

Art review Sasha Grishin

Glimpsing the reality that lies beyond

LE MONDE: OBSERVATIONS OF PLACE

By Julian Laffan.
Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street,
Deakin. Until June 4.

The humble woodcut was one of the earliest print-making technologies that was devised in the later Middle Ages as a strategy to disseminate information to a mass audience.

These “democratic multiples” were rediscovered by the European and Australian modernists, including Edvard Munch, Andre Derain and Margaret Preston, and employed as a modernist medium. Some artists, for example the Sydney printmaker Cressida Campbell, saw an intrinsic beauty in the woodblock itself and, instead



Julian Laffan's *Girl at the museum*.

of using it as a printing block from which to print multiple impressions, sold the inked-up block as the unique art object.

Julian Laffan, a young Canberra printmaker who now lives and teaches in Braidwood, in this exhibition has completely abandoned the reproducible matrix quality of his woodblock and presents the square 21cm x 21cm blocks of carved plywood that have been manipulated with gouache and pencil. The 26 blocks at the exhibition appear like small illuminated vignettes or picture postcards from his recent travels in Europe, America, China and Mongolia.

The blocks are not intended for printing, for example, the inscriptions have not been reversed in the carving to read the correct way around in the printing, and the carving of the surfaces is conceived more for the effects of low-relief sculpture than possible positive and negative spaces in print-making.

The compositions appear like casually observed photographs in which nothing much happens, but the suspense and the potential for narrative is immense. For example, we observe a girl at a museum with her back to us looking at a painting in which the woman in the painting looks back towards the viewer. There is a strong sense of anticipation, where something



Julian Laffan, *Nastoriun Temple, Mongolia*, woodcut, gouache and pencil on ply, 21 x 21cm

could happen, but nothing actually transpires. In the street scenes people seem to get on with their business, but there may be someone waiting beneath a window in Verona, by a canal in Paris, on a corner of an Edinburgh street or near a mosque in Cairo.

The fact that each block has been laboriously and painstakingly

carved in wood seems to contradict the instant snapped quality of the image and through process imbues these blocks with deeper meaning. They are little frozen moments in the life of complex communities found throughout the globe as we observe the shadows gathering on Tiananmen Square or the soaring wings of the Nike of Samothrace as

she presides over the grand entrance into the Louvre or the image of a shepherd in the Khangai Mountains of Mongolia accompanied by a cow and horse.

Laffan produces an effective exhibition where we seem to catch glimpses of a reality that lies beyond the one that we first encounter.