

Review for Hobart "Mercury" 1988

## **SHOCKING DIVERSITY**

University Fine Arts Gallery.

This exhibition of prints from Sydney, perceptively mounted by the rejuvenated Print Council of Australia, bears a title which suggests a great lack of coherence, but there is in fact a very clear unifying characteristic.

These works are all by people who care deeply about today's society, and who, like hundreds of artists before them, have found in the terseness and clarity of the hand-printed image, a ready vehicle for registering their concerns - which are indeed diverse, but not shocking, rather thought-provoking.

At one extreme, the beautifully-drawn etchings of Elizabeth Rooney at once woo the eye and assault one's comfortable complacency with what they have to say about the creeping destruction of old Sydney. She uses graffiti in "Signs of the Times" to sideswipe our flawed leaders also: "Have a Bob each way; in 39 Pig Iron Bob, in 83 Uranium Bob, and Hard Rain to come".

Equally beautiful visually, though at a far remove, are the fabrics and enticing shirts of Paul Worstead. He loves riotous colour as much as Ken Done does, but uses it well, is a very good designer, and injects quiet self-mocking humour through his choice as "decoration" - smoking butts in ashtrays, winged thongs (Mercury a surfie??) and a homage to Aspro, quick relief for whatever ails good Aussies.

There are a substantial number of posters, mostly "message art" which by definition cannot afford to be too subtle - take them or leave them, but you can't miss them or ignore them.

Two large groups of posters come from the well-known workshops Redback and Garage Graphix, and they're good - Michael Callaghan and Leeanne Donohue in particular are deft image-makers, and their messages are in sharp focus. Their topics vary from local Mount Druitt parish-pump issues to a strong group of works about Amnesty International.

Jeff Gibson's cryptic photo-montages have the form and price-tag of posters but messages that one has to seek for in one's own psyche, and Tony Coleing's huge assembled linocut "Battlefield" seems to drag Bosch into the Twentieth Century.

The curator of the exhibition, Julie Ewington, says in her intelligent catalogue essay that "there is nothing necessarily 'Sydney' about this work..", and insofar as the issues are relevant to all of us in the "global village", she is right. However this sort of unashamed directness, even brashness, is seemingly generated only by big cities, and in Australia, Sydney does it best.

Personally, I think it's good stuff - it is doubtful whether as citizens of the world we have the right to munch obliviously on lotuses while society creaks at the seams, even down here in Tasmania where the creaks are barely audible much of the time. These artists provide a splash of cold water in the face which the less somnolent among us should find invigorating.

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