

## Return of the Archive at Megalo Print Gallery celebrates 40 years of the print workshop

Sasha Grishin

Music, Theatre & Arts

**Various artists: *Return of the Archive*. Megalo Print Gallery, 21 Wentworth Avenue, Kingston. Until November 30, 2020.**



Annika Romeyn, *Faults and Facets*.

This year Megalo turns 40 and as part of its anniversary celebrations it is launching an exhibition that examines some of the highlights of its four decades of existence.

The title for the exhibition, *Return of the Archive*, rather than *From the Archive*, sounds somewhat enigmatic to outsiders like myself.

The archive of more than 1000 prints plus documentation was prepared and lodged as a donation to the National Gallery of Australia in 2013.

Earlier this year and somewhat unexpectedly, the donation was rejected and the archive was returned to Megalo and hence the title of the show.

With any major selected survey exhibition of a print workshop that has been operating for four

decades, there is an inevitable broad-church cross-section of artists, styles and mediums.

Nevertheless, the simple roll call of artists' names reads like a who's who in Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous printmaking in recent times.

Megalo was set up as the Megalo International Screen Printing Workshop based at Ainslie Village in Canberra with the legendary co-founders, the late Colin Little and Alison Alder, the current head of the Printmaking workshop at the ANU School of Art and Design. It had its origins in clenched-fist social protest and brazen feminism.

One of the first commissioned prints at Megalo was for Nugget Coombs, Judith Wright and Stewart Harris who had set up the Aboriginal Treaty Committee and was executed by Colin Little.

In the catalogue note there is a slightly quaint observation, "We had to print 500 but we didn't have any drying racks so they were all pegged up on clothes lines, strung across the whole studio." These prints have become very rare and very valuable.

Little's *He lies and he knows he lies*, a screenprint from 1981, has lost none of its power and only change the schematic head of Malcolm Fraser with that of another prime minister and the print has lost none of its relevance or poignancy.

Raymond Arnold is a nationally highly regarded printmaker now mainly associated with his very finely worked environmental etchings, but he had his origins in screenprinted posters, two of which are in this exhibition.

Annie Franklin is another wonderful printmaker whose early days with Megalo saw her make powerful screenprints such as *Time is running out (for Australia's Native Forests)* as well as delicate environmental etchings including *Morning song* (2005).

As Franklin observes, "The equipment was basic, the heating was rudimentary and the ventilation was supplied by the gaps in the tin. But they were good times, energetic and creative."

There is this sense of energy and social commitment that runs throughout the exhibition. The Indigenous artist Arone Meeks was another active contributor to Megalo, whose prints made here, including the lithograph *Gender Spirit II* (2017), are powerful, beautiful and memorable.

Megalo has also nurtured many younger artists who now are emerging as important printmakers in Australia, including Annika Romeyn with such powerful and sophisticated work as the etching *Faults and Facets* (2011).

For people interested in printmaking, or simply the art scene in Australia's national capital since 1980, this is a must-see exhibition. It is a relatively small selection from a very rich history, a history where women artists have outnumbered the men on a ratio of two to one.

Although socially committed printmaking was the original brief of Megalo, it has turned into a very broad, all-inclusive organisation that has striven for and achieved a very high level of artistic excellence.