

Peter McIntyre

1910–1995

Bachelor of Fine Arts: Slade School of Art, London

What’s so important or interesting about some rocks in the desert? For Peter McIntyre these rocks weren’t just inanimate objects. *Outback Australia* is all about experiencing the vast emptiness of the desert and for him the experience was a powerful one. Of another painting similar to this one he wrote, “Out from Alice Springs in the heart of Australia we drove into the desert, into a vista of reds, ochres, and blacks-without-end, where the very hills were worn smooth and round, crouching like animals in the brooding silence”.

McIntyre is really working the poetry here. He is using the rocks as symbols, which means they stand in for the “brooding silence” of the desert and for time, stretching so far back that even something as hard as rocks and hills have been worn down. In contrast to these invisible qualities, the rocks are something you can grasp, something that can be depicted. McIntyre’s picture of rocks is symbolic because it ‘shows’ the viewer a reality beyond the visible.

You can see from the surface of *Outback Australia* that McIntyre has painted it with a palette knife as well as a brush. He spread the paint over the board and in places scraped it back, which gives it a distinctive effect, quite different to the look of oil paint applied in brushstrokes. Mixing brush and knifework gave McIntyre a range of effects with which to suggest the look of the desert: shifting sand, ridges of rock, the sharp edges of an extreme landscape.

Unlike many modern painters who were more interested in the paint, colours and forms and how they interact with each other – making abstract paintings that didn’t try to reproduce what the eye can see – McIntyre never let the paint get in the way of the subject. He maintained a careful balance in which painterly technique was directed towards realistic representation of subjects in the natural world. Human figures and landscapes were subjects he returned to often in his painting.

McIntyre’s interest in making realistic or academic paintings¹ relates to his experiences as an official war artist in World War II, a role which made him famous. It also had an impact on how he painted, and what he believed painting was for. Rejecting the modern styles he had learned as an art student in Europe before the outbreak of war, McIntyre made paintings that he believed would communicate directly with people. Art, he believed, should be about recognisable things, and should speak to ordinary New Zealanders in a straightforward art language. It was an approach which worked, and McIntyre’s books – of his war paintings, of New Zealand and the Pacific, as well as the American west – were hugely successful.

Damian Skinner

¹ ‘Academic’ refers to the conservative standards of the art academies that sprang up in the late 18th and 19th centuries, which were opposed to modern art.

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govetbrewster.com

www.tepapa.govt.nz

www.warart.archives.govt.nz

