

Scratching beneath the surface

Sasha Grishin

Melinda Schawel: Unravelling: works on paper & sculpture. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Tuesday to Sunday 10am-5pm. Until August 30.

Melinda Schawel is an American-born artist who lives and works in the lockdown capital of Australia - Melbourne.

As the COVID-19 virus struck, Schawel could see her career and art practice slowly unravel (hence the title of this show) but art and the beauty of nature started to slowly strike back and to heal the soul. She writes of the process, "At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic with no end in sight, it felt like any hard-fought career in the arts sector was unravelling before our very eyes and so I, like many others around the globe, found solace in the garden and the company of family, while photographing the minutiae of the changing seasons, and contemplating the very high price we all pay for the pace of modern life. My anxiety was eventually replaced by a renewed sense of clarity and purpose that ironically only an extended period of quiet reflection could have led to. A myriad of feelings, as a result of forced isolation, is embedded in the works I created for this exhibition."

Schawel, more than most artists that I am aware of, punishes her materials with newer tools, drills, hammers

and nail bits, but out of this apparent violence she arrives at a lyrical resolution to her work. It is as if there is a perceived need for physicality in the process to achieve an outcome that is light, decorative and somewhat whimsical. As an artist, she appears to enjoy the game of contrasts and mixed anticipations. As you look into one of her pieces, from a distance, there is a breathing

ease and simplicity, but on closer examination there is a preciousness of detail and subtle nuances in surface textures.

She is an artist in love with surfaces - the manner in which they catch the light, enhance or impede the spread of ink or allow accidents to take over the creative process and to some extent over-ride the conscious dictates of the

intellect. Take, for example, *Uncertainty II*, an ink and pencil drawing with collage on torn and perforated paper, realised on a reasonable scale of 76 centimetres by 49 centimetres. The expanding fans of colour in the lower part of the composition are contrasted with a pulsating blue and black bullseye in the top half. However, the real power of the piece lies in the monochrome gulf

between the two areas of colour with a frenetically perforated surface that in turn highlights the conceit of collaged surfaces echoed in an illusionistic manner by a whimsical line. It is her ability to create this active little microcosm that gives Schawel's works their sense of magic.

One of the most striking and effective pieces at the exhibition is Schawel's



Melinda Schawel, *Crown II (black)*, in *Unravelling* at Beaver Galleries. Picture: Supplied

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Re-calibrating II, again in ink and pencil on torn and perforated paper and of similar dimensions. In this work there is a strong rhythmic flow, like a convergence or a vortex with sweeping energies being drawn towards the centre of the composition. The palette is much more reserved, deceptively almost monochromatic, with shapes seemingly relating more directly to the forms of nature. The tactile qualities of the surface draw the viewer into a detailed examination.

In several pieces, the forms break out from their uneasy truce with two dimensions and adopt the format of low-relief sculptures. *Crown II (black)* - engraved aluminium and acrylic, measuring 65 by 71 by 6 centimetres - is probably the most successful of this new breed of enigmatic objects that seem to physically hover in space.

When the body is physically constrained, the spirit breaks free and finds expression in art.