



ANGUS MCDONALD

STORY KATY PRESTON

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Currently working on an upcoming exhibition entitled *Deluge*, Angus McDonald is investigating themes of loss, beauty, love and cycles of existence in his expansive studio on the NSW North Coast, where he spoke to Katy Preston.



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ESTABLISHING A SUCCESSFUL career over the past 20 years, painter Angus McDonald is an artist who places his trust in the art-making process, rather than trying to intellectualise the meaning behind his ideas. He seamlessly integrates the use of photography with traditional painting methods, transforming the photograph into a tool that allows him to create large-scale works that are both dramatic and complex.

McDonald is currently working on his upcoming exhibition at Dominik Mersch Gallery, titled *Deluge*. Investigating themes of loss, beauty, love and cycles of existence within this new exhibition, he is stepping into new and uncharted territory in his own practice by using the same core imagery to create both figurative realist and abstract artworks to be exhibited collectively. In preparation, McDonald has immersed himself in his Lennox Head studio on the New South Wales North Coast. He sees this space, and the people who at various times inhabit it, as a creative universe detached from the rest of the world.

It's 20 years since your first exhibition and your art-making process has moved through several stages. Would you say this has been an organic process?

Definitely. Early on in my career I drew and painted my subjects entirely from life. That was natural to me as I was taught that way. After that, I changed my approach and began increasingly employing photography in order to broaden my range of subjects and create more complexity in the compositions. This was a logical step for me as I could introduce more narrative into my work.

I try not to get stuck in one place. I've always let myself respond naturally to the subjects and ideas that interest me and then set about making a body of work in the most cohesive way I can. I think of my work as a continuous thread that goes back to the first piece I ever made, ending with the most recent piece I've completed. This thread describes an expanding universe of my own making which continues to grow and evolve. I continuously seek to understand more about the world through my art than I already know and use that to build the story of my practice.

Would you say you are a process-based artist?

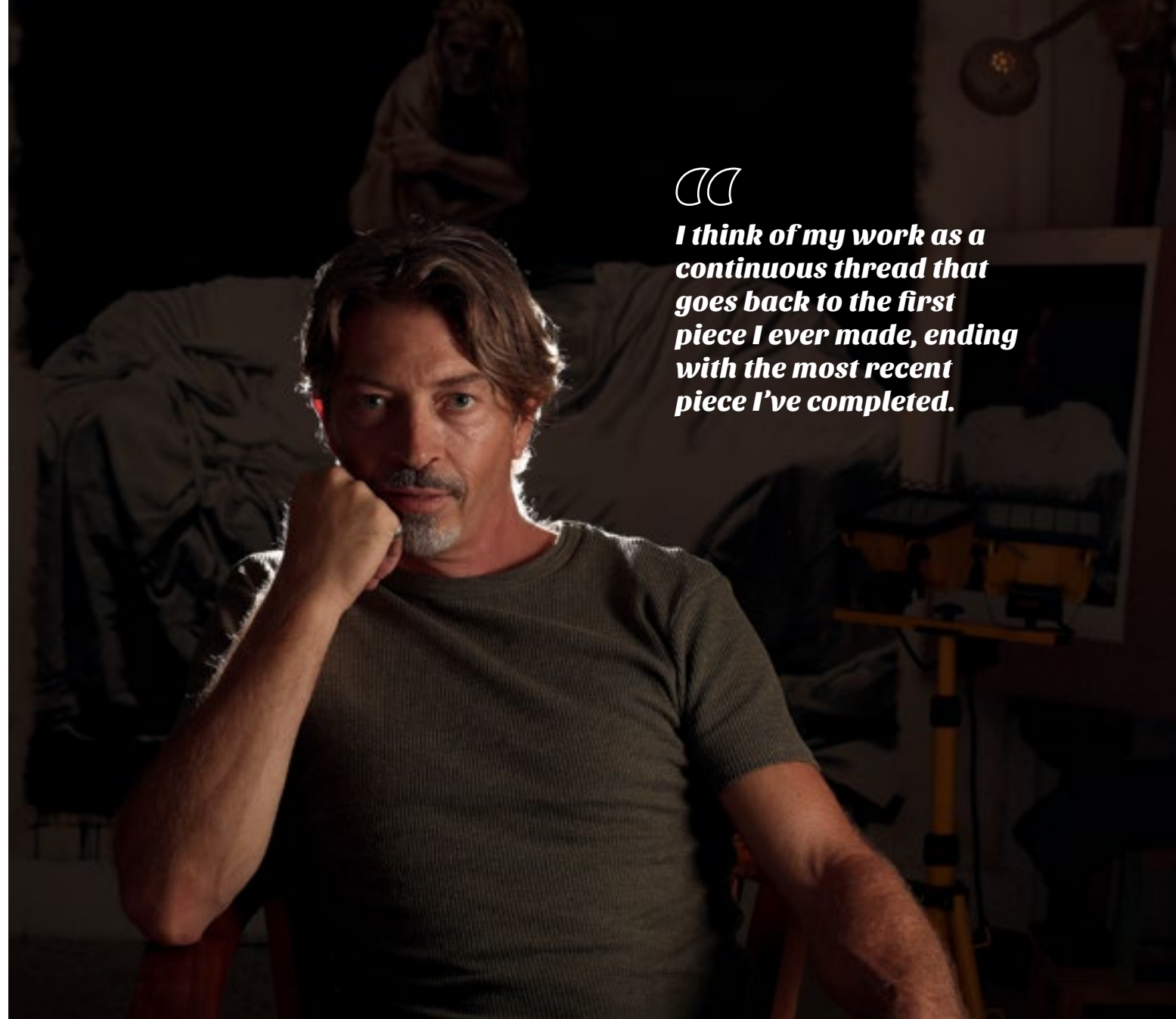
That's a really good question. I would say yes, I've moved in that direction. Not in the sense of the way we understand the Process Art movement from the 60s in Europe and the US. That was about artists adopting an erratic and random way of working, improvising. They operated completely serendipitously and weren't concerned with the physical integrity of what they produced. I explore but have a more rigid structure in my practice and am interested in the technical side.

But I would say yes, in the sense that I'm more interested in the pleasure I can find in the process of making work than I am in what happens next once it's finished. My art is the whole arrangement. It is described by the process and dynamic that exists in the studio, the discovery and energy, the realising of ideas, seeing them through, the act of painting and my overall way of living. This is the whole picture of what I do and what my practice is. It's a creative universe that exists obliviously in some respects to the wider art world where I show my work. I'm very interested in that wider world but the true pleasure is in the studio.

Having worked in studios all over the world, how important is the studio space to your practice?

The physical space is very important in terms of defining what you can do and how you approach your art. It's a major influence on what comes out. I'm very fortunate to have a large studio now, which I designed and built under our house nine years ago. I've had lots of small studios over the past 20 years and I didn't really mind, but I think it's been a natural progression.

When I was making the studio large I was somehow hoping that I could arrange it so I could do a show like this eventually. The generous size of my studio allows me to work on numerous pictures at the same time and have many pictures hung in various states of completion. I like that approach because I can take time on pieces and bring them up over a longer duration. It also allows me to have assistants and the space to undertake large shoots. This complements the work I'm doing.



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Speaking of photography, do you see painting from life and working from photographs as two distinct components of your painting practice, or complementary?

Totally complementary. They inform each other. There is a pleasure in painting from life that can't be found using photography as a reference, but it's more difficult to attempt complex figurative compositions from life as things don't stay put and organic pieces decay on you. I use photography now as the basis to make my major pictures and I complement these with smaller, faster works done on panel or paper in gouache or oil, painted freehand from life, from my imagination or from various imagery to continuously clarify my thinking and approach. Photography doesn't have the same volume of information that you can divine from physical observation.

I think that the years of working directly from life have helped me to use photography to get what I need. My process now consists of creating photographic imagery through extended shoots in the studio and using these as references to work from. The subjects I choose are sourced from notes and central ideas gathered over a long duration. Once the shoot begins, the subject matter finds its own course and often the imagery moves in a direction that I hadn't contemplated.

I generally have assistants and friends working with me. These sessions are intense, highly creative experiences. They're also excellent fun. I then isolate the most interesting images, manipulate them and select which ones to use as the basis for major oil paintings or drawings. These are transferred to the working surface using grids. Once I begin painting, I make decisions about what information I use and ignore, and what to invent intuitively to add visual strength to the picture.

Your paintings now range from figurative realism to abstraction. How do you determine how a particular artwork will evolve?

This exhibition I'm working on, *Deluge*, is the first time I've used the same core imagery to create both abstracted and figurative realist works that exist together. I make broad decisions about which pictures will be more literal in advance and decide intuitively as I go about the abstracted pieces. The larger literal pieces involve a lot of

process so I need to make that decision earlier. I'm considering the pieces as a group that give context to each other.

Making this show is a new step so it's pretty exciting. Combining genres is something I've been thinking about for quite a few years. I've always had an equal appreciation for abstraction and figurative realism and don't see any real distinction between them. All paintings are compositions of colour, tone, form and mark-making arranged spatially in a certain way. Half the reason a painting works or doesn't work is what is included or left out. The other half relates to the manner in which it was put there.

I'm not that interested in what something looks like; I'm more concerned with what I can extract from the situation to transcend appearance and reveal something more. In the process of working, I let details disappear, wipe things out, and am always looking to eliminate anything that is unnecessary. In that sense, I see my quintessential task as a painter as being exactly the same as all painters regardless of genre: that is, I try to concentrate on what is essential to create the most emotion and achieve a sense of rightness in the pictures. ■

EXHIBITION

Deluge
30 July – 22 August 2015
Dominik Mersch Gallery

www.angusmcdonald.com.au
www.dominikmerschgallery.com

- 01 *Limelight*, 2014, oil on canvas, 92 x 107cm
- 02 *Natalie Wilkin*, 2013, oil on linen, 205 x 270cm
- 03 *Angus McDonald in his Lennox Head studio*, photographer Nolan Verheij-Full
- 04 *Lilies*, 2012, oil on canvas, 75 x 65cm
- 05 *Lessons of History*, 2015, charcoal and chalk on acrylic washed paper, 148 x 198cm
- 06 *Bovine Dreaming*, 2012, charcoal and pastel on acrylic washed paper triptych, 150 x 350cm

Courtesy the artist and Dominik Mersch Gallery