

Tipping point

In scientific parlance a 'tipping point' refers to the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the levels at which the momentum for change becomes unstoppable. The phrase 'tipping point' comes from the world of epidemiology, but it is now used more commonly to refer to changes in our climate. In environmental terms a tipping point can be seen as movement towards a delicate threshold that can cause dramatic environmental change; the point of no return from which linked and symbiotic systems spin perilously out of balance. It is a phrase with some pertinence to Melissa Smith's exhibition *Collective Traces*.

This is not to suggest that the work in *Collective Traces* is concerned with environmental catastrophe. However a central theme of the exhibition is the artist's relationship to the environment and of immanence. Another thread that runs through this body of work is the idea of the oblique, the incline and the threshold in the landscape. But as the title of the exhibition suggests there are multiple threads drawn together here. There are specific meanings and places alluded to rather than laid open; traces for us to follow along the meandering lines of the artist's lived experience.

Collective Traces represents a survey of the last five years of Melissa Smith's print-making practice. This coherent body of work presents certain recurrent motifs, concerns and distinctive mark making processes. Multiple printmaking techniques are employed to create a layering of image and meaning. The artist airbrushes the paper before printing to create a rich, smouldering surface on which fine striations and deeper incisions build up a complex accretion of marks. Many prints feature organic, elliptical forms floating on or anchored to the red glow of the ground. The artist also often perforates the paper, piercing the surface, rendering it permeable. These perforations reference possible journeys, arcs moving across fields of memory or the more tangible imprints of experience.

By a Side Wind marks the start of references to the oblique in Smith's work. The forms appear to be pushing from one side, toppling into one another. Yet mirroring and avoiding this collapse the forms remain upright. The perforations reference the artist's movement through the landscape and create a sense of momentum and energy in the work.

A number of images reference specific locations as well as emotional states associated with memories of those places. As a child Smith spent time in the Northern Territory. The work *To Remember* is inspired by this time and place. The form, while suggesting the ubiquitous and anthropomorphic presence of termite mounds in that part of the world, also, in its intricate patterning, echoes the surface of the ground, the sand hills of the desert and the tracks that criss-cross the country. For Smith the work alludes to the sense of independence and cultural richness she encountered there as well as acknowledging a subliminal connection to the freedom and openness of childhood.

Certain other works are more intimate and grounded in experience of the sensate world. In *Traces of Touch* or *Lean Towards Me* the starting point of the imagery is the sensuous arc and immediate tactility of a smooth stone picked up from a shore. The experience of the stone cradled and caressed in the hand can act as a mnemonic, both for the particular beach and the touch of a particular person - the memory rooted in a time and place. In *Passing thoughts* the same dynamic is at play. A random encounter with the delicate fragility of a fallen leaf from an old tree recalls a lovers brush, the fleeting nature of love and the passing of time. Here multiple intersecting lines and overlapping perforations

suggest possible trajectories towards delicate thresholds. There is a storey, a journey and a memory associated with each print. These psychological landscapes reflect the artist's experience of stepping lightly in the world.

The diptych *Hollow Pearl* is part of a series of works that relate to different, more expansive concerns. It is a monumental print that seems to offer multiple viewpoints and frames of reference. The work highlights the relationships between the micro and macro worlds perceived by the artist. Perhaps it is an image of an island viewed from above surrounded by a pulsating sea; perhaps it is a hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica viewed from below and intersected by the arcs of flight. It could also be a close-up view of an irregularly shaped stone surrounded by delicate, moss-like plant forms, overlaid by the wings and antennae of an insect. This speculation is enabled by the indeterminacy of the image and the artist's desire to create layers of meaning. Whatever it is, this is not a passive representation. It is an expression of momentum, of forces shifting, forming and moving.

Vapour is perhaps the print most grounded in specific imagery, despite its cosmological reach. It is an image of a vapour cloud hovering above a low profile of the earth, while a comet streaks across the night sky. In this instance it is a particular moment when Mc Naughts comet cut a great swathe across the planet. The blaze of red sky is striated by the movement of stars and the perforations lead us along an astral trail. This series is the beginning of the artist's vision turning up-wards towards the heavens. *Astral* and *Trail* are also part of this series which represent monumental cosmological forces at work.

In *Collective Traces* the artist's concerns are manifested in subtle ways and always cloaked in seductive beauty and technical skill. Smith is not interested in hitting the viewer over the head with rhetoric or an easily read position. However the sense of tipping, of being slightly out of balance, encapsulated in these works, is an eloquent response to our precarious situation, the extent of which is only now becoming evident.