



EUAN MACLEOD & RODNEY POPL

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Euan Macleod is represented by **King Street Gallery on William** and **Niagara Galleries**. He lives and works in Sydney, NSW.
Rodney Pople is represented by **Australian Galleries** and **Despard Gallery**. He lives and works in Sydney, NSW.

Front cover: Rodney Pople, *Parliament*, 2021, digital image and oil on linen, 200 x 140cm.
Back cover: Euan Macleod, *Zoo Crowd*, 2021, oil on polyester, 191 x 206cm.



New York Zoological Society photo "The Most Dangerous Animal In The World" exhibit at the Bronx Zoo, 1963. Public domain.

Foreword

Euan Macleod and **Rodney Pople** are two of Australasia's finest contemporary painters. Their works engage with the landscapes, histories and cultures of Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, filtered through a distinctly antipodean imagination.

Euan Macleod (born Christchurch, NZ) charts the spaces we inhabit, revealing our visible presence within them; the psychological manifestations, and elemental ingredients of place. He renders paint as if hewn from the volcanic rocks of the landscape of his birth.

Rodney Pople (born Launceston, TAS) wields a biting, Grosz-ian¹ wit, scattering his characters into the dusty halls of the Academy and the annals of art history. The seeming lightness of his touch often belies the intensity of his message.

Western Plains Cultural Centre (WPCC) engaged both artists to visit Dubbo and produce works inspired by the WPCC collection theme of the animal in art, and the animals (and their audiences) at **Taronga Western Plains Zoo**.

Both artists spent time at the Zoo in 2020-21, observing and sketching the interplay between animals and humans, before returning to their respective studios to produce work for this exhibition. The zoo setting provided a widescreen life-drawing session - the animals going about their daily rituals, watching us watch them; the humans vying for the best view, unwittingly posing for the artists. The artists worked quickly and expressively, capturing what they observed in pencil, ink and paint. It soon became clear that while they sketched animals in captivity, they were also observing humans in the wild.

Later, whilst ensconced in their studios, the world was plunged into lock-down due to Covid-19, and the notions of freedom and captivity took on completely new resonances. The resulting works riff on these ideas as well as art history and politics. The works absorbed the influence of the studio; the artist's cornucopia of ideas, inspirations and references. Pople imbues his animals with a human-like presence; Macleod's anthropomorphism is in reverse. The mood, sombre yet playful, highlights the complicated nature of animal/human relationships.

The works ask us to ponder our place in the world, the structures that keep us there, and how the impact of our growth has pushed species to extinction. We may well question how many degrees separate us from our own.

Kent Buchanan, Curator



Euan Macleod, *Human/Animal Study*, 2021, oil on polyester, 38 x 51cm



Rodney Pople, *The Art Lesson*, 2021, oil on linen, 210 x 260cm



Euan Macleod, *Zoo Crowd Study*, 2021, acrylic on polyester, 86 x 59cm

Peering in, peering out: Euan Macleod & Rodney Pople's 2°

You should be in a cage

The site of the high school I attended was previously occupied by the first public zoo in New South Wales. Jokes about the behaviour of teenagers aside, there were few indications of its operations a century earlier. But there was one piece of evidence about what had once existed there on Billy Goat Swamp at Moore Park: the bear pit. The bear pit is a small open-topped rotunda with an arched viewing gate at the bottom and two staircases curving up to its lip, where zoo-goers could safely peer in or down on the furry occupants – and be peered at in return. With its padlocked grill, iron-fenced summit and small, stark concrete interior punctuated vertically by an artificial tree trunk, the bear pit remains a grim reminder of a bygone era of animal captivity. It is an example of the conditions which prompted the zoo's Secretary to propose, in the 1910s, the change to a bar-less zoo. The site was considered unsuitable for this vision and in 1916 the zoo was moved across the city, to what is now known as **Taronga Zoo**, Sydney.

In the late 1970s, a further evolution of this concept saw **Taronga Western Plains Zoo**, Dubbo inaugurated, the first in Australia with open ranges suitable for the conservation of large, plains dwelling and grazing animals. Concealed moats replace walls and fences, allowing visitors an impression of being in the wild with these animals. It is this intersection of human and animal species, facilitated by the zoo's setting, that is the jumping-off point for **2°**, **Euan Macleod** and **Rodney Pople's** exhibition at **Western Plains Cultural Centre**. This is the first time the **Western Plains Cultural Centre**, whose collection has a unique focus on the animal as

subject matter, has hosted an exhibition arising from a dual artist residency at Dubbo Zoo. Both **Macleod** and **Pople** spent time at the Zoo in 2021 and 2022, sketching and making studies for work which would later take shape in the studio. The Sydney-based artists met two decades ago when teaching at the **National Art School** and have since developed a trusting relationship where their studios are regularly opened to each other for conversation, encouragement and critique. This project provides an opportunity to view each artist's unique approach while also featuring some surprising commonalities which provide an insight into the nature of the pair's collaboration.

Who's who in the zoo?

For both **Macleod** and **Pople**, the zoo setting serves as inspiration for imagined scenarios exploring zoo and animal themes. With the artists working on the exhibition in the shadow of the pandemic (the pair live near each other and took regular walks together during lockdown), it is unsurprising that themes of barriers and confinement have emerged strongly in these works. Leashes, enclosures and fences appear throughout these compositions, but the subjects of their captivity are often unexpected. In a theme explored by both artists across several paintings, a visit to the zoo is inverted, with both artists reimagining it from the animals' viewpoint. In **Macleod's** large-scale painting **Zoo Crowd** (2021), a crowd of people press up against a fence with wide-eyed excitement, their individuality blurred by the fence's criss-crossing wires. The odd skull appears among the disturbing collection of visages, adding a sinister layer of symbolism to this scene.



Rodney Pople, *Tiger, tiger*, 2021, oil on linen, 140 x 190cm

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Euan Macleod, *Rhino Study*, 2021, acrylic on polyester, 38 x 51cm

Pople, too, has explored this trope. In his painting ***Tiger, tiger*** (2021), a roaring tiger with piercing turquoise eyes prowls about before a window upon which is squashed the faces of viewers angling for a look at the beast. In these switcheroos, **Macleod** and **Pople** each highlight the animalistic qualities in the expressions and gestures of their human subjects. The very notion of subject and object is turned on its head through these role reversals.

In their paintings for **2°**, **Macleod** and **Pople** have traced, erased, redrawn and tangled the lines between civilised and untamed behaviour. The hypocrisy simmering in settings of apparent enlightenment and sophistication is brought to the surface, often with absurdity and humour. The works in the exhibition investigate the relationship between humans and animals, examining their differing and shared traits and hierarchies of dominance and survival. The exhibition is the first time **Macleod** has introduced animals as subject matter, whereas for **Pople**, animals have been included in his paintings for many years. For both artists, animals have also provided an extensive visual vocabulary through which human nature can be explored.

These are not direct transcriptions of either artist's time at Dubbo. Rather, the zoo becomes a conduit through which ideas of looking and being looked at, subject and object, freedom and control, are investigated.

Spot the stripe

Animals are a newfound focus for **Macleod**, and in **2°** the creatures' forms and appearance, as well as the zoo environment, have provided opportunity for painterly play. The loping, spectral figure which is a regular protagonist of **Macleod's** paintings makes an appearance, in shadowy and animal-hybrid forms,

alongside more detailed imaginings of the zoo setting, containing subtle elements of visual symbolism and play such as a skull hovering amongst a crowd of faces or a cartoon monkey on a t-shirt.

Macleod's paintings investigate the barriers between species. Animals are seen behind fences and bars; dog and owner are separated yet connected by a leash; clusters of green foliage are edged by grey rocks against the red dirt. Several of **Macleod's** works in the exhibition are the result of experimentation with a new painting technique in which latex strips are applied to the canvas, painted over, then removed to reveal layers of underpainting. The resulting compositional and optical play finds black and white striped bars interspersed with a zebra's coat, and grey lines dissolving an elephant's hide into its surroundings. For **Macleod** particularly, the gloom of lockdown can be seen in the shadow of bars and fences cast over portraits of animals including zebras, rhinoceros, tigers, and leopards. These large creatures fill their respective paintings to their edges, their forms crowding out the open plains of the zoo behind and imparting a sense of claustrophobia that recalls the zoo conditions of old.

The striking colours and patterns of these animals' pelts contrast with the grids of fences that have been carved into **Macleod's** typically thickly applied brushstrokes. In one painting, the shadow of a figure is cast over a tiger, nudging into its stripes. **Macleod's** paintings have captured with subtle precision the quintessentially Australian light conditions of the Western Plains – clear blue skies punctuated by fluffy white clouds, long sharp shadows, dusty green foliage and red dirt.

Macleod's works explore the canvas as a threshold on

which paint is used to carve out new ideas of space. It's not only animals that appear on the other side of these boundaries. Both **Macleod** and **Pople** have used the zoo as a prompt to consider the act of looking and being looked at, and for humans the shoe is often on the other foot.

Table manners

Pople's works take a typically surreal step into a world of shock, humour and iconoclasm to achieve this. In ***The Café*** (2021), a pair of diners shove a large hunk of raw meat and a cream-filled cake into their respective mouths, eschewing cutlery for their hands while a fork-wielding lion hungrily looks on. A strange mix of genteel and animalistic behaviour plays out behind them, with café patrons dining in amongst prowling tigers and dangling monkeys. The grotesque humour of the scene is highlighted by flicks of paint which dot the painting like blobs of whipped cream.

For **Pople**, inserting animals into human settings highlights the hypocrisies of values and institutions, and monkeys, in particular, provide an opportunity to explore definitions of civilised behaviour via a near-human facial expressiveness. Is a casino the setting for a sophisticated atmosphere worthy of a James Bond film? Is Parliament the place where our nation's values are politely debated? In ***The Art Lesson*** (2021), a small monkey instructs two zebras on **Rubens' *Venus at a mirror*** (1615), watched on by a group of human onlookers. The anxious expressions of these observers, framed by the palms of their hands pressed up against the glass, imparts a layer of tension within this surreal tableau. The gazes of each of the paintings' characters ricochet around the glass enclosure like an unanswered question. The work brings an art historical dimension

to the subject-object inversion which both artists have investigated throughout the exhibition, as does ***Accademia giraffe*** (2021), which finds two of these elongated giants casually wandering the galleries of this Venice institution.

Several of **Pople's** paintings, including ***Accademia giraffe***, employ an unusual technique which the artist has developed and worked with over the past 15 years. Photographs taken by the artist, sometimes photoshopped into new compositions, are printed onto Belgian linen, becoming the basis for paintings. The resulting works are an aesthetic and conceptual synthesis of painting and photography. The tension between the two mediums creates a tightrope which **Pople** deftly walks, integrating the photographic image into the paint, and the paint into the photograph, until the two combine to create a composition that reaches across the history of image-making.

In a series of more intimately-scaled paintings, **Pople** executes a series of deceptively simple portraits which draw the viewer in close to meet the gaze of these creatures. There is a softness to these portraits, and although their species spans the animal kingdom, from kangaroo to monkey to rhinoceros, ultimately, like the most effective portraits in any media, the viewer is drawn into the eyes of these creatures, and their differences to us become redundant as we dwell instead on a shared sense of being.

Eye to eye

The open ranges of Dubbo Zoo are a living reminder of how much animal conservation practices have improved in Australia in the 138 years since that bear pit was constructed on Billy Goat Swamp at Moore Park. But



Rodney Pople, *The Café*, 2021, oil on linen, 144 x 195cm



Rodney Pople, *Accademia giraffe*, 2021, digital print and oil on linen, 140 x 200cm

while the conditions of zoos continue to evolve for the better, their role will never be obsolete while the human desire to gaze at, understand, and compare ourselves with animals remains potent. Through the works in **2°**, **Macleod** and **Pople** remind us that whether humans encounter animals across an open plain, behind a fence, at the end of a leash, chowing down on lunch at the neighbouring café table, or in the tales we tell down the generations, the differences between our species are not as clear-cut as we might initially believe. As the works in this exhibition suggest, it is by questioning the ways animals and humans see each other that more can be revealed about the nature of how we exist, together. Perhaps, ultimately, the most dangerous animal in the zoo is you.

Chloé Wolifson, August 2022



Euan Macleod, *Large Lookout*, 2021, oil on polyester, 150 x 180cm



Euan Macleod, *Study Tiger Blue Stripes*, 2021-2, acrylic on polyester, 38 x 51cm



Euan Macleod, *Tiger with Bars*, 2021, oil on polyester, 38 x 51cm



Rodney Pople, *The Cat and the fiddle*, 2021, oil on linen, 210 x 203cm



Rodney Pople, *Afternoon light*, 2021, watercolour on paper, 30 x 40cm



Rodney Pople, *Three Zebras*, 2020, oil on linen, 80 x 94cm



Euan Macleod, *Eland Facing Right* 7/12/21, 2021, pastel on paper, 28 x 36cm



Euan Macleod, *Zebra Eating* 9/10/20, 2020, pastel on paper, 28 x 36cm



Euan Macleod, *Rhino and Baby* 28/5/21, 2021, pastel on paper, 28 x 36cm



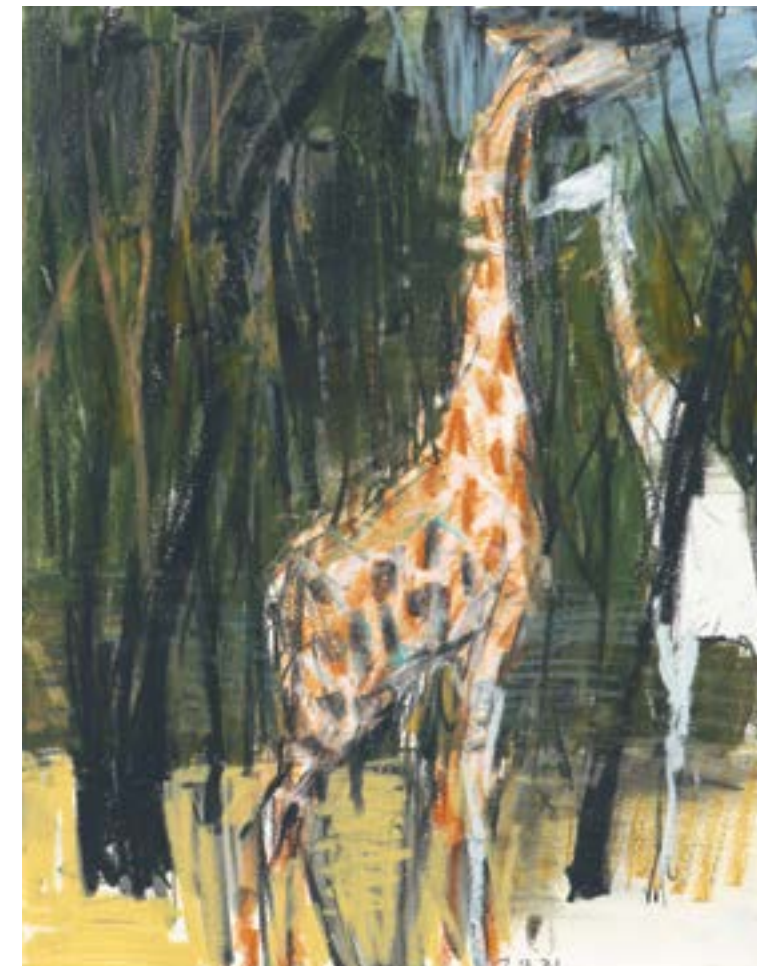
Euan Macleod, *Monkeys* 7/12/21, 2021, pastel on paper, 28 x 36cm



Euan Macleod, *Zebra Group* 27/5/21, 2021, pastel on paper, 28 x 36cm



Euan Macleod, *Dubbo Goat* 9/10/20, 2020, pastel on paper, 28 x 36cm



Euan Macleod, *Not titled (2 Giraffes)* 7/12/21, 2021, patel on paper, 28 x 36cm

The loping, spectral figure which is a regular protagonist of Macleod's paintings makes an appearance, in shadowy and animal-hybrid forms



Rodney Pople, *Madame Rhino*, 2022, oil on linen, 80 x 60cm



Rodney Pople, *Spider*, 2022, oil on linen, 80 x 60cm



Rodney Pople, *Zebs*, 2022, oil on linen, 80 x 60cm



Rodney Pople, *Mr Giraffe*, 2022, oil on linen, 80 x 60cm



Rodney Pople, *Kanga*, 2022, oil on linen, 80 x 60cm



Rodney Pople, *Mr Lion*, 2022, oil on linen, 80 x 60cm

For Pople, inserting animals into human settings highlights the hypocrisies of values and institutions



Rodney Pople, *Dairy country*, 2020, oil on linen, 200 x 160cm



Euan Macleod, *Zebra & Figure in Cage*, 2021, oil on polyester, 56 x 78cm



Euan Macleod, *Zebras 29/5/21*, 2021, acrylic on paper, 38 x 58cm



Euan Macleod, *Zebras and Painting 28/5/21*, 2021, acrylic on paper, 38 x 58cm



Euan Macleod, *Zebras and Pram 29/5/21*, 2021, acrylic on paper, 38 x 58cm



Euan Macleod, *2 Zebras 29/5/21*, 2021, acrylic on paper, 38 x 58cm



Euan Macleod, *Zebra Two Heads 29/5/21*, 2021, acrylic on paper, 38 x 58cm



Euan Macleod, *Zoo Boy Blue Hat*, 2021, oil on polyester, 120 x 84cm



Rodney Pople, *Black Rhino*, 2021, watercolour on paper, 30 x 40cm



Rodney Pople, *Gibbon Studies*, 2021, pencil and ink on paper, 30 x 40cm



Rodney Pople, *Rhino Study 1*, 2021, watercolour on paper, 30 x 40cm



Rodney Pople, *Two Monkeys*, 2021, watercolour on paper, 30 x 40cm



Rodney Pople, *The Swing*, 2021, watercolour on paper, 30 x 40cm



Rodney Pople, *Zebras*, 2021, pencil on paper, 30 x 40cm



Rodney Pople, *Monkey Crossing*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 47 x 52cm



Euan Macleod, *Behind bars, baby*, 2022, etching on paper, 25 x 32cm



Euan Macleod, *Behind bars, animal*, 2022, etching on paper, 29.5 x 44cm



Euan Macleod, *Gorilla Island*, 2022, oil on polyester, 65.5 x 75.5cm.



Euan Macleod, *Swinging Monkey*, 2021, oil on polyester, 84 x 120cm



Euan Macleod and Rodney Pople in Euan's studio, Sydney. Photo by Kent Buchanan

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