

ARTIST PROFILE

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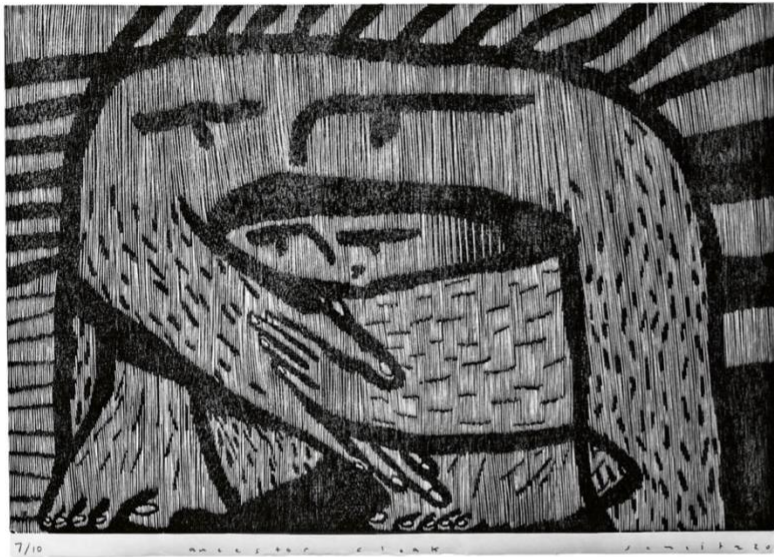


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Michael Schlitz

STORY LUCY HAWTHORNE PHOTOGRAPHY LISA GIPTON



Michael Schlitz's upcoming exhibition of woodblock prints, *Folkscape*, draws its name from the stories and landscapes that inspire the artist, featuring dream-like and highly patterned images where the line between figure and landscape is indistinct. The Tasmanian printmaker's work is subversively humorous and occasionally dark, but always working in harmony with the material.

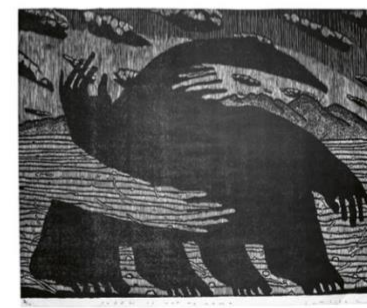
It's a cold winter's day when I visit Michael Schlitz's studio in Tasmania's Huon Valley. Dampness hangs in the air, but in the artist's hand-built hut is a welcoming fire and cups of tea. The kettle boils on the wood-fire stove while we talk. Without the fire, Schlitz warns, its brutally cold and draughty. I don't doubt it. Condensation clings to the windows, blurring the view of ferns and gumtrees outside. The Celery Top Pine was salvaged from the closed mill in Huonville; I run my hand along the windowsill, feeling the knots and curves of the tree. Like his artworks, the building is simple, raw, and celebrates the handmade. Imperfections are something to be celebrated, Schlitz remarks, "sometimes the imperfections are the excit-

ing part of the image. Everything I do is imperfect. That's part of nature."

Schlitz pulls out an in-progress woodblock and demonstrates how he paints his image directly onto the block before removing the soft grain of the wood around the picture. He counts the toes on the figure's foot — six — and paints over the bonus toe, his brushstrokes quick and unconscious. The pace is quite unlike what I usually associate with woodblock printing, with its often intricate detail. "I just make pictures as they come into my head and I listen to the radio a lot," Schlitz explains. He claims the work is based on "simple ideas, using one simple V-gouge tool." For Schlitz, it's important that the line follows the grain,

thereby "mirroring nature," rather than working against it. His use of "bleed printing," in which the paper is smaller than the block, is also significant, highlighting the paper's raw edges. It allows the image to "bleed into the space," suggesting a far larger world beyond the edges of the paper.

The bush environment is central to Schlitz's life and work, with most pictures featuring figures in a landscape, or, increasingly, figures morphing into the landscape, the distinction between human and environment ambiguous. He stresses his "desire to connect to the landscape. Some people call it biophilia. The landscape seeps into your bones somehow."



01 Ancestor Cloak, 2020, woodcut on kosuke paper, edition of 10, 65 × 98.5 cm

02 Up and down, down and up, 2023, woodcut on kozo paper, 56 × 73 cm

03 Metal Tree, 2019, hand printed woodcut on Japanese Kozo paper, unframed, 138 × 90 cm

04 Predator is not my name, 2019, hand printed woodcut on Japanese Kozo paper, 101 × 121 cm



05 *Somewhere in the middle of somewhere*, 2023, woodcut on kozo paper, 57 x 72 cm



06



07

The Melbourne-born artist first studied art at the University of Southern Queensland then moved to Hobart to complete honours in printmaking at the School of Art, University of Tasmania, in 1996. He was drawn to the landscape, as well as the work of the then printmaking teacher, Raymond Arnold. In Tasmania, he thrived. Of particular influence were the fieldtrips run by Arnold to regional Tasmania, where the group would visit a national park one day and be interviewing the housewives and miners of Queenstown the next.

Schlitz describes Arnold as "one of the few educators able to combine research and teaching in a seamless way. He lives for the art." The admiration is mutual, with Arnold recalling Schlitz's own enthusiasm and contribution to the fieldtrips. "Michael was looking for a conceptual framework for his work," Arnold explains. "These journeys out into the landscape gave him a format to explore, and ideas about Tasmania and colonisation to bring to his work. He'd be on these gritty mining sites, but he'd almost be in another space, an imaginary space. He's

always had this kind of mystical grounding to his work, almost visionary. It's unusual for an artist to tap into such a psychological, visionary framework."

In 1999, Schlitz came across a print in a book that would become his inspiration for years to come: Jacques-Etienne Victor Arago's *Première Entrevue avec les Sauvages*. The image describes the 1818 meeting between Captain Louis Freycinet's expedition and Aboriginal Australians at Shark Bay. Fascinated with the theatricality of the image, Schlitz reinterpreted the scene for many years, the sampled imagery becoming increasingly distorted over time. In his 2000 Master of Fine Art exegesis he noted Arago's use of gesture as language, writing "this language of the gesture is the language of the mute." This preoccupation with Arago's language of gesture is evident in his drypoint prints of the time, *Ventriloquist*, 2004 and *Astronomer*, 2004. Part of a Print Council of Australia commission, *Ventriloquist* is pantomime-like, "like a stage," Schlitz says. The characters "are not looking directly out at you. They're engaged with their own space."

As with Arago's figures on the beach, communication is through gesture. "A picture tells a thousand words," Schlitz reminds me.

Schlitz's distinctive woodcut style didn't develop until after his master's degree when he received an Asialink grant to study Japanese woodblock printing, *mokuhanga*, at Nagasawa Art Park. Unlike many Western-style printing techniques, this water-based technique offered a less toxic, more portable method of producing prints. Unable to take his vast collection of source material overseas, he started drawing the figures from memory, their faces distorting, and becoming less akin to Arago's stiff profiles. Schlitz's figures now are softer and cuter, their broad frames distorted sometimes to the point of anamorphosis. His 2021 *Fortune Teller* features a squat figure with stumpy toes and wide eyes, cradling a crystal ball. The patterning in the figure's cloak blends into the background

07 *Astronomer*, 2004, drypoint etching, 76 x 56 cm



landscape. In the multi-panelled *Crossing Borders*, 2022, a man with engorged limbs, burdened with a bucket of water on his head, appears to be engulfed by the ground below.

Where once he overtly critiqued colonial history in his work, Schlitz's stance on the past has changed: "I was borrowing from the past to critique the past. What right do I have to pass judgement?" He says he "turned it inwards" instead. Consequently, Schlitz sees a lot of "darkness" in his work, stemming from his mental health issues. Ultimately, he says, "everything you make is autobiographical. It's how you make sense of the world." It's a notion echoed by gallerist Emma Bett, who notes, "there's a self-portrait in every work." However, Bett doesn't share Schlitz's concerns about the "darkness," pointing to the popular 2020 print *Ancestor Cloak*, which depicts a man embracing a child, keeping him safe. The edition sold out. "A lot of mothers bought it," Bett observes.

While Schlitz's sampling from Arago's image has become less and less obvious over the years, some influence remains. He maintains an interest in the beach as a stage, a liminal zone, "a meeting space between two worlds." The parallel engraved lines in his prints are in themselves "a representation of the landscape," reminding Schlitz of "ripples of sand in the beach." We see these



ripples in his work in the 2022 groups show *Water[shed]* in support of the Restore Pedder campaign. *Pedder is not my Name*, 2021, has the Lake Pedder landscape literally hugging a shadowy figure, their forms only evident through the other's presence – a contrast of light and dark, pattern and absence. Schlitz makes the point that Pedder is not the Indigenous name for the controversially dammed lake. Along with titles like *The Denier* and *Striven to Extinction* in his upcoming show, it's evident that Schlitz's work still contains a political undercurrent, even while he en-

courages ambiguity. "I don't want to know too much about my work," he says "I make pictures that come to me. The more that I do, the less I know about it. It's always been about what people bring to the work." ■

EXHIBITION
The Well in the Waterhole
1 September – 23 September 2023
Bett Gallery, Hobart

08 *Crossing Borders*, 2022, hand printed woodcut on Japanese Kozo paper, 128 x 98 cm

Images courtesy of the artist, Bett Gallery, Hobart, and Beaver Galleries, ACT



8 September – 26 November 2023

Photo: Michelle Estay

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