

ALEX  
SETON  
LAST  
RESORT



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LAST  
RESORT



McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery

COVER

A paddle... 2014  
wood, Bianco marble  
125 x 18 x 4 cm

EXHIBITION DATES

**McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery**  
16 November 2014 – 8 February 2015  
**Linden Centre for Contemporary Art**  
6 January 2014 – 22 February 2015

**Rockhampton Art Gallery**  
30 May – 12 July 2015

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

**Authors:** Barkley, Glenn/ Mitzevich,  
Nick & Slade, Lisa / McAdam, Jane  
ISBN 978-0-9874010-3-8

**Published by** McClelland Sculpture  
Park+Gallery, 390 McClelland Drive,  
Langwarrin Victoria 3910 Australia  
www.mcclellandgallery.com.au

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Exhibition Curators:

Melinda Martin, Director & Edwina Bolger,  
Curator, Linden Centre for the Arts

Penny Teale, Senior Curator,  
McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery

**Design:** Kate Mansell, monoprint.com.au

**Photography:** Mark Pokorny and  
Page 26 Sam McAdam

**Printing:** Mercedes Waratah

**Paper:** K. W Doggett Fine Papers

**Edition:** 1000

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*Last resort* 2014  
Wombeyan marble, stainless steel, theatre lights  
Installation view, dimensions variable



## FOREWORD

Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts and McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery are proud to be co-presenting the work of renowned Sydney based sculptor Alex Seton across our two venues during the summer period.

Seton's solo exhibition *Last Resort* will commence at McClelland from 16 November 2014 to 8 February 2015 and at Linden from 6 January to 22 February 2015.

This new body of work, presented over the two venues draws on themes Seton has explored previously, such as the specifically commissioned work *Somebody died trying to have a life like mine*, for *Dark Heart* the 2014 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art. Seton's work is informed by the tradition of classical statuary and he uses the skills and traditions

of the past to communicate contemporary concerns, asking us to engage more than fleetingly.

*Last Resort* is a continuation of Alex Seton's compelling discourse surrounding ideas of the 'outsider' and more recently specific to issues encountered by those seeking asylum within Australian waters. Seton's installation at McClelland brings in to question the notions of the utopian paradise represented through the creation of inflatable palm trees carved in Wombeyan marble that appear to rupture and precariously rest upon their shore of remanent rubble. The association to island life, leisure and water-recreation, surfaces by extension through the rendering of a solitary oar and discarded inflatable lifeboats.

These exteriors mimic in incredible detail the material of rubber, its puckers and folds, in their suggested states of inflation and deflation signifying the collapsed and sunken aspirations of those turned away from Australian shores.

While undeniably these works seduce and optically intrigue, it is the latent sense of menace that lurks beneath the surface of *Last Resort's* idyllic sanctuary that unsettles. The discarded inflatable vessels and playtime objects absent of human presence are carved from stone, a material that is chosen for its dense and resilient qualities, rather than the buoyant qualities associated to the objects to which they refer. These objects of the 'now' stand as haunting reminders of the tremendous risks others face





in the attempt to find solace and safety within brighter horizons.

Alex Seton's *Last Resort* coincides with the 2014 *McClelland Sculpture Survey* as part of an extensive series of exhibitions and programs that promote the best of Australian sculpture.

Continuing the exploration of Australia's response to migration, Seton has created a series of solitary marble life jackets and a marble replica of an inflatable life raft to disperse across Linden's gallery floors.

These monumental works examine our national character and asks each viewer to consider "what prevents us from readily extending good faith and protection to those who seek asylum?" The solitary marble life vests create a tension between the object designed to protect and the absence of a body

— moving the audience to consider how people just like themselves risk their lives on a boat in order to seek a better life in Australia.

Accompanying these works is the new immersive soundscape and installation, *Odyssey*. This digital soundscape will echo through the gallery, recreating the sounds of a heavy storm at sea. The turbulent sounds comprised of crashing waves and the lilt and rock of a boat is heightened by the darkened room. A single light bulb dangles from the ceiling providing the audience with a space to gather and reflect on the experience of many who have huddled in the dark hull of a boat.

It is significant for Linden to present this exhibition because the themes explored in this work have a strong synergy with Linden's history — a home built by a Jewish émigré

seeking to grow a business, raise a family and build a better life in Australia; and later as a private hotel that provided accommodation for those travelling from worn torn post WWII Europe and to those migrating to Australia. The grand Victorian mansion that now houses Linden is testimony to the fortunes and opportunities provided to previous migrants in Australia.

This publication, led by Penny Teale, Senior Curator at McClelland, which accompanies Alex Seton's exhibition *Last Resort*, presents insightful and intriguing perspectives on the artist's most recent work and has been generously supported with our gratitude by the Besen Foundation. We would like to thank the authors, Glenn Barkley, Nick Mitzevich and Lisa Slade, and Professor Jane McAdam who have contributed through their perceptive and

invaluable essays. Thanks must also be extended to Joanna Strumpf and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney for their invaluable assistance.

Finally, our deep gratitude and thanks to Alex Seton for creating a stunning exhibition that stimulates, inspires and challenges each of our audiences.

**Melinda Martin**

Director, Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts

**Robert Lindsay**

Director, McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery





## THE PRINCIPLE OF NON-REFOULEMENT

*A paddle...* 2014  
wood, Bianco marble  
125 x 18 x 4 cm

*refouler* to push or force back, to cause to turn or flow back (1611; c1175 in Old French in sense '(of the sea) to flow back' (*Oxford English Dictionary*))

*Non-refoulement* is the international legal principle that protects asylum seekers and refugees from being sent to any place where they have a well-founded fear persecution, or where they face a real risk of other serious human rights abuses. It lies at the heart of the international regime to protect people from harm in their own countries.

The principle of *non-refoulement* is central to the effective operation of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which is the international treaty adopted after the refugee crisis during the Second World War,

and which sets out the rights of refugees and countries' obligations to them. Australia chose to sign up to this treaty in 1954, and has essentially translated its protection obligations into national law through the Migration Act.

The Refugee Convention defines a 'refugee' as someone with a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion', who is 'outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country'. In other words, a refugee is a person who cannot go home because there is a real chance that they will be subjected to persecution on account of their political views, ethnicity,

or sexuality, and so on. People are protected from persecution by government officials, as well as persecution by private actors where the government is unable or unwilling to prevent it.

As human rights law has developed, so has the principle of *non-refoulement*. International human rights treaties prevent countries from sending people to places where they would face a real risk of being arbitrarily deprived of life (including, in some jurisdictions, by virtue of the death penalty); torture; cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; enforced disappearance; or a flagrant denial of a fair trial. Australia voluntarily signed up to these treaties and has also implemented some of these obligations in domestic law. Protection based on human



*A paddle...* 2014  
wood, Bianco marble  
125 x 18 x 4 cm

rights law is typically granted where the feared treatment does not reach the level of severity of ‘persecution’, or where there is a risk of persecution but it is not linked to one of the Refugee Convention grounds.

Under international law, the principle of *non-refoulement* applies wherever public officials exert control — whether in their own territory, in joint operations in another country, or on the high seas. This means that it is not lawful to send back boats of asylum seekers without ascertaining whether or not they are in need of protection. Doing so could expose them directly to harm if they are forced back to the country where they are at risk. It could also indirectly expose them to harm if they are sent to a country that does not

have adequate refugee status determination procedures in place, and departs the person without properly ascertaining whether or not they need protection. This is sometimes called ‘chain *refoulement*’ — because one country passes the asylum seeker on to another country, which in turn returns the asylum seeker to the place where they are in danger. Under international law, any country involved in this chain is responsible for violating the principle of *non-refoulement*.

The principle of *non-refoulement* is considered to be such a fundamental humanitarian rule that it has attained the status of customary international law. This means that even countries that have not signed up to the Refugee Convention or human rights treaties are obliged to respect it.

Of course, while the principle is not always respected in practice, it is significant that no country ever asserts that it has a right to return people to harm. Instead, they try to argue that the people they are removing are economic migrants (not refugees), or that they are being sent to a safe country.

The principle of *non-refoulement* is not discretionary; it is a legal obligation. It is a reminder that all of us have the right to seek asylum, and the right not to be subjected to persecution, death, torture, or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. It is a means to finding safety, protection and dignity.

**Professor Jane McAdam**

Director of the Andrew & Renata Kaldor  
Centre for International Refugee Law  
University of NSW





*Recursive time machine* 2013  
Performance by the artist reproducing his  
right hand with a Pantograph machine, digital  
resin prints and marble inside a Perspex box  
200 x 200 x 200 cm



## THE LAST RESORT

If there is one thing that appeals to art punters it's skill and realism. It's something that is upfront in the work of major sculptors of the twenty-first century like art super-brands Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst et al. Perhaps it's the most interesting part of their work — done not by themselves but instead left to production lines of studio assistants, all polishing and carving and when that doesn't work, you just outsource the carving and modelling to craftspeople and specialised services across the world.

Cast against this, David Esterly in his masterful book *The Lost Carving*, digs down deep in to the nature of carving<sup>1</sup> and its relationship to the body and the hands, realism and individual skill and craft. To Esterly the constant carving, which by its nature can

be quite a singular activity, is an antidote to the glossy bauble like qualities of contemporary sculpture that is so connected to the market and to superstardom, reflecting both metaphorically and physically, the world in which we live — pure narcissism.

And while branded globalised art dominates art-fairs, exhibitions and galleries all over the world there is still a need to place value onto the handmade, the slow crafts and skills that have evolved over 100's of years — that are centred on individuals that seem to say — I made this, I touched this, I saw this.

Alex Seton, a maker par-excellence, works for and against the idea of the artist craftsmen and contradictorily questions the romantic idea of the artist in his studio whilst revelling in it.

### 1.

*The Lost Carving: A Journey to the Heart of Making*, David Esterly. Chapter VII: The Thinking Body is a careful dissection of the shallowness of Koons, Hirst et al.

It does go without saying that the sheer shallowness of their work, its lack of intellectual depth and self-reflective qualities is its subject. Does this make it great -maybe or maybe not?

It is worth mentioning that Esterly's own work, as an incredibly skilled lime wood carver, and indeed Alex Seton's work, signal a broader return to craft based traditions that is in some ways are reactions against the new orthodoxy. You only have to look at the way ceramics and textiles have invaded the contemporary art museum for further proof.

The rise of 'workshop culture', the high rate of middle class attendees to gallery public programs now remodeled as access programs, and even the emergence of websites like Etsy are proof of people's needs to get their hands dirty and moving. The "I made this" DIY movement then leads to a greater understanding of an artist like Alex Seton - even having some understanding of the physicality of making, increases your understanding and comprehension.



*Recursive time machine* 2013  
Performance by the artist reproducing his  
right hand with a Pantograph machine, digital  
resin prints and marble inside a Perspex box  
200 x 200 x 200 cm

2.  
Roughing Out, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery,  
2013. Seton translates the term *Roughing Out*  
as 'the process of the beginning' see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MV7aQCIFeo>  
(accessed 22/9/2014)

3.  
ibid

He acknowledges the selfish joy  
of making, while trying to  
dismantle it at the same time:

'Why is there a demand from the  
audience for this idea of labour?  
Why do we need an overt display  
of effort?'

Seton, like Esterly, places a lot of  
emphasis on the very act of making.  
And although he is aided when  
he needs to be by both assistant  
and machines — he uses them for  
his own ends when ambition may  
outstrip the sheer physical force  
needed to extract a form from a  
solid block of marble.

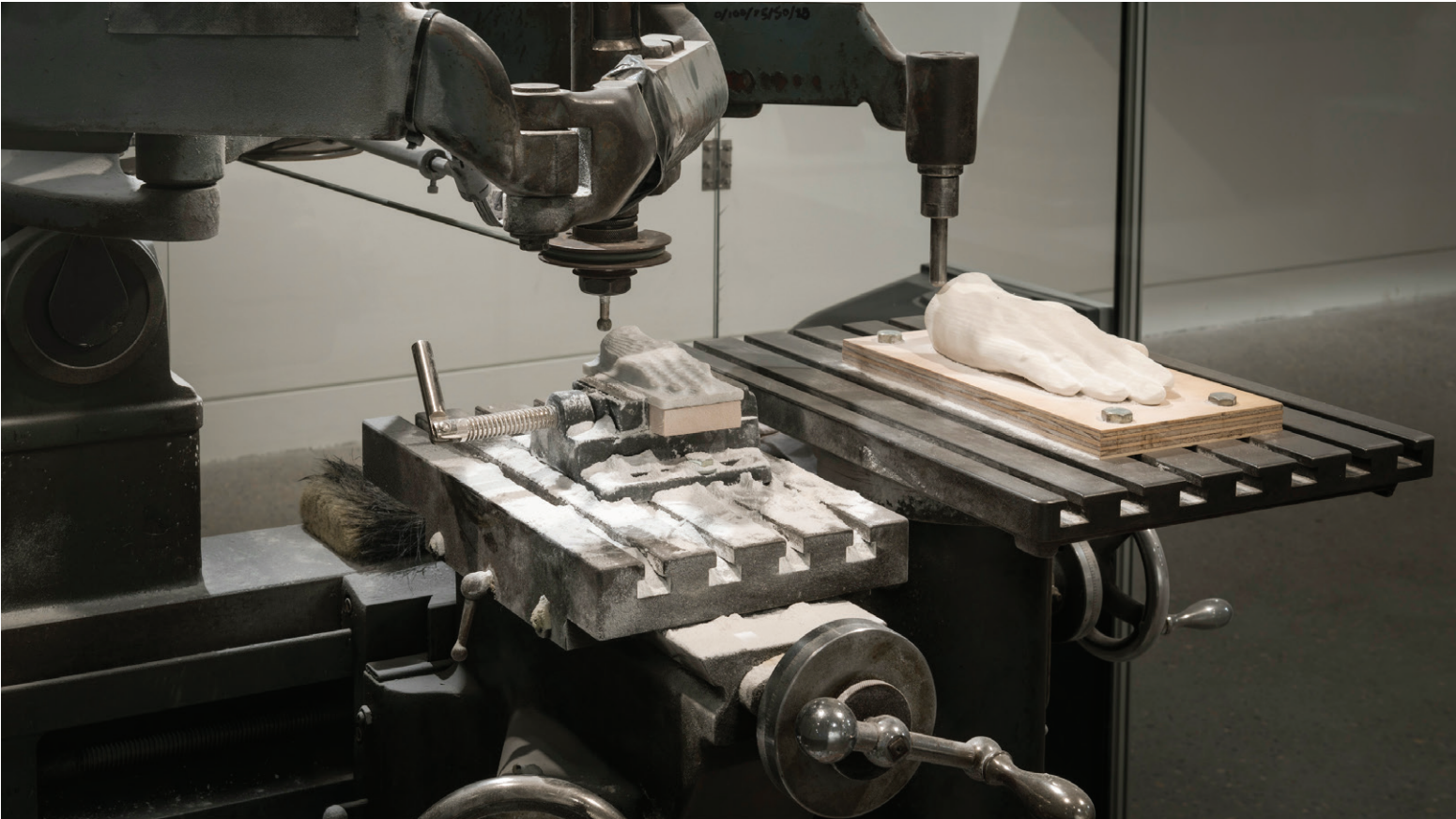
(The part of me that responds to  
that seems to be overwhelmed by  
the part of me that has been trained  
to be sceptical of the studio...even  
writing those words is difficult.  
Imagine actually doing it? But I think  
you do it for your own curiosity as  
an artist. The satisfaction of making

is irreplaceable and unique. Why  
would you want someone else to do  
most of it, or even all of it, for you?)

You might think what is the point of  
Seton's work? In a moment where  
perhaps anything goes, surely  
just dumping the 'real' objects  
themselves in the gallery like flotsam  
and jetsam would be enough.

Is it too farfetched to imagine a  
meditative space where the process  
assumes more importance than  
it should? Seton is no stranger to  
this. In perhaps his most revealing  
exhibition *Roughing Out*<sup>2</sup> he showed  
the different ways a sculpture could  
be made — pre-empting a purely  
mechanised future by looking into  
its past through what he called  
'chicken and egg questions'<sup>3</sup>.

The key work *The recursive time  
machine* (2013) is composed of  
a number of elements but at its  
heart is a pantograph 3d modelling







*Life Vest M (Emergency)* 2014  
Bianco marble  
50 x 35 x 25 cm



4.

A pantograph machine can make a copy of a large object into a small object, or vice versa. Digital routers and 3d printing machines replaced them.

5.

A machine which is now more than likely only one year later to be obsolete.

6.

It is also worth questioning what will happen to the objects once they are taken from the context of the exhibition. Although they maintain their meaning they can be reduced simply (I use that word facetiously) to an immaculate beautiful, coveted object.

7.

I admit that I have had difficulty in reconciling the connection between the carved objects and the 'real' objects that they incorporated. Seton has mentioned he wants to work against virtuosity – 'the work becomes incredibly finicky (decorative) and puts emphasis on technical prowess – "exactly what I do not want...the 'real' elements contrast the carving and help make the 'illusion' melt away upon closer inspection. A self-acknowledgment of its own artifice" This is part of the system of operating dualities within Seton's work like hard/soft, light/heavy, real/unreal.

machine<sup>4</sup> that the artist manipulates to replicate a copy of his own hand that has been made from cornstarch using a digital 3d printer<sup>5</sup>.

All this interrogation of method foregrounds the work and I think the push and pull between skill for its own sake and an obvious strident politic is what he is trying to resolve in the exhibition *Last Resort*. There is so much skill in Seton's work that it could begin to overwhelm its political content and the trick is, to incorporate both skill and intent equally.

In *Last Resort* the context is paramount<sup>6</sup> especially to an Australian audience — an oar, a raft, a life jacket — these can only speak of our recent shameful history. Of refugees, border panic, hopelessness and lies. There is the obvious use of objects that float — like a blow up palm tree — all of which have to do

with leisure and holidays in the sun, albeit a slightly trite, corny tropical paradise where we are oblivious to the world around us.

But it is the element of surprise that comes through the making that is an important one. The false nature of deception in the work and where the objects start to move in and out of focus between realism and abstraction is at the heart of it. Knowing when to stop and when to pull back is then transferred to the viewer. I think to some this may cause a kind of visual despair.<sup>7</sup>

There' are' a series of etched lines running around the back part of *Life vest (emergency)* (2014) that could signify it as being in an unfinished state — as if the artist will come back. He seems to be saying that he is not trying to fool you, importantly this isn't a life

vest it's a piece of stone. Maybe he is also drawing our attention to the beauty of the etched marks whilst also playing with the eye, or even with touch, in putting one type of surface against another breaking the light in a different way, adding visual and nuanced complexity to the carving by putting one sort of texture and shape against another.

Similarly *Durable solutions 1* (2014) is a carved marble version of a child's blow up raft. It is deflated but leant against the wall. When you first see it, it looks to be made with great verisimilitude. This scale works beautifully and it's something that is surreal yet familiar recalling funerary statuary or a monument to the drowned. Its art-fullness is discovered in the moment when the realism falls away and the works becomes abstracted. What looked to be

hyper real is in fact quite roughly hewn. The obvious carving of the stone making it more human, a unique thing in itself.

It's a simple but effective trick that takes it all the way back to sculpture's traditions and the relationship between figure and plinth or pedestal. Marble more than any other medium can do that. I imagine that there is also self-indulgence at play — anyone who has made an artwork knows the precious freedom that making a mark can do. Just etching a line across the surface of the marble, which at the end of polishing and buffing is done up close as if looking into the marble itself, it is easy to understand the way you could lovingly fall for a roughly grooved line, wanting to maintain each engravings individual beauty

before it becomes too refined, losing its rough tactile vitality.

I don't think they can deceive you as objects — I think his visual language and style is not about deception, it's not politics after all. The sculpture and its making becomes a metaphor for broader social realities and like politics it's about reading what lies behind the work's veneer to reveal a deeper subtext some of which is subtly intimated, some of which is obvious.

It is about that moment when something that seems refined and solid is revealed to be made up of marks and scratches. When stone becomes stone and reality falls away.

**Glenn Barkley**

Independent curator, writer, artist and gardener based in Sydney and Berry, NSW



*Durable solutions 1* 2014  
Wombeyan marble, polyester ropes, spigots  
140 x 95 x 12 cm







## THE LAST RESORT

A territory of Australia, the Cocos or Keeling Islands are located in the Indian Ocean, half-way between Sri Lanka and the West Australian coast.

In May 2013 the Australian Federal Police confirmed the discovery of 28 life-jackets washed up on a Cocos Islands beach. One of the life-vests is believed to have contained a small amount of Iranian money or *rial*.

No other clues of the origin of the vests or their wearers are known.

In the Sydneyside studio of Alex Seton the words ‘someone died trying to have a life like mine’ are written on the studio whiteboard, scrawled alongside dates, deadlines and the names of suppliers. These words — a reminder of purpose and a call to action — became the title of the work that premiered in *Dark Heart*, the 2014 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art and is now in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia. Seton’s 28 life-jackets carved in Australian marble offer a contemporary *vanitas* — replete with the virtuosity and duplicity of centuries-old European *memento mori*.

Strewn across the Gallery floor with neither plinth nor pedestal, Seton’s sculptures bewilder beholders, so unfamiliar to contemporary audiences is his

### LEFT AND PRECEDING PAGE

*Someone died trying to have a life like mine*, 2013  
Wombeyan marble, nylon webbing  
dimensions variable

Gift of John and Jane Ayers, Candy Bennett, Jim and Helen Carreker, Chris and Elma Christopher, Cherise Conrick, Colin and Robyn Cowan, James Darling AM and Lesley Forwood, Scott and Zoë Elvish, Richard and Jan Frolich, Peter and Kathryn Fuller, Andrew and Hiroko Gwinnett, Dr Michael Hayes and Janet Hayes, Klein Family Foundation, Ian Little and Jane Yuile, Dr Peter McEvoy, David and Pam McKee, Hugo and Brooke Michell, Jane Michell, Peter and Jane Newland, John Phillips, Dr Dick Quan, Paul and Thelma Taliangis, Sue Tweddell, Tracey and Michael Whiting, GP Securities, UBS and anonymous donors through the Art Gallery of South Australia Contemporary Collectors Director’s Project 2014

command of material meaning and so unexpected is their encounter with these effigies. With a degree in art history, Seton apprehends and subverts the legacy of carved marble — the pathos of the shroud and the mastery of the monument. In his hands the life-saving devices condemn their wearers to a watery grave — echoing the fate of those who have befallen the stony cold of Australia’s recent immigration policies.

The attendant works — a lifeboat oar, single life-vests in varying sizes, and an inflatable lifeboat and palm trees, originate conceptually from *Someone died trying to have a life like mine*, but have their material origin in much earlier work. In the 2010 exhibition *Infinitely near* Seton rendered inflatables, including the emblematic palm tree, in marble.







*An island in the sun* 2010  
Bianca marble, rubber  
65 x 45 x 5 cm



What were for the artist unrealised dreams can now be interpreted as the stuff of nightmares where the inflatable plastic prop (straight from poolside at Lassiter' Hotel, on the set of *Neighbours*) is resurrected and recontextualised. Carrying the name and double meaning of *Last resort*, these apocryphal palms, with their smooth limbs and plump leaves, bear little resemblance to their arboreal ancestors. Hewn from Wombeyan marble, quarried from the New South Wales' Southern Highlands where Seton spent his childhood, their crystalline surfaces pulse with blood-red veining. Surrounded by rubble, cast off in the act of making the trees and the life-jackets, the trees resemble war-torn monuments and signify the wreck of hope. But this bleak picture is interrupted by Seton's theatrics. A spotlight returns this

paradise lost into a tropical oasis, projecting a clichéd tableaux of the palm trees, silhouetted as though by the setting sun, onto the gallery wall. Like the closing scene in a Looney Toons' cartoon, this anamorphic illusion suggests *That's all folks*. But we never quite believe it.

**Nick Mitzevich**

Director, Art Gallery of South Australia,  
Adelaide

**Lisa Slade**

Project Curator, Art Gallery of South Australia,  
Adelaide



*Last resort* 2014  
Wombeyan marble, stainless steel, theatre lights  
Installation view, dimensions variable











PREVIOUS PAGE

Installation view *Re foulment*  
at Sullivan+Strumpf

LEFT

*A paddle...* 2014  
wood, Bianco marble  
125 x 18 x 4 cm







**PREVIOUS PAGE**

*Durable solutions 1* 2014  
Wombeyan marble, polyester ropes, spigots  
140 x 95 x 12 cm

**RIGHT**

*Life Vest M (Emergency)* 2014  
Bianco marble  
50 x 32 x 25 cm







*Life Vest M (Emergency)* 2014  
Bianco marble  
50 x 32 x 25 cm





*Life Vest M (Emergency)* 2014  
Bianco marble  
50 x 32 x 25 cm









## CATALOGUE OF WORKS

### McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery

*Last resort* 2014  
Wombeyan marble, stainless steel, theatre lights  
Installation view, dimensions variable  
Collection of the Gold Coast City Gallery

*Durable solutions 1* 2014  
Wombeyan marble, polyester ropes, spigots  
140 x 95 x 12 cm  
Rodney and Anne Smorgon Sculpture Collection, Melbourne

*Durable Solutions 2* 2014  
Wombeyan marble, polyester ropes, spigots  
140 x 95 x 12 cm  
Collection of Russell and Lucinda Aboud

*A paddle...* 2014  
wood, Bianco marble  
125 x 18 x 4 cm  
(series of 8)  
Collection of the artist

### Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts

*Life Vest S (Emergency)* 2014  
Bianco marble  
50 x 35 x 25 cm  
Private collection, Sydney

*Life Vest M (Emergency)* 2014  
Bianco marble  
54 x 40 x 30 cm  
Private collection, Melbourne

*Life Vest XL (Emergency)* 2014  
Bianco marble  
58 x 45 x 35 cm  
Private collection, Sydney

### PREVIOUS PAGE

*Last resort* 2014  
Wombeyan marble, stainless steel, theatre lights  
Installation view, dimensions variable

### LEFT

*Inflatable crown (regency)*

*Durable solutions 3* 2014  
Wombeyan marble, polyester ropes, spigots  
140 x 95 x 12 cm  
Private collection, Hong Kong

*Odyssey* 2014  
5.1 surround sound stereo, laptop mixer, single light bulb, infinite soundscape





## BIOGRAPHY

Alex Seton's artistic practice incorporates photography, video, sculpture, performance and installation to investigate the complex relationship between form and substance. He is best known for his beguiling marble carving, applying refined craftsmanship to unexpected forms. Blankets, hoodies, inflatables and flags are rendered in stone, invoking a somatic paradox. By infusing the rich heritage of Classical statuary with contemporary concerns, Seton gives weight to the issues we face here and now. In his most recent bodies of work, life jackets and poolside toys become potent reminders of Australia's troubling policies pertaining to asylum seekers; inflatable crowns celebrate the ease of contemporary life, too readily taken for granted.

Seton has exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally. Selected solo exhibitions include *Refoulement*, Sullivan & Strumpf, Sydney (2014); *Roughing Out*, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre, Sydney (2013); *Six More*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra (2012) and *Elegy on Resistance*, ARTHK12, Hong Kong (2012). Recent group exhibitions include *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Dark Heart*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide (2014); *Australia: Contemporary Voices*, The Fine Art Society Contemporary, London (2013) and *Gravity of Sculpture: Part II*, Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs, New York (2013). In 2014 Seton was granted the Inaugural Nancy Fairfax Artist in Residence, Margaret Olley Art Centre, Tweed River Art Gallery, Murwillumbah.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Linden and McClelland are grateful to the many people who have supported this exhibition. They too share our passion for supporting new contemporary art and our dedication to working closely with significant Australian artists.

We would like to extend our gratitude and thanks to Alex Seton who has shown great generosity, enthusiasm and support during the development of these two important exhibitions.

Thank you to the individual donors who have generously supported the exhibitions, to Rockhampton Art Gallery for being a host venue in 2015 and Joanna Strumpf and Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney who have provided continuing advice, enthusiasm and support for the project.

Thanks to the amazing teams at Linden and McClelland for working so closely on this unique

collaborative project. To the Linden team: Melinda Martin, Edwina Bolger, Emma Matthews and Lizzie Baikie and the McClelland team: Lyn Johnson, Penny Teale, Erin Wilson, Imogen Good, Myron McMurray and Ian Cail for all their hard work and commitment to this significant exhibition.

Alex Seton wishes to thank Penny Teale at McClelland Sculpture Park + Gallery and Melinda Martin at Linden Centre for Contemporary Art, without whom these exhibitions and this publication would not be possible. Special thanks to Kate Mansell for the book design and to all the writers for their wonderful words. Thank you to Joanna Strumpf & Ursula Sullivan, and Jan Murphy for their invaluable advice and support, and to the teams at Sullivan & Strumpf and Jan Murphy Gallery. A huge

thank you to Mitchell Ferrie for his unwavering toil and belief in the shows and to Kate Britton’s brilliant turn of phrase and keen eye. To Simon Bethune, Mia Clendinning, Laura Moore, Jason O’Connor and Vasili Vasiliades for their hard work and friendship. To Mark Pokorny for the beautiful photography that graces this book. Lastly a huge thank you to Georgia Hobbs for her unwavering patience and loving support that saw me through this whole process.



**McClelland**  
SCULPTURE PARK+GALLERY

390 McClelland Drive  
Langwarrin Victoria 3910  
Open Tuesday–Sunday 10am–5pm  
Tel: +61 3 9789 1671  
[www.mcclellandgallery.com](http://www.mcclellandgallery.com)



