

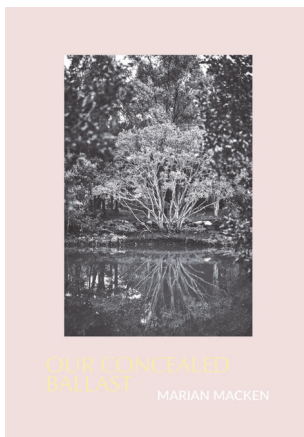
book review / ELIZABETH MUSGRAVE

Our Concealed Ballast

By Marian Macken

Vagabond Press, 2023, 112 pp.

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Our Concealed Ballast by Marian Macken is a spare and beautifully crafted memoir chronicling her passage to a place of calm after a shattering personal loss. Allusions to a journey occur throughout but are encapsulated most poignantly in the title. Ballast, typically loaded into a ship's bilge to provide stability in rough seas, is the term Macken adopts to describe a reservoir of "emotion and solace," a nonmaterial weight that keeps her on an even keel and moving forward. Her memoir, illustrated with a selection of elegant black-and-white images by Sydney-based photographer Joshua Morris, chronicles the loading and redistribution of this ballast through grief and inner turmoil.

Macken's principal field of scholarship is the artist's or architect's book—which she defines in earlier writing by citing Clive Phillpot amongst others, as sitting "provocatively at the juncture where art, documentation and literature all come together."¹ *Our Concealed Ballast* extends this book-making practice to poetic prose, with structure, layout, and production indicating additional layers of content. Like Gaston Bachelard in his topoanalysis of the spaces of intimacy, and David Malouf in his "mapping" of the spaces of his childhood home, Macken works with the affinity of memory for place and occasion. She levers the methodologies of earlier writers on memory but looks beyond place and occasion to interrogate the emotions embedded in the poetic images and sensations that key memories restore to her. Like all journeys, Macken's recollecting has a temporal dimension and, just as for Malouf whose memory does not return him to the most recent incarnation of *12 Edmondstone Street* but to a much earlier spatial arrangement, Macken's memories do not arise in chronological order. In acts of remembering, time is not linear, continuous, or divisible.

Macken's introspection begins bluntly with an event so shocking yet so candidly narrated that the reader is momentarily stunned. She then recounts her coming to terms with this event, by looking at it through the lens of a prior loss, by observing how it defines and anchors subsequent endeavours, and by reflecting on how these two perspectives—backwards and forwards in time—are entwined, folded into each other at the point of recollection. The reader grasps the immensity of a love in the hollowness and dislocation precipitated by the sudden removal of its object. The scope of Macken's grief—and her investigation—is set out on the first page: the "grasping" of "some pieces of information" would

“take years.”² We are not surprised then by the references to Henri Bergson and Edmund Husserl³ or by the citing of a couplet from a poem by Clive James on grieving; “in being taken out of this world you were taken out of time.”⁴

As discrete events are recalled and their circumstances described, the reader is drawn into moments of despair and of amazing resilience and insight. Each vignette has its own page, giving rise to a graphic and literary syncopation—the intensely personal is followed by the more abstracted, the intricately detailed by the spare and concise—reflecting the ebb and flow of time and emotional energy. We sense the tension of hovering between the need to withdraw, to be stationary, anonymous, and absorbed in work, and the compulsion to keep moving, to progress, to travel, even through Burma with a small child in tow. Vignettes are ordered to suggest “unconscious ideation” rather than a “conscious narration”⁵ and reflect an understanding that in acts of remembering, there is what philosopher Edward Casey describes as a “co-immanence of past and present.”⁶ Events and objects that trigger images or sensations also prompt musings on authenticity, agency, and the content of architectural representations. What exactly is held within the lines of an architectural drawing?

Through introspection Macken reveals the provocations for her artists’ books investigating aspects of architectural space and time. We see the relationship of her book-making to life events and an honouring of that. The pause to explore ideas and constructs is productive of new knowledge and insights but “thinking through making” is also about bringing something “near” in the Heideggerian sense. As Casey, paraphrasing Heidegger, writes, “we cannot encounter nearness directly, but only by attending to *what* is near, namely, ‘things.’”⁷ Macken herself observes that the ephemera she has collected over time speaks to “house and home, moving and possessions, travelling, capsule hotels, nomadic architecture and moveable buildings” and to “friendships and the grief of losing these.”⁸ Her interests, vulnerable to “fluctuations and mutability,” unsurprisingly correspond with her personal circumstances, and manifest in a restlessness.⁹ Her ballast—the “emotion and solace which keeps [her] steady”—is substantiated through memories which, whilst immaterial and fleeting in themselves, do not lose their potency with time.

My preoccupation with memory, place, and time aside, many readers will engage more directly with Macken’s book as a portrait of loss and grief. Her writing works on the imagination of the reader disturbing their emotions and prompting introspection. Morris’s images assist by evoking the passage of time and its impact on both nature and artifact. Mangroves shoots through anaerobic mudflats trigger memories of a rich, organic smell and a sucking sound as feet sink in with the body’s weight. Frangipani leaf shoots accompany a change of season, triggering memories of impending heat and humidity. They are images I associate with a happy childhood. But for Macken, such images are bittersweet; they belong to a place she associates with withdrawal after heartbreak. Macken is fearless in exposing the intimacy and intensity of her experiences as remembered, making this beautiful book a gift and a privilege to read. *Our Concealed Ballast* is an account of orienting and moving over time towards a place, not of acquiescence, but of an easier reciprocation with the world; a generous and haunting topoanalysis of the struggle in coming to terms with loss and profound grief.

NOTES

1. Marian Macken, "Binding Architecture: Drawing in the Book," *Architecture and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2015): 226, citing Clive Phillpot, "Books by Artist and Books as Art," in *Artist/Author: Contemporary Artists' Books*, edited by Cornelia Lauf and Clive Phillpot (New York, NY: Distributed Art Publishers: American Federation of Arts, 1998), 33.
2. Marian Macken, *Our Concealed Ballast* (NSW: Vagabond Press, 2023), 9.
3. Macken, *Our Concealed Ballast*, 84.
4. Macken, *Our Concealed Ballast*, 18.
5. Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, London, UK: University of California Press, 1998), 289.
6. Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 168, in which "the past is immanent in the present and the present in the past."
7. Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 272.
8. Macken, *Our Concealed Ballast*, 33.
9. Macken, *Our Concealed Ballast*, 33.