

Megan Walch: *Into the Wild Wood*

Wild Wood 1

Oil on canvas

112 cm x 112 cm

2009

Rust

Oil on canvas

112 cm x 112 cm

2009

Wild Wood 2

Oil on canvas

112 cm x 112 cm

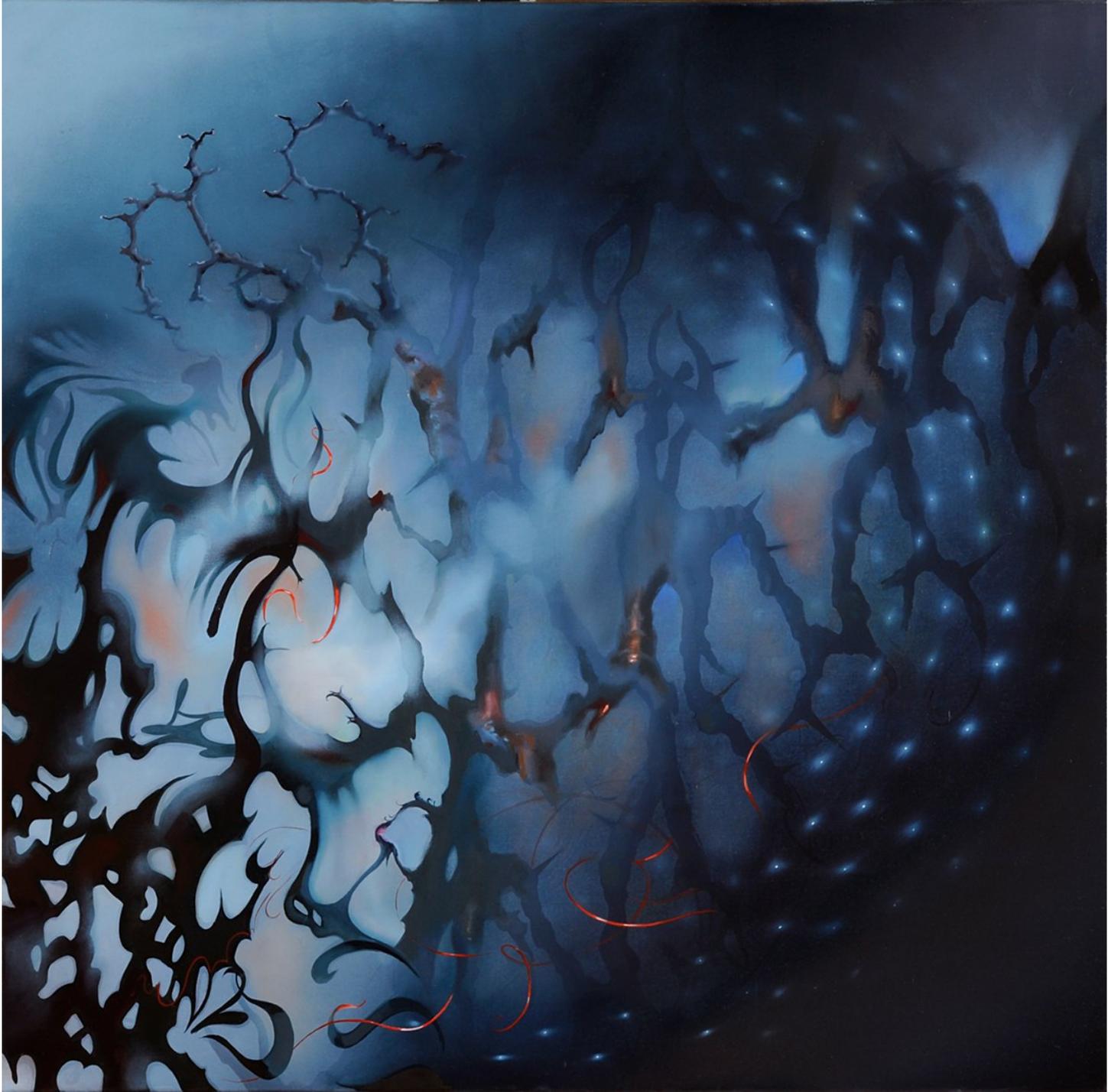
2009

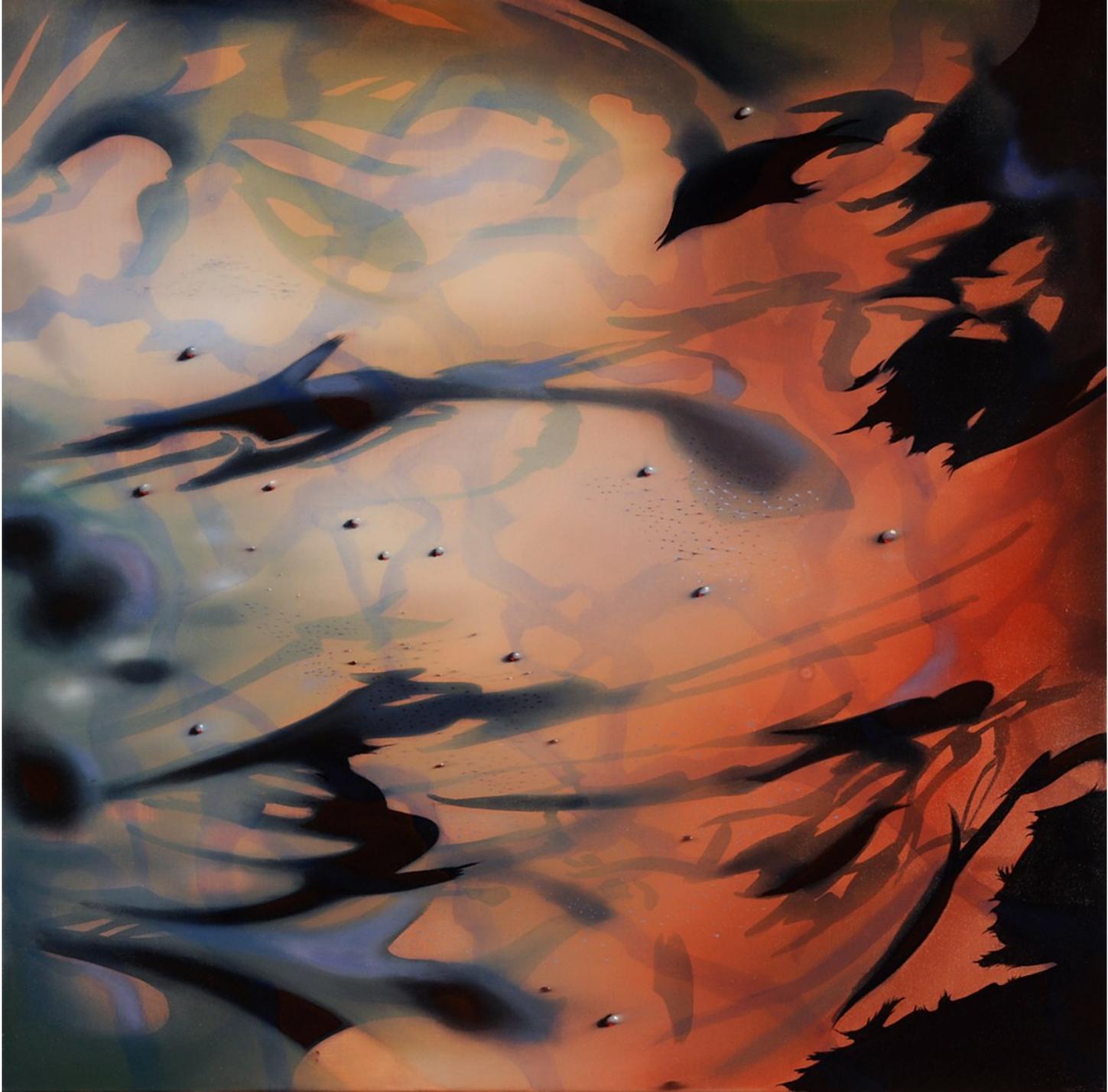
Exhibited in *Wilderness Balnaves Contemporary Painting*

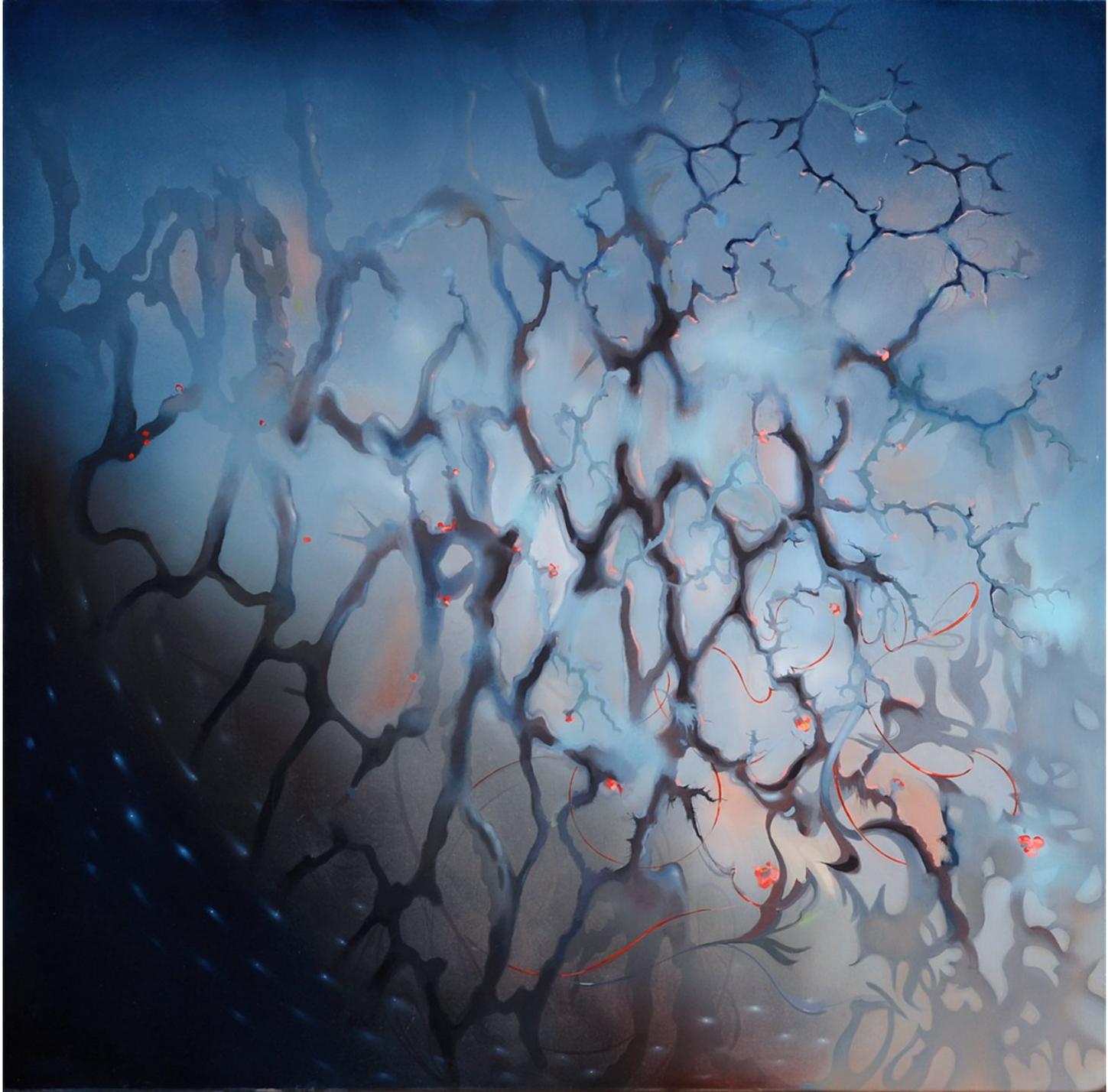
Curated by Wayne Tunncliffe: Head Curator of Contemporary Art

Art Gallery of New South Wales

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'Wilderness' Catalogue Essay

Naomi Flatt AGNSW

From Rorschach-like, spreading butterfly shapes to hyper-striped, stringy alien creatures consuming themselves and puffing gas in green-blue space, Megan Walch's work has been characterised by a Pop- and science-fiction-tinted plasticity, and an extraordinary writhing, internally generated energy. Like a planet sweating carbon dioxide under swirls of hot clouds, or a brain stimulated by electrodes, her imagery pulses with biological intensity.¹

Recent paintings such as *Wild Wood #1 (maj.)*, *Wild Wood #2 (maj.)* and *Rust (maj.)* 2009 retain the organic internal energy of previous works, without the surface plasticity of, for example, the 2006 *Doppel Lecker* series, in which whorls of chrome-like paint reflect and abstract a world in motion. While in earlier paintings shapes often twitched isolated in space, as though ready to jump off the canvas and onto their next gig, in these new works forms resembling tendrils, branches and shadows seem to grow across the canvas, receding into space covered in cloud and pushing forward with the solidity of black-inked tattoos. It is as though the forms have begun to ground themselves in their environment – taking root and working themselves into a strange subterranean space.

A formal and psychological shift has occurred in Walch's work since she returned to settle in Tasmania after years of living and travelling overseas. Her peripatetic existence brought to the work a sense of rapid movement, and diverse visual influences, from Venetian frescoes to Thai pop culture and Chinoiserie. In a 2005 interview she said: "Travel has been for some reason a really integral part and an easy part of my practice", with critic Ashley Crawford writing: "[Walch's] subject of choice is the swirling cultural detritus around her as she traverses the globe".²

Since returning in 2009, Walch has reconnected with both the physical landscape of Tasmania, and with the idea of "staying in the same place, and what it's like to explore the domestic and home".³ With their barbed entanglements, swirling clouds and hot contrasting palette, *Wild Wood #2 (maj.)* and *Wild Wood #1 (maj.)* show the influence of bright blue Tasmanian light, and the spiky, claw-like structure of the magnolia tree in Walch's garden. These are however psychological as much as observed landscapes – imaginative networks charting the connections between person and place.

Walch has spoken of the way in which settling permanently in Tasmania has necessitated an inward turn; a time of engagement with the landscape but also of intense self-analysis.

¹ Edward Colless has written of the influence of the 1972 science fiction film *Solaris*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, on Walch's practice. In the film, scientists orbit and explore a psychic planet that communicates with them, responding to their fantasies. Edward Colless, 'Evil flowers', *Australian Art Collector*, issue 29, Jul-Sep 2004, p 121.

² Walch quoted in Chris Beck, 'Tickled by Tingles', *The Age*, 24 Sep 2005, p 7. Ashley Crawford, 'Megan Walch: Tingles', *Australian Art Collector*, issue 34, Oct-Dec 2005, p 220.

³ Unless otherwise stated, quotations are from telephone interviews and email correspondence with Megan Walch, November 2009.

For her, the paintings reflect the duplicitous nature of home – “home is not a benign space . . . it is the place where both nightmares and fairytales are enacted”. While the return to home has associations of comfort and security, it can also mean a return to self, with a sense of reaching both forward and back, of confrontation, foreboding, and entanglement. Exterior trees and clouds, rust and water, branches and light, become interiorised in these organic abstractions – or as Walch calls them, these “wildernesses of introspection”.

Walch also holds an interest in networks and in the imaging of microorganisms. In 1997, when studying in San Francisco for her Masters, she worked with images of plants, animals and bacteria taken from electron microscopes. She explains: “it was part of my ongoing investigation into different ways to model a multiple unit in painting that is organic . . . the multiple unit invariably becomes a network”. This interest in what writer Jane Rankin-Reid called “energy’s internal organisms” resonates with the current works in their resemblance to the webs and tangential connections of neural pathways.⁴ The forking branches and orbiting points of light in *Wild Wood #1 (maj.)* and *Wild Wood #2 (maj.)* remind us of dendrites, and of neurotransmitters sparking across synapses.

*“An adult brain contains about 100 billion nerve cells, or neurons, with branches that connect at more than 100 trillion points. Scientists call this dense, branching network a ‘neuron forest’”.*⁵

The form and shape of these paintings conjure a psychological and biochemical wilderness – a forest of neurons invaded and interrupted by red, snaking tendrils that grow faster than the branches they threaten to overtake. Walch writes: “The discovery of the elastic human brain's ability to forge new pathways is relatively recent and very exciting . . . 'Into the Wild Wood' is also a bodyless network. As with neurons and the way in which they fire and misfire - the issue here is connectivity and its dysfunctional opposite”. As well as on canvas, Walch paints directly onto walls and around corners, involving us through the alteration of physical space, as shapes continue to fork and grow, creeping across the room, grafting us into her imaginative forest.

⁴ Jane Rankin-Reid, ‘Traffic in uneasy abstraction’, *Shocking crashes and chases* (ex cat), Hobart: CAST Gallery, 2000.

⁵ <http://www.alz.org/brain/05.asp>, accessed 3 December 2009.