

Warringah printmakers

One of the things that strikes me about printmaking in Sydney in general, and in this exhibition in particular, is its non-institutional nature. Let me try to explain, printmaking in Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, Perth and Hobart, over the years, has been to some extent dominated by the art schools. We think of the RMIT printmakers, the VCA artists, the Canberra School of Art printmakers, the QCA printmakers and so on. In Sydney, for reasons not particularly clear to me, from the outset, printmaking has had more of a community, rather than an institutional base. This is not to deny that printmaking has an institutional presence in Sydney, and one only needs to think of the National Art School, COFA and other illustrious institutions, but even at East Sydney Tech., printmaking was introduced later than in either Melbourne or Adelaide. Where Sydney printmaking excelled was in its community-based organizations such as the Sydney Printmakers, the Art Workshop at Willoughby, the Southern Highland Printmakers and, more recently, the Warringah printmakers.

Why the point is worth making is because community based organizations thrive on a creative diversity, a lack of hieratic structures or a house style, a preparedness to experiment without keeping a watchful eye on the opinions of the school fuehrer and the ability to entertain a broad church approach to levels of technical achievement and conceptual accomplishment. It is within this catholic diversity that some of the best art is realised and this is a feature of this exhibition.

As the impressive catalogue, which I gather was made possible through the generosity of Sir Ron Brierley, dwells in its excellent opening essay by Tony Geddes and Katrina Cashman on the subject matter employed by the 41 artists in the exhibition, I thought that I would make a few comments on the conceptual and technical properties evident in the work on display tonight. Many artists when they turn to printmaking view it as an artistic medium through which they can breed relatively inexpensive original multiples of images initially conceived in a different medium, such as in painting, drawing or photography. These may be original prints in the technical definition of the term, but they are never particularly interesting as they always reproduce something which exists in another medium. In this exhibition there are very few prints of this nature and virtually all of the artists have arrived at the final resolution of their artwork by working through their medium and printmaking technologies. To put it slightly differently, one could argue that these artworks could not have been achieved through any art form, other than through printmaking.

Take for example Susan Rushforth's monumental *Water spirit II*, where ingeniously she has given voice to the natural elements to create a self-portrait of the seascape with its tidal connotations and an open field of interpretative associations dealing with marine mythologies. The work is intrinsically a woodblock print, but the natural grain of the wood speaks of other physical and spiritual dimensions.

Anthea Boesenberg in a triptych, also on quite a bold scale, traces from a postcolonial perspective the scars of human habitation through the dimension of time. Her alchemy of printmaking technologies subverts any literalness in the reading of the imagery and it becomes a beautiful evocative work of mood and feeling, but with an effective and long lasting resonance. Marguerite de Fondaumiere in her almost life-size swimmers in aquatic blue employs the washy, painterly magic of the monotype to create a sensuous and slightly ambiguous artwork.

Rosanna Jurisevic also effectively employs the uniquely distinctive magic of the woodblock to play with different levels of perception as we seem to be observing an area topographically, exploring it on the surface as well as peering into its depth. Wendy Morrison and Pearl Orwin

employ complex intaglio techniques where the printmaking processes permit the creation of what could be termed pools of reflection, small gem-like creations with many tiers of meaning built up in layers of textures. Almost at the opposite end of the technological divide, Mark Visione employs effectively the simple brutality of the collagraph technique to play with graffiti-like blocks of imagery. For an artist who in much of his work excels in complex and sophisticated techniques of printmaking, his *Pirate-sharks-pirates* triumphs in its elemental simplicity.

I certainly could extend greatly my list of examples, but I have been warned to keep my opening remarks short and to the point, so enough has been said to demonstrate that most of the artists in this exhibition are printmakers for whom the printmaking technologies lie at the very core of their art making.

The final point that I wish to make is that of the 41 artists in this exhibition, all but three are women. What are we to make of this? I do not think that this primarily reflects the peculiarities of North Shore demographics with bored housewives seeking distraction in the visual arts, but is a marked trend in Australian printmaking over the past couple of decades. Much of the best of Australian printmaking today is dominated by women artists. Let me give you a very short engendered history of Australian printmaking over the past century which could cast light on this phenomenon. At the beginning of the 20th century Australian printmaking was dominated by the Painters-Etchers Society which ran a well policed and profitable printmaking industry dominated by male artists, with the wonderful Jessie Traill the odd woman out. With the great depression when the bottom fell out of the print market and there was no serious audience for modernism, women printmakers, most of them of independent means, such as Margaret Preston, Dorrit Black, Thea Proctor, Sybil Craig and scores of other women modernists dominated Australian printmaking in the later 1920s and throughout the 1930s. After the war, when both modernism and printmaking came into vogue, the women were gently elbowed aside and the blokes moved in – one need only to think of George Baldessin, Udo Sellbach, Earle Backen, Martin Sharp and Brett Whiteley as some of the obvious examples, with someone like Bea Maddock the token female presence. By now you will have gotten the drift of my argument – when printmaking is financially thriving it tends to be male dominated, when it is not particularly economically viable or the flavour of the month with collectors, then a space is created for female practitioners.

I am inclined to think that with the exception of digital imaging and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander printmaking which carry with them their own raft of problems, printmaking in Australia over the past couple of decades has faced some difficulties. In view of the historical model which I have just outlined, small wonder the predominance of women printmakers. As was the case historically in the past, these women artist printmakers are making some of the best and most adventurous art in Australia today, challenging, visually intelligent and beautifully crafted. Just look at the work of Rebecca Baird, or the collaborative piece by Sue Anderson and Gwen Harrison, Susan Baran, Geraldine Berkemeier, Christina Cordero, Annie Day, Denise Scholz-Wulfing, Nathalie Hartog-Gautier, Jan Melville, amongst many others, all of them are making art of a very high order which would not look out of place in any serious exhibition.

In historical terms the Warringah Printmakers Studio is a relatively recent organization, but has already become the focus for the creation of significant art by a number of dedicated artist printmakers. It is a great pleasure to declare *From ocean to harbour* exhibition by members of the Warringah printmakers studio open.

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