

Changing Landscapes

Two artists abroad

Story Steve Lopes and Euan Macleod



Steve Lopes, *St Nicholas Church*, 2012, oil on canvas, 40 x 50cm

Two artists set themselves the challenge of mounting a London exhibition in just two weeks and discover the benefits of taking risks in their painting practice.

STEVE: It was with great trepidation and excitement that Euan Macleod and myself set ourselves the challenge of creating a commercial London exhibition. The idea was to spend just two weeks painting the wild, western, coastal areas of Scotland and then put on the show three days later in the British capital.

It would be a chance for us both to get away from familiar territory here in Australia and test our abilities on foreign soil. Initially, we thought that it would just be fun, but then reality set in. How were we going to organise the trip? What would we paint? There are few challenges a painter fears more than exposing their work to an unresponsive audience, especially a hardened London crowd.

EUAN: It sounded fantastic but I really didn't think about it too much beforehand. Both of us were working towards large solo shows, plus contending with the usual deadlines, but about two weeks out I suddenly wondered about the wisdom of such a decision. The 'holiday' had become a frightening reality of having to produce enough good work in two weeks to put on the walls of a gallery in London. Would we be totally humiliated?

We had painted together a number of times on artist trips and Steve encouraged me not to "think too much about it", though I'm sure he was having his own doubts. The trip went off without too many hitches (Steve losing his big toenail in an accident on the first day was one!).

What I've never attempted before is having such limited time to paint the work, and not having any other work to fall back on – a bit like jumping out of a plane without a reserve parachute. The other major complication



Euan Macleod, *Elsa Craig*, 2012, oil on canvas, 40 x 50cm



Steve Lopes, *Wet Carpark & Pier*, 2012, oil on canvas, 40 x 50cm



Euan Macleod, *Steve/Rain*, 2012, oil on canvas, 40 x 50cm

was that I'd never painted in Scotland before. I've painted in 'new' places quite often, but without the pressure of having to exhibit the result – and, given the time frame, we had to exhibit pretty much everything we painted. No-one wants to be publicly humiliated by what they hang, especially in London, somewhere Steve has shown before but I hadn't.

When I think back on this daunting prospect, we could so easily have talked ourselves out of it at any stage: the logistics of executing and mounting a show in another country, the issues of dealing with a totally new environment in such a short time frame, what were we trying to achieve, how our work fits into current thinking about contemporary landscape practice and, ultimately, what was the point?

STEVE: Watching Euan and myself working after the first few days overseas, it was interesting to see how artists adapt differently to an unfamiliar subject and a totally different context or new environment. Navigating your way into a coherent body of work in such a situation is a big challenge. The most difficult aspect was trying to come up with as little baggage as possible and trying to limit the self doubts. We are aware that in contemporary art there seems to be a prevalence for the pre-packaged idea, a level of market safety and surety in the work.

EUAN: There was huge potential for public failure, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. What we had to quickly adapt to was how do you get beyond that? Artists need to be open to failure, which is very important. It sometimes gets too easy to play it safe. What's vital in your career is risk. It's hard to avoid a strategy and formula as you become established as an artist, and there's always lots of talk about risk, but we don't often

see that in artists' work. To actually test yourself and take that risk – and wear the consequences – takes courage.

STEVE: We needed some inspiration along the way and early on we lucked out by seeing an incredible exhibition in Edinburgh, which was a few hours' drive away from our base in Prestwick. Everyone in the UK had been reviewing and talking about this show – the last works of Philip Guston at Inverleigh House. What a surprise to stumble upon this on our trip. It was our duty to make the pilgrimage. For once, Euan went completely quiet for a few hours.



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lightness of touch, craft, and the spectacle of the attractive, informed mark. Good painting is about 'touch', the use of mistake and impediments, the underlying history and tactility of the works, and subject matter and wonder all rolled into one. Guston had the confidence to do these difficult works, take risks and challenge himself. Still, the magic comes from him not having to explain what they are about, from not being able to grasp all that he is doing but appreciating the chemistry that lies behind the actual process. Creativity sometimes gets lost in professionalism and manufactured success. The pleasure in Guston's work comes from a sense that there is no failure, no hesitation. It's fresh and not contrived.

STEVE: It was a good lesson and I didn't disagree with Euan's harsh but honest statement: "people just have it or they don't." For me, this was a real learning experience for my own approach, and over the coming weeks as I painted I was conscious of trying to bring some of Guston's chemistry into my work. I was aiming for some sense of 'feel' or 'touch' in what I was trying to accomplish, not just the rendering or replication of a subject. Painting each day with a limited timeline was actually refreshing. We didn't have time to worry – the doing was enough. The actual act of painting became increasingly important and worrying about outcomes wasn't going to make our work any better.

After about seven painting days we had 13–15 works. Working this way seemed to embody the spirit and approach of 'no control' which this whole project was really about. Letting go and just painting, you have to be present in the moment. It was good to feel empty each morning, without any idea of what we were going to paint – just plonk our gear in the car or carry it to a unfamiliar

Guston is a big influence on a lot of painters and we weren't too proud to acknowledge the same reverence to his work. Although deceptively simple, there is a real sense of urgency and directness to Guston's works. They are complex in their meaning and particularly personal, yet full of mystery.

EUAN: Every viewer has to find their own way into Guston's paintings. They have a

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Steve Lopes, *Portrait of Euan, Rainy Day*, 2012, oil on canvas, 50 x 40cm



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Euan Macleod, *Figure & Dog*, 2012, oil on canvas, 40 x 50cm



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location and start work. Occasionally the unpredictable Scottish weather would send rain down on us mid painting and in order to finish the work we just had to keep painting through the drizzle and diabolical winds.

On our last painting day we got up early and I cooked Euan his first kippers and eggs for breakfast. We set off for the ruins of an abandoned 12th-century church and cemetery. We both worked hard that day and painted four oils that eventually all made it into the show. So, after eight days of actual painting we had 17–20 works each for the exhibition. For us, the whole idea was more about coming back to why we paint – savouring the enjoyment that we get out of the process. Taking yourself ‘away’, not thinking, and being constantly immersed in your art is a truly enriching experience.



Steve Lopes, *Promenade*, 2012, oil on canvas, 40 x 50cm

We had enjoyed painting together, hadn't had any arguments, had put up with each others' bad jokes – and now all we had to do was show the paintings to the public. Before anyone had seen the work, we managed a brief mention in *The Daily Telegraph* as one of the three shows to see in London that following week – no pressure!

EUAN: Three days after the last oil painting was finished *in situ*, we delivered the paintings to the London gallery. Mercifully, they weren't too wet. There was a good response to the show and I think both of us were very pleased with how it all went. I really appreciated the challenge and it felt great being able to put the work on the walls of a gallery within days of producing them in a totally new environment, especially one as exciting as the city of London.

Thinking back on what I consider a really successful trip and show (and, no, in the end I wasn't embarrassed), I remembered how easily I could have talked myself out of going, to avoid the challenge that lay ahead. There were so many reasons the idea was problematic, even down to how to transport wet oil paintings and the unpredictable Scottish weather. However, pushing myself out of my comfort zone and doing something new was hugely beneficial. Looking at painting in a different way, getting some of the freshness and excitement back into the work and then being able to show the paintings was great.

Often the work you exhibit can feel 'in the past'. Your current work will have moved on by the time the exhibition opening comes around, or things that are happening now in the studio excite you more, though you may

feel they're too unresolved to show. You're thinking: "How will the market deal with that?"

Will the trip change the way I work or even the way I approach it? I'm not sure. It seems too early to tell. But there's an excitement about just doing something without the fear of failure talking you out of it, and taking a chance.

Euan Macleod and Steve Lopes are both represented in the National Gallery of Australia.

www.wattersgallery.com/artists/Macleod/macleodnew1.html
www.stevelopes.com.au

- 01 Steve Lopes's sketchbook
- 02 Euan painting at Prestwick, Scotland
- 03 Euan at Philip Guston exhibition, Edinburgh
- 04 Euan at Loch Doon, Scotland
- 05 Steve at Loch Doon, Scotland
- 06 The exhibition at Fiumano Fine Art, London
 Courtesy the artists