

Hinterland – Charlotte Watson 2019

Looking into McLeod's paintings is looking into place. In this exhibition of new paintings, 'Hinterland' takes us on McLeod's travels from rural Victoria to the Cornish coast, pausing in various places to sit and watch the changing state of many old buildings, streets and towns. Removed and quiet or rusting and rotting, these locations are not often a destination in themselves, but the places that we pass along the way.

'Hinter' is derived from the German word for 'behind'. In English, 'hinterland' technically refers to the land beyond and away from the coast or river. But McLeod works with a more poetic interpretation; that of 'an area or era beyond what is known'. In this exhibition, pleasant scenery asks us to pause and enjoy. But stay a little and 'Hinterland' holds us in an ambiguous sense of time; one that is both past and present. Spend even longer and we learn that hidden amongst this body of work is a slow and subtle critique of the ever-changing value toward Anglo/Federation heritage. This is articulated not only in terms of the buildings or towns as objects in themselves, but what their decline or abandonment say about our way of life and ultimately how our social values have changed.

This change is pertinent in *Elegy* (2018). McLeod is a Thornbury local, often taking walks in the area and photographing as he goes. Based on a 130-year old cottage in a backstreet of the north Melbourne suburb, the dilapidated subject of *Elegy* is an all-familiar tale. Heritage requirements are deemed too expensive or constraining, leaving owners to purposely abandon buildings until earmarked for the next glossy development. However *Elegy* doesn't point at the specifics of neglect. In fact McLeod's gestural style only hints at the state of disrepair, where sienna strokes pull downward upon the roof and a blur of Australian greens clutch the building itself. In leaving out the specifics, McLeod plays on his audience's familiarity, asking them to fill the cottage's forgotten story.

The scenes painted within 'Hinterland' lead us to the crux of this exhibition – the history of place, and its place in our history. To engage in this question inevitably leads us toward the role of nostalgia, an emotion clearly present for the artist in *Nineteen Seventy Nine* (2019). Here we see the 1920's Elwood flat that McLeod lived in during his time as an art student. *Nineteen Seventy Nine* is a kind of revisiting, painted whilst holding both the memory of his student days and the nearly unchanged building, forty years later. McLeod depicts the flat in a kind of ambiguous duality of time; the same green exterior, plane tree and empty street, but we could not be certain which year. Here, through rapid strokes and a soft palette, McLeod's green flat looms as it takes us to a personal place where the past (and its unchanging present) clearly draws meaning and joy.

By comparison, other works are clearly portrayed in the present day. *Saturday Afternoon* (2018) looks like a typical rural winter, but if we start asking questions about the scene then it is a subtle observation of changing economic and social movements and their impact on small towns. In this painting we have a fictionalised country town, drawing from the similar layout and setting of many Victorian districts such as Warrnambool and Casterton. McLeod sets us up at a vantage that could only be that of a visitor, the sole person voluntarily in the cold, looking downhill onto the main drag. The absence of people is noticeable but secondary – as visitors, our greater want is the country quiet, slowing us down from the comparative city life.

Fiction, history and memory have a slippery relationship, where holding two can reveal the porousness of the other. In their suggestiveness, the works in 'Hinterland' show that we may conjure, but never grasp, the past or our memory. This inability to grasp fits the aesthetic of McLeod, where soft colours and their gestural application suggest a yearning for the yesteryear. But if memory re-writes itself each time we access it, then to long for another time means we also create a kind of fiction. This means the stories we tell and the places we know rely entirely on narratives or images that are not quite complete.

McLeod's process is essential to these fictions. An avid traveller, McLeod takes thousands of photos that feed into the places or buildings that end up in his work. For example, this amalgamation of history and fiction is seen in *Expectation* (2019), comprised of various photographs and drawings McLeod accumulated through his travels in Wiltshire, England. The act of selectiveness is important as it tells us that his works are less about concrete details and more about the feel or the memory of a place. In *Expectation*, we surmise rural England life based on a lone figure. As we watch him wait indefinitely for something out of scene we are left with the sense of rural life moving, as writer Carlos Ruiz Zafón somewhat pejoratively described, 'at the speed of boredom'.

McLeod's works, indeed McLeod himself, stops to observe the forgotten. Beyond the tranquil surfaces McLeod points to the slow change that occurs to our quiet places. Through the language of architecture and place, McLeod asks us to examine the impact of these changes on how we understand and value our Anglo and/or settler history. Do we resist and protect these places from the inevitable entropy in our modern way of life? Or do we in fact become the assemblers, sifting through history or revisiting memory, with all of their fictions, in order to see the past.