

“Debra strives to bring light to the dark in her photography and printmaking. Her monotypes extend the tone of black towards what is possible with silver gelation photographic paper.”

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Debra Luccio 'New York Figures: Dancers and Life Models of New York City'
Paintings, Monotypes, Drypoints, Etchings & Drawings Exhibition Dates: 4 – 30 September 2007
Opening Speech 7PM 4 September 2007 STEPS GALLERY 62 Lygon St Carlton South (beside Trades Hall, Melway
2B F11) Website: www.debraluccio.com Email: info@debraluccio.com

Welcome everyone to Debra Luccio's exhibition New York Figures: Dancers and Life Models of New York City, Paintings, Monotypes Drypoints Etchings and Drawings.

It is marvellous to see so many monotypes on the walls. I initially contacted Debra about her monotypes after they were shown in this venue and at Colvile St in Hobart Last year. Debra has continued to pursue the medium of monotype whilst travelling recently with her partner in New York.

While in New York she lectured to the students of the Art Students League. This august institution was founded in 1875 and it has an interesting connection with the international history of monotypes.

On returning to the US from Munich in 1878 William Merritt Chase - the president of the Society of American Artists - taught the principal courses in drawing, and painting at the League. Chase taught at the League for 22 years [from 1878-1896 and 1907-1911], had “an ability to instil enthusiasm in his students”¹ was a popular teacher, and “his presence contributed to the League's future success.”²

Chase was a friend of Frank Duveneck, and Otto Bacher. These artists formed a group in Munich known as the Duveneck boys and they are credited as being some of the first US monotype artists. For a time monotypes were referred to as 'Bacherotypes' This was mainly because Bacher's hand press was used to produce the work. At a later stage in Venice James Mc Neil Whistler was associated with this group. At the beginning of the twentieth century some of these artists were in part responsible for the surge in popularity experienced

¹ <http://www.theartstudentsleague.org/Navigation/Home/HP-FRAME.html> page 3.

² “One significant upset occurred when William Merritt Chase resigned in 1896. The problem was reported to be a matter of philosophy, Chase challenged the custom of requiring beginning students to draw from the antique, insisting that drawing directly with the brush was a superior means of learning to paint. The conservatism of the Paris-trained artists, particularly Kenyon Cox, prevailed, so Chase formed his own school, the Chase School (later renamed the New York School of Art). His overwhelming popularity as a teacher, in addition to the fact that most students (like Chase in his own student days) abhorred drawing from antique casts, assured the success of the new school, which presented a major threat to the well-being of the League. By 1902/03, the League's president, Samuel Shaw, was concerned that his institution might actually collapse as a result of Chase's defection.”
<http://www.theartstudentsleague.org/Navigation/Home/HP-FRAME.html>

in the monotype medium in Paris. At this time many artists 'discovered the medium' at monotype parties, possibly through formal instruction at the Academie Julian, or by contact with American artists.

Rupert Bunny, the first influential Australian monotype artist, produced some of his best work during the surge in interest in this art form. His initial work was with the American Augustus Koopman.

In 1907-8 Georgia O'Keefe studied under Chase at the Art Students League and produced a number of interesting monotypes. Others who studied with Chase and produced monotypes include "Edward Hopper, Gifford Beal, and Josef Stella"³. After a stint in Paris The noted American colour monotype artist Clark Hobart also spent three years studying at the Art Students League. In the late 1890's he produced monotypes which are stylistically similar to the work of Maurice Prendergast. He is important from a historical point of view because his monotypes were accepted into print competitions.

Most of the monotypes mentioned above were black ink or oil paint on paper. Bunny, Koopman, Prendergast and Hobart used colour; either as subtractive monotypes, - ink scraped, brushed and wiped off an unincised surface and printed- or additive, - paint applied to the surface in a grouped crosshatch style and printed. Debra's work differs from this by its use of intense and complex voids, and the theatrical way in which she applies and forms black. This is relevant when contemplating her subject matter.

The complex darkness and enveloping void in Debra's work is evocative of the Australian master artists: John Brack, and George Baldessin. All are Melbourne based artists with a knowledge of European art history. They respect paper, the act of drawing and printmaking, and understand the power of the void when juxtaposed with the human figure.

Baldessins' studio is located close to Debras house, and she has worked there to produce her large prints. In a recent catalogue of works by Baldessins' circle of artists, curated by Dick Turner at Castlemaine Art Gallery, the artist Fraser Fair recounted that not only did Baldessin have an intimate connection with the nude of the Japanese pillow book tradition, but also had a attachment to black and the void. Fair relays a conversation over a Japanese art book in 1968 where Baldessin provocatively stated that: "The void is just as expressive as the object adding to the mood and eroticism of the figure." This statement is applicable to Debra's almost completely curtained picture planes.

Brack's nudes, are the antithesis of erotic, one can pick the early process studies, or those half complete by a hint of femininity, or volume in the figure. The nude is, out of place, walking a tightrope between carpet corners, always falling towards the viewer on a shifting floor. The scene is set in Brack's studio - a familiar place to all who know his work – however, an uncomfortable site for a model. A world of Mondrian composed panels, luxuriously complex rugs, uncomfortable chairs, and forever draped but unworn clothing. The room; this model trap, not the model herself, is in some way the reason for the study. The void space, the area of no action, of metaphorical black, where the psychological, pictorial game is being played, within each image is where Bracks skills in drawing and composition come into play and surprisingly open a new space for one to discover within the void. Brack used the female form and the studio model in fixed conté as a focus point, the peripheral action, linked to a subvertible, academic tradition to discover within the void. A noted example of this is when asked by his dealer Kim Bonython in 1963 to add to the void space in his portrait. After two years of ignoring the request the artist painted a separate picture of the item the dealer wanted added, rather than change the construction of the image so substantially by desecrating the void.

All these Melbourne figures share connections. The void is complex, but most worthwhile in Debra's monotypes. Viewing the complex black of Renaissance paintings and influenced by a fellow art student Kirsten Perry, she became persuaded to use numerous colours combined to achieve black on the printed image. Her monotypes are built using a photographers eye,

³ Moser, J., *Singular Impressions The Monotype in America*, Washington, 1997, p.76.

through an intense multi layered printmaking process. Lighter coloured inks are knowingly laid in central arks or L shapes, thus adding to the figures form and depth of tone. Debra strives to bring light to the dark in her photography and printmaking. Her monotypes extend the tone of black towards what is possible with silver gelation photographic paper.

The difference between Debra's work and that of Brack and Baldessin, is the constant movement, and contorted shape of the figures. This is something Rupert Bunny tried to achieve in his coloured oil monotypes. Debra refines movement on paper by working, and overworking the highly layered and heavily inked plate.

Debra's monotypes are considered large for a traditionally intimate medium. Because of the complex overworking, the sticky nature of the ink, and the size, they are physically demanding to produce. Unlike single layered plates she states: "there is a great deal of pushing around to get the light to come through"⁴ or to get a mark. As compared to making a monotype photography tends to provoke a feeling of dislocation because there is a lack of artistic physicality. The expressive technique of monotype, gives the artist a direct connection to the creative, one must feel the paper, and pigment, one drives the ink around in the construction of the image. Debra may take an hour to ink a copper plate and an hour and a half to three hours to produce a drawing.

Copper is used in preference to zinc for the monotype matrix because of the rich tone of the plate. It enables one to hide some drawn or wiped detail and it frees the artist from a precise line and introduces the magic of chance. Chance is always a dancing partner when producing monotypes, where lifting the sheet from the plate may expose future directions for the work, or a complete mess.

The feet of the dancers and the solid base of the image are dark, both strengthening the composition, and affirming and stabilising the working tools of the dancer - their feet. Contemporary dance is about lifting and then solidly connecting the body to the ground, and this stabilising tool is used to depict that connection.

A few of the figures depicted are compiled from some quite confronting even immodest, life models, but mainly the figures are dancers. Debra sketched sessions, and took photographs of the full dress rehearsal of the Tiffany Mills Company of contemporary dancers for their production *landfall*. She also drew the dancers of the New York City Ballet, and the American School of Ballet. This store of imagery has enabled her to capture the archetypal dancer. These works have been metamorphosed by the separation in time and space between the recording of the initial real inspirational images and the emergence of the monotype in her Australian studio.

I am convinced that the dancing figure monotypes Rupert Bunny produced in the late 1890's and early 1920's, reveal his striving to depict movement of the archetypal dancer and not the movement of an individual. After consulting Bunny's sketchbooks, and some of his early photographic source materials, one can establish that the source sketches for those works were collected some 20 to 30 years before the final monotypes were printed. The process is almost an internalisation of the dancing figure, the figure seems to have been like a tune that over the years kept replaying and developing in his brain.

The Dancer has become a traditional figure in monotype printmaking. Degas is the most celebrated, studied, and admired figurative monotype artist. He produced over 400 monotypes, with many depicting young dancers on and off stage or in training at the Paris Opera. The women in the Degas brothel monotypes, and women engaged in their toilet have a close affinity to the lightly clad contemporary dancers and models depicted by Debra.

The Australians Francis Lyburner, and Fred Williams were obsessed with the backstage antics of actors and dancers in London in the late 1950s to the 60's. Both made monotypes: Lyburner producing a substantial body of work concerning these burlesque and ballet performers.

⁴ Luccio, D., Interview Melbourne, 2007

With this exhibition Debra is carving her own niche in the Australian History of International monotype practice. She is far from alone. The contemporary Australian Monotypes surrounding her consist of important landscape inspired abstract icons by Bruno Leti, dark spatial plays by Graham King, the free form hills and trees and intimate pillow book monotypes of John Walker, striking lifetime refinements of human nature by Murray Walker, traditional Degas inspired studies by Wayne Viney and Tony Amenerio, and the bold abstracts of Elizabeth Cummings, Ann Thompson, Anne Lord and the collaborative artists of the APW and the Dianna Davidson/Whaling Road print studios.

As you may have guessed drawings and monotypes are my particular interest. I regretfully admit that I only glanced at the marvellous, detailed oil paintings on canvas in this exhibition. These are the accepted endpoints in the academic construction of art pieces. I do not wish to discourage anyone from enjoying the paintings, but I would suggest that observing the artistic process, the gradual emerging of exciting early forms and resolution of a multitude of artistic problems, is all to be seen in the monotype. A work in progress may be more revealing and stimulating than the finished and respectable end product. It seems a shame that Degas covered so many of his monotypes in pastel to finish them. Let them stay as our ghostly tutors.

This is a marvellous group of artworks inspired by the New York City dance scene and its models. It captures their muscular bodies and the grace of their movement. I hope Debra's fascination with the human form and all its possibilities continues for many years to come.

I declare this wonderfully black show open.

Thomas A Middlemost