

Art review Sasha Grishin

Out of the safety zone and into life's unknown

STREET: WORKS ON PAPER.

By John Pratt. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street. Until May 14

John Pratt, who recently retired from the School of Art in Canberra, has been for many years celebrated as a printmaker and draughtsman of national significance.

This exhibition is his strongest, most challenging, and most profoundly moving show to date. It is a large and highly accomplished exhibition of 25 woodcuts and collages that focus on the human figure as set within an urban environment.

The premise behind most of the compositions is the question of what actually happens when people leave a zone of safety, such as a footpath, and launch themselves across the road – placing themselves potentially in harm's way.

Conceptually, the strength of the show lies in the fact that the theme is treated as a broad metaphor for life itself, with the figure launching into the unknown on leaving the confidence of youth, or secure employment, or even robust

health. It becomes a tortured, slightly enigmatic being facing an existential dilemma.

The figure itself, as found in the glorious woodcuts *Terrain II*, *Step II*, *Passage I* and *Kerb II*, has something heroic about it, boldly charging into the future, while the surroundings are somewhat fragmented, unknowable and slightly menacing.

A quiet and modest exhibition that in an allegorical way reflects the spirit of our time.

Pratt, speaking about these works in a catalogue note, observes "the street zone was like a stage with a broad repertoire of movement and intent – walking, running, conveying, waiting, conversing. While the role of the pavement as a relaxed transit zone prevailed, there was also at times a certain sense of urgency, uncertainty and even 'flight'."

The pieces are to some extent self-referential, but they also serve

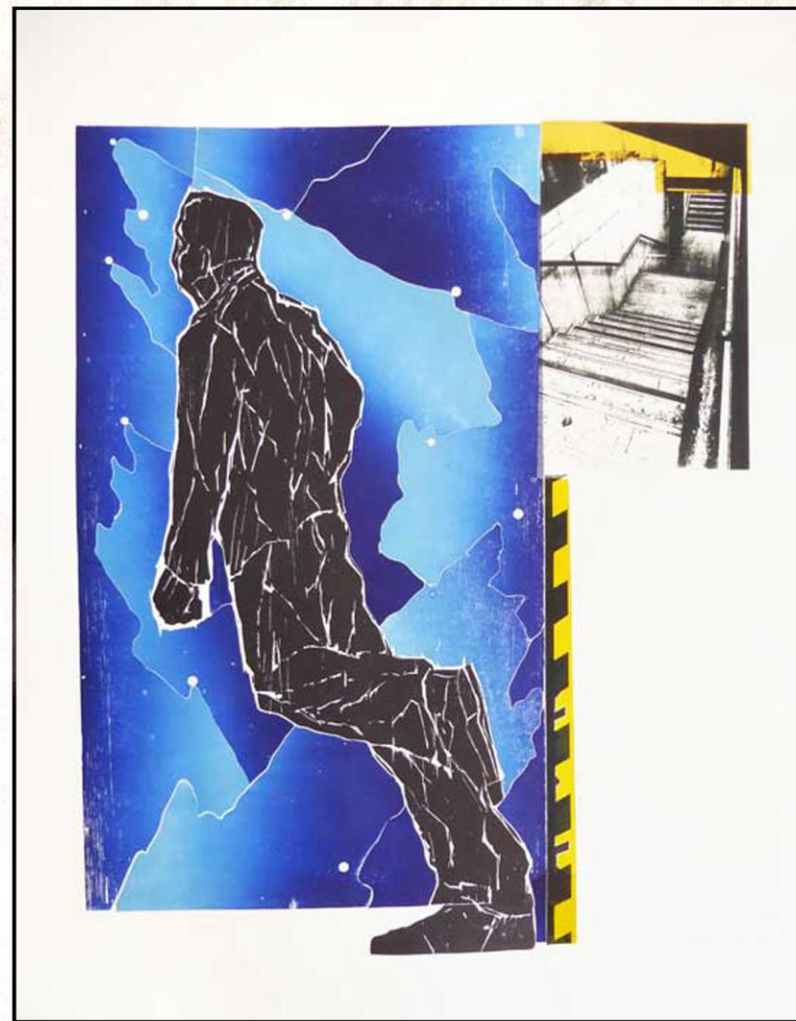
as a visual metaphor for everyone. On a much broader level, they may comment on the general uncertainty that many of us feel in the face of unfolding global events and the sense of personal impotence at being unable to have an impact on that which we are witnessing.

On entering the exhibition, one is mesmerised by the technical brilliance of Pratt's work, the juxtaposition of organic, tactile elements and photographic architectural insertions.

For many years, he has masterfully included in his prints unexpected colour-intense fragments to disrupt the general harmony of the composition, in this way introducing a note of urgency and destroying any sense of harmony and equilibrium.

Almost as in music when a composer introduces a discordant note to completely alter our perception of a passage of harmony, Pratt's colourful interventions play a formal as well as an emotional role in his compositions.

As you negotiate your way around the exhibition, you became aware that all of these urban fragments, when assembled together,



John Pratt, *Step II* in *Street: Works on Paper* at Beaver Galleries.

present quite an apocalyptic, even eschatological view of humanity as we seem to be lunging into the abyss and leaving behind the safety of the old established order. It is the sacrifice of the imperfect for the unknown.

This is a quiet and modest exhibition that in an allegorical way reflects the spirit of our time. It carries an implicit message concerning an impending disaster that may be felt on both a personal and on universal level.