**THE SECRET LIFE OF TREES**

By Carrie Kibbler, Curator, Hazelhurst Arts Centre

‘You try on a lot of hats as an artist ... Developing your own style is about working out who you are and being honest enough to say, this is who I am and I’m going to make work that is as true to that as I can.’ – Alexander McKenzie

Alexander McKenzie was born in Sydney and grew up in the Southern Highlands, Hunter Valley and Western Sydney before moving, in 1985, to Cronulla – a place to which his family has a strong connection. When McKenzie’s father, Jimmy Slaven, immigrated to Australia in 1960 from Glasgow, Scotland, he moved to the beachside suburb and the extended Slaven clan followed. McKenzie’s maternal great-grandparents, who had emigrated from England decades earlier, also made Cronulla their home. It was where McKenzie’s parents met; where his extended family came together for celebrations passing on Scottish traditions to younger generations; where he spent his late teenage years executing detailed renditions of local houses, landmarks and coastlines in ink or graphite; and where he now lives with his wife and three children in a quintessentially Australian blue weatherboard house with a red-tiled roof and a studio in the backyard. Yet McKenzie acknowledges that he feels much more connected to Scotland, his ancestral homeland, than to his country of birth, commenting that ‘I don’t feel particularly Australian. It’s not in my blood. I feel much more at home in Europe, and I feel much more at home when it’s cold.’

McKenzie is known for his evocative and luminous landscape paintings. For him, the landscape is both a place for contemplation and a metaphor for personal journeys. Created entirely in his mind’s eye and conjured from imagination and memory, his uninhabited landscapes are places that do not exist but are a means of exploring personal and historical narratives through symbols and metaphors. While his works have an underlying sense of familiarity, they are more evocative of otherness than a representation of a specific place, and they instantly transport the viewer into a dreamlike otherworld. The visual symbols, located in a maze-like formation in each work, provide a pathway for the viewer to navigate the underlying narrative. As McKenzie explains: ‘The suggested journey and choices of direction in each of these paintings reflect the decisions, both temporal and spiritual, that all of us must make in our lives.’

McKenzie eschews the glorious light and unique and diverse landscape of Australia, as well as the abstraction favoured by his contemporaries. Instead, his works have a closer affinity with the landscape and environment of Scotland, with islands as a central motif, as well as waterways and lochs, and the recurring elements of cool atmosphere, low light, misty skies, lush emerald-coloured hills and evergreen conifers.

It is a landscape that McKenzie began drawing almost two decades before experiencing it firsthand. When McKenzie was a child, his father would recount stories of growing up in the port city of Glasgow, and of joining the British Merchant Navy and working on naval ships as an engineer. With no photographs of his life prior to living in Sydney, Slaven would draw with his son to illustrate these memories, instilling in McKenzie a connection to his father’s homeland.

Years later, McKenzie found himself unconsciously drawn to landscapes that echoed those of Scotland and of his father’s stories – the harbour of Sydney, the cool climate and mountainous landscape of the Southern Highlands, the naval shipyards at Williamstown in Victoria and the rolling green hills of the South Coast of New South Wales, elements of which continue to appear in his paintings.

McKenzie’s first visit to Scotland and Europe in 1995 was a pivotal point in his practice. He describes visiting Scotland as a light-bulb moment when everything crystallised and finally made sense: the stories his father had told to him, his preference for temperate climates and his attraction to European rather than overtly Australian landscapes. He spent the five years after this visit travelling between Sydney and the United Kingdom, and then painting the landscapes of Scotland and Ireland in his studio at his parents’ house in Cronulla. He also continued to seek out landscapes similar to those of Scotland, including in the Southern Highlands and on the South Coast, and later in Victoria, Tasmania and New Zealand.

McKenzie’s first trip to Europe also gave him the opportunity to spend countless hours with the paintings by European masters that he had previously seen only in books or on the posters that he had plastered his bedroom and studio walls with since childhood, paintings that became a turning point in both the composition of his works and his technique. As he explains:

‘When I would look at contemporary art school painting or Australian painting, there would be an immediacy and brashness of the image, but I couldn’t stay with the works. The works I was looking at in Europe were layered and very worked. I loved that there would be an immediate design element or colour, feeling or atmosphere, but if I sat with the image, let it sink in, the longer I spent with it the more I could find, and it became something that had an endless lifespan. I wanted to make work that was more like this.’

McKenzie’s interest in European art led to his intense study of centuries-old painting techniques and a move towards increasingly complex symbolism in his work. As such, numerous comparisons have been drawn between his paintings and those of the masters of the Dutch Golden Age, a period that McKenzie has often cited as having the largest influence on his work. Spanning the 17th century, the Dutch Golden Age saw the Netherlands leading Europe in terms of trade, science and art, with its far-reaching influence spreading to Japan and subsequently informing the style of the Edo period, which McKenzie has rigorously studied. It was a prolific period for artists, who gave clues as to the meaning or subject of their works by incorporating layered symbols, hidden messages and paintings within paintings.

McKenzie’s paintings and highly detailed drawings, with their combination of landscape elements and trees – such as eucalypts, Japanese box pines, poplars and Joshua trees – draw on various continents and climates and have a direct correlation to the floral still-life genre painting that was prominent in the early 17th century and favoured by artists such as Rachel Ruysch and Jan Davidsz de Heem. The still-lifes reflected the importance placed on flowers, such as tulips, by the Dutch, as well as the numerous plants and flowers imported from around the world as international trade flourished.

However, like McKenzie’s constructed landscapes and gardens, the exquisitely rendered and scientifically accurate floral compositions existed only in the artists’ imaginations. Highly refined and loaded with complex symbolism, the arrangements were physically impossible to achieve, not only because they were top heavy, but also because the flowers – from different countries, climates and seasons – would never bloom simultaneously in real life. Flowers were often chosen for their symbolic meaning rather than their appearance, while the inclusion of various insects in the compositions acted as a vanitas – a reminder that life is transient, and death is certain. In McKenzie’s works, the vanitas is the white light in the distance that takes form on a shoreline or at the end of a pathway.

McKenzie’s fish paintings, dating from the mid-1990s, mark the beginning of the use of symbolism in his work. At the time, the fish works were metaphorical portraits, alluded to by titles such as ‘Self-portrait in a group’ (1996) (above). Throughout history, fish have been associated with religion and worship, and symbolise life and spiritual change. Additionally, fish moving freely through water is representative of transitions through life. Fish continue to appear in McKenzie’s paintings, although over time the references have become more discreet.

In 2004 there was a noticeable shift in McKenzie’s work as its focus moved from the natural to the urban environment. There are subtle inclusions of aspects of the latter in ‘Electric fence’ (2004) (page 47) and the more obviously suburban ‘The field’ (2004) (page 51), which features houses, power lines and street signs. This new direction was a way of marrying his recent landscapes with his earlier industrial works, such as ‘Landscape with farm equipment’ (1993) (page 21), and his documentation of the heavy industry sites around Tempe and St Peters in Sydney, while also acknowledging his connection to an Australian identity. It was at this point McKenzie became interested in the symbolic nature of elements like street lights, directional signs, fences and pathways, and rather than directly painting the built environment, he used these elements to create a metaphorical one, providing an indication of human life without the presence of figures. The exception to this are his highly regarded portraits of prominent Australians who share a common connection to certain places or interests, such as his childhood friend, musician Sarah Blasko, who he painted against a backdrop of Shelley Beach in 2008 (page 111).

The Australian landscape, although not a central focus, has often featured in McKenzie’s works, particularly in his early works and later represented by the eucalyptus tree – either as a central element, as in ‘Burning tree, Exodus 3’ (2009) (below and pages 56–57), or as a subtle inclusion in the background of a painting, as in ‘Seeking steps’ (2012) (pages 70–71). From 2006 McKenzie gradually moved away from representative to imagined landscapes, and his visits to formal gardens in China and Japan saw the inclusion in his work of Asian elements – such as pagodas, lanterns, moon gates and bonsai. These elements appear in as early as 2006 in ‘The climber’ (page 53) and become more evident in ‘Moongate 1’ (2012) (page 67), ‘In search of a clear view’ (2015) (pages 90–91) and ‘Outlook’ (2018) (pages 122 –23).

Trees are a recurring symbolic motif in McKenzie’s practice – from his childhood drawings through to the works he made at art school and his presentday paintings. The image of the tree is loaded with symbolism, and throughout the ages, in western, Asian and indigenous cultures, trees have had both physical and spiritual significance. They represent a connection to the world and the environment, act as boundary markers, signify particular locations and provide an emotional connection to place. As such, the tree is central to many

key cultural mythologies, including the Tree of Life, the Cypress of Kashmir, Thor’s Oak and the Cedars of God.

In McKenzie’s work the tree is often a metaphor for the self, and thus his paintings become a type of self-portrait. His 2004 work Two trees (page 49) alludes to the significance of finding one’s partner or soulmate – in McKenzie’s case, his wife Simone. In other works McKenzie employs plant supports that indicate someone is tending the plants and looking after the garden, or metaphorically assisting on life’s journey. Seedlings are supported with stakes to help them grow, vines and hedges are trellised to encourage particular growth patterns, and poles support older trees to prevent them falling.

The prominent central trees in McKenzie’s more recent works are self-referential and based on bonsai. As McKenzie explains: ‘I like the idea of looking after a tree as it grows, changing it, clipping it, curating it, bending it, as an overriding symbol of the way I believe we need to do that to ourselves – tended trees become a reference to one’s own soul.’

The tree as a metaphor for the self is perhaps most poignant and intensely personal in McKenzie’s 2015 work ‘The cutting’ (page 83). As with many of his works depicting fire, the burning Japanese black pine in this painting immediately indicates disaster while the sundial in the foreground represents the passing of time. McKenzie has explained the composition, alluding to its symbolic meaning:

‘I was intrigued by what my dad had said to me before he died, that typically mankind has three score years and ten, or 70 years, which is phrase from the Bible but also described as the seven stages of man. He died at 77, but I took this idea and each tree represents a decade, the six main trees and the bent one making 70 years. In my fourth decade, life has had its challenges; it feels like someone has sabotaged that particular decade and that particular tree.’

Another constant feature in McKenzie’s work is water – whether as a constructed canal or pond, loch or lake, a winding river, or surrounding an island – which symbolically represents fertility, renewal and purity. In his 2008 exhibition Lakeland he explored the dual symbolism of water and flooding associated with regenerative birth and death. Living close to the ocean, McKenzie swims almost daily and often talks of his connection to water as one in which he finds revival and restoration from exhaustion or illness, and a way to clear his head of distraction.

‘Five Porches Pool’ (2016) (page 94–95) is specifically about water being restorative and imbued with spiritual power. The title references the Pool of Bethesda in the Gospel of John. It was thought to have been located in Jerusalem and named Bethesda, which means place of mercy or grace in Aramaic. The biblical narrative describes how the sick and infirm would sit at the edge of the pool under the shade of five porches or porticos, waiting for an angel of God (implied by McKenzie’s inclusion in the painting of Japanese koi kites) to stir the waters, which would then have the power to heal. The painting has an overwhelming sense of calm and is one of McKenzie’s few recent works with no red symbols to indicate danger.

Each year McKenzie travels overseas to research various garden styles, from the symbolist designs in Japan and China to the formal gardens of Italy and France, which informs the development of new bodies of work. He spends entire days in particular gardens – from public gardens crowded with visitors to grand private estates in which he finds himself alone – looking at the internal gardens and the landscape beyond, drawing, painting and photographing them, and often placing himself in the image of a specific landscape as way of committing it to memory.

References to formal gardens first appeared in McKenzie’s work in 1986, in a school assignment in which he developed formal architectural plans for a house and surrounding gardens complete with separate spaces for edible and ornamental plants, terraces, trellises and water features. Years later, his first visit to the formal French Renaissance gardens of Chateau de Villandry in the Loire Valley in 1995 made a lasting impression. McKenzie’s formal garden compositions were first shown in his 2010 exhibition The keep – with works such as ‘By grand design’ (2010) (pages 62–63) and the later ‘High hedges’ (2013) (page 77) and ‘Plant lover’s guide’ (2014) (pages 78–79) – and have in recent years become increasingly elaborate, as with the 2017 work In

danger of knowledge (opposite and pages 98–99), which he credits to his renewed interest in the grand Italian garden designs of British landscape designer Russell Page (1906–85).

‘In danger of knowledge’ (2017) features an ornate formal symmetrical garden with a grand fountain and obelisks as the central focus or pinnacle of the space. Atop the obelisks, crescent moons indicate the start of something new. The scrolled Buxus hedges and box Yew hedges are a nod to Russell Page, as are the sculpted acorns, which act as focal points and introduce colour, while also being a symbol of strength and immortality. McKenzie explains that the foreground is deliberately overgrown with thorny brambles and blackberries, implying that the garden will return to its natural and wild state if left unattended. The maze and pathways through the work are metaphors for navigating one’s path through life; the fountain represents what is being aimed for; and the central path offers a direct route. Yet, as with life, nothing is quite straightforward, with McKenzie presenting the viewer with directional signs that take an alternative route through the work, full of obstacles and meandering pathways that lead away from the imagined endpoint.

McKenzie’s most recent work, and his largest to date, once again explores his competing sensibilities about life. The title of the work, ‘More than many Sparrows’ (2018) (pages 104–06), is paraphrased from a story in the Book of Matthew in which Jesus suggests that there is no need to worry about life’s path because if God is looking after birds, and humans are more valuable than birds, then God will certainly look after them. It is an epic painting in both scale and composition that brings together many of the keys symbols and elements used in McKenzie’s earlier works.

Starting with a central island, which McKenzie identifies as a self-contained metaphor for the life span of a single person, the work pulls the viewer in two different directions: to the right, which resembles the spring, with a blossoming weeping cherry tree and warm light, or to the left, which is dark with hidden gargoyles and a stormy sky. The two different and possible paths are a metaphor for what we choose in life.

Without these guiding signposts and markers, McKenzie’s works can defy interpretation. Through his paintings, McKenzie is opening a window onto is private world, one that juxtaposes a cultivated garden with the wild natural landscape beyond. The perfect work, like the ideal life, is impossible to create, although McKenzie admits that he is constantly striving: ‘I think if I made the perfect work, and I felt like I had said it all, I feel like I would be entitled to just stop … but I feel like it is impossible to get there. As I paint, the image of the perfect work is vanishing and dissolving.’

All artist quotes from interviews with the author, March – May 2018

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