

Although the ten artists in this remarkable exhibition come from Australia, China and the USA and draw on a diversity of cultural backgrounds, they nevertheless present us with a remarkably unified artistic statement.

The excitement of the exhibition stems not so much from our encounter with each individual work, but from the exhibition's realisation of these quite unexpected interconnections. Curator Tony Scott, unlike many academic curators who set out to illustrate an intellectual thesis, has assembled seventy works on paper with visual similarities and shared sensibilities and this results in some unexpected revelations.

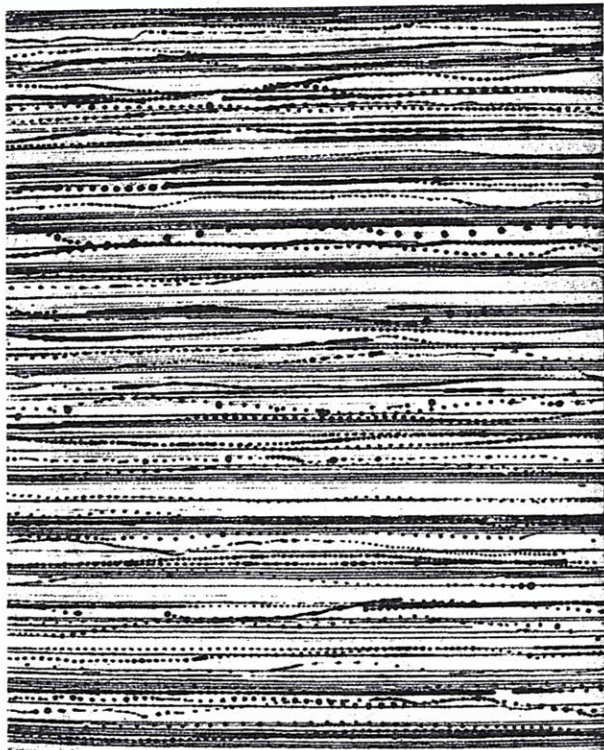
An example is the surprising similarity between the drypoints of Australian printmaker Kim Westcott, now resident in New York, and the charcoal, pastel and pencil drawings of Qin Yifeng, a Chinese artist from Shanghai. Westcott's large-scale prints stress a horizontal layering on which, like musical notation, tracks of dots and lines create tiny pockets of concentrated energy. Qin Yifeng's vertical arrangements of lines weave waves of energy with rhythmic grace and dramatic power.

Yet within the framework of these broad formal parallels, the actual artistic sensibilities they reflect are actually quite different. Kim Westcott's images in fact refer to the landscape of the Little Desert in Victoria, where she worked directly onto the plates. Once we know this, we begin to appreciate more fully the way intricate detail and the preciousness of her surfaces is set against the general monotony and regularity of the overall scheme. The metaphorical references to the desert landscape are expressed in the process by which these works reveal themselves: a certain sameness gives way, on closer examination, to great richness and diversity. In contrast, Qin Yifeng's series of *Linefield* drawings are very much more urban. An explosive energy is barely held in check by the disciplined structure of his images and a hidden dynamic subverts their apparent uniformity.

I doubt that Melbourne printmaker Martin King has ever met Shanghai-born artist Ding Yi, yet there are striking similarities in their work. While both adopt the ubiquitous postmodern grid,

# Three cultures

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Kim Westcott, *Melody*, 1994, drypoint with embossing, photo courtesy Meridian Gallery, Melbourne

both have developed it in a very personal manner, using a basic cross-like shape. What they have in common is this combination of conceptual sophistication and an interest in the primeval potency of the mark. Both artists work in series. King constantly reworks his obsession with the sacred space of the circle. Ding Yi, in his *Shishi* (*Appearance of Crosses*) series, takes the formal regularity of initial marks and develops them into a very rich and idiosyncratic surface.

In the work of both artists, pulsating colours and a floating design create a sense of optical illusion. However, with Martin King there is something of an organic unity in the work and the sense of alchemy and ritual involved in the revelation of the mark, like some primitive scribbling of nature. Ding Yi's marks begin in order, precision and discipline then, as they accumulate, the rigid structure gradually breaks down. So the visual similarity between the work of these

two artists, is offset by striking conceptual differences.

Garner Tullis is one of the towering figures in contemporary American printmaking. His work in this show is disarmingly simple: small lozenge-shaped lattice designs in drypoint, highlighted with gouache. The geometric severity of the patterns is counteracted, however, by a sensuous and highly individual sur-

face. Tullis's abstract lozenge grids remind us of lead-light windows (which, of course, have their own richly symbolic meanings) but are softened by the irregular ink-catching burr from the drypoint, the sketchy, whimsical linework and the nuances of opaque colour. Like Ding Yi and Martin King, Qin Yifeng and Kim Westcott, Garner Tullis presents a subtle play between geometric linearism and personal, idiosyncratic surfaces.

At first glance, the cool, reserved, cerebral geometric abstractions of Stephen McCarthy may seem to have certain affinities with the work of Garner Tullis, but Tullis' sensuality and playfulness find no echo here. Born and trained in Melbourne, Stephen McCarthy matches an immaculateness of technique with a relentless geometric purity. Yet the work is not anachronistic. It may take its permission from the art of Mondrian, Albers, Buchholz and the Russian construc-

tivists, but it emerges with its own and distinctive voice. There is a distilled perfection in the balance of line, colour and geometric structure, but also a certain dynamism that just slightly disrupts any feeling we might have of complacency and stability.

German-born, Melbourne-trained artist printmaker Raphael Zimmerman, in his etchings and monotypes, looks back to the conventions of Abstract Expressionism and the spontaneous gestural mark. Again, it is not a question of reviving earlier conventions, but reassessing them in the light of Joseph Beuys and German Neo-Expressionists such as Kiefer, Penck and Baselitz. His prints are very large and have a brooding and menacing presence. While their existential angst and eschatological atmosphere might be familiar, the strange primitive marks, which resemble skeletal forms, seem to tap into that world of ritual and magic that is the natural envi-