

# LUNGLEY

WHEN YOU EXPERIENCE A WORK OF ART YOU SEE YOUR OWN UNDERSTANDING...WHAT YOU KNOW AND WHAT YOU DON'T...WHAT YOU LIKE AND WHAT YOU DON'T.

SOME THOUGHTS ON William Mackrell's exhibition: "STRIP" at Lungley Gallery

Text by David Thomas

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William Mackrell's work makes me feel uncomfortable...at first...then I/we sort of enter into to it and accommodate his compelling but odd imagery...it's a bit like life really... odd but then we deal with it.

It is through engaging with William Mackrell's work that I can access certain feelings, sensations and ideas that I normally would not... if I give his work TIME ...he opens up new content for my consideration ... for my interpretation. Content that circles around time...duration, endurance , care, paradox, the abject, decay and renewal, the actual and the imagined, the dream and material, the micro amid macro...the personal amid the political AND FORM as it disrupts and extends the categories of media/object /performance to become (that unfashionable thing)...POETIC.

In Mackrell's work the photograph is not simply an object but is performed ...it is transformed to enable us to see how the real and imagination are interwoven... WE see how sensibility works...ours and his, to generate a POETIC vision. In doing this I could argue that he extends the legacy of Northern Romanticism... this is where his work shifts from being simply about personal responses (his and mine) to the cultural, aesthetic and political.

It's obvious or will become obvious that I am an admirer of Mackrell's work but I am an informed admirer with reasons why I believe his work is worthy of admiration. I am not alone in this. Some artwork seems inevitable, a necessity, reflecting the aspirations and crises of our age... But perhaps before I get too carried away with grand claims for Mackrell's work let's stop here and be specific. I will concentrate on only two of Mackrell's works in the current exhibition but what I write applies equally to other works.

Let's start with a hair photograph "Strip"<sup>1</sup>.



*Strip (2023)*  
Etching on C-type print mounted on aluminium 24.5 cm x 22.5 cm

A smallish work of an enlarged section of the artist's body 24.5 cm x 22.5 cm, an unframed photo mounted on aluminium, clean and precise. (Mackrell's supports/framings are carefully considered and contribute to our readings the work. They do not get in the way, they are specific to each work and amplify content). The photograph's motif is of body/ies and hairs. Mackrell obsessively and carefully traces each follicle of hair incising the image with a sharp tool....this transforms the photographic image into a residue of performed action. The cropping of the image questions our own sense of position, of scale. The size and the texture of the image forces

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us into intimacy with the work...we become like Dali's ants crawl over the body...micro /macro implodes. "Strip" evokes a post-covid intimacy with the body. It shifts us from the consideration the mimetic function of photography to the confrontation a new awkward presence...a real object. We struggle to locate which part of the body/bodies we are confronted with. WE are challenged to make sense of what we are looking at or should I say inspecting. We consider human touch and its relationship to form, and the materiality of the photograph and body... sharpness of tool and softness of flesh. WE are engaged with TOUCH OVER AN EXTENDED DURATION. Like Mackrell... WE move from the past time, the memory of the photographic moment to the present, the time of our perceiving, we shift from material fact into the space and time of IMAGINATION, or to put this another way ... We enter content that is poetic, expressive, psychological and aesthetic. "Strip" celebrates the slow unfolding of content, the movement of meaning.

IN LIFE HAIR KEEPS GROWING, LIFE KEEPS FLOWING...however the photograph is fixed ...a time past becoming a memory. In "Strip" this past time has been extended into the present via our perceiving of his human touch/mark/ gesture... Mackrell generates a type of sympathy with the form, between form and mark making and image ...a call and response, a variation and that eventually becomes a transformation into feeling.

**"For me it's not only about scratching away the surface of the photograph to reveal a mark, he says, "it's also about depth, breath and time spent."**

**"There are days when your hand is looser and you feel like you're finding a rhythm with the work, and other days when you feel you're fighting against it. I can find I'm literally pushing into the paper more and you can actually see some of that tension..."**



*Aquarius (2016) Etching on C-type print, mounted on aluminium 100 cm x 56 cm. Manchester Art Gallery Collection.*

An aside; **Hair and the Gothic. The micro amid macro.**

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## THE PRE RAPHAELITE'S WERE INTO HAIR, WILLIAM MACKRELL IS INTO HAIR.

As I was sitting in Mackrell's studio in London in May 2023 the Rossetti exhibition was occurring at Tate Britain. We discussed hair as I was looking at one of "Strip".

Mackrell's work moves beyond the fetishization of female hair of Rossetti to something more complex. Through a synthesis of painting/drawing /performance Mackrell engages us with erasure that reveals /addition via removal /revelation /obscuring, oddness, mystery, eroticism. the abject, obsession ...perhaps something we can call the Gothic. Not the Gothic of the American horror genre... although there is an echo of the HAUNTED in some of his images...a ghosting of imagery. No, I am thinking of something more akin to John Ruskin's characterisation of the Gothic. The Gothic in his view had the attributes of Savageness/Changefulness. In this sense Mackrell's work can be seen as a continuation of a Northern European sensibility, something of neo neo Romanticism that celebrates feeling, the mysterious, the unknown, the uneasy, the asymmetrical,...the felt not simply the known... not the ordered rational of classical form but a site where dark and sometimes light emotional forces are at play.

BEYOND THE ROMANTIC AND THE GOTHIC: MACKRELL'S PRACTICE. I use the terms Gothic and Romantic with care but am SUSPICIOUS OF THEM. They reveal something... but they are also capable of closing readings, of pigeon-holing Mackrell's practice. I/we have to be careful not to slip into simply authorising his work by linking it historically to external movements. HIS WORK IS MORE RELEVANT THAN THIS. His is a contemporary Romanticism that is grounded literally in the present, in our era.

There is an unease a darkness that recognises the general condition of the post pandemic world in the age of global warming amid the renewal of a hot cold war. **LIKE A CONTEMPORARY FUSELI AMID THE CLIMATE CRISIS** there is also in this work a sense of individual unease that may be deemed personal, that alludes to the strange nocturnal space of dreams and nightmares. The pose in John Henry Fuseli's may be seen as a source for the poses in Mackrell's the "Nightmare Series" of which "Strip" is a part.



Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) *The Nightmare* 1781 Oil on canvas 101.6 × 126.7 cm. Image copyright Detroit Institute of Arts.

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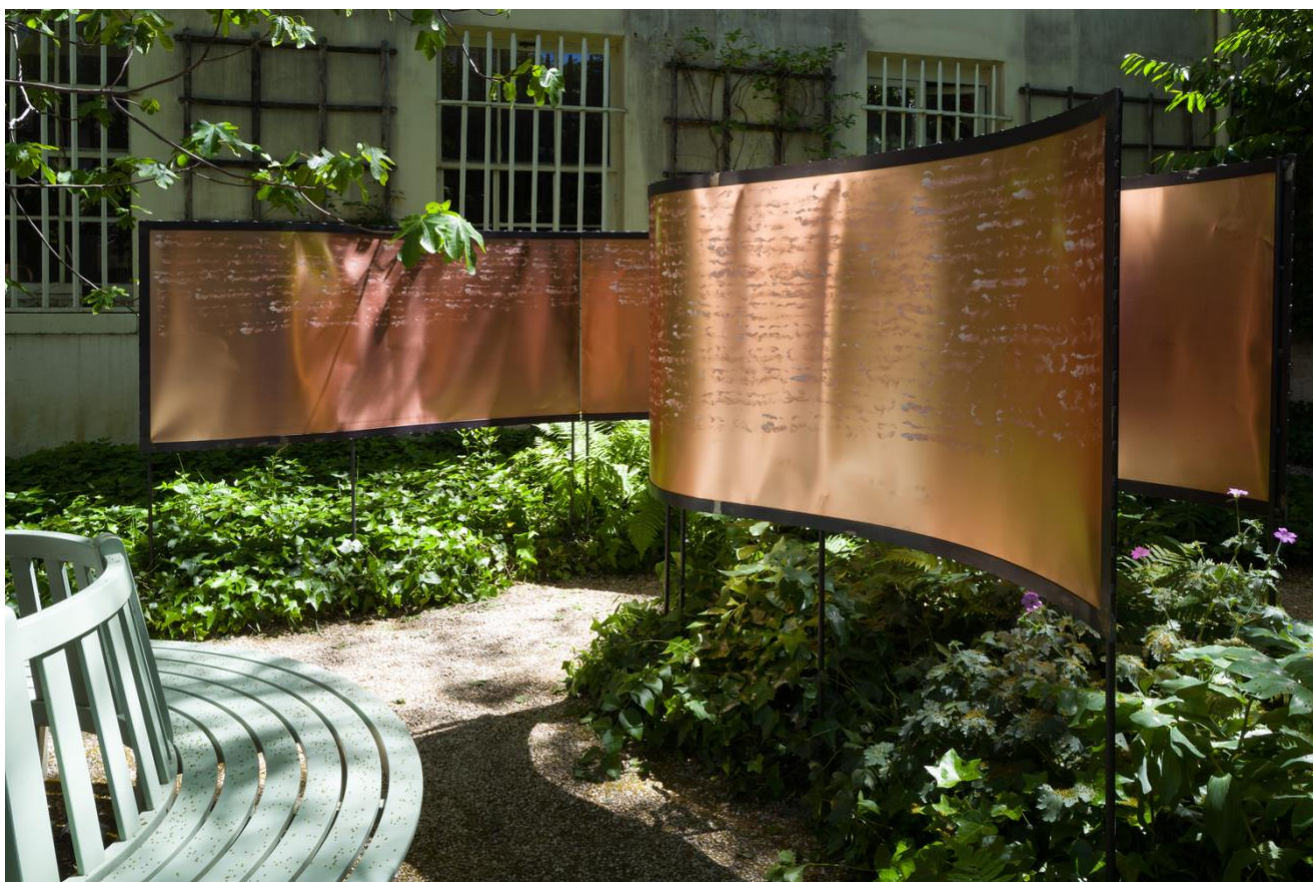
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## THE BODY and THE MARK (Facture) and DURATION meet a POETIC SENSIBILITY

I have mentioned above one type of mark in Mackrell's practice, the scratched /incised line manifest in the Hair photoworks. This is the mark of the hand and the wrist made close up with a tool... sharp. It is disciplined controlled, responding to and transforming the pre-existing imagery in photograph. The fineness of Mackrell's linework creates an atmosphere not simply of concentration but an atmosphere of OBSESSION. In doing so it reveals endurance and duration as content, both are ongoing aspects of Mackrell's practice, past and present.

MACKRELL HAS EMPLOYED DIVERSE STRATEGIES THROUGHOUT HIS PRACTICE TO ENGAGE WITH TIME. Take for example his recent work at the Musée Delacroix in Paris 2019 where in some ways he was PERFORMING SILENCE via the imprint of his (the artist's) lips on copper surfaces. Marks are MUTE. He mouthed the language of Delacroix's diaries which were translated and performed via the imprint of his lips on copper sheets. These sheets wound through Delacroix's garden ...suggesting not only the temporary nature of the existence of speech but also the invisibility and persistence of idea /thought/feeling. His is communication NOT THROUGH THE WORD as I am trying to do, but through the signification of performed form and materiality in situ... the difficulty of communication ...the silent words...are transformed into new temporalities of form.



*A Painter In The House of Letters, 2021 Musée Delacroix Paris, supported by Fluxus, 1-14 June 2021. Image courtesy of the artist.*

The copper reflected light as well as mark in the garden, an intrusion of human feeling thinking and making into the natural world of air and plants. The muteness of these lipstick works reflect not only Mackrell's feelings but suggest our own struggle to understand, to communicate by asking us how do we make sense of our emotional and physical realities in this physical world... in this world of culture and ideas. These silent traces move through nature on curving copper forms like thoughts, like emotions. Mackrell's use of the Delacroix's diaries leads not to academic referencing/appropriation but to the eloquence of poetry in a similar way to the manner in which he references Fuseli or the diverse moods of Bosch's "Gardens of Earthly Delights" in his recent plant based works.

Amongst these, is the copper coloured, artichoke work: "**VIOLETTA BURNS**".

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*Violetta burns (2023)*  
*Pigment on archival paper mounted on linen 226 cm x 152 cm*

In relation to these works in the Lungley show Mackrell writes:

**“The show will include a mixture of these plant based works, I like the artichokes’ continued dialogue from the sunflowers. When consumed the artichoke contains the properties of cleansing and purification. Both the artichoke and sunflower have similar postures and stalk like bodies/characters quite individually unique on close inspection. There is this sense of decay renewal (as we spoke about) seeds pouring out of the head when they collapse under their own weight at the end of their cycle... there are some connections here to the fragility of hair - our changing body...”**

I think here of the similarities and differences between MACKRELL'S approach and the grand ambitions of KIEFER (sunflowers) /BEUYS (alchemical properties of materials in a social context) who by placing their works firmly amid the social and historical realities revealed the grand sweep of big ideas from history to ecology...

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Mackrell's are no less ambitious but they seem more internal, more intimate. The copper coloured, "Violetta Burns" artichoke work amplifies the relation of light and dark in/to each other. Light comes from behind from inside...it generates a sense of energy.

The work is 226 cm x 152 cm filling the wall, immersive in scale, it has the characteristics of a large tapestry-like wall-hanging, the photograph is supported on a canvas material. This amplifies the organic nature of a plane in space not unlike the curving copper sheets in the gardens of the Musée Delacroix.

The quality of light emanating from the work can be seen as a continuation of the ongoing use of light as energy evident in Mackrell's work since his early "flouro" works where the light flow was erratic due to the flickering imperfections of the near worn out fluorescent tubes...Now an outdated technology, they seemed to suggest the end of a cultural time, a time after the Modernism of Flavin. They suggest that "flouros", like Modernism was at their death knell.... but... within these works there was/is still a flickering of life, of light struggling to be, of light/life in all its FRAGILITY... in its transience, in its persistence.

SO TOO WITH the recent sunflower, artichoke and seed works light persists.

The particular use of / light /dark/ contrast/ material/process suggest the alchemical (the colours of copper /silver /lead), here a pictorial drama is at play. These works are literally created through exposure to light ... the light appears to come from behind, as an illumination.... The real becomes image, becomes poetry. Here also colour meets materiality. Here copper acts as a conductor of energy. Here regeneration is suggested...here hope is suggested after catastrophe...

For whilst Mackrell's plant works appear post-apocalyptic they offer a sense of hope amid our current political, ecological and personal concerns. And it is this sense of hope, before action that is what is needed today. His work is a valuing and an empathetic address to each of us to recognise the value our own internal realities amid external conditions...and to understand as Saemus Heaney suggested in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "Crediting Poetry" that..."we are all hunters and collectors of values".

David Thomas, Naarm/Melbourne, Australia, August 2023.

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**David Thomas** was born in Belfast N. Ireland. He lives and works in Melbourne/Naarm, Australia. His work explores the contemplative function of painting, photopainting and installation. He holds a PhD from RMIT University where he is an Emeritus Professor in the School of Art. He occasionally curates and writes on contemporary Eastern and Western art.

His work is held in numerous private and public collections in Australia and overseas.

He is represented by: Block Projects Melbourne, Australia, Minus Space, New York, USA and raum 2810, Bonn, Germany.

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<sup>i</sup> In an email whilst considering the title of the work and potential title for the show Mackrell revealed the complexity and fluidity of his associations with the idea "Strip":

"Stripped back, stripped bare, stripped body, skin, flesh, hair, stalks crackling dried golden, lower light, stripping off the leaves of the artichoke, this protection shield, sharp leaves hard to get at. Requires patience.

The work titled "Strip" started as a test strip of paper that incidentally became mounted as a work".