

Art review Sasha Grishin

# A focused refined vision in a dark palette

## FROM THE AIR

By Michael Schlitz, Beaver Galleries,  
81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until March 26

**M**ichael Schlitz, a 50-year-old rural Tasmanian-based printmaker, is predominantly known as a woodcut artist who frequently prints by hand from reasonably large woodblocks. He draws his designs with a brush and water-based ink directly onto the block and then gouges his simplified designs mainly through a series of parallel strokes made with a v-shaped gouge. After inking, the print is made with the Japanese kozo paper being placed on the block and then gently rubbed on the rear with a baren.

This low-tech, handmade quality is central to his art production, not only creating a completely autograph print, but also one that has a dark, mysterious and organic feel about it. I also assume that, because of his printing methods, there is a degree of variation in the prints that make up the edition, which is generally restricted to about eight, although on occasion rises to 30 copies.

Schlitz's prints have a very distinctive appearance – simple imagery, dark and black palette and rhythmic parallel lines – accompanied by a lovely subversive sense of humour.

I remember when I first encountered his work at the Grahame Galleries in Brisbane about 20 years ago, thinking to myself that there is something of a Stanley Spencer quality in his imagery with awkward thick-set figures cast within some dark antipodean Eden. Nothing much has changed in the subsequent couple of decades, other than the vision has become more focused and refined, the imagery tighter and more intense.

This is Schlitz's second solo exhibition in Canberra, the first in 2001 at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space was titled *Recent Ex-*



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Michael Schlitz, *juggling with raven*, in *From the air* at Beaver Galleries.

*periments*. The Beaver show is a sizeable exhibition with 17 woodcuts and creates a wonderful focused and special atmosphere within its space. The figures appear to be crowded into the surfaces with awkwardly splayed hands and squashed faces. I see a strong autobiographic element in these prints as the artist explores memories and everyday experiences.

The print *Please teacher! I do not understand* has a palpable sense of pain, like a half-remembered nightmare of a child with dyslex-

ia fighting with a system determined to make him conform. The cutting of the face becomes frenetic as the inside and outside landscapes merge.

Another print, *Lovers*, is a gentle and somewhat humorous celebration of sexual love as two heads are drawn into one.

I am reminded of the famous print of lovers by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch where there is a similar interweaving of heads, but there the lovers are being dragged down into

the waves, while with Schlitz it is a celebration of joy and ecstasy.

One of my favourite prints in the show is *Juggling with raven*, a curious composition where the human figure and the raven are brought together in a curious juxtapositioning of forms. This is a gorgeous exhibition that will delight anyone interested in printmaking and in mysterious worlds where experience and fantasy meet and create tales of exotic places that seem distantly familiar to us.