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Liza McCosh: Fusion
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Deakin University Art Gallery
Introduction

One could say Liza McCosh is consumed by land. A relationship that continues to the present day with her native locale in Western Victoria, she is attracted to and energised by the formidable elemental forces which have defined and imprinted themselves on the region. This attraction to dramatic and powerful landscape has compelled her to travels that have extended to remote Australia, Canada, Alaska and New Zealand.

Liza McCosh also has a long relationship with Deakin University beginning as an undergraduate student in the early 1990s and successively obtaining her Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in 1994, Masters of Arts (Research) in 1997 and PhD in 2004, completing her dissertations The Interpretation of Nature as Spiritual Content in Painting and The Sublime: Process and Mediation.

Liza has been increasingly involved as a member of staff lecturing in painting, drawing, colour theory and visual theory; supervising Honours and Post Graduate candidates; as the Summer School Co-ordinator as well as a number of voluntary roles as a member of Academic and Research committees and Faculty Boards. Her commitment to Deakin has spanned the long journey from the School of Contemporary Arts in Warrnambool to the Institute of Koorie Education in Geelong.

This project was assisted by the generous contribution of time and energy from Marion Manifold who has written an engaging and lucid appraisal of the artist’s endeavour in the catalogue essay. We would also like to express our gratitude to Brenda O’Connor, Acting Director of the Warrnambool Art Gallery for travelling to Deakin University, Melbourne Campus at Burwood, to open this exhibition.

Victor Griss
Exhibition Curator
Fragment 2007
acrylic and oil on canvas
90 x 70 cm
“Descend, bold traveller, into the crater... and you will attain the centre of the earth.”
Jules Verne

Liza McCosh travels from her home on the coast at Warrnambool to work at Deakin University’s Institute of Koorie Education on the coast at Geelong. In doing so, she traverses the volcanic landscape. She skirts the Framlingham Forest and Aboriginal Trust, the volcanic eruptions of the Sisters and Mt Noorat, the crusty salt rimmed crater lake of Gnotuk, and the town of Camperdown nestled into the maar of Mt Leura, and past Mt Wirrdgil. McCosh then encounters the volcanic upheaval and barrier of the Stony Rises – a low rise of rocky outcrops, covering approx 150 square kilometers. The area is a complex coalescence of dormant volcanoes, lava flows, rocky ridges, collapsed blisters and caverns, brackish and fresh water lakes, peat bogs and lagoons where humans have lived for approximately 50,000 years. Evidence of the Aboriginal occupation – middens, structures and fish traps – are remnant features in the landscape. Mega-fauna once roamed the Stony Rises, and fossilised giant wombat claws and pearly opalised kangaroo teeth are found on the clay pans by shifting lakeside lunettes.

The Stony Rises presented an inhospitable barrier to the first Europeans but the pioneering Manifold brothers penetrated the rugged and dense bushland and in 1838 reached the fresh water source of Lake Purrumbete and called it ‘the wished for land’. Others followed: settlers, scientists and artists... including Eugène von Guérard, who in the 1850s recorded the newly explored wilderness and colonial settlement under wide expanses of sky and at times his art evoked the romantic sublime.

Now McCosh journeys to the centre of the Stony Rises.

McCosh has rigorously researched the philosophical concept of the sublime to situate her art practice. She has explored the romantic, material, feminine, geological and ecological sublime but shies from an idealist transcendental Kantian sublime, which she perceives as problematic, privileging mind and spirit above body, matter and experience. McCosh purposely aims to collapse patriarchal dualisms by preferring a ‘material sublime’ derived through the interaction of the senses with the material. She grounds herself in the materiality of her art making.

The sublime itself cannot be represented. The sublime is an experience where the mind overcomes the fear and awe of the material, often nature. However a sense of the sublime experience is often depicted in art, a joining of the material and the immaterial. The romantic art tradition depicted humans in mysterious
dark woods or on the edges of precipices awed by
nature, but in the same works a misty ethereal light
evoked the sense that they had overcome the fear
and awe and attained an enlightened sublime state.

However, humans rarely get a show in McCosh's
work. It is the viewer who is overwhelmed by
McCosh's elements — earth, water and sky — which
McCosh admits has roots in a romantic Turner-esque
tradition. She seeks the sublime experience through
her art and describes instances of her encounters.

As a small child McCosh ran to the edge of a
precipice at Tower Hill and was overcome by
awe at the realisation of her close encounter
with falling, death.

McCosh also refers to sublime moments in the making
of her art: struggles with new mediums, accidents
occurred, the unexpected rippling of paint, or other
effects through which 'new insights into creativity were
realised'. McCosh maintains that a material sublime
is of greater relevance to the contemporary artist
as it 'is a sensory experience grounded in forms of
material interaction... which interprets the experience
as a holistic co-emergence of matter rather than the
mastering of matter'.

McCosh employs a chance automatism process
to disrupt and defy boundaries. Describing one of
her chance processes, McCosh squeezed the remains
of the sponge onto the painting and found the paint
'volume and consistency changed. The paint retained
air bubbles, taking on a whipped texture and the
appearance of porous rock'. The works are inherently
informed by the atmospheric processes of the water
cycle — fog, swirling mists, liquid, precipitation.
McCosh lets the paint go where it will. The pigment
curdles. Air, evaporation, defines the rest.

In Fragment, Surge 2 and Blow, McCosh's primeval,
explosive phreatomagmatic eruptions of water and
magma, steam and gases, and pyroclastic flows spiral
out of control. Iron pisolithes (buckshot) spatter the
canvas, cinder cones meld into the lava flows, scoria
upheavals mould craters and the wind blown oils
form lakeside lunettes, swamps and maars, tectonic
depressions and monoclines. Shorelines swell and
recede and water seeps through gullies and chasms
— forming tunnels, lineations and sinkholes, cavities
and fissures.

McCosh's marbling also destroys the contrived
European painting traditions, such as 'coulisses', that
Von Goerlitz used to enclose the vista'. There is no
frame of trees, rocks or mountains; it is unrestrained
nature and forces. As in Gaia theory, the earth, the
canvas, becomes a living, self-regulating organism.
The work evokes a fear of falling, dissolution of
identity, vertigo. The viewer is sucked into the vortex
toward nadir. We traverse the caves and grottoes
with McCosh to the molten amorphous realm
bubbling beneath the surface.

McCosh allows the materials and natural processes
to achieve effects. In Vapour, the natural vapourisation
of heavily liquefied pigments and multiple overlays
leave paint particles stranded in a swirling amorphous
slurry. To further confuse the senses, McCosh turns
the canvas sideways so that the paint runs across the
canvas, seemingly defying gravity.

Automatism processes and marbling heighten and
confuse the senses and undermine the centrality of
an image. In mythological discourse they are
synonymous with the feminine idiom. Fusion's chaotic
space subverts rationalistic order and centrality and
evokes a bloody coagulation, visceral ignition,
woman, birth, life, and death.

B.M. Stafford wrote about the marbling process:
'This protean and womanly attempt to adjust to the
manifold meanders and openwork of matter seemed
'mad' from the rationalist perspective'. Yet, as G.G.
Harpham noted in his treatise on the grotesque:
'Montaigne's sympathy to pied beauty does not
compromise the center, but it strengthens it, for it
admits everything as a possible center, and admits
that the true center is beyond our grasp'.

In Spray McCosh demonstrates order is beyond
our grasp and determinately misses the canvas
with pigment. The eruption's Medusan tendrils
whip into space — the both fascinating and feared
Earth Mother. Cataclysm evokes the insanely intense
heat and furnace of the centre of the Earth, an
illusionary gaseous ether where mediums dissolve
in an alchemical flux.

Latent 2, appears as an eerily suspended sol noir,
or black wormhole tunnelling through the molten
cosmos. We are hurled into a nebulous Malin-like
stellar storm. Supernovas self-destruct, cinders
explode. Fusion 2 evokes McCosh's travels through
the firestorms of Black Saturday where a
lace like shroud hurls through the configuration.

McCosh views the activity of painting as holistic — all
parts of the medium and process are interconnected
and have a sensory tactile significance, from the
canvas ground, more than just a support for the
paint, to the pigments and washes. The tools
and implements — sponges, brushes and brooms —
become extensions of her body. It is an intrinsically
intuitive material process, yet there is an order
amongst the chaos, for McCosh has intellectually
mastered amorphous surfaces.
There is also a spiritual dimension to McCosh’s work, embodied in the ritual manipulation of the mediums. McCosh denies order, yet a natural meditative harmony exists deep in the nebulous minimalism of Glow where ethereal burning phosphenes pulse and blind the eyes. Influenced by Merleau Ponty’s belief that if the body and world engage they become interchangeable, the atmosphere of Glow is all encompassing, merging until there is no beginning and no end. Linear logic and identity is collapsed.

Although McCosh’s work is grounded in the material, there appears to be an intellectual exploration of the ego’s dissolution into the unconscious, a physical and psychic dissolution – like the mythical and paradoxical hero’s descent into the abyss.

The earth, air and elements, and McCosh, are in transition.

Other works temper the fiery holocaust and connotate the cooler wintry months when McCosh travels the Stone Rises. In the Confl uss series, McCosh uses repetitive lace stencils to overlay sky and landscape to reference colonial intervention. The wavy lace stencils evoke the fragility of exploration and settlement in this strange land and the undulating hills and stone walls. Or perhaps the lace has deeper connotations. According to W.J. Thompson, males required an illusion of lace to screen women’s sex as it pertained to the terror of the sublime.

Subtle lace stencils merge from Confl uss: Smoulder’s Turneresque whiteout. Fusion: Scape evokes swirling mists, an interplay of forces envelopes the viewer in a foggy blur rising above the colonial lambertiana landscape. Travel’s horizontal lace stencils are reminiscent of the repetition of McCosh’s travel to and from Warmambool. And Confl uss 1 suggests the muddy spatters and dribbled sludge on the windscreen from dragging a semi (trailer) in the sleet, while Verdant, the safety and dreamy waft of blue sky against lace curtains in a cosy home.

And as I sit on the summit of Mount Wiridgill I dream of what lies beneath and visualise McCosh’s art. I am reminded of André Breton’s evocation of the sublime: “It is in fact impossible for the mind not to experience it in both a remarkable happiness and disturbance, a mixture of panic-provoking terror and joy.”

Dr Marion Manifold
Wiridgill
Camperdown

References:
Corru:x: Smoulder 2009
acrylic, enamel and oil on canvas
120 x 101cm
Vapour 2007
acrylic and oil on canvas
100 x 75cm
Fusion 2007
acrylic and oil on canvas
90 x 70cm
Glow 2007
acrylic and oil on canvas
70 x 90 cm
Latent 2 2007
acrylic and oil on canvas
90 x 70 cm
Verdant 2009
acrylic, enamel and oil on canvas
120 x 101 cm
Travel 2009
acrylic, enamel and oil on canvas
120 x 101 cm
Fusion: Scape 2009
acrylic, enamel and oil on canvas
120 x 101cm
Conflue X: South West Landscape 2009
acrylic, enamel and oil on canvas
120 x 101cm
Liza McCosh

Liza McCosh was born in the South West Victorian township of Koroi and has remained in the region throughout her life, taking the surrounding natural elements as inspiration for her art. Her studio is in Warrnambool; a city that highlights nature’s elements with its rugged coastlines, dramatic skylines and volcanic topography. Her workplace is Geelong; the constant travelling between cities providing further contact with the volcanic plains of the region. The themes of water, air, earth and fire have dominated the 20 solo exhibitions that McCosh has developed over the past two decades. An interest in the sublime and the generative possibilities of painting practice underpin her work. Her qualifications include a Bachelor of Arts with Honours (1994), a research Masters Degree (Deakin, 1996) and a PhD (1994) entitled The Sublime: Process and Mediation (Deakin, 2003).

Throughout her career McCosh has been the recipient of several awards including an Arts Victoria International Cultural Exchange Grant (2001, United Kingdom), a Deakin University Research Travel Grant (2001, New York), a Deakin University Postgraduate Scholarship (1999), an Arts Victoria Research and Development Grant (1997) and an Australian Postgraduate Research Award (1994). She has undertaken residencies at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK (2001) and at Arthur Boyd’s Bundanon and Riversdale properties (1999, 1999).


Collections include: Artbank, Bundanon Trust, Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, Gippsland Art Gallery, Warrnambool Art Gallery and private collections throughout Australia, Canada, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Liza McCosh currently lectures in Art at the Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University.
Above and cover (detail)

Fusion 2 2009
acrylic, enamel and oil on canvas
101 x 120cm