

# Ewan McDougall



## Hard Out Twenty Years of Painting

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TEMPLE GALLERY

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*Post Muttonism 2006*  
Oil on canvas 1530 x 1220 mm

“Ewan McDougall’s ... works ...are a kind of adult animation in technicolour tactility. Humanoid figures in garish colours dance and loom against yellows and oranges. The animistic is invoked: the extension and diminution of figures ask the viewers to mentally morph themselves into the kind of emotional space the characters’ gestures suggest.

His palette-knifed impasto is secure, funny and clever.”

Bridie Lonie ‘Can You Feel It?’ *New Zealand Listener* August 20, 2005.



Sarah 1989  
Acrylic on paper 370 x 510 mm

## Ewan McDougall Hard Out: Twenty Years of Painting

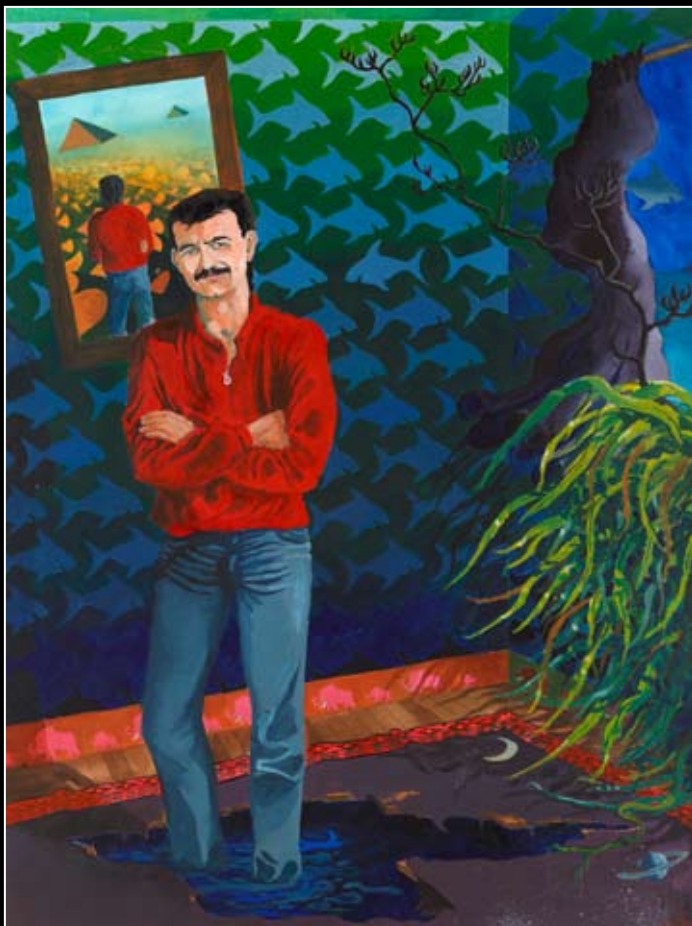
Ewan McDougall has been at it for twenty years. An artist who started when many would already be in mid career he had another life before he took up painting. That first life ended in crash and burn but from it comes the content, articulated in a fiercely wrought, personal idiom, of his paintings' demonic, hilarious vision of life down here on planet earth. It is an art which laughs and howls like a hyena, dances like the flames of hell, crackles with furious energy but is masterfully tactful too. It might have been a wowser art. Instead it is pointed but wry. McDougall has been there, done that and knows the consequences too. But he is not on any crusade just alight with the craziness of it all. He wants to share his knowing take on life and the frantic, but compassionate, merriment it inspires.

He was born in Wellington in 1948, grew up in Oamaru and went to Waitaki Boys High School where he was taught art by Colin Wheeler. McDougall went on to the University of Otago and graduated with honours in Political Studies in 1971. He had worked to support himself at freezing works, and continued to do so later and his worker's number – 173 – appears in several paintings. He was also involved in rock bands, *Pussyfoot* and *Noah*, playing drums. He became a junior lecturer and pursuing an academic career went to Australia in 1976.

The academic ambitions didn't last. After working in Australia's North West deserts McDougall set off on the now familiar trail through Nepal to London. In Britain there were pub jobs, work on North Sea



*Escape from the Mad Cows* 1993  
Acrylic and oil on paper 910 x 710 mm



*Self with White Pointers* 1989  
Acrylic on Arches paper 770 x 510 mm

oil-rigs, but also lively recreation which saw him surfing in Baja California. Eventually he got back to Australia which is where he met the British-born Sarah Martin, a writer he married in 1983. McDougall had been partying all along the way, living the Rock and Roll life with all its baroque accompaniments. But an 'active social life' was starting to look a lot 'like alcoholism'.<sup>1</sup>

Ewan and Sarah came to New Zealand in 1984. In 1988 McDougall was admitted to Queen Mary Hospital at Hanmer Springs, stonewalled by his addictions. At the suggestion of the Medical Superintendent, Robert Crawford, he assisted painting a mural and in the process found the slayer of his personal demons.

**Sarah** of 1989 is an early result. McDougall's wife floats semi-nude and vulnerable above a canyoned lake with a strange, threatening biomorph hovering behind, throwing out dangerous tendrils. There's some cute Kiwiana in the foreground but a pair of tusked elephants are charging into the lake heading in the general direction of the lady. As a variation on *Perseus and Andromeda* we have the maiden and the monsters but no hero, a reflection, perhaps, of the general decline in gallantry – or delusion? – since the Epic Days of Old. At this time McDougall was using illusionism to paint in a Surrealist manner.

**Self with White Pointers** of the same year is another of this sort, showing the artist, resolute, but apparently submerged, in an underwater lounge room, not quite insouciant, but curiously unperturbed by a number of sharks swimming around.

McDougall found the time and care necessary to produce these illusionist effects was cramping his desire for spontaneous expression. An association with the artist Lindsay Crooks, who shared his passion for surfing, produced **Campbell's Bay** in 1991 where the seascape and tousle-haired surfers are becoming more hydrodynamic. The following year, **The Commission** showed a further step in the evolution of a personal idiom with an idol-like human figure accoutred with a fishhook and taiaha. This was a reaction against the futility of trying to paint a commission, signalled by the dollar on the fishhook. **Escape from the Mad Cows** of 1993 reflects relief after a return

<sup>1</sup> Richard Dingwall, 'I've Done All the Dumb Things' *Art New Zealand* 86, 1998.



*Fall of the Blue Angel* 1995  
Oil on board 330 x 900 mm

to New Zealand from a sojourn in England. There's a reference to the eponymous disease; a nuclear power station is shown in the background; the faces of the figures have become masks, with lead white and rouge standing in for death and passion.

**Fall of the Blue Angel**, 1995, marks another long step towards a personal language. Now we have only mask-like faces, grinning and hollering, oblivious to an angel plunging to his doom above. **Descent from King's Cross** of the following year points the moment of the artist's arrival. Now faces and figures are wholly schematic and colour has become a weapon. The theme is the madness of human life as revealed by a truly hyped-up party, appropriately set against the high-rise background of Sydney's cabaret district.

By this time McDougall had developed a lexicon consisting of mask-like, saw-toothed, grinning faces, highly simplified figures reminiscent of primitive art and falling figures, all painted gesturally in vibrant colours on fields with little or no illusion of depth. He has been called an 'Outsider' artist and has been associated with 'Art Brut' – raw art – but is really a neo-expressionist.<sup>2</sup>

**Icharus with flaming dancers** of 1997 is a particularly animated example of his gesturalism with Icharus swooping down in a curve nicely echoed by the hollow arc made by the body of a madly flexing

<sup>2</sup> He was called an 'outsider' artist by Mark Amery, quoted by Nigel Benson, 'Take a Colourful Life' Otago Daily Times 28/6/2007. He was represented in the 2004 London Raw Arts Festival and the 2006 Spanish Raw Art Exhibition in Valencia in Spain. Bridie Lonie, called him a neo-expressionist in 'Can you feel it?' New Zealand Listener 20/8/2005 and he has concurred (emails to the writer 22/4/08 & 2/5/08).

limbo dancer. **Man 1/2 Cut** of the following year is a brilliant visual metaphor which would serve very well for a wouser campaign except that isn't McDougall's message. He is not banging the drum in a Prohibition parade but is pointing to the self-destructive madness of not just partying but life, with some head-shaking and laughs along the way. In a play on the expression 'party animal' he has called himself a 'painting animal'. For McDougall the painting is the party, a visual celebration of the madness of life, full of joy but not overlooking the horror.<sup>3</sup>

**Man with birdsong** has a figure whose head is encapsulated in what looks like an inverted bottle. He is surrounded and menaced by fanged avifauna which seem more like pterodactyls than birds. Life is pretty savage and perhaps a man needs a bottle in which to hide. **Happy New Year** is a riot of faces with upthrown hands and eyes all anywhere. These celebrants are certainly getting out of it and look not just sozzled but crazed and injured.

The 2001 painting **Sex and Drugs and Rock 'n Roll** has these words boldly inscribed, extended into a thought by the addition of *is very good indeed*, which is ironic, as we see the figure of a man stretched on his back on a gurney or operating table. From his mouth come the words *wot a way to go* and his face wears a beatific smile. Here's one party animal who's on the way out but still thinks he's somewhere like heaven.

<sup>3</sup> McDougall called himself this when talking to Piers Midwinter, Curator and Director Raw Arts Festival quoted in *Kate Hickey has a one on one with Piers Midwinter*, Art Fairs International website, [www.artfairsinternational.com](http://www.artfairsinternational.com).



*The Birth of Heinous* 2007  
Oil on canvas 1850 x 2150 mm

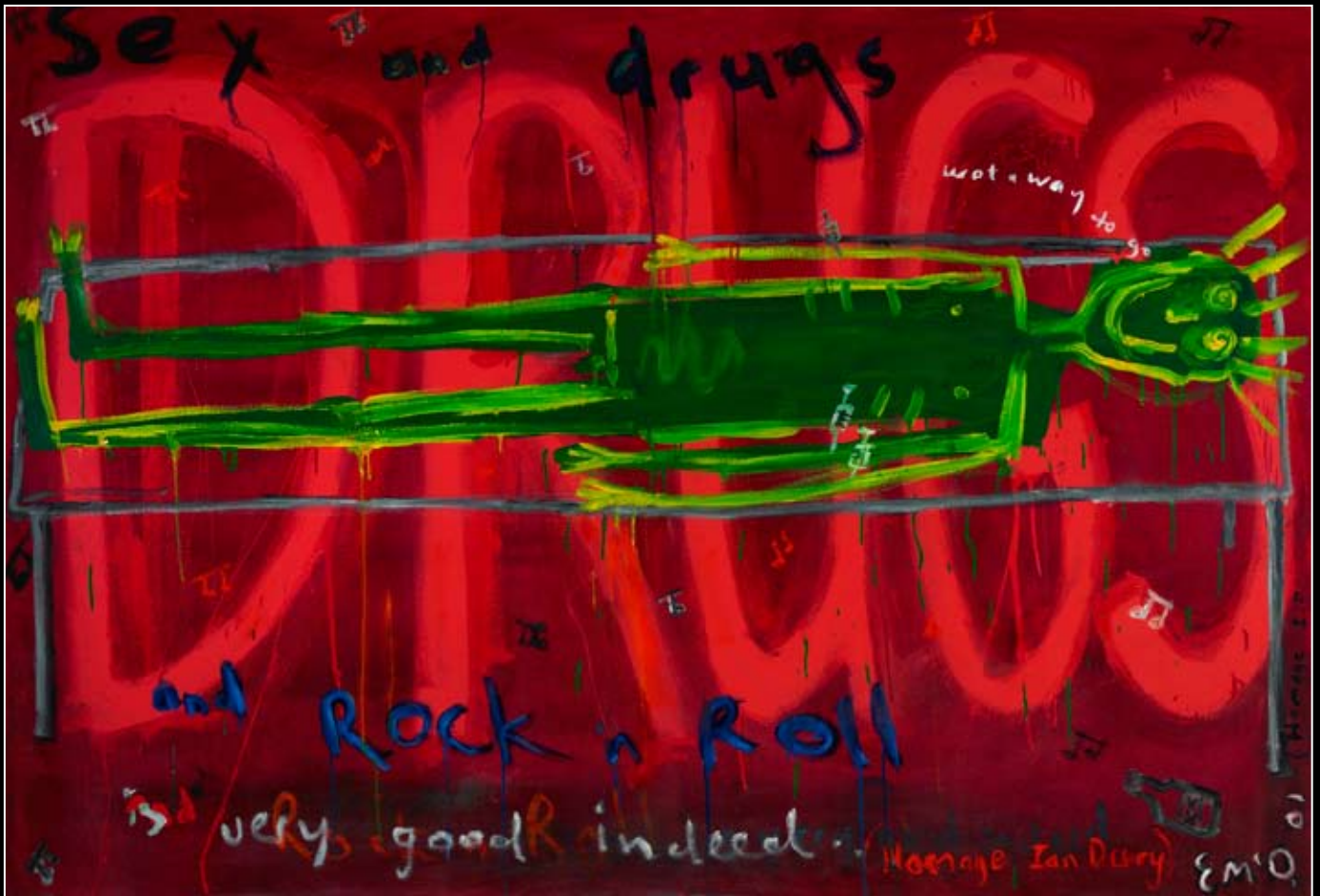
**Planet Hell** is vividly inscribed with maniac figures in rich gold on a red ground with black and green touches for contrast. The figures are partying up another storm which looks like a vision of the inferno with a recumbent skeleton under their feet. There are the same colours and others too in the gloriously titled diptych **Gimme ya Money! This is a Fuckup!** which could stand as a metaphor for much of life.

**Are we there yet? (after Gauguin)** is a large jamboree of stick-legged people, apparently happening in space. There is a two-headed dog, a skeleton in a cage and a woman streaking in from the side, her head thrown back and her hair flying like one of Picasso's women in *Guernica*. A figure holds a pennant reading "Love" and "Hate" and is also holding a nosegay suggesting the ambivalent state of relations between the sexes. An inscription reads "Where th' Fukawi", leaving us to wonder if perhaps

the human tribe hasn't quite found Gauguin's paradise yet.

McDougall is no kind of primitive but he took a crack at scholarly waffle with his 2006 painting **Post Muttonism** where the party this time could be a gallery opening. There are inscribed verbal puns mixing art talk and freezing works lingo. A small suspended carcass is subtitled "cutting edge?" while elsewhere someone asks "Got sushi?" Perhaps all the world is not so much a stage as any kind of human gathering.

In 2007 McDougall produced **Painting or Death** and **The Birth of Heinous**, large confident works in his established manner on his abiding theme of the craziness of life. By this time McDougall had a long list of solo and other shows behind him, up and down New Zealand, in public and dealer galleries,



*Sex and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll* 2001  
Oil on canvas 700 x 1450 mm

and overseas in England and Spain. He had made his presence felt and had developed a critical following of people who felt the power of his madcap vision. It is an engaging art if also sometimes worrying and an art full of humour at the human condition. One senses the artist shaking his head and chuckling at the fun and folly.

**Malestrom**, of 2008, is on the plight of the party animal. Its day-glo colours and hectic energy leave little doubt these are red-blooded guys having fun, although, there seems to be too much blood altogether, impastoed on bodies and filling spaces. To be a party animal, it seems, is to be an accident waiting to happen.

Twenty years on McDougall is on top of his game, painting hard, an artist who has found his pace and is crackling along like a bushfire. It may have been hard getting to the starting blocks but he makes it look easy now.

Peter Entwisle  
July 2008



*Icarus with flaming dancers* 1997  
Oil on canvas 710 x 910 mm

## EWAN MCDOUGALL (1948-)

Ewan McDougall was born in Wellington, New Zealand. His family later moved to Oamaru where he was educated at Waitaki Boys High School and taught painting by North Otago painter Colin Wheeler.

Ewan attended Otago University while also working in freezing works and drumming in the Dunedin Rock bands Pussyfoot and the Noah Shrub. He gained an honours degree in Political Studies in 1971. He worked at Otago University as a junior lecturer and tutor before leaving to travel overseas.

Over the ensuing decade Ewan traveled extensively, working in mining, in pubs and on oilrigs. In the early 1980's he returned to New Zealand with his partner, writer Sarah McDougall.

In 1988 he was referred to Queen Mary Hospital at Hanmer Springs for treatment for addiction and while he was there he was directed to paint a mural by Medical Superintendent Robert Crawford and he began to paint again.

He has subsequently, over twenty years, developed a vibrant signature style. His witty, outrageous works are inhabited by a wealth of personal references to his often volatile life.

Ewan has had 49 solo exhibitions in some of New Zealand's most prominent dealer galleries and numerous group exhibitions as well as exhibiting internationally.

- In 1994 he exhibited in two group exhibitions in Cornwall, UK.
- In 2000 he participated in the Hocken Library Gallery exhibition Art from the Sick Rose which was curated by Sarah McDougall.
- Ewan exhibited in 'Southern Heat' at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2002-2003.
- In 2004 he showed new paintings with Gallery 2021 as part of the Sydney Art Show.
- McDougall exhibited in London in 2005 with the prestigious West End Gallery The Rebecca Hossack Gallery, as well as taking part in 'Art London'- the Chelsea Art Show, the London Art Show and the London Raw Arts Festival.
- Later the same year Ewan exhibited alongside three other international Raw Art painters at Arte Immagini Gallery in Cremona City, Italy.
- In 2006 he exhibited at the Spanish Raw Art Exhibition in Color Elefante Gallery in Valencia, Spain.
- He was a finalist in the Park Lane Art Awards 2006, and in the New Zealand Portrait Gallery Adam Art Awards in 2006 and 2008. His portraits were selected as part of the touring exhibitions on both occasions.
- In 2007 he was a finalist in the Anthony Harper-Centre of Contemporary Art Awards in Christchurch.

- The painter is an eight-time finalist in the Sir James Wallace Art Awards, a finalist in the Norsewear Art Awards and a prize-winner in the Mainland and Cleveland Art Awards.
- In July, 2008, 'Hard Out' Ewan's twenty-year retrospective exhibition opened at Dunedin's Temple Gallery prior to touring South Island galleries.

He has paintings in a number of public collections including: The Forrester Gallery, The Aigantighe Gallery, The University of Otago Auckland Centre Collection, the Otago Hospital Collection, The Centre of Contemporary Art Collection and numerous private collections.

[www.ewanmcdougall.co.nz](http://www.ewanmcdougall.co.nz)

