

Familiar formula in high demand

Review

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Julian Laffan: The familiar road. Beaver Galleries. Until September 17. beavergalleries.com.au.

Julian Laffan's exhibition *The familiar road* brings to his audience his familiar images in his familiar chosen medium of a painted woodblock matrix. This formula is obviously a hit with his audience with the show virtually selling out before the opening.

Laffan's subject matter consists of "scenes" or, in his terms, "moments", encountered on his drive on a stretch of road from Canberra to Braidwood to Narooma. The scenes are honest, if a little unremarkable, things that all of us have encountered on that familiar stretch of highway. Many of the scenes depicted are shown reflecting the light conditions that the artist encountered on his regular journeys with mists, twilight, a winter moon and the changing effects of light.

Travelling in a car through a wooded landscape is something that is a common experience for most people living in the bush capital and it is this experience that Laffan has captured perfectly in his woodblocks.

The technique that he employs is curious, but one that is growing increasingly fashionable. The Sydney-based artist Cressida Campbell, who is associated with the circle of Margaret Olley, studied the traditional Japanese woodblock techniques at the Yoshida Hanga Academy in Tokyo. She would draw her subject on a plywood block, then carve it, paint up the block and then place a sheet of paper on the block and in this way take an impression.

If the block is properly cut and the impressions are taken professionally, quite an edition of prints can be made and were made by the great Japanese printmakers. Campbell also took to exhibiting the painted block itself as a unique "non-editionable" artwork and these proved very popular



Julian Laffan's painted woodblock titled *The call of the mountain*, on show at Beaver Galleries. Photo supplied

with clients. Laffan, who is a long-standing printmaker, has followed in this tradition of carving plywood blocks, in his case birch ply, that he then manipulates with gouache, oil paints and pencils.

As far as I am aware, he takes no prints from this matrix and he exhibits the matrix as the finished work.

Laffan's woodblock paintings differ from Campbell's in a number of significant ways. Although both artists for their subject matter look to their immediate surrounding world - Campbell frequently turns to still life compositions and Laffan looks to the road ahead of him - Campbell seeks and achieves an immaculate finish, while Laffan deliber-

ately leaves traces of his technique and of the artist's personality.

In Laffan's woodcut painting, *Misty mountain*, we are aware of the artist's vigorous gouging of the woodblock from the rough cutting to suggest tree trunks, the long deep gouging indicating line demarcations on the road and the eccentric carving to accentuate the speeding vehicle.

This carving would make little sense if the artist intended to print the block and is intended more for the sculptural relief effect in the painting.

Colour is applied expressively, more in tonal blocks than to pick out detail.

In some of the other painted woodblocks,

including *The call of the mountain*, the emotions conveyed through the carving of the block are the key ingredient for the success of the work.

From the scratchiness of the grasses in the foreground to the articulation of the topography with thin lines and the sweeping emotional gouging of the skies in relief, these create the emotional and physical presence of the work. Colour is simply used to reinforce the carved lines.

Laffan's *The familiar road* is a satisfying exhibition, attractive and well crafted, but personally I would like to see something a little more conceptually and technically challenging from this talented artist.