



A detail from David Frazer's *The tangled wood* (Composition IV). Picture: Supplied

## Grand images form an ambitious show

BEAVER GALLERIES

### DAVID FRAZER: THE TANGLED WOOD

Closes March 1

#### Review

Sasha Grishin

AFTER half a dozen solo exhibitions at this gallery, Canberra audiences have had the pleasure of observing the slow unfolding drama of David Frazer's graphic oeuvre.

Frazer is a Victorian artist who trained in Melbourne and is based in Castlemaine in the old goldfields country in the direction of Bendigo. He is an allegorical storyteller, where his narratives frequently deal with decay, despair, alienation and are accompanied by a good dose of existential angst. Technically, he is an accomplished printmaker who seems equally at home with intaglio, relief, wood engraving and lithography. His last exhibition at this gallery, in 2018, was dominated by the huge print *Slow boat*, that in some way was a celebration of futility with a small rowboat shown stranded and decaying in the Australian bush.

In this exhibition, possibly his most ambitious to date, Frazer has largely moved away from the small allegorical vignettes to the grand image of *The tangled wood*. There are 10 studies of different aspects of the bush with its tangle of vegetation. Whereas in much of his earlier work there was a self-referential protagonist who would find himself in various allegorical situations, here the trees and the mass of vegetation serve as a metaphor for the human condition.

The artist writes concerning this series of work, "Tangled wood, tangled life. Wounded wood, the wounded damaged, flawed man. It's all essentially the same old thing: just confused, hopeless, exhausted, bewildered men". The romantic notion of losing oneself in nature is taken one step further, where the human presence is no longer necessary and nature itself plays out the whole human drama.

It is not exactly the personification of the separate elements of nature - in other words - trees, rocks and shrubs playing human characters, but a parallel drawn between human society and the society of tree.

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### What saves Frazer's work from a prosaic overstatement is the mastery of intaglio techniques.

overstatement is the mastery of intaglio techniques. When we examine a work like *The tangled wood* (composition iv), we are seduced by the similitude of the captured surface textures of the grasses in the foreground, the decaying bark on the fallen tree trunks and the sensuous surface of the saplings. We can differentiate the types of gums, the foliage and areas of new growth as well as passage of death and decay.

There is a tradition in Australian printmaking where artists such as Jessie Trill and Hertha Kluge Pott would enter into the soul of the bush and a group of trees would become the carriers of mood and inspi-

ration. The great Rembrandt in his *Three Trees* etching created a whole microcosm of human existence anchored within a peculiarly Dutch reality.

Frazer's tangled wood is a specifically Australian reality with the sense of density and impenetrability - a difficult struggling environment where some trees to survive need to shoulder their way at the expense of others. Despite the apparent fecundity in the bush there is also a sparseness and conflict.

Frazer's etchings are quite large, for example, *The tangled wood* (composition iii), measures 80 by 90 centimetres, but generally they are a composite of four plates to stress both the handmade quality of the image with this imposed grid asserting the flatness of the picture plane within which the image is located. They are quite tough images of a lyrical setting.

For a number of years, Frazer has distinguished himself through his technical excellence and quirky imagination, being awarded many prestigious print prizes along the way.

It is now timely to have a major survey show of his art.