

# Review

Cathryn McEwen "Above and Below"

A first impression on entering the gallery to view Cathy McEwen's exhibition, "Above and Below," is that these elegantly hung works are merely paintings of water. And they are indeed beautifully executed images of water; rippling across a rock pool, rolling out to sea or shimmering in the sunlight, McEwen has captured the quintessential qualities of water in a series of profoundly contemplative observations.

But first impressions of what we see above, are soon challenged on closer inspection as they reveal their Delphian charm. What first appeared as realistic depictions of water, now dissolve into the depths of abstraction. Bold, confident strokes of colour, act like digital pixelation. Paintings seen on the screen are real enough, but seen on the walls of the Art Studios Cooperative gallery, these images morph into an abstract expressionist riot of colour. Close up and personal, the eye is seized by vibrant colour and energetic brush strokes, but step back and once more the water's surface reappears. The abstraction that lies below becomes the reality seen above.

The portrayal of reality is a prevailing feature of McEwen's work, reflecting her innate ability to translate imagery into paintings that have, as curator, Rose Vickers<sup>1</sup> has noted, a "hyperreality" about them. as she skilfully balances subtle shades of light and shadow in her consummate interpretation of the aquatic environment. Subtle shades of light and shade, water pools and reflections, were a preoccupation in the later years of Claude Monet, who remarked, "I have come back to things that are impossible to do: water with weeds waving in the depths."<sup>2</sup>

In 2000 I was fortunate enough to see Monet's extraordinary paintings firsthand and it is an experience I shall never forget. Standing in the middle of the Musee de l'Orangerie, I found myself immersed in Monet's watery world, marveling at the ambitiousness of the work but captivated by it's beauty. However, it was on a closer inspection that I was even more profoundly moved. For here the images of water, water lilies, willow branches and light melt into total abstraction, where brushstrokes create a glorious tapestry of colour. I was in awe of this colour. How could this cacophony of colours transmute into images water lilies? The plants and their reflections had become a surface covered with an orchestra of paint, a "lyrical abstraction."<sup>3</sup> I was reminded of this experience when I first encountered McEwen's work in "Above and Below." She too was painting something "impossible to do."

To create reality through abstraction is no easy feat. It takes an experienced artist, one who has mastered their medium, has an exceptional understanding of light and colour and an acute perception of something as ephemeral as water. McEwen is such an artist. Her painting demands that we look below the surface, of the paintings and ourselves. Up close, we experience the intimacy of the artist's brush stroke, her juxtaposition of colour and seemingly spontaneous mark making. But on stepping back, we become aware of the meticulous attention she gives to extracting an image out of these abstract elements. This duality is reflected in titles such as "Inner Sanctum," "Sanctuary," "Meanderings," each alluding to states of mind as well as expressing the subject of the paintings. "Above and Below," is a remarkable exhibition of contrasts; of reality and abstraction, surface and depth, outer and inner, all subtly combined in this exceptional body of work.

Penelope Lee 2015.

1. Rose Vickers, Curator for Artful Sydney, <http://www.cathrynmcewen.com/about--videos.html>

2. Musee d'Orsay, 2015, Claude Monet, Blue Water Lilies, [http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/painting/commentaire\\_id/blue-water-lilies-2960.html?cHash=19dc39765c](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/painting/commentaire_id/blue-water-lilies-2960.html?cHash=19dc39765c)

3. ibid