

Clever prints with introverted humour

ART

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MICHAEL Schlitz: *Pictures from the mindfield*. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin, until November 21. beavergalleries.com.au.

Michael Schlitz is a maverick printmaker from Tasmania who creates dark, brooding and earthy images in his art.

Schlitz's primary medium is the woodcut with which he works on a large scale. They are very deliberate, low-tech, monochrome prints where the simplified forms are gouged out of the wood and then hand printed in thick black ink that glistens on the surface.

The prints possess the quality of something coming out of the earth - somewhat primeval, tactile and visceral and defiant in their overwhelming sense of presence.

They are also very clever prints with an introspective quality and they frequently possess a refined and introverted sense of humour. The gouging of the wood follows rhythmic patterns that invariably involve the beholder in an emotional engagement with the process of the work.

The technique of the cutting, inking and printing is at least as important in the realisation and impact of the work as the imagery itself.

The print *the log in mine for the splinter in yours* is characteristic of the body of new prints in this exhibition.



Michael Schlitz, *the log in mine for the splinter in yours*. Picture: Supplied

The scale - almost a metre high by 120 centimetres across - is imposing and draws you into the composition. The title, with its Biblical reference (Matthew 7:3) "And why do you look at the splinter in your brother's eye, but not notice the beam in your own eye?" presents one point of entry into the print.

The squat figure in the print, literally rooted to

the ground with plants growing through her feet (for some reason I assume the figure is female), has her head morphed into a log. The sheer weight of the log appears to weigh down the figure and anchor her to the ground. Surrounding the figure is a strange and desolate landscape setting with rocks and bundled bits of vegetation. Above the low horizon is the sky where the

carved-out clouds possess a corporality and mass that is indistinguishable from the rocks on the ground.

Schlitz creates a dream-like zone, a liminal space full of ambiguity, tension and unease, where there is a sense of transition from one state to another. The Latin "limen" literally means threshold, which is a good way of thinking about these prints.

They evoke the sensation of crossing a threshold from one state to another - from a physical and observable reality to one that is allegorical, metaphysical and submerged within a dream-like state.

The 12 woodcut prints at this exhibition appear as meditative gems of introspection that operate on many levels and strike a familiar chord with many of us

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who are presently emerging out of a state of quarantined isolation and with hesitation and uncertainty are crossing the threshold into a new existence where the rules are uncertain and disputed.

Most of the woodcuts at the exhibition explore the ambiguity of liminal states: for example, *the weight of tongues* - a large glorious diptych print - plays with the idea of "tongue weight" that is familiar to anyone who has driven a trailer and the notion of a figure literally weighed down with tongues on her head.

Whimsy, humour and the probing of our psychological vulnerabilities are all ingredients of this distinguished exhibition. The deceptive simplicity of imagery and technique serves to enhance the impact of the work. We are seduced by the promise of innocence only to discover a dark and brooding world that questions our understanding of reality.