

A high-contrast, artistic photograph of a person's legs and feet lying in a field of small blue flowers. The person is wearing a blue garment. The scene is lit with a strong blue light, creating a monochromatic effect. The text is overlaid on the image.

Bam.

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**Ben Quilty. Ozzie Wright. Abbey McCulloch. Robyn Sweaney.
Brendan Kelly. Carolyn Delzoppo. Michael Cusack. Casey Chen.**

+ ART IN UNEXPECTED PLACES



ABBEY M
The Rapids

Abbey McCulloch.

By Nadine Abensur.

WALKING INTO ABBEY MCCULLOCH'S STUDIO IS UPLIFTING, THE NORTHEASTERLY LIGHT BRIGHT AND THE COOLING BREEZE COMING IN FROM ALL SIDES. ESTABLISHING THIS HOME WITHIN A HOME, TOP OF THE TO-DO LIST WHEN BUYING BACK AND RE-APPROPRIATING THE GOLD COAST HOUSE IN WHICH SHE HAD GROWN UP. WITH A YOUNG AMERICAN STAFFY AT HER FEET, THIS IS THE CAULDRON FOR ALL QUESTIONING AND EXPERIMENTING – THE PROFOUND INVESTIGATIONS INTO HER OWN PSYCHOLOGY, HER WOMANHOOD, HER PAINTING AND SCULPTURE. AND WHAT AN INVESTIGATION IT HAS PROVEN TO BE.

THE RAPIDS, 2021 INSTALLATION VIEW AT THIS IS NO FANTASY.
PHOTOGRAPH BY JANELLE LOW



I admit to having been a little dazzled by her giddy early success — three times an Archibald Prize finalist (2007, 2009, 2013) — and by the apparent glamour of her work. Sitters included celebrities Nell Schofield, Toni Colette, and Naomi Watts. So, it's perhaps not surprising that my most vivid memories of her work are from those years. In a palette of gelato pink sand yellows, greens and blues, the girls (the young women, I should say) of these earlier works are often unnervingly pretty, petulant and proud, furtive and a little sinister — a point we address in our conversation as we stand by the newer, wilder canvasses and their bold figures.

Even then, McCulloch's early subjects stare at you from the canvas, not simply objects but also provocateurs. The figures and loose portraits picked and pickled from the psyche and the sketchbooks of the artist as a younger woman seem to be staring at the patriarchy and its mores, sniggering in its face. An exploration of the real and the imagined, the true and the false, the seen and the hidden; the paintings are unsettling, like a child's horror story.

In *The Fussy*, sexuality leaks uncontrolled and uncontrollable through kohl-smudged eyes, the black drip of vulnerability. It is the murkiness of these mixed emotions, this tension and contradiction between the softness of the palette, the (uneasy) prettiness of the girls, and their often covert and curious mix of defiance and self doubt that intrigues and drives McCulloch.

She questions everything that appears to be “too beautifully simple” and likes to capture what is hidden or revealed only in moments of unguardedness or sudden and fleeting self-awareness. She longs for a less complicated experience but seems destined to have to untangle the knotty mess to get to it. It was never conventional portraiture that motivated her but an interest, as she puts it, “in diluting someone's likeness to make my kind of image ... I like to paint feelings.”

It didn't take the #MeToo movement for McCulloch to question the things happening to women. From a young age, she has sought “to understand people who trust people ... I don't trust anyone.” She says, “It's not a nice place to be. I can't escape these issues I have with women and vulnerability. It's all I think about.” And yet here we are some eight years later, and the figures are large and boldly outlined, in near neon brilliance as they sit, lie (or is it hover?) above the imposing and arguably male landscapes of the Wild West and the old Western films McCulloch has loved since childhood. Prettiness has morphed into presence (maybe even omnipresence) and petulance into power. It isn't that they have surpassed emotion or doubt, but that they are a more expanded, more impersonal version of themselves.



THE RAPIDS, 2021 INSTALLATION VIEW AT THIS IS NO FANTASY.
PHOTOGRAPH BY JANELLE LOW

Opposite page
THE SUNDOWNER 2021, OIL ON CANVAS, 167 X 140 CM



Though the delineation between figure and landscape is strong, the women's bodies are transparent, with mountain sand rocks, rivers and streams for flesh. And so we get talking about a true power that resides inside every woman, whether she is cognisant of it or not: her magnificent, devastating power to 'be'.

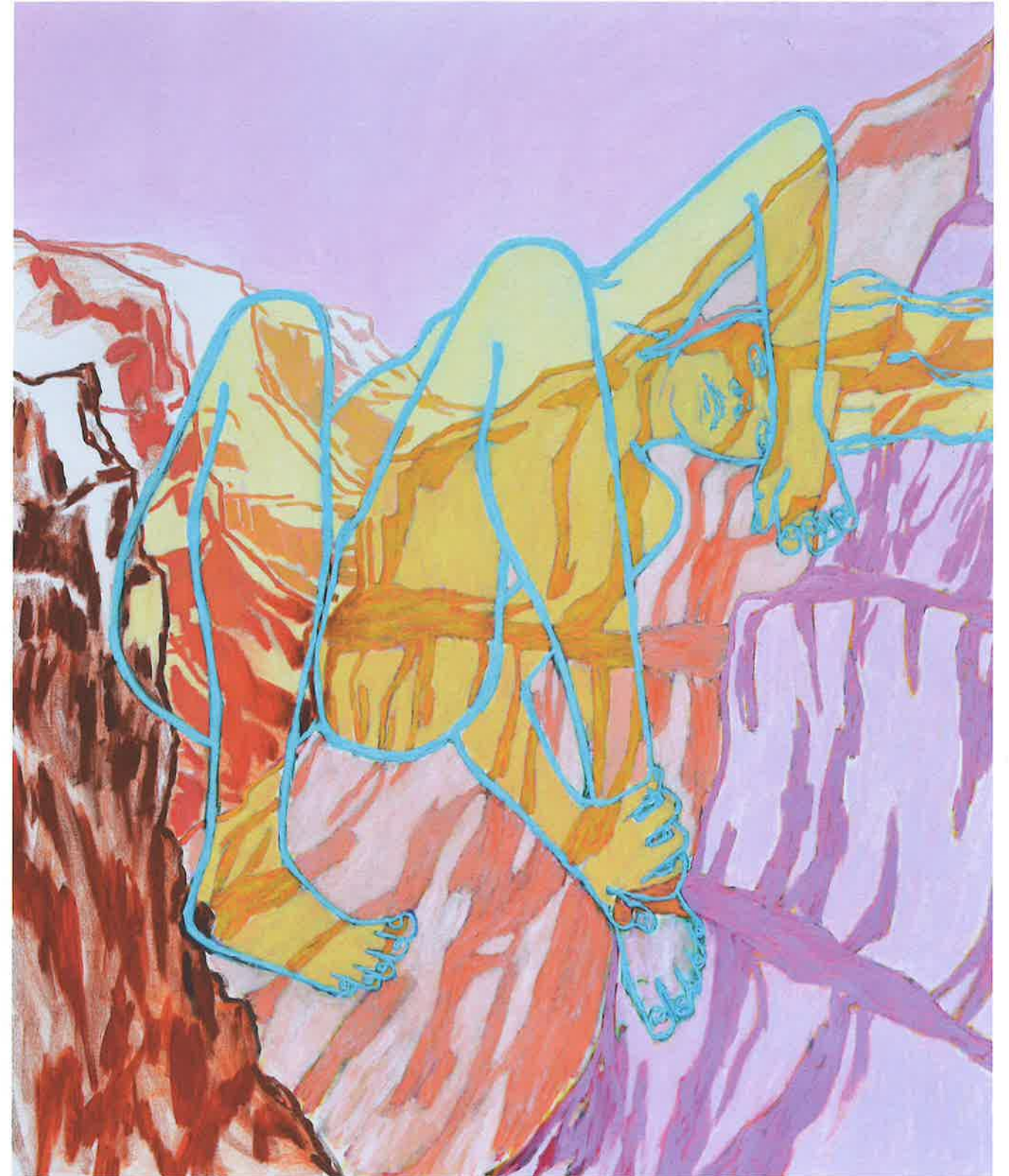
An out-of-left-field and the first-ever experience of debilitating anxiety has led her to question everything. And so we come to the sculptures. These handpainted, glossy, strangely contorted figures are plastic smooth, but more importantly, are incredibly tactile. It is impossible to resist the temptation to run a hand along their curves. Constructed in coils of clay, McCulloch began to fashion them as a way to relax. She discovered that "the process of rolling the clay was very therapeutic" and that seeing her drawings become three-dimensional was enough to get her through to "the other side of what was a horrible time". She later acknowledges, "Our thoughts are our greatest enemies". The sculptures, too, have matured —fuller-bodied, saturated in colour, they continue the exploration of the fake and the real. The short film *The Adventure* (2019) made for The Walls Art Space shows McCulloch's sculpture *Pam* buffeted by the waves, yet she remains undamaged. It is part of learning to disassociate from the mind and enter into the peace of the body.

Having long pondered on what it is to be a woman, and never having been comfortable with the societal expectations (angry and confused about what being female meant, she says), this statuesque artist tells me that she always felt that she wanted to escape standards she didn't understand, and longed to go straight into the anonymity of old age. At 46 years old, she has a long way to go and a lot more to explore. And so we keep talking.

Yes, McCulloch's paintings have grown along with her, and though she feels she is still only scratching at the surface, it's clear that she's come a long way. "Far too timid in the past", she now wants to fire up. And she does. Now, she makes images of women that are "transcending something threatening". She considers these paintings to be hopeful images. "They [the women] are seeking a state of peace because sometimes that threat is themselves. It's our ability to grow and shift out of fear that I am always interested in," she says.

In *The Verge*, the woman sits atop the mountain, grounded and transcendental, apparently at peace yet resonating with what McCulloch calls the same "wild multitudes as the land, in all its volatility and its serenity". The poses are yogic in character and inspiration, yet there's no denying the insouciance of the open-legged pose. Here is the desire to be in the body and escape its limitations. The suspected timidity of the earlier paintings has well and truly gone. These highly-hued hills and rugged rocks, monumental and magnificent, make for an exhilarating landscape over which McCulloch longs to ride, bare back no doubt, with a cowboy hat on her long flowing hair. When I ask her if she has a fantasy life, something she still hopes to achieve, she says without hesitation, "Yes, to ride horses, and learn to breed them". Just like that, from scratch. Gone too in this body of work is the economy of paint and the guilt, borne, she says, from her experience of art school where, like other artists of her generation, she had to fight to paint. This led to a frugality with her medium, a self-consciousness that made her feel almost guilty, as if she were throwing food at the walls. She maintains a pared-back look, yet closer inspection reveals many layers of paint, the more completely to explore the wild energy of the body and its place in the world.

Abbey McCulloch is represented by THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne.



THE AMBUSH 2021, OIL ON CANVAS, 167 X 140 CM. ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THIS IS NO FANTASY

Opposite page

THE SUNDOWNER 2021, OIL ON CANVAS, 167 X 140 CM