

Editorial

Being asked to write about the exhibition, *Collateral: Printmaking as Social Commentary*, for *Takahē* offers an exciting possibility for an art historian who is a long-time admirer of printmaking, as did the exhibition itself at the Gus Fisher Gallery at the University of Auckland in July and August 2011. I find it deeply rewarding to be able to bring prints to the attention of new audiences to share the pleasure and stimulation they offer. If most *Takahē* readers are accustomed to enjoying words that create pictures and recount tales, I believe they will also enjoy these print pictures that sometimes deploy words and certainly tell stories, albeit in a different, visual way.

Printmaking is often the ‘poor relative’ in the visual arts, given less attention than painting or sculpture, for example, and rarely enough the subject of a substantial dedicated exhibition and accompanying catalogue. It may be that the public is misled by the multiples that make up print editions, confusing them with mechanical reproductions and undervaluing them as a result. Even those who are aware that artists’ prints are ‘hand-made’ and just as ‘original’ as other artworks may not fully grasp the intricacies of printmaking processes and appreciate the complexity of decision-making and skill that lies behind a print. Yet those who are prepared to take the time to engage closely with works such as those represented on *Collateral* are amply rewarded in discovering the diversity of visual delights that printmaking provides. Not only are these printmakers consummately skilful in the different processes they use – engraving, woodcut, drypoint, etching, aquatint, screenprint, and digital printing were all represented on the exhibition – but they deploy them to create a remarkable range of forms that may present the most economical line or the most intricate detail, that may apply rich colour with multiple printings or explore the subtlety of a monochrome tonal range using black ink alone. Their work also challenges customary expectations in their use of innovative forms and materials, such as artist’s books, fabrics, multi-media works and engraved and etched metals. It made my task as curator a particular pleasure as such variety lent added visual interest to the exhibition. But it would be a mistake to enjoy these works for their aesthetic achievements alone. The printmakers that I was privileged to work with in *Collateral* bring to their work a seriousness of purpose in seeking to use prints as a form of social commentary, and expect an equally serious engagement on the part of their audiences. While the subjects of their works were developed as a response to each artist’s individual concerns and experiences, they address themes of universal interest that have resonance for a wide range of viewers. Michael Reed and Sandra Thomson of Christchurch confront corruption in two arenas that are widespread internationally – arms dealing and abuses in the church respectively. Diane Victor of Johannesburg explores the dark underbelly of violence and corruption in post-apartheid

South Africa. Daniel Heyman of Philadelphia reveals the iniquities of American operations targeting Iraqi civilians. Part of the heritage of printmaking has been its potential to carry ideas, yet as a creative process it avoids the didactic or documentary qualities of polemical texts and photojournalism. The prints of these four artists are thought-provoking not only in their choice of subject matter, but also in the manner in which it is presented, using metaphorical visual language in an engaging and challenging way. Nonetheless such robust social critique is perhaps not expected by audiences at art exhibitions. Visitors to *Collateral* professed themselves intrigued by the works but sometimes shocked by their content, and some found it difficult to reconcile aesthetic qualities with the demanding subject matter, which they found hard to dismiss from their minds long after they had been to the exhibition. Their responses confirm the potency of the prints: the works of all four artists on the exhibition demonstrate eloquently not only the versatility of printmaking, but its ability to create forms that unite visual delight with social acuity.

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