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Hazelhurst

SUTHERLANDSHIRE
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HAZELHURST STAGES FIRST MAJOR SURVEY OF ALEXANDER MCKENZIE'S WORK

At 11 years of age I knew all I wanted to be was an artist. I also knew how much I was against development by the time I reached my teenage years. I became outspoken about it and continue to speak out about it. This has certainly influenced my work. I paint idealistic, romantic settings which are devoid of people and buildings.

Alexander McKenzie

Alexander McKenzie, best known for his evocative and luminous landscape paintings will hold his first major survey exhibition, **The adventurous gardener**, at Hazelhurst Arts Centre in August. It will showcase 42 of his most significant works, many of which have not been seen before together as they are largely from private collections.

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



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formation in each work, provide a pathway for the viewer to navigate the underlying narrative.

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 said Alexander McKenzie.

McKenzie, six times a finalist in the Archibald Art Prize and a nine time finalist in the Wynne Prize, knew he wanted to be an artist from a young age.

Born into a creative Scottish family, Alexander's artistic pursuits were encouraged from an early age. *My father developed drawings to illustrate his stories to me of growing up in Scotland and the war years and of his working life in Glasgow. My mother was a free-spirit and educator who also encouraged all creative pursuits. By age 11, my paintings had become so prolific and consistent that they had taken over the house in which I grew up in Sydney's western suburbs, so much so my parents gave me a spare room to use as a dedicated studio* said Alexander McKenzie.

McKenzie's interest in European art from a young age 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.

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 Europe and Asia: the islands, lochs, and lush emerald-coloured hills of his ancestral homeland of Scotland; the ornate and formal Renaissance gardens of France and Italy, and the Edo period gardens of Japan that are loaded with symbolism.

The tree has becoming a recurring symbolic motif in his work – from his childhood drawings through to the works he made at art school and his present-day paintings.

In McKenzie's work the tree is often a metaphor for the self, and therefore his paintings become a type of self-portrait said Curator of the exhibition Carrie Kibbler.

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 said Alexander McKenzie.

In contrast to his uninhabited landscapes are his portraits of creative people he finds fascinating and compelled to paint such as actor Richard Roxburgh and musicians Matt Corby and Sarah Blasko – a childhood friend who he painted against a backdrop of Shelley Beach in 2008.



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Sutherland Shire Mayor, Carmelo Pesce said *this is another opportunity to celebrate the artistic talent of Southern Sydney. While Alexander has lived in this area for much of his life, his work is internationally recognised. He has a strong connection with this area. This exhibition brings together Alexander's creative work for the first time in more than 25 years.*

Belinda Hanrahan, Director, Hazelhurst Arts Centre said *this an important exhibition for Hazelhurst. We are delighted to showcase Alexander's work. He has not just had a very long personal history with this area but he was instrumental in the development of Hazelhurst way back in the mid 1990s.*

Alexander McKenzie's work is held in major collections including The Australian War Memorial, Deakin University, Home of the Arts, Macquarie University, Maitland Regional Gallery, Newcastle Regional Gallery, Orange Regional Gallery, Queensland University of Technology, Tweed Regional Gallery and University of Queensland.

DETAILS:

Alexander McKenzie: *The adventurous gardener*

Hazelhurst Arts Centre

782 Kingsway, Gymea.

Opens 25 August – 21 October

10am – 5pm daily. Admission free

For further information please contact: Susanne Briggs sbriggs@ssc.nsw.gov.au or 0412 268 320

Image: Alexander McKenzie, *A year of sailing*, 2016, oil on linen, private collection. Courtesy of the artist and Martin Browne Contemporary