

ROSLYN KEAN

Along the Way

21 June to 22 July 2023



Night Rain—Softly Falling, 2013, U/S, woodblock and ink drawing, 76 x 95 cm

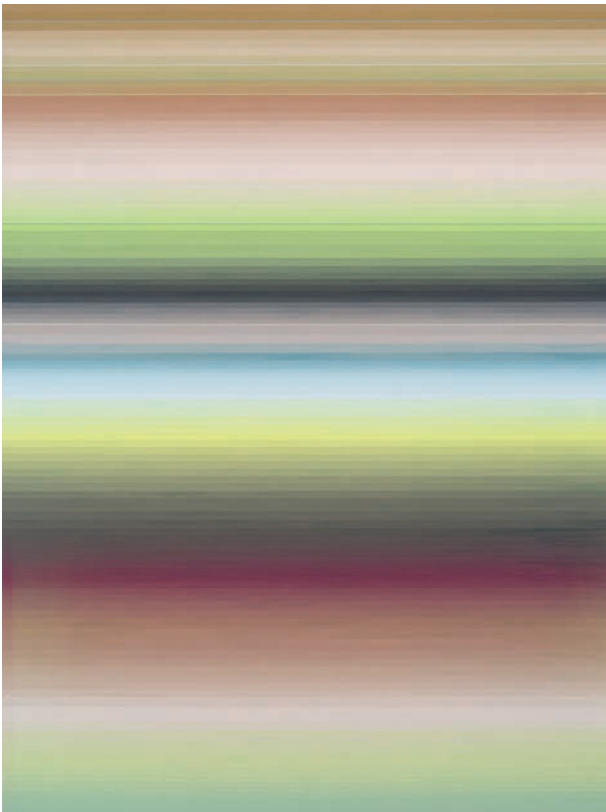
For five decades Roslyn Kean has created complex multi block prints that often involve up to 15 blocks layered with exacting registration. Her work reflects nature and the experience of the silence of space. Her minimalism and limited colour evoke a contemplation of the landscape.

ALONG THE WAY

Roslyn Kean is a nationally and internationally recognised printmaker renowned for her exquisite, spiritually charged woodblock prints. However, her path to becoming an artist printmaker was far from conventional. Biographies of many established Australian printmakers appear to frequently run in a fairly straight line. Many future printmakers, in art school acquire the tools of their trade, then they exhibit their prints where they receive recognition, and ultimately they settle into a pattern of teaching, studio practice and exhibiting.

In contrast, the career path of Roslyn Kean was different. At the age of eighteen, she went straight to art school, the National Art School in Sydney, better known as East Sydney Tech. However, after a couple of years, without completing her degree, she went to the Shillito Design School, where the dynamic Phyllis Shillito plunged Kean into the realm of intricate colour theory.¹ Kean made some frenetically exacting colour pattern paintings that were painstakingly detailed with precise gradations. Inspired by that experience, Kean applied to study at the Royal College of Art in London, however, she was not accepted, and her portfolio was returned to her addressed to Austria – a simple geographical slip to make for a Eurocentric institution. In the meantime, she applied for postgraduate study in painting at The Slade in London with a hastily assembled portfolio mainly selected from her work at the Shillito Design School, where she was accepted. However, as there were no places left in painting, she was accepted into printmaking. This was the early spiralling path that led to the artistic formation of one of Australia's most significant contemporary printmakers.

As a child, Kean was in awe of beautiful surfaces. Her paternal aunt, Phyllis Kean, made tapestries and Kean recalls a specific tapestry of a spacious Australian landscape with gum trees that hung in her aunt's living room.



Liminal Space, 1975, gouache



Ostwald Colour Theory, 1974, gouache, 52 x 41 cm

The image always stayed in her mind and planted the desire to make something as beautiful as the tapestry that had been lodged in her memory. In her adolescent years, as well as being fledgling artist, Kean was also a track and field athlete competing at an elite level, a flautist, and a dedicated bush walker.

Kean's early English art found expression in incredibly intricate screenprints documenting particular trees, or the pattern of wind on sand dunes – the idea of nature echoing itself, frequently based on photographs she had taken. Seriality, repetition, space and the shape of time were all important concerns in her work. She would spend prolonged periods of time cycling around the English countryside, travelling across the Sahara Desert and walking across Iceland in all instances documenting everything that she encountered with a camera and quite often playing her flute and meditating on the nature that she encountered. "Through my flute I would talk to the sand dunes"² she later reflected. While in London, she started to actively exhibit at the Graffiti Gallery and at the prestigious Angela Flowers Gallery.

Two prints completed at The Slade School, London



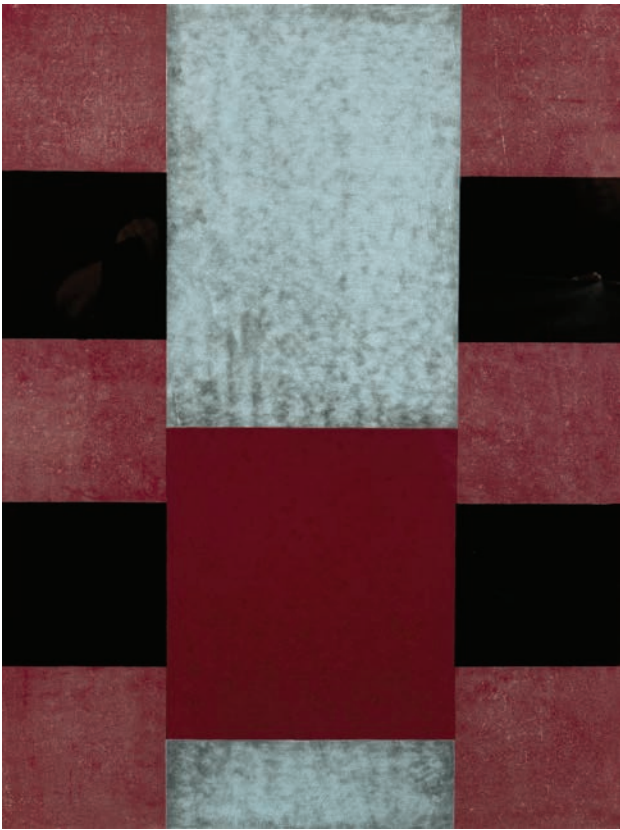
Sahara No 4, 1982, screenprint, 76 x 56 cm



Ten Times Round, 1976, screenprint, 70 x 48 cm



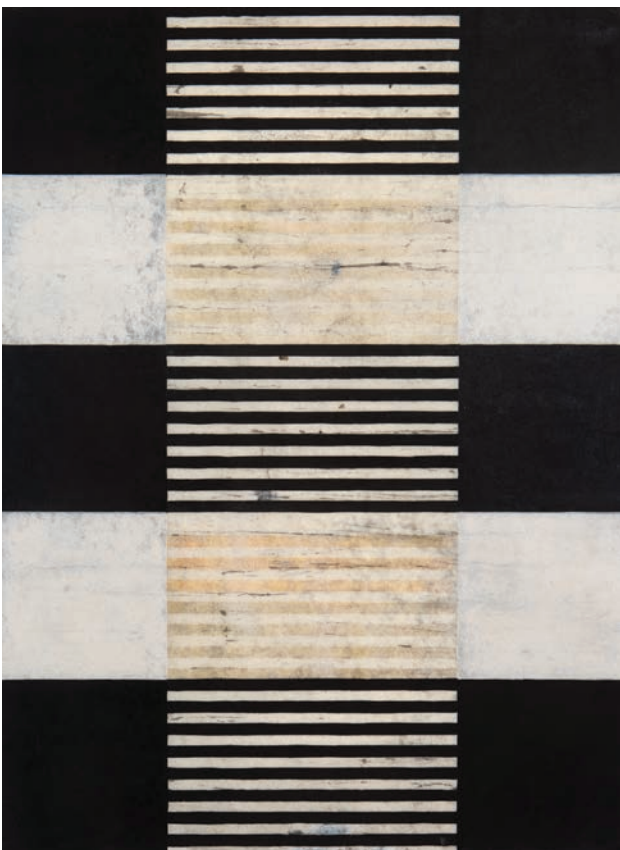
Beneath the Pacific Ocean, 1985, screenprint, 56 x 76 cm



Weaving My Ancestors Voices, woodblock, 76 x 56 cm



Beyond Horizons II 2001, multiblock woodcut and goldleaf, 76 x 56 cm



Evening Sky II, 2014, U/S, woodcut with gold leaf, 76 x 56 cm



Between Horizon and Shadow, 2014, U/S, multi block woodcut and gold leaf, 76 x 56 cm

Kean's love affair with Japanese culture can be traced back to primary school where she had a Japanese penfriend and was fascinated by all things Japanese. At the Shillito Design School, she employed traditional Japanese woodblock prints for the basis of some of her colour theory exercises and while studying at The Slade, she often went to the British Museum to explore their fabulous collection of Japanese woodblock prints. In 1985, she was awarded the highly competitive Japanese Government (Monbusho) Research Scholarship and spent over two years researching traditional Japanese woodblock printing at the Tokyo National University of Fine Art, for most of the time, under the supervision of Tetsuya Noda.

Kean observed that after almost three years in Japan, "My approach was to just print, print and more printing to explore every avenue, look at original works, read every aspect of their making and try and emulate the printed surface on the best quality paper available and understand the life and culture of that time, materials available, the scale the of workspace, climate and the dedication. The artisan skills that had developed over hundreds of years."³

Rather than returning directly from Japan to Australia, Kean felt the need to explore the even more ancient origins of the woodblock print and travelled to Tibet. She recently observed, "I needed to see the deep blue ceilings of the Tibetan temples and, having seen them, they have remained in my work until this day." At the Gyantse Kumbum in Tibet, Kean found a library where monks in a dimly lit room printed by hand from the sacred blocks. Here the monks used something resembling shoe polish that they dabbed onto the blocks with a soft pad of ink and then printed both sides of the paper in succession.

Back in Australia, Kean became the most celebrated master of the traditional Japanese woodblock print in the country, while internationally her prints were awarded some of the most prestigious prizes including, in 2017 the Keiko Kadoko Print Award, (International recognition for exceptional expression of Mokuhanga technique) and in 1999, Triennale Prize, 12th Norwegian International Print Triennale.



Burnt Landscape, 1995, woodblock and gilding, 10 x 22 cm

In this exhibition, for the first time we sense a continuum in Kean's art from the earliest obsessive and intricate colour theory paintings, then some of the London screenprints, through to the most recent floating seas of suspended geometric edges that in a strange manner echo some of the shapes explored in some of her earliest colour theory paintings. There is a prevailing serenity and inner peace in her art – a contemplative silence that speaks of the experience of Japan, but one that is uniquely realised within an Australian setting and the Australian palette. When you are absorbed by the mystique of Kean's world, you leave the conflicted reality of material things and are invited to dissolve into a spiritual realm that lies between realities.

Reflecting on what has happened to her art along the way, Kean observed: "From a very early age I always felt the space between the trees, between the laid stones is what really matters. As a child playing in the harsh Australian bush, I made my secret paths and placed stones in well-constructed patterns just because I could and I knew only the natural elements would disturb them. In particular, the not knowing what would happen was the best part. Waiting for nature to rearrange for me."⁴

Sasha Grishin
2023

¹See Eva Fay, Shillito Design School - Australian Colour Education in the '70s, 2021

²Roslyn Kean, taped interview with the artist, Manly, 16 July 2011

³Roslyn Kean, Life after Geidai, a paper delivered in Japan in September 2014

⁴Roslyn Kean, Life after Geidai, a paper delivered in Japan in September 2014



Basho's Garden, 2020, woodblock, 75 x 110 cm



Weaving My Ancestors Voices, 2018, woodblock, two panels, each panel 76 x 56cm



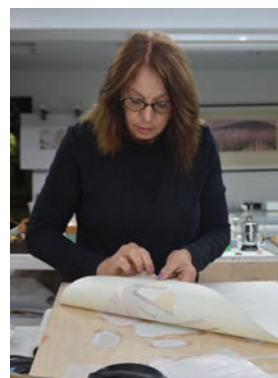
Shattered not Broken, 2020, woodblock, 75 x 55 cm



Mindfulness II, 2020, woodblock, 75 x 55 cm

Roslyn Kean

Roslyn Kean studied fine arts at TAFE and the Shillito Design School, Sydney. In 1976 she studied postgraduate printmaking at the Slade School of Fine Art London. In 1985 Roslyn was awarded a Japanese Monbusho scholarship providing two years graduate research at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts in the field of Mokuhanga.



Since 1988 Roslyn has specialized in Japanese printing techniques and has taught extensively in Australia and the UK. In 1990 Roslyn returned to Sydney establishing the Stables Print Studio where she mentors other artists with an interest in relief printing and the contemporary application of this traditional 16th Century medium. Kean has exhibited extensively in Australia and internationally.

GRANTS and AWARDS

- 1985-87 Japanese Government (Monbusho) Research Scholarship. Research in Traditional Japanese Woodblock Printing at Tokyo National University of Fine Art.
- 1999 Triennale Prize, 12th Norwegian International Print Triennale 1999.
- 2001 Scandinavian Cultural Grant, Canberra, Australia, 2001
- 1991 Swan Hill Regional Gallery, acquisitive award
- 2014 2nd IMC Tokyo, International Mokuhanga Exhibition, Tokyo Geidai, 2014, 2nd place award
- 2016 Awarded Artist in Residence for Inkfest 2016 by Ink masters Cairns, Australia
- 2016 Short listed finalist PCA commissioned print award 2016
- 2017 Finalist (1 of 10 artists selected) Print Council of Australia, Commissioned Print Award
- 2017 Keiko Kadoko Print Award, International recognition for exceptional expression of Mokuhanga technique Presented at the 3rd IMC Hawaii, by the International Mokuhanga Conference Board at 2017 International Mokuhanga Exhibition 'The Beauty of Mokuhanga – Discipline & Sensibility'
- 2018 Australian Print Triennial, Highly Commended Prize, The Art Vault. Mildura, NSW, Australia
- 2019 Hornsby Art Prize – Printmaking Prize



Photography: Irena Conomos. All images courtesy the artist

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