

ARTS

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Inspired by nature

Biophilia: Sue Lovegrove, Sara Maher, Michael Schlitz, Belinda Winkler, Vicki West, Catherine Woo, Beaver Galleries. On until September 30.

Biophilia is an exhibition by six Tasmanian artists. Its title is coined from a theory of the biologist E.O. Wilson who defined biophilia as an innate and genetically determined affinity of human beings with the natural world.

This is indeed apt as all the artists in the exhibition find their initial inspiration in nature, its phenomena, its visual forms and patterns and the politics that now define it culturally.

Sue Lovegrove is well known to Canberra audiences through her association with the late lamented Helen Maxwell Galleries, and now through Beaver Galleries where she exhibits on a regular basis. Lovegrove uses mark making to build up the surfaces of her very complex compositions. Abstract in form, her works have their genesis in Lovegrove's sensitivity to nature in all its aspects. The artist is attracted to the remote areas of Tasmania where one is aware of the sky, clouds and wind – all subjects of this body of work. The artist asks herself the question: how do you paint the wind?

In the two paintings *Writing the sky* no. 521 and no. 526, Lovegrove builds up layers of paint in soft muted tones over which she transcribes dramatic lines that flicker across the layers, encircling themselves in a whirl of movement. In the series *Cloud Nest* nos. 7-10, the lines that form the circles of cloud nests are more gently integrated with the background. These delicate and lyrical little works have the brevity of a haiku with the same ability to suggest more than is described.

Michael Schlitz is a printmaker based in Tasmania. His work is linked to nature and its place in our social and political construct of the environment. Schlitz's large and impressive prints (64 x 90 centimetres) have the impact of a broad sheet. The area of white ground left along their edge provides a contrast to the complexity of the play of tonal values in the main image.

Especially of note are the two works *Field work* and *Binding the edges*. These images appear to be linked in meaning although they are not presented as such. *Field work* with its skulls portrayed as if almost growing from the fields cannot fail to evoke the killing fields of Cambodia. In *Binding the edges*, the skulls are replaced by the emerging shoots of plants. A case perhaps of which would you prefer to see growing?

The starting point for both Sara Maher and Catherine Woo is the landscape in miniature – a microcosm of matter that evolves into a larger image. Woo uses either a mixture of clay granules or glass particles on aluminium sheets which she allows to be formed into patterns by wind and water in her open studio. This results in extraordinary images that resemble the immensity of the tidal flats in southern Tasmania and the salt lakes of north-western Victoria – places that are the artist's inspiration for these works.

The universality of these images is



attested to by the fact that they evoked for me the immensity of the flood plains of Arnhem Land, which I flew over recently. The works have the same patterns of rivers, lagoons and tidal estuaries that make

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traceries of patterns out of water, sea and land. *Ebb II* is one of the most striking of Woo's works. Its grey tonal passages of colour, movement and texture give the surface of the work an almost palpable dimension.

Maher's work is informed by the ancient landscapes of Tasmania and outback New South Wales. She uses ink and earth pigments to reproduce the transitory effect of nature – what has been left behind in the trail of an insect or a tiny pattern left on bark.

The very fragility of nature that she depicts poses the larger question of the ephemeral nature of our world that is imperceptibly slipping from our grasp. The works on paper are delicate and repay a closer view. Her two large works have transfixing images of golden light made by pooling ink and clay on paper. Their surface is only barely marked by subtle thin tracery lines and patterns.

Both Belinda Winkler and Vicki West work in three dimensional space. Winkler is

a ceramicist and sculptor. In this exhibition her works are small ceramic objects in white porcelain with glazed white interiors (but one group is in bronze). These small asymmetrical objects are arranged in two, three or 12 groups that seem deceptively

artless. In reality, they are highly organised through playing one aspect of an object against another to set up complex relationships. They rest lightly on their bases with some objects inclining slightly on an axis towards one another or nestling up

close. The pattern created by their closed or open voids also creates a rhythmic line between them. The *raison d'être* of these vessels is not in their individuality but in their relationship to one another.

West is an aboriginal artist who belongs to



Topography of Ideas: (Clockwise from far left) *Landscape Without* by printmaker Michael Schlitz; *Receding Light II* by Sara Maher; *Lake bed* by Catherine Woo.

the Trawlwoolway people of north-east Tasmania. She is concerned with the cultural survival of her people in the post-colonial era as well as with associated environmental issues.

To make her two baskets, West uses both a traditional method of weaving as well as a coiled and stitched technique associated with a more contemporary movement in Aboriginal art.

She uses local material such as white flag iris and flax to weave her baskets. The *Untitled* basket has a ring of kelp draped around it like a garland – a reminder of the place that kelp played in basket-making among the original Aboriginal inhabitants of coastal Tasmania. In the *Possum* basket is piece of possum fur – an enigmatic inclusion, perhaps referencing native fauna in the life of West's aboriginal ancestors?

This exhibition is a chance to connect with six Tasmanian artists, some of whose work has not been shown in Canberra before. It is a fruitful encounter.