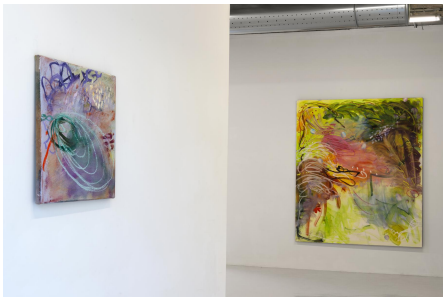
Settling troubled waters with Emma McIntyre

A review of the exhibition 'Up bubbles her amorous breath'

by Megan Macnaughton

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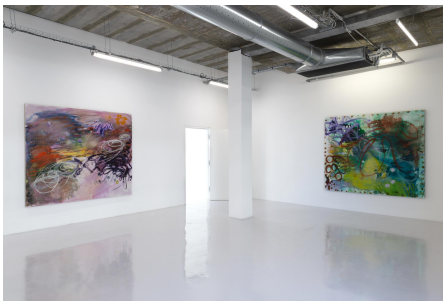
Emma McIntyre, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, exhibition view, Air de Paris, Romainville, January 9 - February 12, 2022. © Marc Domage. Courtesy the artist and Air de Paris, Romainville.



Emma McIntyre, *Rose on red*, 2021. Oil and oil stick on linen, 30.5 x 35.5 cm. Exhibition view, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, Air de Paris, Romainville, 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Emma McIntyre with *Seven types of ambiguity*, 2021. Oil and oil stick on linen, 182.9 x 350.5 cm. Exhibition view, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, Air de Paris, Romainville, 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Emma McIntyre, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, exhibition view, Air de Paris, Romainville, January 9 - February 12, 2022. © Marc Domage. Courtesy the artist and Air de Paris, Romainville.



Emma McIntyre and Megan Macnaughton visiting *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, Air de Paris, Romainville, 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

Aotearoa artist Emma McIntyre's first solo exhibition in Europe, Up bubbles her amorous breath*, at Air de Paris Gallery in Paris, France, unveils a new series of paintings by the LA-based artist. In this piece, writer Megan Macnaughton finds refuge from a grey Paris day in McIntyre's vividly imagined landscapes, in which the artist draws on art historical legacies of abstraction and expressionism, layering the works with bodily gestures that invite multiple temporalities and readings, at once historical and contemporary, frenzied and contemplative.*

Once the body has sunk, the last breath lingers over the ripples, a vanishing haze reflected on the water's surface. In an instant, the surrounding landscape has swallowed up all evidence of a physical presence, traces of the body integrated into the aqueous setting and vegetation, into a new cycle of life. In Greek mythology, Leander swims across the Hellespont every day to visit his beloved Hero in her tower. One windy night her lantern blows out, leaving

Leander, lost in the dark with no landmark, to drown in the stormy waters. Only the bubbles of his last breath remain: “He’s gone; up bubbles all his amorous breath!”.[01]

For her first solo show in Europe at Air de Paris gallery, New Zealand-born, Los Angeles-based artist Emma McIntyre’s new series of eight paintings evoke a landscape—akin to the one described by poet John Keats in *On a Picture of Leander*: one that has flourished in the aftermath of dramatic events.[02] Always working in series, McIntyre began composing these works last July, in the warmth of late summer evenings and long golden hours of California daylight. Finding refuge from a grey rainy Paris day onto the second floor of Air de Paris, now relocated to the trendy up-and-coming industrial district of Pantin, was like stepping into the fragmented representation of a country garden in full flower. Snippets of cropped details (in McIntyre’s smaller compositions) punctuate my walk through a lavish countryside made up of wider, more panoramic views. The well-balanced, tastefully orchestrated scenography offers an immersive experience that reminded me of the Musée de l’Orangerie, the eternally tranquil home to Claude Monet’s waterlilies. The pleasant rhythm of the paintings’ layout in the space adds a certain musicality and sensory dimension to them. The vivid color palette flickers from solar yellow tones to pale violet buds, including notes of blood orange and bursts of burgundy—perhaps an ode to the inimitable evening light in McIntyre’s newly adopted city.



Emma McIntyre, *Spirits that lend strength*, 2021. Oil and oil stick on linen, iron oxide and graphite, 30 x 28 cm. Exhibition view, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, Air de Paris, Romainville, 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Emma McIntyre, *Blood moon*, 2021. Oil and oil stick on linen, 41 x 35.5 cm. Exhibition view, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, Air de Paris, Romainville, 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Emma McIntyre, *Rose on red*, 2021. Oil and oil stick on linen, 30.5 x 35.5 cm. Exhibition view, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, Air de Paris, Romainville, 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

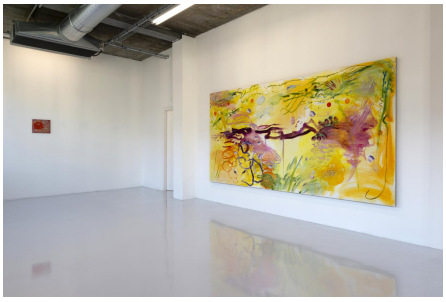
After visiting the exhibition, I had the chance to speak with the artist about her process over a zoom conversation, during her ten day quarantine in a hotel room upon returning to Auckland for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic. McIntyre's medium and materials, she tells me, demand a multitasked approach to painting, as the various stages of painting and drying require her to engage with several canvases at a time, each at a different point in her creative process. Her works go through three stages, conserving the physical traces of each step, ultimately inscribed into the longer temporality of completion. First comes the prepping of the canvas with oil ground. McIntyre has grown comfortable with large formats, particularly 213 x 192 cm, that she approaches with no preconceived sketch or composition. Then comes the pouring of oil paint: she places the canvas directly on the floor before spilling oil over it, layer by layer, from different cardinal points of the surface. In line with Helen Frakenthaler's practice of soak-staining in the 1950s, each color is made up of oil that has been liquefied with gamsol and can take up to two weeks to dry. The different tones mix and merge, or rather collide and overlap, to form the backdrop for the composition to come. The final step of the creative process is performative. Using an oil stick, paintbrush, or anything quite literally "under [her] hand",[03] McIntyre finalises the work in an impulsive, concluding surge, that usually involves an overflow of energetic writing or cover-up. The

final stage often prompts a bodily engagement from McIntyre, who recently has begun to use her hands and fingers to scratch or body print over the surface of the canvas, following some experiments during lockdown with body-stamping, in the Klein tradition.[04] A sense of immediacy from these final gestures disrupts the slow buildup of the painting process, and signs of temporal tension, between Arcadian stillness and spontaneous rush, linger in the work.

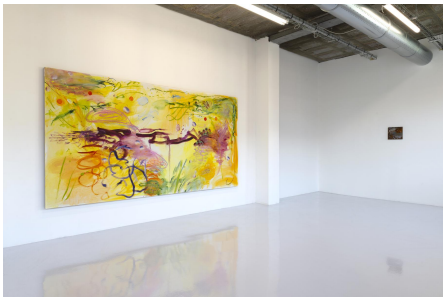
Cy Twombly, another source of inspiration for McIntyre, also depicted the Greek myth of Leander and Hero, in his eponymous four-panel painting *Hero and Leandro (A Painting in Four Parts)* from 1984. In the fourth panel Twombly writes the final verse of Keats' poem, which McIntyre in turn borrowed (and feminised) for the title of her show. Essayist and art historian Joshua Rivkin draws a parallel between Leander's tragic destiny and the ephemerality of human existence, and the trace left behind by the artist in Twombly's work—a description that could also apply to McIntyre's series:

> "*The breath will stop. The lovers die again and again. What lasts is language. Not the image or the pale sweep of white, not a painting, but a poem. This is the afterlife. Handwriting, borrowed words, a disappearance. Not a shout for help but a bubble of breath.*"[05]

Far from expressing nostalgia or dread about fatal destiny, McIntyre's works, like Twombly's, felt reassuring to me in their acceptance that all experience is transient: individual narrative is most often forgotten, but a brushstroke can leave its mark on history and be remembered by future species.



Emma McIntyre, *Seven types of ambiguity*, 2021. Oil and oil stick on linen, 182.9 x 350.5 cm. Exhibition view, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, exhibition view, Air de Paris, Romainville, January 9 - February 12, 2022. © Marc Domage. Courtesy the artist and Air de Paris, Romainville.

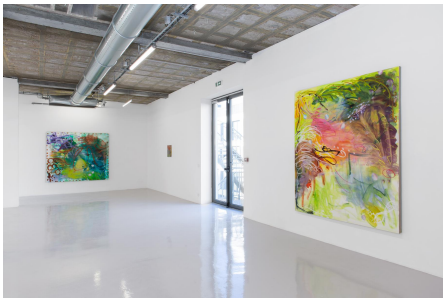


Emma McIntyre, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, exhibition view, Air de Paris, Romainville, January 9 - February 12, 2022. © Marc Domage. Courtesy the artist and Air de Paris, Romainville.

Other types of marks on the canvas allow McIntyre to introduce some figurative elements. Her eclectic formal language reveals a profound understanding of the history of art. In *Seven types of ambiguity* (2021), she copies the detail of a flower from a painting by Mary Cassatt, taking it from an Impressionist setting and making it the only figurative element of a contemporary abstract composition. This confirmed my impression of passing through natural surroundings and the artist's attentive observation of Modernist masterpieces. A strong sense of decorative understanding is also evident in her works, with flowers presented more as motif than detail or still life. Pierre Bonnard and the flatness of his perspective are invoked in most of her compositions, such as *The light of ambivalence is a heavenly one* (2021), where all sense of depth and scale is made difficult to grasp. "When I was in Paris," confides McIntyre, "I went back to visit Bonnard's paintings at the Musée d'Orsay. I remember being very struck when I first saw them: during the period when he was interested in Japanese art, he painted a lot of bodies wearing fabrics that look incredibly flat. He didn't paint the fabric to mold the bodies, he painted them only for formal, decorative play."

Another recurring motif is the pom-pom or polka dot, sometimes used as a framing device for the composition, or to create a certain rhythm or visual tool that harmoniously ties in some formally disparate elements. Since moving from New Zealand to Los Angeles in 2019 and completing an MFA at the ArtCenter College of Design there, McIntyre's visual language has become more assertive. "I really wanted some hardcore pressure on my practice

and ArtCenter was a pressure cooker for pushing my work and develop my language," McIntyre explained during our conversation. She traces the origin of this newly acquired confidence back to thought-provoking teachers (such as Richard Hawkins),[06] her abandonment of a compulsive use of grid-compositions and a receptive, bustling Californian art scene with an unquenched thirst for contemporary abstract painting.[07]



Emma McIntyre, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, exhibition view, Air de Paris, Romainville, January 9 - February 12, 2022. © Margot Montigny. Courtesy the artist and Air de Paris, Romainville.

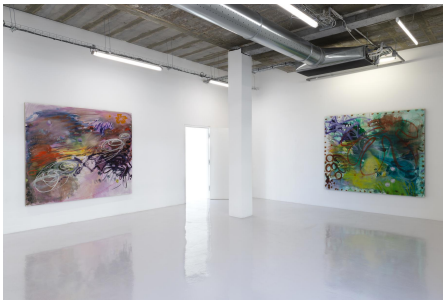


Emma McIntyre, *The light of ambivalence is a heavenly one*, 2021. Oil and oil stick on linen, 213 x 183 cm. Exhibition view, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, Air de Paris, Romainville, 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

Even though New Zealand will always be home for McIntyre, she found her move to the United States liberating, especially thanks to the community she landed among: "the LA artworld is very open and welcoming, and everything goes – I feel the freedom to do exactly what I want to do. There's a lot of love for painting here, and there are conversations going on about painting that I've always wanted to be having. In LA, I [...] didn't feel like I had to conform in order for there to be some kind of conversation around my work. I could just do what I did and that was enough." American curator and gallerist Chris Sharp chose to inaugurate his eponymous gallery in Los Angeles with a solo show by McIntyre at the very beginning of 2021. Her first solo show outside of New Zealand received promising reviews and helped catapult her into the dynamic local artistic community. The exhibition also drew the

attention of some curious onlookers on the other side of the pond, including Florence Bonnefous, Co-founder and Director of Air de Paris, who invited McIntyre for this solo show.

There is something particularly fitting about McIntyre's work appearing for the first time in Europe under the banner of Air de Paris. Founded in 1990 in Nice—an intentionally decentralised location to escape the uniformity of Parisian artistic standards—Air de Paris has been historically celebrated for its open-minded, bold and free program, creating unexpected encounters that transcend generations and nationalities with an eclectic mix of artists, from emerging and mid-career (Gaëlle Choisne, artist duo Claire Fontaine, Adriana Lara) to more established ones (Philippe Parreno, Liam Gillick, Sarah Morris, Carsten Höller, …).[08] Emma McIntyre has found her place in an interconnected, global network via a gallery whose very name is a homage to Duchamp and the necessary transnational exchanges that are triggered by the production of artistic meaning.[09] 'Le hasard fait bien les choses' (*as luck would have it*) would posit the French, whereas the less superstitious would reply that there is no such thing as coincidence.



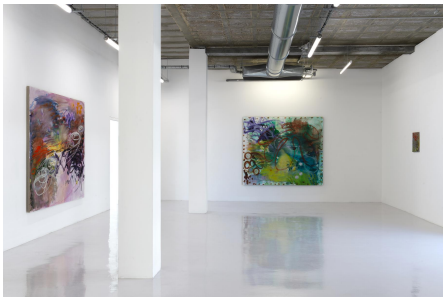
Emma McIntyre, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, exhibition view, Air de Paris, Romainville, January 9 - February 12, 2022. © Marc Domage. Courtesy the artist and Air de Paris, Romainville.



Emma McIntyre, *Sweetbitter* (detail), 2021. Oil and oil stick on linen, 183 x 213 cm. Courtesy the artist.



Emma McIntyre and Megan Macnaughton visiting *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, Air de Paris, Romainville, 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Emma McIntyre, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, exhibition view, Air de Paris, Romainville, January 9 - February 12, 2022. © Marc Domage. Courtesy the artist and Air de Paris, Romainville.



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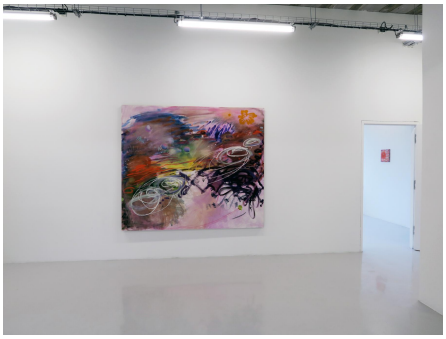


Emma McIntyre with *Seven types of ambiguity*, 2021. Oil and oil stick on linen, 182.9 x 350.5 cm. Exhibition view, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, Air de Paris, Romainville, 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

McIntyre's emotionally charged compositions capture the peaceful atmosphere of a spring day that is upset by a sour turn of events. The dense field of brushstrokes agitate and scramble soft Turneresque skies, like the micro-events and amorous dramas that disrupt and inhabit the timeline of our lives—evidence of ruptures and continuities, rough patches and happy endings. Perhaps the landscape McIntyre paints is the one she constantly re-imagines and constructs in her mind, from a two-fold memory of lived experience and assimilation of art historical references. Joan Mitchell instantly comes to mind, her multi-paneled abstract compositions sharing many pictorial qualities and conceptual roots with McIntyre's:

> *I paint from remembered landscapes that I carry with me – and remembered feelings of them, which of course become transformed. I could certainly never mirror nature. I would more like to paint what it leaves with me.*[10]

Mitchell's words point to the ever-changing and subjective quality of nature as it is captured in McIntyre's paintings. Their abstract quality offers an entire untouched field on which to project our personal narratives and emotions, to imagine or re-contextualise our most intimate fantasies.[11] By stepping beyond or away from figuration, McIntyre delves further away from imitation and closer to another essential influence: Georgina Houghton. A pioneer of the Spiritualist movement in the second half of the nineteenth century, Houghton sought to represent the subconscious and the transcendent, without ever defining her work as abstract.[12] Free-hand drawing and swirls made up Houghton's visual language, and McIntyre re-integrates them into her contemporary abstractions (most notably in the paintings *Arcadia* and *Up bubbles her amorous breath* (2021)) as unaltered, automatic translations of her interior imaginary – essentially from mind to paintbrush.



Emma McIntyre, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, 2021. Oil and oil stick on linen, 183 x 213 cm. Installation view, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, Air de Paris, 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Emma McIntyre, *Arcadia*, 2021. Oil and oil stick on linen, 45.5 x 51 cm. Installation view, *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, Air de Paris, 2022. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

Cross-references from various periods meet in her creative language, as they do in most reviews of her work.[13] But McIntyre appears still firmly contemporary: her work sits within a wave of young artists who are gaining increasing international recognition as they remain faithful to an expressionist, De Kooningesque,

Kirkeby-inspired abstraction. In the face of a ubiquitous return to figuration among emerging artists, heavily supported by commercial interest and high-level demand (some may call it narrow-minded obsession), McIntyre aligns herself with the pillars of a new contemporary abstraction that are giving a fresh impetus to modern day creation and breathing new life into the artworld. She shares the landscape genre and formal abstract similarities with Daisy Parris (currently presenting a solo show at Sim Smith, London), the immediacy and agitated writing of Rachel Jones (currently showing at Thaddeus Ropac, London) and the integration of repeated motifs and decorative patterns like Oscar Murillo (co-winner of 2019 Turner Prize). It's a generation that is developing an abstract language in harmony or rupture with our times, that understands the porosity of cultural exchanges, and is attentive to individual narratives in a context of increasing inequalities, free-market globalisation and ecological nightmares. It comes as no surprise that McIntyre is represented in New Zealand by Coastal Signs, an alternative model to commercial galleries, imagined by Sarah Hopkinson in the last year. The group functions as an informal cooperative in which artists take part in the decision-making process for the gallery's program and activities. An initiative that clearly rejects the current overarching gallery model, one solely guided by economic profit and hierarchical structures.[14]

Up bubbles her amorous breath is an invitation to pause and reflect, to take a time-out from omnipresent discussions about the metaverse, to become aware of the transformations of our surroundings and lend an ear to the natural world. Here Donna Haraway's words resonate nicely with McIntyre's brushstrokes: "Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places".[15] The openness and fluidity of the environments she creates, their free interpretation, the elaboration and respect of a creative process, the slowness it requires, the space left for mistakes and uncontrolled impulses… doesn't this echo Haraway's call to *sym-poiesis*, in other words to 'make-with' our ecosystems, with each other, in all our diversity and struggles? To navigate our cities-that-never-sleep and overly consumerist habits with a touch more patience and solidarity. To understand that 'staying with the

trouble' means facing and learning to deal with ecological catastrophe instead of denying it, and finding means for collective dreaming and organisation. McIntyre's art speaks eloquently of the ephemerality of the human condition, yet manages to celebrate the transitory through a frenzy of vivid colours, an assertive fervor and zeal. It is an ode to what we can do as a collective, and what will continue to live on beyond our last breath.

Footnotes

01. John Keats, "Sonnets: On a Picture of Leander," in Thomas Humphry Ward, ed. *The English Poets. 1880–1918*. Vol. IV. The Nineteenth Century: Wordsworth to Rossetti.

02. Ibid.

03. Emma McIntyre, interview with the author, January 2022.

04. Chloe Lane, "Making Art in the Time of Covid-19. Amy Howden-Chapman and Emma McIntyre in the United States" on Contemporary HUM website, 28 May 2021. [Accessed 31 January 2022: www.contemporaryhum.com/writing/making-art-in-the-time-of-covid-19/]

05. Joshua Rivkin, *Chalk: The Art and Erasure of Cy Twombly* (Brooklyn and London: Melville House Publishing, 2020), 258.

06. Emma McIntyre, interview with the author, January 2022.

07. Arlène Berceliot Courtin, "Up bubbles her amorous breath", press release (Paris: Air de Paris, 2022). [Accessed 31 January 2022: www.airdeparis.com/1/1.pdf]

08. Patrick Scemama, 'Air de Paris' in La république de l'art, 5 February 2015. [Accessed 31 January 2022: www.larepubliquedelart.com/air-de-paris/]

09. The gallery Air de Paris takes its name from the eponymous work created by Marcel Duchamp in 1919 in France, as a gift to his American friend and patron Walter Arensberg. The work consists of a bulb containing physiological serum bought in a pharmacy that Duchamp emptied before filling it with air from the French capital and sending it across the Atlantic Ocean.

10. Joan Mitchell, interview with John I. H. Baur, *Nature in Abstraction*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1958), 73.

11. The unencumbered fluidity and ambiguity of McIntyre's paintings could be linked to Judith Butler's insistence on the political necessity of safeguarding the circulation of fantasy. Bearing in mind that Butler does warn us that the realms of representation and fantasy - as places where psychic freeplay can unfold - are in no way freed from the constraints of power relations. Litz Kotz, "The Body You Want: An Interview with Judith Butler" in *Artforum*, Print Issue, November 1992, 82-89. [Accessed 31 January 2022: www.artforum.com/print/199209/the-body-you-want-an-inteview-with-judith-butler-33505]

12. The Art Newspaper, 'Georgiana Houghton' in series *Elles font l'abstraction*, 1 June 2021. [Accessed 30 January 2022: www.artnewspaper.fr/news/georgiana-houghton]

13. Suzanne Hudson, 'Reviews: Emma McIntyre', *Artforum*, May Issue 2021; Andrew Berardini, 'Slippery Dancefloors & Somatic Promiscuities', *ArtNow Essays*, April 2021; Fanny Singer, 'Art Histories Collide in Emma McIntyre's Sublime Abstractions', *Frieze*, February 2021.

14. In conversation with the artist, January 2022. Link to Coastal Signs website: www.coastal-signs.net/i/index.php?id=about-hp7656di98w

15. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chtulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

Biographies



Emma McIntyre is a New Zealander painter born in Tāmaki Makaurau in 1990. She now lives and works in Los Angeles. Since 2012, she has been a part of multiple group shows in New Zealand. Her first solo show *Loop the Loop* at 30upstairs in Wellington opened in 2016, the same year she graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland. Her work was presented in various shows around New Zealand since then. In 2021, the year of her second graduation, this time from the ArtCenter College of Design in California, the Chris Sharp Gallery in Los Angeles, California organised her first solo show outside of New Zealand. *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, her first solo show in Europe, was presented at Air de Paris, France, from 9th January to 12th February 2022.



Megan Macnaughton is an art historian and writer born in Paris, France, in 1995. She holds a BA in History of Art from the University of Bristol and an MPhil in Latin American Cultural Studies from the University of Cambridge. Her research focuses on historically overlooked female artists as well as emerging contemporary practices. Interested in the socio-political implications of cultural exchanges, she has written extensively about photography, performance art and cinema in Latin America. She has worked for various institutions including Museo de Arte Contemporaneo (Buenos Aires) and Fondation Henri Cartier Bresson (Paris), and several contemporary art galleries such as Arnolfini (Bristol), Erna Hecey (Luxembourg) and kamel mennour (Paris).

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