

25 / BRETT MCMAHON

For artist **Brett McMahon**, returning to the natural and industrial environs of his childhood home of Newcastle, two hours north of Sydney, has generated a fertile period of creative output.

A fixture of Sydney's contemporary art scene since the late 1990s, McMahon traded his inner city urban life for his seaside hometown in 2011. Since then, he has honed his artistic practice and reconnected with the environment of his coastal upbringing.

Known primarily as an abstract painter, McMahon's large-scale minimalist canvases and works on paper graced the gallery walls of well-known Sydney dealers such as the late **Ray Hughes** and **Rex Irwin**, from the late 1990s until 2010.

McMahon's work is now less about formal abstraction and more about evoking primary structures and patterns found in nature. The compositions appear like microcosms of the natural world – rhythmic waves and traces of aquatic forms from the watery ecology of the Dudley rock shelves. Swampy mud flats, sand dunes and gnarled coastal scrub – all this is translated into ripples, patterns and textures.

Another important change is the expansion from two to three dimensional works. Sculpture and installation now form a major part of his practice. Sourcing hardware stores for supplies such as ropes, strings and timber, as well as found materials, he moves seamlessly from his trademark geometric and linear canvases to floor and ceiling-based installations. This was demonstrated to dramatic effect in *Distillation*, a 2015 exhibition at the Newcastle Regional Gallery that provided a survey of the past 15 years of McMahon's creative practice.

His large wall works are often architectural in scale, rendering patterns in timber like three-dimensional drawings and not unlike industrial scaffolding. It is fitting then, that McMahon was selected to design the exterior walls of the Newcastle Courthouse, completed in 2016. Titled *Melaleuca*, his rhythmic wall panels evoke the swamp paperbarks of the Newcastle area.

This commission was followed up with three solo shows in 2017. A major exhibition at the University of Newcastle Gallery, where he works as a casual academic, saw him collaborate with classical musician **David Banney**. Evoking tidal flats and rock pools, the centre of the gallery was dominated by sharp timber off-cuts that had been burned and

charred to create textured sculptures. The result resembled shards of shells or oceanic debris.

A solo exhibition at NKN Gallery in Melbourne, titled *Taman Bahagia*, revealed a new explosion of colour in his paintings, prompted by a visit to his wife's home in Malaysia. This was followed by a return to the Sydney commercial gallery scene with a striking solo show at Annandale Galleries in October last year. McMahon's sculptures, composed of industrial materials such as steel and piping, were muscular, powerful and evocative. They sat alongside monochromatic wall works, stiff paper and canvases energetically incised and worn like weathered objects.

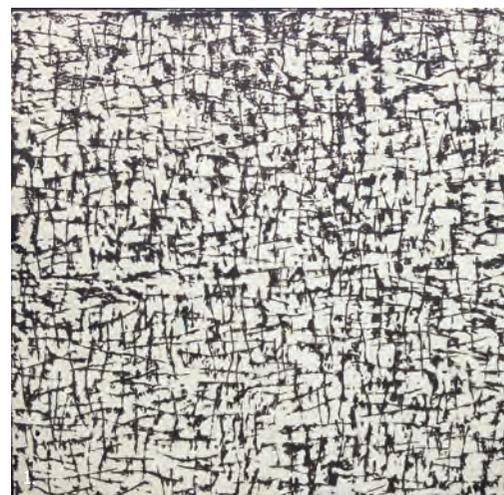
Mark-making is central to McMahon's practice, whether in two or three dimensional form. Converging the industrial and natural world through his elemental forms, the artist's practice seems to have strengthened since his return to Newcastle. He has found a new artistic rhythm.

Victoria Hynes

1. Brett McMahon, *Traces 3*, 2017. Acrylic on handmade paper, 200 x 200cm. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ANNANDALE GALLERIES, SYDNEY. PHOTOGRAPHY: BRETT MCMAHON.

2. Brett McMahon, *Taman Bahagia*, room installation, NKN Gallery, Melbourne 2017. COURTESY THE ARTIST, ANNANDALE GALLERIES, SYDNEY, AND NKN GALLERY, MELBOURNE.

3. Brett McMahon, *Colony* installation, 2017, University of Newcastle Gallery. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE GALLERY, NEWCASTLE.





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