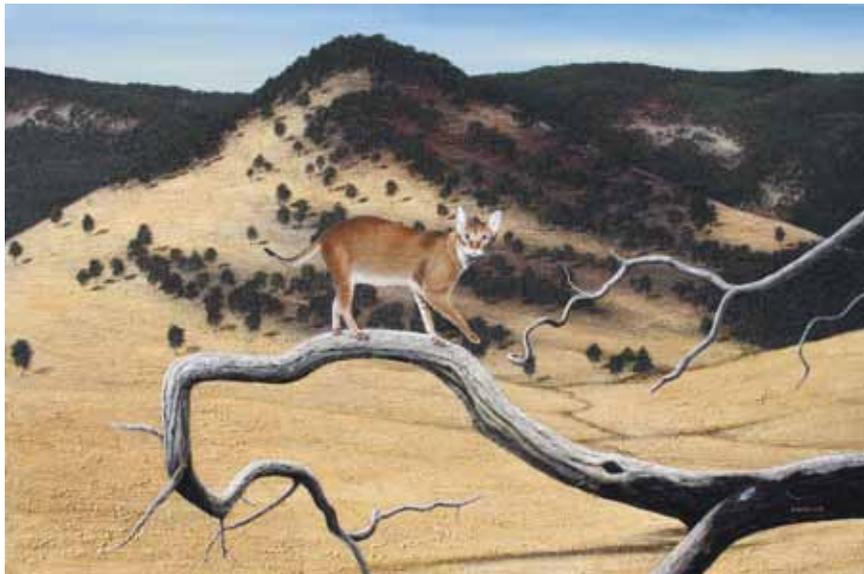
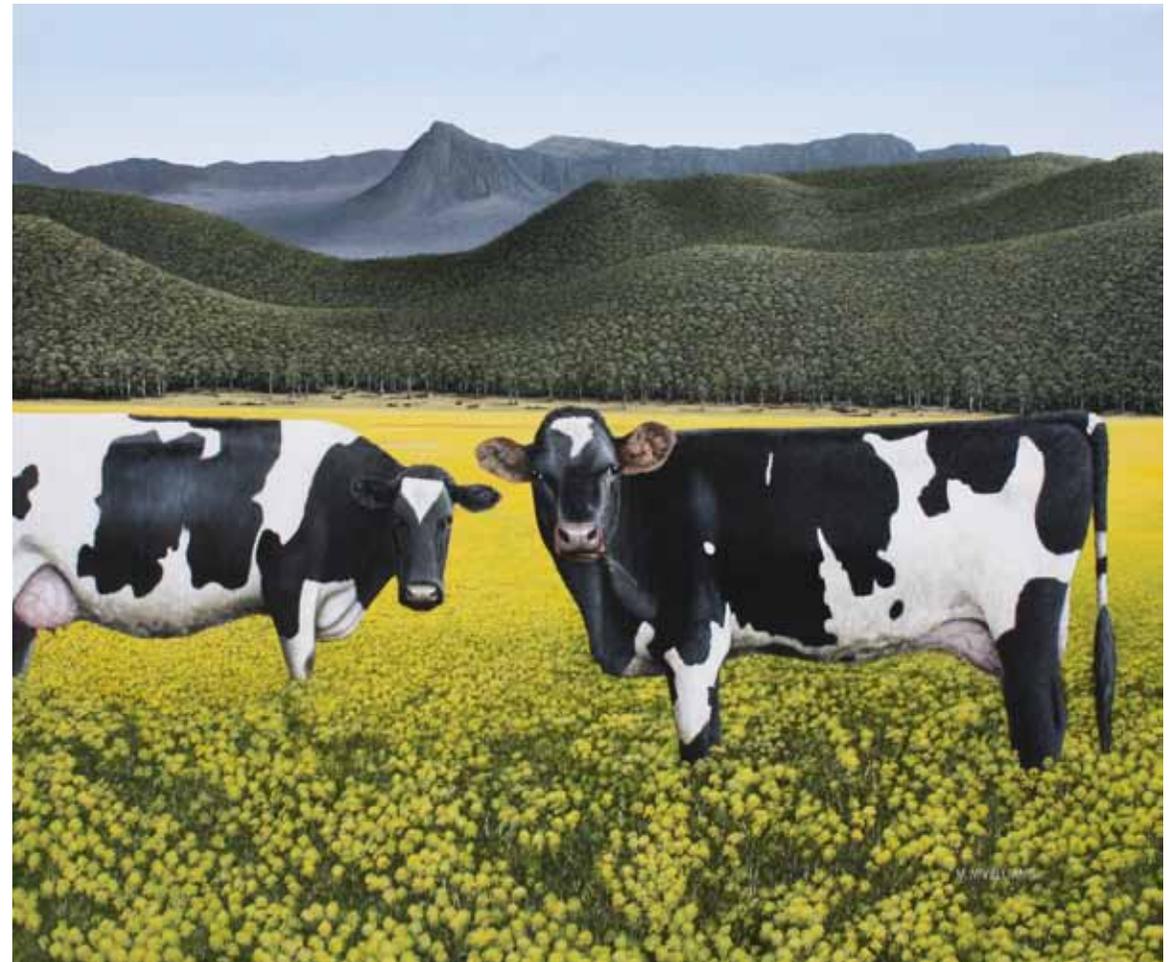
Right and below
On the Garden Path
synthetic polymer on Australian cedar
occasional table c. 1850
72 x 91 cm (diam.)



Left
Rabbitscape
synthetic polymer on linen
112.5 x 152 cm

Below
Cows in the Canola
synthetic polymer on linen
120 x 100 cm

Bottom left
Naughty Pussy
synthetic polymer on linen
150 x 100 cm



Michael McWilliams T A S M A N I A N T A I L S

This exhibition is like a fantastic story book, bringing together a diverse range of tales from the world of Michael McWilliams, populated by a host of colourful characters amidst the beauty of the Tasmanian landscape – the hills, mountains, beaches, gardens and other scenery known to him and depicted with great technical skill and confidence.

The landscape is a central focus of these tales, setting the scene for his cast of creatures – well loved domestic pets, native animals and livestock – all imbued with a real sense of personality and purpose, from the benign to the mischievous. McWilliams' skilful use of light and colour in the landscape adds to the narrative and ambience; golden yellow grass, forests of green trees, misty and mysterious grey mountains, sparkling waters, vast blue skies, and bright flecks of coloured flowers in a garden. *Ghostly Visions* is a striking play of light against dark. His proficiency as a landscape painter has developed and many of the paintings in this exhibition are palpably tactile; they come alive and, like any good story, completely transport the viewer.

McWilliams' tales are sometimes ones of great beauty and gentleness; the quiet hills dotted with a few sheep in *Long Track Up*, *Long Track Down* and *Descending Darkness* and *On the Crest of a Hill*. The beauty of the Fingal Valley looking back to Ben Lomond is exquisitely captured in *Cows in the Canola*, the serenity of the natural mountain landscape a contrast to the riotous yellow flowers, with both drawn together by the contemplative cows. This painting is also a lovely play on butter versus canola, an element of amusement that is typical of McWilliams' work.

For McWilliams' stories often feature a great sense of fun; with the sheep kicking up their heels in *Dancing in the Afternoon* and then transposed from their paddocks to be placed squarely on the road in *Mole Creek Road Blocks*. It is this surprise of the

unexpected that is such an admirable and enjoyable feature of McWilliams' oeuvre.

This real sense of fun is balanced by a more serious side that may at first be overlooked. McWilliams' artworks emphasise the place of flora and fauna within the wider order of things, causing us to reflect on our place within the world. The effect of humanity on the landscape, through development and farming; and the displacement of native plants and animals and the destruction of their habitats are common themes. The introduction of European species to the Australian landscape has had an irreversible effect. *Hanna and the Gorse Bushes* is a charming depiction of a cow in grazing land. However, Hanna is surrounded by gorse which is regarded as one of the worst weeds in Australia. It is invasive, spreads quickly, provides shelter for pests such as rabbits, is flammable (so a fire hazard), and prevents stock grazing in infested areas.

Similarly, *Rabbitscape* (a finalist in this year's Wynne Prize for Landscape at the Art Gallery of New South Wales) draws attention to the plague proportion of rabbits, especially in Tasmania. Rabbits take over the territory, whether bush, farm or garden, and dominate the landscape. They are destructive, digging burrows and eating plants. The sheep and kangaroo are pushed to the background, soundly displaced, peering at the viewer from between the multitude of rabbits who seem about to hop straight out of the painting, loudly and boldly making their claim as the lead in this tale.

The suggestion of a moral tale is also evident in *Passing in the Night* with the fox and the thylacine slinking in the darkness. The Tasmanian tiger, although officially declared extinct, still lives in McWilliams' tales, often a shadow hidden among trees, acting as a symbol of hope and belief.

The Open Gate is a beautiful example further exploring stories of place and of native versus introduced species. Here is a contrast between a

cultivated and well-tended garden looking to the hills of the natural landscape beyond the gate. The animals have invaded the garden for food; sheep and cows as well as kangaroos and a pademelon and bandicoot. The scene is painted on a cupboard, a reminder of McWilliams' beginnings in giving new life to appropriate furniture from his business, Longford Antiques.

Despite this strong environmental viewpoint, McWilliams tends to instill a positive sense of responsibility. He does not preach, but rather takes a 'velvet glove' approach and the viewer is allowed to make their own interpretation. *Naughty Pussy* depicts a cat balancing lightheartedly on a dead tree branch. There is some ambiguity in the painting (Is the cat domestic or feral? Are we looking at a killer or playful pet?) which shows up the duality of cats and is reflected in the title – the diminutive and affectionate pussy is only half-heartedly scolded for being naughty – the tell-tale feather remains. *Four Legs and a Few Feathers* continues this theme – are the feathers all that remain or what is left from the one that got away?

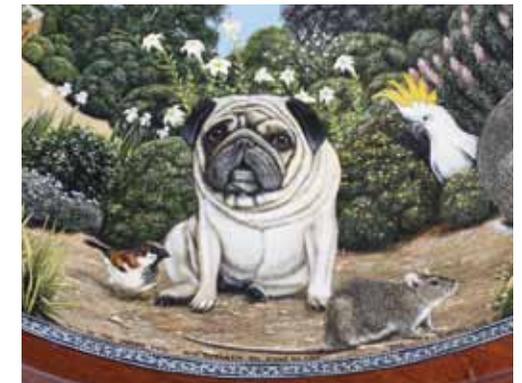
As to be expected in such an anthology, a variety of characters are considered – beloved pets, neighbouring livestock and observed wildlife. McWilliams' depictions of animals are really portraits. It can be quite disconcerting to find oneself eye to eye with a giant rabbit, a swooping seagull or a cow in a canola field. Yet it is this interaction that leads the viewer into the painting and to find our place within it – to respond, react and recognise. Sometimes this is an immediate reaction to a universal experience, such as *The Chip Snatchers*, the invasion of seagulls at a picnic on the seashore a familiar occurrence. There is a level of accessibility in McWilliams' work; by painting recognisable themes and scenes the viewer is easily attracted for a closer look. Those that do will be well rewarded; to admire the artist's technical skill,

to become immersed in the atmosphere and to contemplate on the layers of meaning and subtle use of humour.

On the Garden Path is a wonderland and like Alice we rush through the swirl of sky with a sense of giddiness. We land in an idyllic place featuring a beautiful garden with pets and other animals who live or frequent here by design or by choice (natural gum trees, cultivated flowers, pet pugs, domestic chooks, and wildlife including goshawk, magpie, kookaburra, cockatoo, rat and of course the ubiquitous rabbits). The vertigo McWilliams inspires is similar in effect to looking up at painted renaissance or baroque cathedral domes; here however is a homage to and celebration of nature.

Of course, we all enjoy exotic tales, as does Elizabeth the pug in *Dreaming of Venice* as she patiently waits for the gondolier to serenade her down the river. Perhaps Elizabeth also visited the Uffizi to admire Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* which she has cheekily invaded with her pug friends. This is so incongruous and quirky and yet also so successful – the pugs really don't look out of place!

Tasmanian Tails is a delight, to be regularly revisited and make new discoveries, like a well-thumbed book.

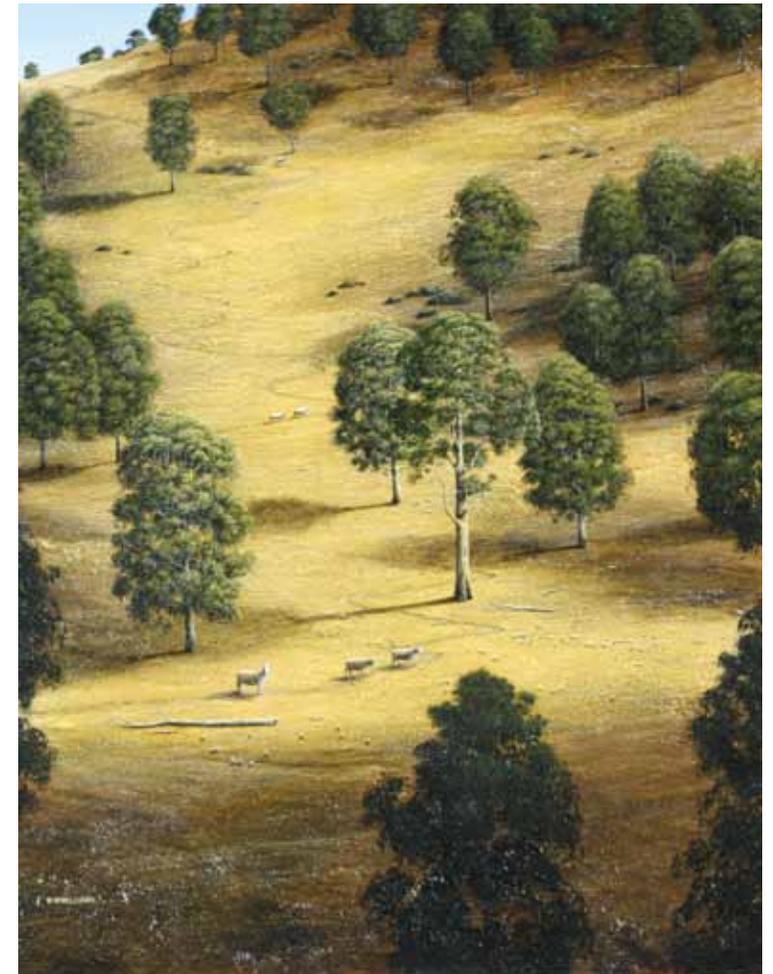


On the Garden Path (detail)

Below
Ghostly Visions
synthetic polymer on linen
120 x 100 cm



Top right
Long Track Up, Long Track Down
synthetic polymer on linen
120 x 100 cm



Bottom right
Four Legs and a Few Feathers
synthetic polymer on Australian cedar panel
8.5 x 16.5 x 1.2 cm





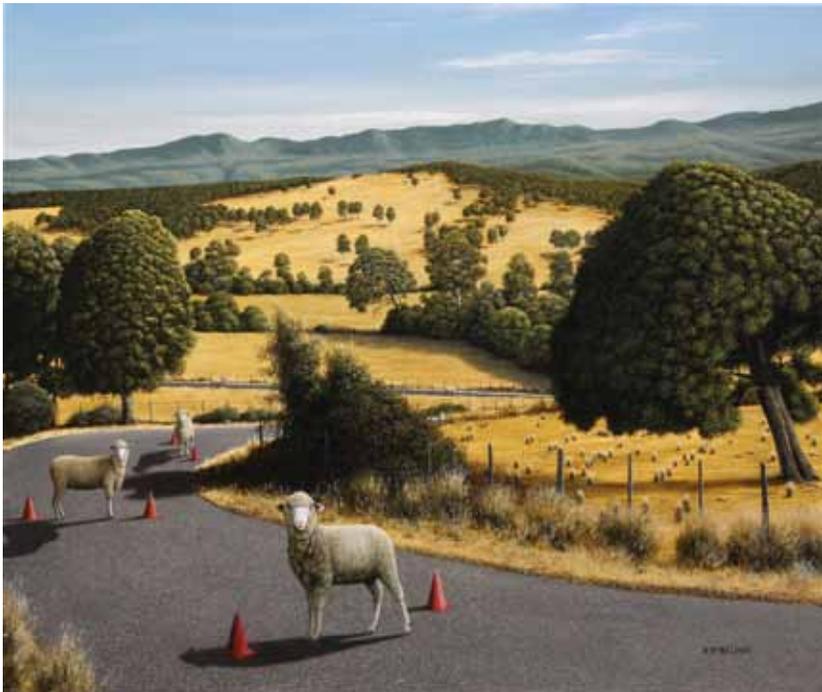
Top left
Dreaming of Venice
synthetic polymer on linen
120 x 100 cm



Bottom left
Mole Creek Road Blocks
synthetic polymer on linen
100 x 120 cm

Below
The Chip Snatchers
synthetic polymer on linen
162.5 x 202.5 cm

Front cover
The Invasion of Venus
synthetic polymer on linen
130 x 210 cm



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Gallery hours Tuesday to Friday, 10am – 6pm
Saturday, 1 pm – 5 pm Sunday, closed