

Rob McLeod

b.1948

Diploma of Art: The Glasgow School of Art

Even at their most abstract, Rob McLeod's paintings are always in the process of becoming something, of taking on new forms and energies. *Small Painter* is at the end of that cycle. A cartoon-like hand holding a real paintbrush emerges from a writhing mass of organic forms. This figurative element challenges the viewer to see a body or a set of energies embedded in these brightly coloured, interconnected shapes.

Bodies are always felt in McLeod's abstractions. Here densely packed, cut-out forms suggest grinding body parts. Holes and the spaces produced by the cut-out technique become the various openings of the body. One small gash is crudely bound by stitches, which fails to halt the paint that gushes over parts of the work. Dripping and oozing paint becomes blood and other bodily fluids. Intense, heightened colours and dense textures capture the body in all its blushing, engorged glory.

McLeod blurs the boundaries between abstract and figurative painting. Just as *Small Painter* exists somewhere between the inside and outside of the body, McLeod charts a course between abstraction and figuration. This is a good example of McLeod's intent to breathe new life and possibilities into a physical, expressive mode of painting that had become unfashionable. Colour and wry humour are McLeod's main weapons.

This approach grants McLeod free reign in the process of making objects, pushing his already physical and labour-intensive practice to new levels. Plywood forms are cut and shaped by jigsaw, then assembled in complex, interlocked formations that threaten to spring off the wall. A satellite form hovers above the main body in *Small Painter*, further complicating the relationships between its constitute parts. Foreign objects are often inserted into or around the picture plane in this manner. A multitude of painting techniques, materials and colour combinations are used. Smoothly painted sections with translucent glazes compete with forms drowned in thickly layered expressionist drips and splatters. McLeod works on a number of paintings at a time. But each painting itself offers a fusion of multiple forms, techniques and approaches. This intensely physical aspect of McLeod's painting always reveals the hand of the artist, even if not depicted literally, as in *Small Painter*.

Like all of McLeod's work, *Small Painter* celebrates its own making and the process of bringing objects to life through painting. This series of paintings captures the body in a heightened state, often connected to X-rated activities or violence. *Small Painter* suggests that painting itself generates similar desires, emotions and releases.

McLeod plays up this idea of the life-giving qualities of paint, and the relationship between artist and artwork that it brings. The glistening, sticky forms of this painting can look like a creature emerging from a cocoon or covered in afterbirth. At other times McLeod plays Dr Frankenstein sending his creatures out to wreak havoc on the world.

Small Painter is a manifesto of sorts, celebrating painting as a physical and visceral practice that feeds off and into sensual pleasures. It is a battle-cry against the anaemic, over-intellectualised contemporary painting McLeod despises. The figurative, cartoon elements barely suppressed in *Small Painter* would soon rise up and dominate McLeod's practice, bringing yet another evolution in the life cycle of these fascinating creatures.

Aaron Lister

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Articles:

Caughey, E. (2002). *Contemporary New Zealand Art*, 4, Auckland, David Bateman.

Books:

Lister, A. and McLeod, R. (2002). *An Orange In A Fried Fish Shop*, Nelson, Craig Potton.

Warwick, B. (1995). *100 New Zealand Paintings By 100 New Zealand Artists*, Auckland, Godwit.



Rob McLeod | *Small Painter* | 1989 | Oil on plywood | 690x1710mm