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# Max Angus: Humanity Personified

*by* Stephenie Cahalan





At 99 years of age, Tasmanian artist Max Angus has an art-making career that spans an impressive 80 years. Here Max talks about his past and how the creative process drives him towards the future.

**M**ax Angus was ten years old when he first encountered the painter William Charles Piguénit. Max was visiting the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) with his father, and on ascending the steep stairs he was greeted by Piguénit's oil painting of mists on the Hawkesbury River. It made an indelible impression on the young boy. 'Piguénit was the first Tasmanian-born painter of note,' Max says. 'The first one, and he died in 1914 – the year of my birth. I just missed him.' They may not have met in person, but Piguénit had a profound impact on the man who is now – at age ninety-nine – Tasmania's pre-eminent watercolour painter.

Max's father, a house painter and decorator, brought home scraps of wallpaper on which Max and his brother would draw. Later he was steered into art by his secondary school headmaster, who did not so much recognise Angus's artistic talents, but more his lack of talent for trigonometry and algebra – skills which continue to elude Max to this day. In the conventional education environment of the 1920s, the headmaster suggested he attend the trade and art classes, thereby inadvertently setting him on a path to drawing and drafting.

When he left school, Max worked as a sign-writer, graphic designer and commercial artist. During the Second World War, Max worked for Army Intelligence at Sir Thomas Blamey's Advanced Land Headquarters of the Australian Military Forces, based on the University of Queensland campus. While the war to the north of Australia heated up, Max found himself in charge of the drafting rooms, compiling weekly intelligence reviews. These were secret documents with limited distribution and illustrated with photos, drawings and maps to let senior intelligence officers know what was happening from both the Australian armed forces' and the enemies' points of view. At that time General Douglas MacArthur had fled the Philippines and taken up residence at the AMP building in Brisbane. As Max tells it: 'We used to give him a big map first thing in

the morning: a big roll of paper which we took straight through to his HQ, based on the reports from the night before.' When asked what briefing one of war history's most famous military men was like, Max says in his typically understated way: 'That was... interesting.'

When Blamey relocated his section to the island of Morotai (at the time a part of Netherlands East Indies and, subsequent to the war, a part of Indonesia), Max found himself working for the Far Eastern Liaison Office producing propaganda leaflets for indigenous locals and Japanese soldiers occupying the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. In the office with Max were three Japanese prisoners of war whose job it was to translate the flyers into Japanese.

'The flyers were dropped by planes or fired by mortars into the bunkers of Japanese soldiers who were blocked off by MacArthur's island-hopping strategies: landing with overwhelming force on Guadalcanal, then setting up with everything that opened and shut, including a Coca-Cola factory. The Japanese were holed up in the bush living off the land or cadging food off the locals. They were taught to fight to the death, these Japanese soldiers.' The leaflets Max made implored them to give themselves up, promising they would be well treated, and urging them to help rehabilitate Japan after the war.

At the head of Max's team of POW translators was Riichi Inagaki who kept records of how many soldiers surrendered, encouraged by those leaflets. When Max tells this story there is a detectable pride at the thought of having helped avert a fraction of the loss of life wrought by war. The pen-and-ink sketch that Max made of Inagaki during that time hangs on the wall of Max's unit today. Author and journalist Scott Bevan chose to include this in *Battle Lines*, his 2004 book on war art, which includes images by artists such as Sir William Dargie, Nora Heysen, Ray Beattie, and Peter Churcher.

Bevan included Max in the book of frontline artists, not for the work he did in his official capacity, but for his extracurricular art, such as his portrait of Inagaki.

During that time in Brisbane, Max would go sketching on his days off and attend night classes run for Australian and American soldiers. Bevan was struck by the way in which Max delighted in what he described as a mixed tribe of humanity gathered there in Brisbane – Japanese, Chinese, Americans – an unusual sentiment in the wartime atmosphere of fear and mistrust. Bevan describes Max as ‘humanity personified’ and names his style of war art as the exact opposite; ‘It was more like anti-war art. Max made peace art.’<sup>1</sup>

After the war, the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Training Scheme for returned servicemen allowed Max to consolidate his talents. Under the tuition of Jack Carrington Smith, and inspired Lucien Dechaineux – Max’s former teacher, art master of the Education Department of Tasmania, and lecturer in art at Hobart Technical School for over thirty years – Max honed his skills and his emerging style.

Max says of Carrington Smith, ‘Jack couldn’t articulate his thoughts. He would say, “It has no aesthetic feeling.” And I would say, “What’s wrong with it, Mr Smith?” and he would say, “You have to do it again, it has no aesthetic feeling.” Dechaineux, having studied architecture, sculpture and painting with Julian Ashton, *he* was able to explain a point of view.’

But it was Piguénit who really taught Max how to express himself with colours and lines. The artist is credited with having made the first known artistic rendering of Lake Pedder in 1874.<sup>2</sup> His other works in watercolour, ink, or oil and gouache depict Tasmanian landscape in the late 1800s, at a time when the wildness of the island dominated its new European inhabitants, not vice versa. Piguénit would have walked long days and bashed bush determinedly to access the subjects of these works.

And this is where the deep influence of the colonial artist on Angus becomes apparent: not just in the inspiration to paint nature in its finest beauty, but by setting the example of immersing himself in the subject in order to capture it. Even now, in his 100th year, Max continues to do this. It is not unusual to see Max and fellow painter Patricia Giles – partners in art for more than fifty years – seated at the water’s edge in Taroona (near Hobart) or Orford (on Tasmania’s east coast).

They have crafted their own easels to accommodate their tools and their ageing knees, allowing them to continue to paint *in situ* before taking their work home to complete in detail. Max’s preferred materials, especially watercolour, are well suited to the temperate Tasmanian climate. The fluidity that captures the colour and light of his natural subjects is complimented by the cooler weather that delays the drying, giving the artist more time to work with the paint.<sup>3</sup>

The passion to paint nature in nature was cemented in Max in 1953 when he first flew in to Lake Pedder, with one of the famed bush pilots of the day, Lloyd Jones. Deep in the south-western wilderness of Tasmania, Lake Pedder was only accessible by foot or by air. ‘I was astonished,’ he recalls. ‘Lloyd Jones flew low across the buttongrass and at the last minute he pulled the joystick back and we went roaring up into the air and underneath us there was this beach that was two miles long and 800 metres wide.’

Years later, as part of the campaign to save Lake Pedder from inundation by the Hydro Electric Commission, Max and his artistic peers, including Raymond Barnes, Norman Laird, Ralph Hope-Johnstone, Elspeth Vaughan and Patricia Giles, spent days there at a time painting, sketching and photographing the near-mythical beauty of the lake and its pink quartz sand. There was a strong sense of purpose in their efforts to capture the lake and make Australians aware of the threat to the place that, at the time, was a National Park.

Photos of Max – wearing his signature beret, perched on the quartzite crags of the Frankland Range and Mt Solitary, with his colleagues walking on the beach, camping in the tea-tree copses on the lake’s edge – suggest something more. They show the thrill of working within a company of like-minded, motivated and creative souls. Theirs was an artist’s cooperative founded on a passion for the Pedder landscape. And while the talent among the group was extensive, there is no denying Lake Pedder is Max’s province.

Max is generous with his praise for those he admires: when Ivor Hele drew, it was ‘like seeing something come down from heaven.’ He shares credit easily: as Max tells it, it was Ray Barnes who convinced the premier to

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make a documentary about Pedder; likewise, it was Frank Bolt who had the idea to form a group of artists to capture Pedder. But his greatest praise is for the photographer Olegas Truchanas, whose travelling slide shows of Lake Pedder helped galvanise Tasmanians to challenge the government’s decision to dam the lake. Of Truchanas, Max says: ‘He had a kind of supernatural air that you felt. It was like he had been here before.’

This deeply-held admiration for Olegas is bound into the publication *The World of Olegas Truchanas*, a collection of images edited by Max and facilitated by a committee of friends after the photographer’s death on the Gordon River in 1972. In 2008, that generosity was returned in the assembling of *Pedder: The Story, the Paintings*. Edited by historian Helen Gee and authored by Max, the book stands as a tribute to Max’s depiction of the lost lake.

Max says he is heartened by people’s desire to possess paintings of Pedder, a place so long hidden from view, which he continues to paint forty years after it was smothered beneath a dam. ‘Periodically I am seized by the desire to paint the beach as it was and I consult my studies. The rest comes from having been there.’

In June 2013, Max Angus and Patricia Giles opened yet another exhibition to a full house. Hugh McKinnon, an old friend and one of the pair’s many ‘students’, opened the show. In his speech McKinnon described the atmosphere, image and the cleanliness of the scenes that ‘refresh the mind’, depicting an environment that has been ‘loved, pondered and painted for over sixty years’ and the practiced eye that draws out and extrapolates beauty it sees.<sup>4</sup>

Max has mentored and coached countless artists over the decades. His lifelong devotion to making art, teaching art and publishing about artists has been consistently supported by Thedda, his wife of seventy-three years. He once explained to protégé McKinnon that on arriving at his painting place, he sets up his easel and stool, then he pauses and takes in the scene, storing energy for the onslaught of creative energy to come. And when it comes, Max urges his students to ‘ride it like a horse.’

Max Angus is certainly still enjoying that ride. ▼

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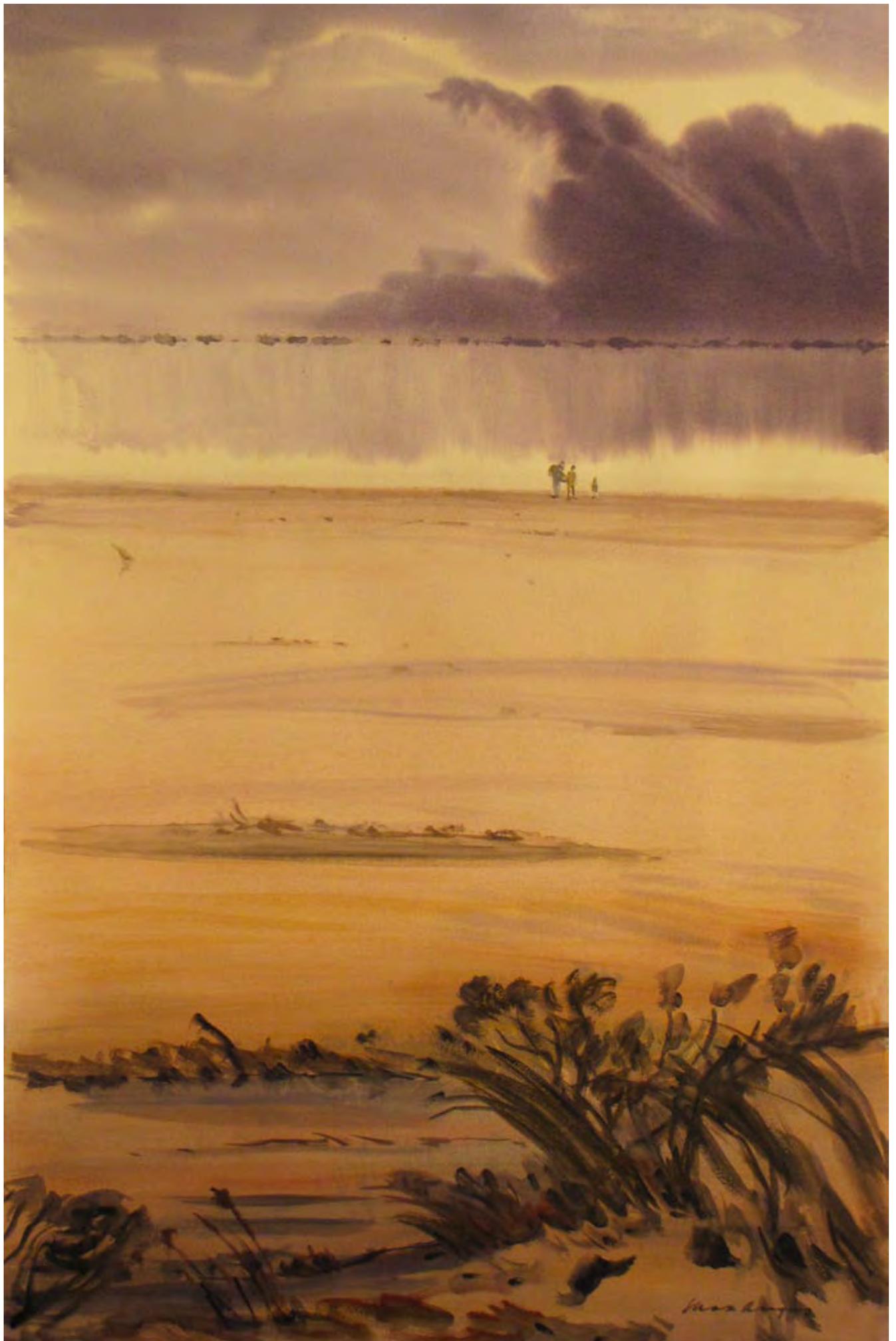
All quotes by Max Angus that appear in this article are from an interview conducted with the author, November 2012.

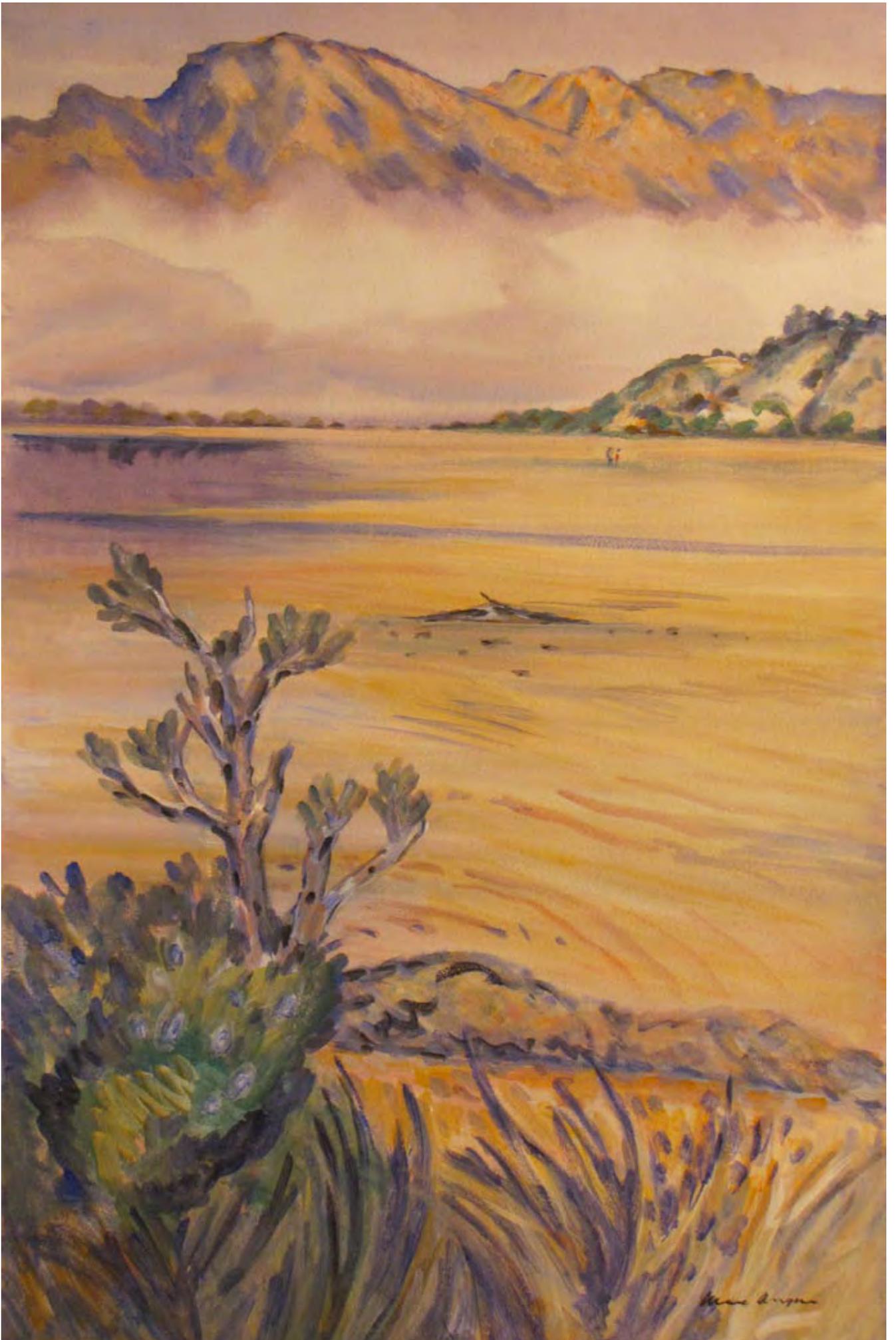
Photos of Max Angus taken by Michael Brady, August 2013. Artwork images courtesy Colville Gallery, Hobart.

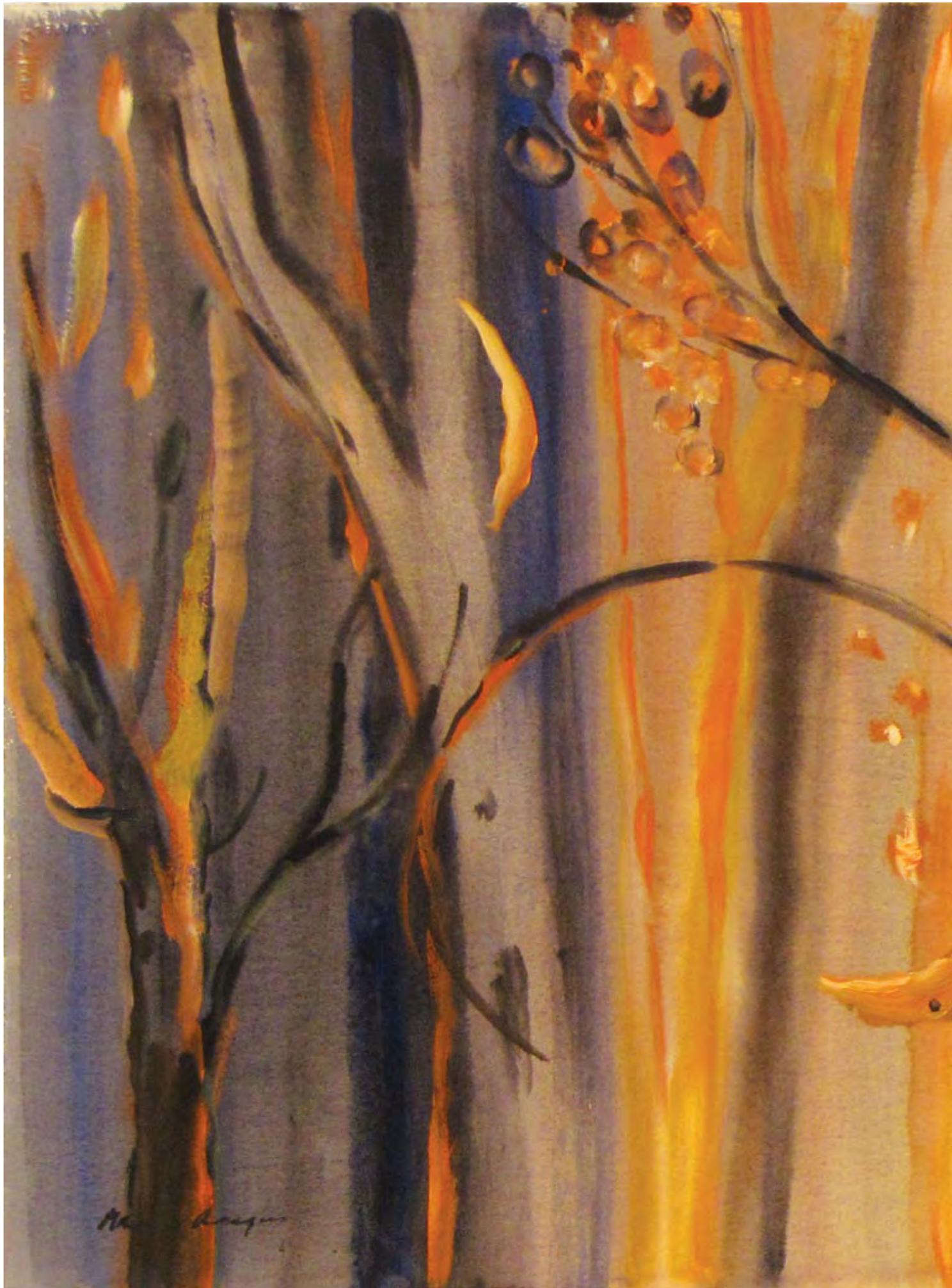


(Endnotes)

1. Scott Bevan in conversation with the author, April 2013
2. Cica, N., *Pedder Dreaming*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia QLD, 2011, p33
3. Backhouse, S, and Johannes, C., *Max Angus: A Lifetime of Watercolour*, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, 2006
4. Hugh McKinnon, opening speech at the joint exhibition of Max Angus and Patricia Giles, Colville Gallery, June 2013









**Left:**  
Max Angus  
*After the fire*, 2013  
watercolour

**Previous page**  
**(left):** *View to the*  
*Franklands from Lake*  
*Pedder Beach*, 2013  
watercolour

**(right):** *The*  
*Coronets from Lake*  
*Pedder Beach, Early*  
*Morning*, 2013  
watercolour