**EVERYTHING TOGETHER**

by Steven Miller

When I have an idea for a work, what happens is that it appears to me completely finished. It’s on the right-hand side at the back of my head as a completely rendered, coloured finished work. It’s usually in an empty room with three walls and it is on the back wall … Then I make these little pencil notes and when I look at them later I can recall what I have seen … This idea starts to dissolve as I start to work on it. It’s there but it is blurring a bit and I am starting to lose it. Then I have this panicky moment when I have to get onto the canvas what it is I have seen.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Mozart used the phrase *gleich alles zusammen*, ‘everything together’, to explain the kind of experience Alexander McKenzie describes above. It was Mozart’s experience as well. In a letter to a patron he said that when he was alone, often while travelling or late at night, compositions came to him ‘complete and finished … like a fine picture … I do not hear in my imagination the parts successively, but I hear *gleich alles zusammen*’.[[2]](#endnote-2) For Mozart this experience was a gift: ‘the best gift I have my Divine Maker to thank for.’ Brahms too described his creative process similarly: ‘Straight-away the ideas flow in upon me, directly from God, and not only do I see distinct themes in my mind’s eye, but they are clothed in the right forms, harmonies, and orchestration.’[[3]](#endnote-3)

For Brahms and Mozart, as indeed for many other artists down through the centuries – painters, poets, musicians – it was natural to write about God as the transcendent source of their artistic inspiration. They believed that the artist was a medium, or instrument, for communicating some part of the mystery of God, who is the Good, the True and – most importantly for the visual artist – the Beautiful. Technical ability and hard work were still required to translate the original inspiration into a compelling work of art. But the source of the work was beyond the artist. McKenzie describes it as being ‘outside my own creative energy’.

This unequivocal spiritual understanding of the nature of artistic inspiration was common in the past, and still is in many non-Western cultures, but it raises eyebrows when voiced in the predominantly secular Australian art world. Here reductionist and materialist interpretations of creativity, using insights from neuroscience, psychology, anthropology and sociology, are more common. Little credence is given to traditional religious thought. Comedian John Safran said that one of the reasons he made his television series *John Safran vs God* in 2004 was to challenge Australia’s culture-consuming demographic: ‘my audience is pretty smug about religion. They’re Michael Moore fans. They think religion is a bit stupid unless it’s Aboriginal spirituality. I don’t think a secular Australian audience gets that everyone else in the world besides them finds spirituality really, really important.’[[4]](#endnote-4)

It is important for McKenzie, but as a white, middle-class man of Scottish migrant stock, he often finds it challenging choosing the right register in which to talk meaningfully about his work. He is aware that for many, religious concepts like ‘visitation’ and ‘epiphany’ will be meaningless, an unnecessary mystification of the artistic process or, worse, a calculated attempt to elevate work, giving it a weight it does not deserve. This is the first obstacle. Another is more personal. His experience of artistic inspiration, which Christian theology would interpret under the category of grace, is not easy for McKenzie himself to understand: ‘why that happens is probably the thing that I most struggle with.’[[5]](#endnote-5) Yet it is there and it is central to his sense of vocation as an artist, sustaining him through difficult times.

As a child, McKenzie loved to draw and had a sense that he would be an artist. Although his Scottish Presbyterian upbringing was austere in terms of religious imagery, his family valued art and saw it as something worth cultivating. His grandparents had met at art college. By the time he was 11 he had a makeshift studio in the family home. His parents built him a proper one in the backyard when he was at Woolooware High School. In these early days, art for McKenzie was about the accurate recording of the world around him in drawing, along with the study of old and modern masters from art publications, some of which could be purchased at the local newsagency. This was the solid path of art training that had been pursued by generations of artists. McKenzie’s facility in drawing eventually won him the Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Robert Le Gay Brereton Memorial Prize for draughtsmanship. He enrolled at the City Art Institute hoping that his skills in the craft of picture making would be refined and expanded. However, at this time it had become fashionable for art schools to insist that students experiment across diverse media. McKenzie arrived with an unusually clear focus. He knew that he wanted to be a painter and time spent in making multimedia installations and the like was, for him, time wasted.

He left the City Art Institute after six months, but soon after won the Brett Whiteley Scholarship to the Julian Ashton Art School, a better environment for his talents. It was here that he had his first experience of a work coming to him *gleich alles zusammen*. It is interesting to speculate on what Whiteley would have made of this 1994 inaugural scholar. Whiteley wrote about the art of painting as a form of alchemy. Influential critics Elwyn Lynn, Donald Brook and James Gleeson were dismissive of an art that attempted to convey deep spiritual meaning, transforming the base metals of human existence into the gold of self-realisation. They criticised Whiteley for playing ‘on the superstition that artists have uncanny powers’ and for his ‘trivialities masquerading as profundities’.[[6]](#endnote-6) Within this hostile critical environment, Whiteley adopted the language of play instead. ‘The fine art of painting’, he wrote, ‘which is the bastard of alchemy, always has been, always will be, a game’. But he added that the aim was to ‘visually describe the centre of the meaning of existence’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Whiteley never abandoned the idea that art had a spiritual meaning and that it could influence society, changing it for the better. Wendy Whiteley describes works like *Alchemy* 1972–73 as a difficult picture ‘to take in … you have to travel the journey with it’.[[8]](#endnote-8)

McKenzie’s landscapes also invite the viewer on a journey. But whereas Whiteley’s multi-panelled works are crowded with competing textual and figurative elements, McKenzie’s are at first sight restrained, classical. They are not dreamscapes like the surrealists made, which immediately invite psychological interpretations. Nor are they entirely Romantic, filled with brooding and restless traces of the Sublime, although this is the tradition with which they are usually mostly closely associated. There is no *Rückenfigur* – a person seen from behind, contemplating the view – in McKenzie’s landscapes. They are devoid of human presence. Whilst sitting confidently within the European tradition of landscape painting in terms of their technique and iconography, their purpose, particularly in recent years, draws more from Asian allegorical conventions of depicting nature.

McKenzie has both studied and visited gardens in China and Japan. He readily acknowledges this influence. The way in which natural objects have a particular spiritual presence in these traditions resonates with him, as does the metaphorical journey that the viewer is invited to take through the landscape. ‘In Edo period gardens’, McKenzie notes, ‘you take a path through the garden, following a certain orientation to discover certain elements along the way: the steep climb, for example, the split, multi-forked road, zigzag bridges. All these things are designed specifically to be a metaphor for your life’.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The first person to travel through this world is the artist himself. McKenzie’s landscapes are deeply personal. ‘My work is a lot about trying to explain the problems I deal with in my mind and how I navigate them’, he says. ‘I don’t make the work to preach to people.’ It is being alone in nature that gives him perspective, a sense of his mortality and the urgency to make ‘some sense of it all in the little time allotted’.[[10]](#endnote-10) The subtly coded world he then creates on canvas is the fruit of this effort. Although he experiences works coming to him as completely finished, the individual items that make up these works are clearly drawn from his personal experience and from his study of art history. Even William Blake’s most visionary creations are now thought to have their genesis in the reproductions he bought of artists not widely studied in the 18th century, artists like Giulio Romano, Albrecht Dürer and Maerten van Heemskerck.

Although McKenzie’s landscapes can be enjoyed for their grand vistas and virtuosic handling of paint, to ‘read’ them requires contemplation, a slowing down. Owners of his work frequently tell of having to live with his paintings for some time before they can begin to decode their symbolic language. The process of creating them is similarly contemplative for the artist. As traditional iconographers have done for centuries, McKenzie makes some of his own materials, like the glue he uses from rabbit skins in the early stages of priming the canvas. He finds that this isolates the fibres in the weave of the linen in a way that commercial products do not and allows the subsequent layers of oil paint to take in the distinctive way that characterises the surfaces of his paintings. The process of working is then multi-layered; some sketchy underpainting, then building up layers of body colour and glazing, each of which requires time to dry before being worked on.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Though each landscape is different, some objects persist. There is often a supported tree; held up by wires or by poles, or even wrapped. This can have multiple meanings, symbolising the entire person or particular virtues and characteristics that need to be nurtured as they grow. Signposts pointing in multiple directions serve a more literal function. Many of the landscapes are set in water. On one level this is a useful design element, adding beauty through reflective possibilities. But water is ambiguous, suggesting both eternity and the abyss. The Jewish and Christian scriptures are crowded with watery references. At the dawn of creation the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters, the Israelites passed through the waters of the Red Sea to freedom from slavery and Christ began his public ministry with baptism in the river Jordan. McKenzie will often paint a landscape and then flood it. A recurrent motif in this aqueous world is the pier with a boat. It suggests that once we have travelled through these landscapes we do not simply arrive at our destination – because we never really know what that is – but at another point of departure, which in the end is our own mortality.

The symbolic message of these works is paramount for the artist. This has often been missed by those who have written about his art, even by those who admire and collect it. From the time of his first show with Martin Browne in 2007, McKenzie believes that he has increasingly focused on ‘what the work means. I always felt that I had something I wanted to say from the work … but it has taken me ten years or more to develop the appropriate skill.’[[12]](#endnote-12) Each person who looks at these works will take away something particular and individual from them, which McKenzie understands. However, all of his works point to a world that can be shaped by our choices, one that is sustaining and meaningful.[[13]](#endnote-13) It is the antithesis of philosopher Bertrand Russell’s image of humanity adrift on a narrow raft about to be overcome by ‘the dark ocean on whose rolling waves we toss for a brief hour’.[[14]](#endnote-14) These landscapes are full of promise and of hope. In the Edo-period gardens McKenzie so admires, the ultimate purpose of the journey is the grand view that one is rewarded with at its end, at the top of the climb: the promise of a true perspective where we can at last see our fleeting lives as *gleich alles zusammen*, ‘everything together’.

1. Alexander McKenzie interview with Steven Miller, Cronulla, Sydney, 8 February 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted in Hans Mersmann (ed.), *Letters of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, Courier Corporation, 1928, p. vii. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Quoted in Arthur M. Abell, *Talks with great composers*, Pickle Partners Publishing, Sevenoaks, UK, 2016, p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Waiting for God’, *Weekend Australian*, 28–29 August 2004, p. 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. McKenzie interview, 8 February 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Donald Brook for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and James Gleeson for the *Sun*, quoted in Ashleigh Wilson, *Brett Whiteley: art, life and the other thing*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2016, p. 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Wilson, p. 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Wendy Whiteley 1995, cited on Art Gallery of New South Wales website, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/348.1998.a-r> (accessed April 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. McKenzie interview, 8 February 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. McKenzie interview, 8 February 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Alexander McKenzie interview with Steven Miller, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre, Sydney, 12 March 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Alexander McKenzie interview with Steven Miller, Martin Browne Contemporary, Sydney, 6 December 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This is not a mainstream approach to art, as McKenzie understands. It runs counter to such positions as that adopted by writers such as Dale Jamieson: ‘almost no one anymore believes that art, the meaning of life, and the nature of ultimate reality are all bound up together in a seamless web. The post-modern art-world treats the history and traditions of art as just another resource to be exploited, along with country music, old TV shows, and Lacanian psycho-analysis.’ Dale Jamieson, ‘Ziff on shooting an elephant’, in Dale Jamieson (ed.), *Language, mind, and art: essays in appreciation and analysis in honor of Paul Ziff*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Boston, 1994, p. 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian, and other essays on religion and related subjects*, (ed.) Paul Edwards, Touchstone, New York, 1957, p. 113.

    **This essay was included in the exhibition catalogue ‘Alexander McKenzie: The Adventurous Gardener’ held at Hazelhurst Arts Centre, Gymea in 2018.** [↑](#endnote-ref-14)