

# Evoking the passing of time while some things remain

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**JULIAN Laffan: *Illuminated artefacts*. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Tuesday to Sunday 10am to 5pm. Until June 16.**

The Braidwood-based artist Julian Laffan has been working with woodblocks for a number of years.

The idea of carving a design into a block of wood and then transferring it onto another surface is of considerable antiquity.

In the Han Dynasty (before AD220), in China, woodblocks were employed to print on textiles and the practice spread to other parts of Asia.

In medieval Europe, in the 15th century, woodblocks (almost invariably called woodcuts) gained great popularity for the printing of illustrated texts, books and handbills, particularly of a

devotional nature.

As moveable metal type and metal engravings emerged as a cheaper, more durable and popular option, like much obsolete technology, the woodblock moved into the domain of art.

European expressionists and other modernists used the woodblock print in their art practice.

In Australia, in the between-the-wars period in the 20th century, there emerged a brilliant generation of women woodblock artists including Margaret Preston, Dorrit Black and Thea Proctor.

Laffan, conscious of this tradition in woodblock printmaking, carves elaborate designs into his blocks of wood - in this exhibition he uses birch plywood - but rather than printing his blocks, he colours them with gouache, oil and pencils, and frames the blocks as the

finished artworks.

Other Australian artists, most notably Cressida Campbell in Sydney, have also converted the actual woodblock from a matrix into the art object.

A couple of years ago, Laffan at the Beaver Galleries exhibited 26 coloured woodblocks that proved enormously popular with the public. In this exhibition, there are 19 coloured woodblocks on display that differ from the 2017 show in two significant ways. The scale of the blocks has now become larger with most of the blocks measuring 34.5 by 34.5 centimetres, rather than the 21 by 21 centimetre blocks exhibited last time.

The other big difference lies in the imagery. The 2017 show consisted of small illuminated vignettes or picture postcards from the artist's recent travels in Europe, America, China and



Julian Laffan, *Old masters*, in *Illuminated artefacts* at Beaver Galleries. **Picture: Supplied**

Mongolia.

The present exhibition consists of intimate domestic interiors - most of which are possibly drawn from the artist's own premises in Braidwood. It is a triumph of peace and domesticity - a cosy and much-loved interior space where little episodes of everyday life have been captured in an

anecdotal manner.

*War and peace* is one of the more elaborate and successful of these woodblocks. On a dark tribal carpet kilim in the foreground is concealed a sizeable black cat. The title of the block jokingly refers to a certain drama that is being played out in the domestic setting.

It is a quality of Laffan's

work that there is a little narrative taking place that the viewer is invited to follow.

*Old masters* is another attractive painted block where there is an assembly of still life objects gathered in the corner of the room that set up a bit of an internal dialogue.

I suspect that there may be a tongue-in-cheek commentary going on among the assembled pieces. In *Braidwood evening*, the still life composition evokes a mood of tranquility and repose. It is a well-loved space that is at peace with itself.

In the age of digital technologies, sound bites and time measured in nanoseconds, Laffan celebrates, somewhat nostalgically, a handcrafted reality that through its materiality effectively evokes the idea of the passing of time, but where some things remain permanent and unchanging.