



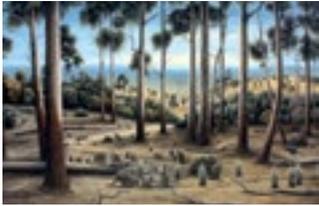
MICHAEL McWILLIAMS

An Aussie Wally

18 JULY - 29 AUGUST 2015

LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART

MICHAEL McWILLIAMS: LONGFORD CALLING



COVER
The Reunion
synthetic polymer on linen
120 x 180 cm

Longford, the birth town of Michael McWilliams, must have seemed like paradise on earth for a young kid growing up in Tasmania in the early 1960s. Free to roam at will, there was none of the concern expressed by today's helicopter parents about where you were and when you were likely to come home. Safe in my elder brother's company, I ranged high and low in Longford around the same time as Michael. I recall one inspired moment of taking from the rich to give to the poor, only to find out later that my brother and I had inadvertently vandalised the local Methodist church to hide ill-gotten gain. There are many different ways to get in strife as a child.

My father secured his first posting as a Methodist Minister at this church. A Ballarat boy by birth, Dad was also a keen angler: a fly fisherman who used Longford and Cressy as a base for his free time. He often trudged through local farmers' paddocks in search of well-stocked dams. When he had more time at his disposal he would head off to the veritable wild of the nearby mountains to locate 'secret' water catchments and rivers that ran free and cold.

My father made a clear distinction between native animals that should be admired but

left alone; domesticated animals that served important physical, emotional and nutritional needs and destructive pests such as rabbits, foxes and feral cats. Rainbow and brown trout were an introduced species that, unfortunately for them, tasted far too good to be left in peace. In this pecking order, cats hovered somewhere in between. Many people around us revered them as adorable pets. Alternatively they were used as efficient killing machines to keep houses and sheds free of rodents and other pests. My brother and I were paid handsomely by my father to stop cats from raiding the chook house. We dutifully kept them at bay using slingshots he had cut and fashioned from local wattle.

The experience of growing up in Longford for Michael McWilliams and his family (at least I like to imagine) would have been much the same. His love of the local landscape, skies and hills would have been nurtured there first. This was the same landscape that inspired a myriad of celebrated painters and writers, ranging from John Glover and Tom Roberts through to Philip Wolfhagen and the award-winning novelist Richard Flanagan. McWilliams's appreciation of native timbers such as Blackwood, Myrtle and Huon pine, his use of colonial picture frames and his skilled training in furniture restoration draw on this unique Tasmanian Midlands heritage. The ever-present sight of sheep, cows, chooks and ducks would have framed his childhood vistas. A long-held interest in indigenous animals and the destructive impact of humans would also have been the source of much consternation and debate.

The art of Michael McWilliams is no nostalgic retake or recreation of the past: nor is it a bleeding heart environmentalism. Rather, his work treads an intriguing path through the myriad of issues surrounding European colonisation of the land. In his work, contemporary attitudes toward both native and

introduced animals are registered, explored and humorously played out. He asks us to consider the plight of *all* animals and the role we can play in their quality of life.

McWilliams's most recent series, *An Aussie Wally*, turns its attention to the Tasmanian wallaby (the Pademelton): extinct on the mainland but still abundant on the Apple Isle. Although not an endangered species as such, wallabies cling to a well-worn path of existence, sticking to bush havens and wandering out into pastures at night. Exploring the no man's-land fringing the hedgerows and beautifully laid out crops, their nocturnal search for food causes problems for local landowners and farmers who sometimes have them shot.

An Aussie wallaby frequents each of the new paintings, most completed in the last twelve months. Sometimes in true *Where's Wally?* style, searching for McWilliams's wallabies demands very close scrutiny. *The Reunion* and *The Three Sisters* are wonderful evocations of wallabies grazing amongst eucalypt strands in John Glover-inspired Tasmanian landscapes, in which carefully groomed parkland and verdant native bush are juxtaposed. In *The Three Sisters* the two hunched grazers turn to face the viewer and we are made aware of the stealth nature of our collective gaze. Implicit in this painting is the precarious balance that needs to be maintained to ensure the animal's future wellbeing.

In another of the large paintings, *Wallaby Amazement*, McWilliams plays cheekily with a mob of wallabies set in a traditional English maze. Trimmed within an inch of its life, the rigid geometry of the maze provides a startling contrast to the motley and naturally curious gang of wallabies who innocently go about their business. Is the artist pointing to the Darwinian adaptability of these creatures? Or have they been segregated, as in *On The Safer Side*? Perhaps the wallabies' relative freedom and playfulness is contrasted with the plight of animals held for long periods in captivity such as in *A Day at the Zoo*?

McWilliams's paintings are divided between ones that show wallabies in their natural (and in some cases unnatural) state, and works that locate them in more incongruous settings. *Lost in the Orient* stitches the furry marsupial into a patchwork quilt of seemingly far away cultures and other times. In *The Window Dresser* the wallaby is caught transfixed in the front window of a menswear store while two further works place Wally in a rubbish dump and a rag bin. In both of these, the beguiling beauty of the surrounding objects and materials and the intricacies of the respective compositions effectively compete for and capture our attention. The dripping ice-cream patina of *In the Rag Bag* is enticing enough to lick. However there is also the sense that the wallaby is drowning in a sea of human consumption and waste.

The Uncertain Visitor is also an impressive painting by McWilliams. It sums up the focus of the show and the paradox we face. A beautifully kept colonial mansion is surrounded by verdant bushes, exotic flowers, English box hedges and manicured lawns. On a meandering gravel path,



The Three Sisters
synthetic polymer on linen
120 x 180 cm



Wallaby Amazement (detail)
synthetic polymer on linen
120 x 150 cm



Lost in the Orient
synthetic polymer on linen
75 x 75 cm

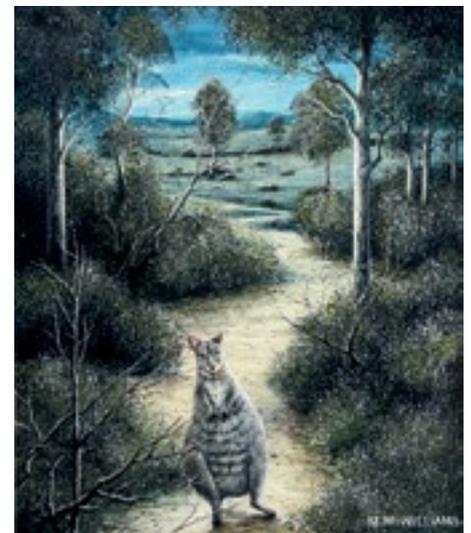
that circumnavigates the exotically landscaped grounds, a wallaby tentatively searches for new habitat or food. Unbeknown to her or him, the family cat suns itself on the path further along, while a Dalmatian watches on unannounced from behind; its mate close by. There is a witty visual analogy between the harmless looking moggie and the Tasmanian tiger or Thylacine which, as the artist points out, was trapped and killed

until almost extinct. This master predator has been replaced across the country by equally voracious but far more damaging domestic hunters in feral 'pets'.

McWilliams's large-scale paintings and smaller paintings on timber panels impart shared memories and ideals that recreate a world that is both genteel and malign. The beauty of the landscape and its seasonal variations shown in *The Leafy Way*, where a tapestry of interwoven foliage dances across the sky, are testament to McWilliams's high regard for nature and its restorative powers. Into this world are introduced various threats. There is the suggestion of implied violence and loss. However respecting all animals and the environment they need in order to flourish seems to be the *raison d'être* of his work.

My father, though now long retired, recently made me a large kitchen table out of Tasmania's famous Huon pine. It is a truly magnificent piece of furniture that has been built to last centuries. He purchased kiln-dried, undressed timber from a timber town, Strachan, in the early 1980s and has carted around these planks from pillar to post ever since. While I marvel at the qualities of the timber – its smell, colour, grain and oily texture – I cannot help wondering about the wood in its natural state and the pristine forest from whence it came. Eight hundred-year-old Huon pine does not come from plantations and I oscillate between admiration for the skill of his craft and the ambition of his endeavour and a concern for the destruction and unlikely regeneration of old growth forests.

Maintaining a balance between sustainable timber and land harvesting and the introduction of new species against the continuing vitality of native flora and fauna are issues that we all face. It is not enough to live in a state of perpetual denial or guilt. The work of Michael McWilliams bridges the lacuna between need and desire by focusing on what is intrinsically worth caring for (and where necessary fighting about). His finely



Late Night Out
synthetic polymer on Kauri pine
23.5 x 19.5 cm



Rainforest Dancer
synthetic polymer on linen
120 x 150 cm

crafted and intricately rendered paintings of the Tasmanian agricultural and pristine wilderness environment, including *Rainforest Dancer*, and his humorous valorisation of Wally as an Australian icon highlight, in the artist's words, 'the plight of animals in our domination of the planet'. They are a gentle reminder of what we have, what is already lost and what we still stand to gain.

Apart from that, of course, these new paintings by Michael McWilliams are just plain good. The refined brushwork, subtle colours and dramatic treatment of light resemble the work of the great John Glover. Just as Glover's style evolved over time so has McWilliams's. His great capacity for storytelling and the disarming sense of humour are matched by an aesthetic sensibility that continues to grow.

Rodney James, 2015



The Uncertain Visitor
synthetic polymer on linen
120 x 150 cm



A Day at the Zoo
synthetic polymer on Kauri pine
24 x 27.5 cm



Mickey and Friends
synthetic polymer on linen
75 x 75 cm



Tip Trip
synthetic polymer on linen
120 x 100 cm



On the Safer Side
synthetic polymer on Kauri pine
24 x 28 cm

This exhibition takes a gentle approach to highlighting the plight of animals in our domination of the planet. My aim is to make us think carefully about our connection and our relationship with animals. Perhaps people seeing these paintings will reflect on an animal and its life, and develop respect and appreciation for the welfare of animals.

Michael McWilliams, 2015



In the Rag Bag
synthetic polymer on linen
75 x 75 cm



Keeping Up Appearances
synthetic polymer on linen
75 x 75 cm



The Window Dressers

synthetic polymer
on linen
100 x 120 cm



The High Flyers

synthetic polymer on Kauri pine
21 x 28 cm



The Leafy Way

synthetic polymer on linen
100 x 120 cm

LAURAINNE • DIGGINS • FINE • ART

5 Malakoff Street, North Caulfield, Vic 3161
Tel: (61 3) 9509 9855

Email: ausart@diggins.com.au
Website: www.diggins.com.au

Gallery Hours: Tues - Fri 10am - 6pm,
Sat 1pm - 5pm