



D I S T I L L A T I O N

the art of Brett McMahon

NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY



FOREWORD

Sarah Johnson
Curator Newcastle Art Gallery

This timely survey of artist Brett McMahon's works from the last thirteen years is testament to the development of this prolific Newcastle based artist. *Distillation* tracks McMahon's evolution as a multi-platform artist, with works of art created in media such as drawing, painting, works on paper and sculpture.

McMahon's works of art are about Newcastle. His formative childhood years took in the visceral aspects of Newcastle life, ranging from the hardened industry of BHP, the working harbour, derelict wharves, to the density of the bush and the allure of the beach.

McMahon said *'...my grandfather used to drive me around BHP and places like that at night... falling asleep in the back of the car. I have distinct memories of lying in the back seat of their old Holden, looking through the back window up at the old cranes, along the wharf road... I grew up at the beach... and the salt and the bleach and the whole feel, the baths- there's a really strong connection there...'*

His works are also *unconsciously* Novocastrian landscapes tangled in both abstraction and the innately personal. These evocative memories have infused into his art and marked distinctive series of works such as the *Industrial structures* series, exhibited at Newcastle Art Gallery in 2006, through to newly created works never seen publicly before.

There is a synergetic, almost cyclical aspect to McMahon's move back to Newcastle in recent years and the realigned focus on aspects of the region depicted in his art. Work such as *Thorns* 2011-13 and the associated wall series of sculptures emerge from time spent on rock platforms and areas of the coast around Glenrock Lagoon. The adjacent Awabakal bush spawned an earlier series of works on paper created as large-scale studies. McMahon's recent progression into sound based works, a form of 'mark making in space', announces an intriguing evolution of his practice.

In the development of McMahon's vocation to become an artist, a defining moment was viewing Fred Williams' iconic *You Yangs Landscape* 1966 in the Newcastle Art Gallery collection in the late 1970's / early 1980's. Brett says; *'Well that impulse (for art and art making) for me comes back to that Fred Williams painting where it was like this thing that I liked, but I didn't like it... and every time I went back to the gallery and I'd look at that painting and I had no*



idea why, it was for me what has made it into such a great piece... it's really almost fuelled a whole career.'

The recurring power of drawing is an integral part of McMahon's art practice, and clearly reveals itself in *Distillation*. He said *'...one of the interesting things about this whole exercise and thinking about this show, is I've realised that all I've ever been is a drawer and I think that my paintings are like drawings, and even the sculptural things are really graphic drawings...'*

Newcastle Art Gallery's first acquisition of McMahon's work was the highly gestural *City drawing* in 2002. It is significant that this work is included in *Distillation*, not only as an early example of McMahon's drawing practice, but also underpinning the Gallery's ongoing support for regional artists.

In concert with an upcoming exhibition at The Lock Up and a significant commission for the new Law Court building in the Newcastle CBD, also launching in mid-2015, the road ahead for Brett McMahon is one of creative rejuvenation and opportunity.

Newcastle Art Gallery acknowledges Sebastian Smee, arts writer for the Boston Globe in the USA and artist Brett McMahon for their dedication to this project.



THE AFTERLIFE OF THINGS

Sebastian Smee
May 2015

How does the world form itself? How do phenomena congregate and clump together? How, and at what speed, do they spread, spill over, disperse, and decay? And what is left of them when they do?

Brett McMahon's paintings, which fuse emotional richness with technical virtuosity, address all these questions; but they seem especially taken up with the final part – with what is left of things. His works, in this sense, bear witness. They function as archives of their own formation.

In one sense, of course, every existing thing could be so described: a weathered rock, a perfectly evolved lizard; a city – what are all these things if not testaments to the process of their own creation? But in a predominantly black-and-white palette – a palette we might associate with copies, documents, photographic evidence – McMahon makes works of art that really do suggest a kind of residue or testimony, as if each painting, sculpture, or drawing had been culled from some vast catalogue of phenomena, abstracted from the original flux of existence, yet still inextricably linked to it. His works present themselves as records of nameless processes – some actively produced, others passively endured. The processes themselves appear guileless and transparent in some cases, opaque and unfathomable in others.

Traced in this exhibition, McMahon's own formation suggests a similar cumulative quality. One can follow the evolution of his thinking as one moves between bodies of work, perceiving a logic that is at once visual and conceptual, but never entirely linear. Rather than forward, each advance points inward, to an unseen core.

In the industrial paintings he made in Newcastle in 2004-05, McMahon deliberately used tools, such as set squares, giant rulers, stencils, and compasses, to create paintings that were in sympathy with the vast industrial architecture they evoked. These large-scale paintings evolved from a period in which, responding to the urban hubbub of Sydney, he had pursued a more fragmentary aesthetic, based in collage. Inspired in part by Japanese woodblock compositions, each image in this earlier series was subdivided into separate, dissonant motifs. But in the breakthrough industrial paintings, McMahon chose to build each work around a single, repeating motif: slanted blocks of black-and-white stripes fitted together as in a puzzle, or networks of straight pink lines overlaying ghostlier, more degraded lines in a kind of infinite regression. The motifs, thus simplified, were enlarged, monumentalized, made visually emphatic. Their surfaces felt stretched tight.

This emphasis on visual distillation linked the industrial paintings with strains of minimalist painting by Ellsworth Kelly, Sol LeWitt, Terry Winters and Frank Stella. But McMahon would not be reduced to any one motif or mode of mark-making. And so, as one moved from work to work, a sense of collage as an aesthetic principle persisted, as did a feeling for the visual cacophony of the city and its industrial support systems. The resulting works saw ecstasies of facture, color, space, and surface tension leaking out of a coolly detached, almost mechanistic idiom. With their twin emphasis on distillation and decay, and their subtle evocation of the afterlife of things, they were McMahon's first wholly successful attempts at making his images at once (as he put it) '*robust*' and '*slow at giving out their secrets.*'



While working on the industrial paintings, McMahon had started exploring the Awabakal Nature Reserve just south of Newcastle. He made drawings, and later lavishly textured paintings in a brown, black, and khaki palette. Their marks were still based on linear structures and a sense of intimate immersion in the motif (in this case the Australian bush). But they grew, layer by layer, mark by mark, in sympathy with natural processes, capturing knots, twists, clumps, and other organic textures.

Pictorially, the resulting paintings seemed to occupy a space between the visceral intensity of Willem de Kooning's gestural painting and the cooler sensibility of Brice Marden's looping layered lines. They may also share some of Fred Williams's instinctive aversion to the picturesque, his determination to honor the scraggly, misshapen, unkempt quality of the Australian bush. Striving to avoid too close an association with abstract expressionism, McMahon says he wanted to channel painterly gesture *'in a controlled way – so each mark had a representative value: branch, trunk, leaf, etc.'*

The *Awabakal* paintings are dense with information and impressively various. But around 2011, McMahon said he felt he needed to *'simplify and purify'* his imagery. *'The bush tracks led me to the coast and the rock platforms and tidal zones were*

a place where this process [of simplification] was taking place naturally. Things were bleached or smoothed or in fragments. [There were] patterns of growth and signs of repetition.'

For McMahon, this was also a time, he says, *'of personal struggle, so I was in the mode of really looking hard at things, paring them back, trying to find my essence, or core.'*

One result was that he simplified his materials (he was intent on *'making a lot out of less'*) and embarked on a brilliant series of works on thick paper, called *After nature*.

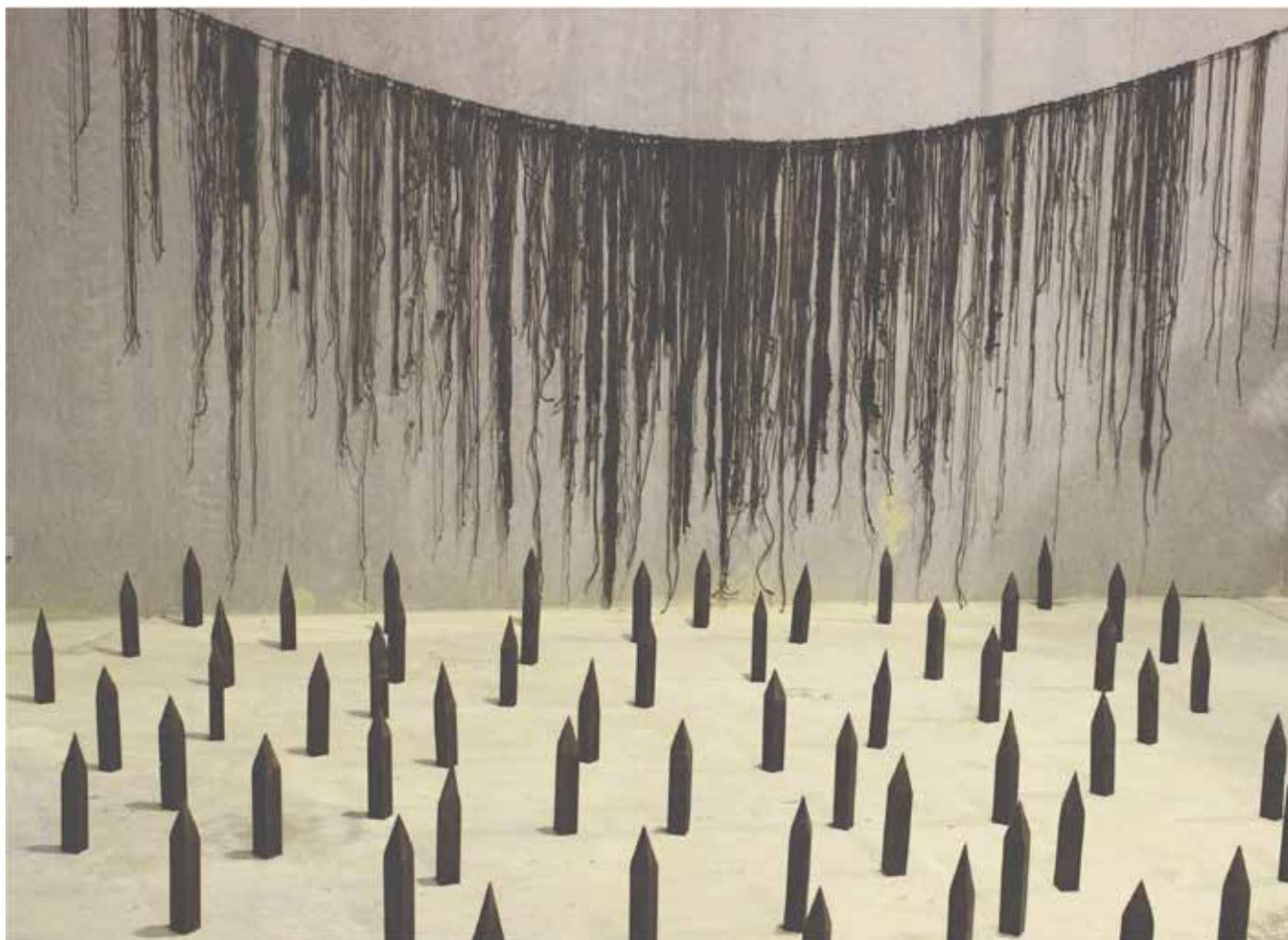
'Paper was perfect as it could be constantly transformed and re-used,' he explains. And indeed, in the *After nature* series, the support was treated very much as a *thing* with its own properties, not just a neutral blank slate. It was drilled, pasted together, sanded, torn, and sprayed.

'You can manipulate paper in so many ways,' says McMahon. *'You can always squeeze it (sometimes literally) a bit more.'* He was still thinking in terms of collage – not, however, *'as a vehicle of juxtaposition,'* but as *'something that gave added weight to some pieces that had simple compositions.'*

Discs, for instance, were cut out of one sheet and pasted onto another. Various other sheets were folded, crumpled, and punctured, the paint blown, sprayed, and brushed onto the paper's surface. The resulting works are tremendously evocative, intensely beautiful. All are the product of a variety of processes – some of them based in chance – that produce a matching variety of effects. And yet each is somehow endowed with minimalist music.

Many of the *After nature* works are frayed, weathered, scraped at and streaked by processes suggesting gradual degeneration and thus the passage of time. So it's perhaps unsurprising that, for all their emphatic material presence and their resilience, these works hint also at absences. They can seem strangely fragile, like old photographic negatives put in storage and left to decay. Looking at them, one becomes uncertain about what, on the one hand, has been added to the surface and what, on the other, has taken on its distinctive appearance as a result of things burnt, bleached, diluted, dispersed, or otherwise taken away. Again, the sense of looking at an archive, a sort of visual index to bigger, vaster, unfixable phenomena, is hard to escape.





In 2014, McMahon wanted to take the material dimensions of his work still further. He started making sculptures and installations – things he had tried only intermittently in the past. He made a series of immaculate wall-pieces, titled *Thorns*, and a related set of floor-based spikes called *Colony*, made from boundary markers (acquired at a hardware store) that were cut, sanded, and given several coats of shellac. These enigmatic, very smooth, very clean pieces soon gave way to much rougher works, made from sections of frayed linen that McMahon patiently unraveled and dyed, later incorporating ropes, ribbons, chain, and wire, all hanging from the ceiling in natural clusters.

These suspended works, beginning with the brilliant *Flood fence*, which was stretched out along a single rope rather than bunched together, satisfied McMahon's desire to combine elements of space, form, repetition, and weight. He was attracted, he has said, to the idea of things existing '*in their own right, not [as] a reference through a lens.*' He could use salvaged three-dimensional materials to cut '*down the distance to the viewer, cutting out the middle man.*'

The large wooden planks, painted red and arbitrarily stacked like builder's refuse or collapsed scaffolding, hark back to the industrial paintings of 2004-05, and particularly the painted networks of pink lines. If they have a forlorn, defeated

quality, they are yet resplendently coloured, and retain the aloof, disinterested, almost heroic quality that marks out all of McMahon's best work, and which – shunning histrionics or contrived pathos – only heightens their emotional impact.

Together, as I've said, all these works feel like *evidence*, or like an index to something larger. They convey a tremendous sensitivity not only to degrees and varieties of presence, but to absence as well. McMahon's small circular paintings, for instance, tap into the same sense of paradoxical distance we experience when looking at things through a microscope. His repeating patterns in these and other works are weathered and decayed, suggesting visual static or interference both in the optical field (streaked lenses, rain-whipped windows, cataract eyes) and in the object itself (erosion, breakdown, decay).

Although they are tough and seem to endure, in other words, they also possess the hallucinatory character of after-images. And this exquisitely calibrated ambivalence redoubles their depth and power.

Sebastian Smees is an Australian Pulitzer Prize-winning arts critic for The Boston Globe.



Front cover

Brett McMahon
After nature series 2013
 (Clockwise from left)
No's 2, 20, 15, 9, 18, 12, 8, 4
 mixed media on paper
 152.0 x 103.0cm
 Artist collection

Back cover

Brett McMahon studio interior
 Newcastle May 2015
 Image courtesy the artist

Foreword

Brett McMahon
City drawing 2002
 ink on paper
 114.0 x 112.3cm
 Purchased 2002
 Newcastle Art Gallery collection

Page 2

Left to right
 Brett McMahon
Network, Wire, Canopy, Buoys and markers 2006
 oil on linen
 236.0 x 190.5cm
 Gift of the artist through the Australian
 Government's Cultural Gift Program 2008
 Newcastle Art Gallery collection
 (*Buoys and markers*) Artist collection

Page 3

Brett McMahon
Awabakal 3 (detail) 2007
 mixed media on paper
 152.0 x 103.0cm
 Artist collection

Brett McMahon
Thorns 2011-13
 enamel on wood, 9 pieces
 dimensions variable
 Purchased 2013
 Newcastle Art Gallery collection

Page 4

On wall
 Brett McMahon
Flood fence 2014
 mixed media
 240.0 x 500.0cm
 Artist collection

On floor

Brett McMahon
Colony 2014
 mixed media on wood
 dimensions variable
 Artist collection



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