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## **Heart of the matter**

### **Antonia Aitken's *Prospect***

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Sculpture, film, and installation are mediums we may not necessarily associate with printmaking. However, in *Prospect* — Canberra-based artist Antonia Aitken's solo exhibition at Craft ACT Canberra Craft and Design Centre — these mediums are combined with woodblock prints and drawings to demonstrate the possibilities of fertile cross-media experimentation while maintaining a strong sense of printmaking.

Since her graduation from the ANU School of Art in 2006, Aitken's practice has been a dedicated and deft exploration of the printmaking process and its intersection with issues of environmental and social concern. Her abiding interest has been the degrading effects that activities such as unsustainable farming and mining have on the environment. Aitken has spent time in numerous environments: Namadgi National Park (ACT), Hill End (NSW), Bundanon (Shoalhaven, NSW), Hudson Valley (New York) and the Liffey River (Dublin). A more recent destination, Queenstown, in the West Coast region of Tasmania, is the subject of this exhibition.

An avid bushwalker, Aitken's approach to her environments of study is often through the intimacy and simplicity of being on foot walking around and through particular country. Walking itself is a form of enquiry, the willingness to move, to move in a certain direction even without a known destination; the enlisting of perceptual knowledge and a slowed-down, more localised embodiment. Walking plays a key part in Aitken's practice and environmental gaze. It is a subject of potent enquiry in several of her works including *Walking River Tracks* (eight river walks, Murrumbidgee River, 2008; large-scale etching) and the artist's book *Drawing the Step*

(2012) which features a CD soundtrack along with etchings as a record of seven daily walks in Rosendale, New York.

Aitken consistently pushes the boundaries of printmaking. In 2007, for example, she initiated the *Collecting Home* project which saw seven artists don etching plate shoes to gather the traces of their home. Transferred through etching and cello-tape casts, the resulting prints were accompanied by short texts that described significant and memorable moments or discussions that were had during the walks. During her 2009 residency at Bundanon, along the Shoalhaven River, Aitken produced tall (body-sized) ink and river water drawings by allowing the tide to draw its mark directly onto the paper. In *Prospect* she has produced a large-scale six-panel woodblock, an epic but intimate depiction of Mt Owen in Queenstown, which has been the site of large-scale ravaging by mining and railway construction for over a century. As with Aitken's last showing at Craft ACT — she was one of four artists in the culminating exhibition (April 2013) for Craft ACT's 2012 Talking Water Artists in Residence program (Namadgi National Park) — this large-scale print is exhibited alongside the originating woodcut blocks for an installation which mirrors Aitken's concerns with process and practice. 'I have always been fascinated by the alchemy of printmaking,' writes Aitken, 'and have tried to find the innate qualities of the medium to communicate notions of time and place.' Aitken's recent tendency to exhibit her carved woodblocks and etched plates as 'objects in their own right' is tied to broader questions about 'the role of the printed image'.<sup>1</sup>

The wood of Aitken's woodblock medium is richly manifest in this exhibition and central to its response to issues of deforestation particularly in relation to Tasmania's now rare Huon Pine. The physicality of the cut plywood blocks (1.2 x 3.6 m) draws attention to the resource of wood and to Aitken's carving method which in this case consciously echoes techniques from early European engravers, contemporaneous with initial moves in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to develop mining in Queenstown. Aitken has also carved/cut and drawn on reclaimed pieces of Huon Pine for her sculptural assemblage *Re-cut* which forms another key arm of *Prospect*. *Re-cut* is reprised after an initial showing in Queenstown (March 2013) as part of the Temporary Residency 4 collaborative print project in conjunction with Land Art Research Queenstown (LARQ), and in which Aitken participated as one of five artists.<sup>2</sup> The work is a landscape of sorts,

or reconstructed landscape, a configuration of variously-sized and shaped timbers on a trestle table, 'reflecting', as Aitken writes, 'on the reconstructed nature of the mined environment'.<sup>3</sup> Lit to dramatic effect, the overall sculpture casts a dirge of deep, dancing shadows. We take in the detail that Aitken has rendered in ink and woodcut on many of the timbers – hillsides, landscapes within a landscape; the carved, painted wood returning us to the material and philosophical dimensions of Aitken's practice.

Aitken's desire to stage this major solo exhibition project at ACT Craft is also a kind of boundary-pushing; the artist well aware of printmaking's own history of sitting 'between the art and craft realms',<sup>4</sup> and equally curious about the reception of her work within the context of a craft and design centre. In this regard, it is fitting to see the tools, the materials of Aitken's craft with the woodcut blocks and woodcut/inked Huon Pine fragments on display. Aitken's work demonstrates a palpable love of the craft of her medium even while its processes and resourcing are also subject to scrutiny. It is this commitment which enables her to constantly test the parameters of her practice, to research and hone technique, to collaborate, to experiment.

*Prospect* represents one of Aitken's most ambitious experiments to date. It marks the evolution of an early-career artist whose highly refined technical and conceptual approach has earned her numerous sought-after residencies and awards in Australia and internationally. These have allowed Aitken the time to spend inhabiting and learning about particular environments as well as numerous opportunities to work alongside other artists and communities. *Prospect* also marks the gathering gravity of Aitken's oeuvre, one which carries its printmaking tradition with openness and rigour and with a willingness to expand and cross-fertilise. The place of the printed image in *Prospect* is less predominant, perhaps, than in Aitken's earlier exhibitions, joined as it is here by the moving image (projected film)<sup>5</sup> and those objects which either precede or, as with *Re-cut*, elude the printed image. For Aitken's the role of the printed image is both fraught and fertile, and ultimately central in a practice as poetic as it is political.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from artist statement for *Prospect*, 2014

<sup>2</sup> The Temporary Residency 4 (TR4) project was facilitated by New York-based artist Prawat Lacharoen and Queenstown-based artist Raymond Arnold, and was held in association with Tasmania's 10 Days on the Island Festival. *Re-cut* was first installed at the Cascade Brewery Depot, Queenstown, as part of TR4.

<sup>3</sup> Artist statement for *Prospect*, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> *Prospect* exhibition proposal, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> *Prospect* includes Aitken's film work *Confluence*, depicting the confluence of the Queen and King Rivers, and projected onto old copper printing plates. The Queen River, 'a still, murky yellow water', according to Aitken, bears the history of copper mining at Mt Lyell, and the King River as a result is considered one of the most polluted rivers in Australia.