

ARTS

Meditation on the transience of life

REVIEW

Sasha Grishin

JOHN Pratt: *Passage*. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until October 11, 2020.

The legend of Icarus has intrigued artists for centuries.

At its core is the story of young Icarus, who in an attempt to escape Crete and King Minos flew from the tower in which he was imprisoned with a pair of wings that his father had made for him constructed from feathers and wax.

In the excitement of flight, he forgot his father's warning not to fly too close to the sun.

As he flew ever higher, the wax melted and as the wings disintegrated the boy plunged to his death into the sea.

John Pratt is one of Canberra's most highly respected printmakers and one day while travelling across the Hay Plain found an eagle's wing, which, like the discarded wings of Icarus, became an enigmatic object around which the artist could weave different narratives.

Pratt observes, "The 'find' initially provoked a playful series of drawings of the wing itself before evolving into a more abstract reflection on the transient nature of flight and transitional space."

This is quite a large exhibition of 23 prints - mainly woodcuts, stencils and etchings - that play with the theme of flight as a process or a passage from one realm to another.

When I view it as a whole, I find it quite a sombre experience, like a meditation on the transience of life and the idea of crossing from life into another realm.

The glorious woodcut *Crossing V* combines four independent elements carved on planks of wood, inked up separately and printed in a dynamic, yet unstable formation.

The central shape that I take to be the wing is printed in a dark grey ink and it seems to force its way between two purple

wedges that seem to block its passage.

On the viewer's left, a solid and more geometric vertical grey block closes off the form, suggesting that there is no way back.

Within this closely structured composition, wound up like a tightened spring, Pratt introduces a vibrant plank of red, collaged onto the surface.

The dash of red is a discordant note like a piercing wound, where the wing is torn off the bird's body or that moment of revelation when Icarus foresees his death.

I have little doubt that the artist would find my interpretation fanciful and as a highly visually literate person, he would respond in purely formal terms of structure,

surface and balance.

For me, there is also this disturbing note of contrast between the highly textured, weathered and organic nature of the main shapes, and the relentlessly flat and seamless geometric red intrusion - a jarring note within the surrounding mix of drama and harmony.

Passage IV is a stencil print where the wing is morphed into a sort of aerial map and the collaged geometrical passages of navy blue and dark red act as intruding elements that anchor the print to the surface of the sheet.

In the ultimate poem about passage, the great John Donne speaks of his doctors as

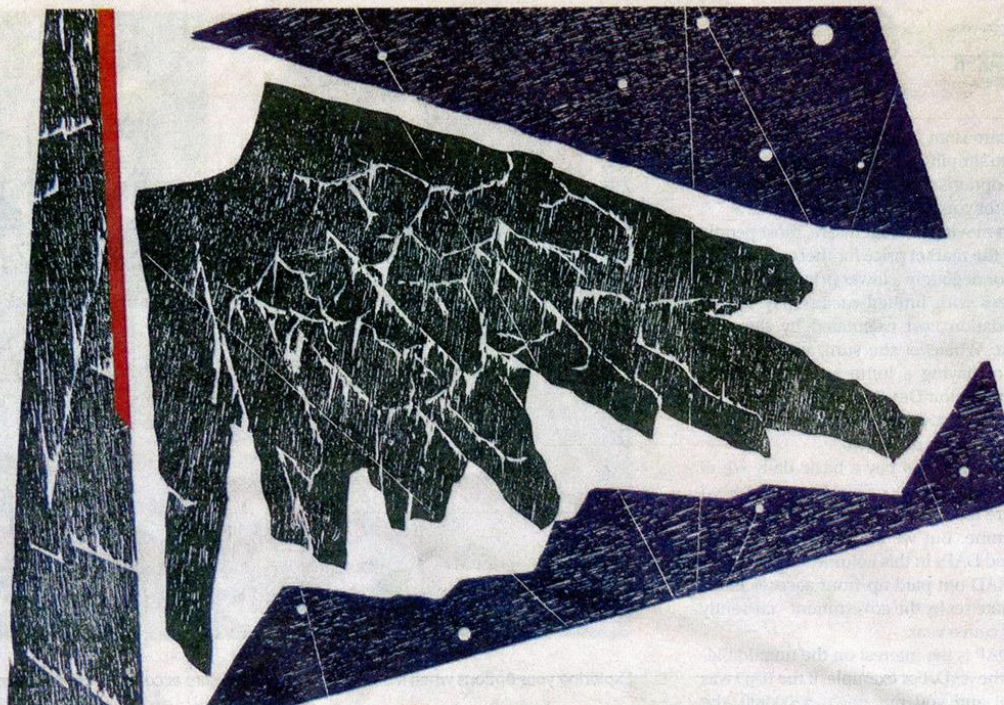
cosmographers, "and I their map, who lie flat on this bed".

The wing has spread over a map with its topography and gradients marked and is surrounded by strange little blood-like droplets.

It is an intense and highly concentrated image that I find slightly disturbing and unsettling.

Pratt for many years taught in printmaking at the art school as it underwent its many name changes and restructurings.

Always an exquisite technician, in recent years his art has gained in complexity and profundity as the passage becomes a metaphor for moving between states of being.



John Pratt's *Crossing V* is in his latest exhibition at Beaver Galleries. Picture: Supplied