

Ben Rak's Pictures of Scratches exposes contemporary art hierarchies

By Tony Curran

Ben Rak's exhibition at Manly Art Gallery takes an abstract and conceptual language to question social inequality through the microcosm of contemporary art. *Pictures of Scratches* is a graceful discussion of social discrimination disguised as cool minimalist formalism.

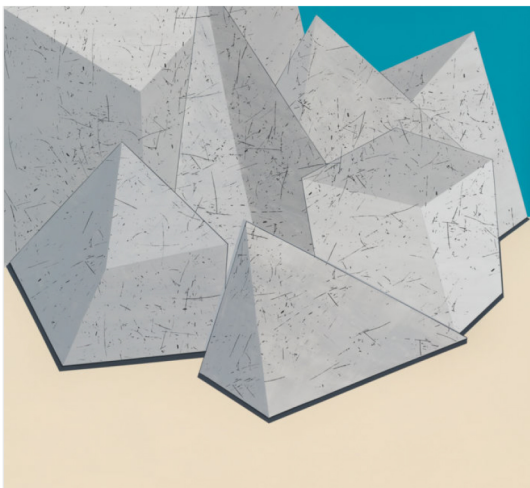


Scratches (detail), 2016. Etching installation of 160 panels, 350 x 220 cm. Area shown, 100 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The most dominant visual element of Rak's *Pictures of Scratches* is the array of sharp, scratched angular polygons that repeat in varied instances throughout the show. The feature works in the show are one large wall installation of 160 small etchings titled *Scratches*, 2016 and two large paintings, *Untitled I* and *II* (*Paintings of Scratches*), 2016. *Scratches* is produced from shards of off-cut etcher's zinc, sliced into irregular shapes and scratched randomly – shaken in a bucket or foul-bitten. The kinds of scratches and foul biting are marks usually treated by the printmaker as accidents but they carry formal similarities to the visual splatters of abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock or Joan Mitchell. The paintings are derived from the forms and textures in *Scratches* but enlarged to confront the viewer on a near-human scale.



Untitled (Painting of Scratches), 2016. Acrylic painting and silkscreen on canvas, 130 x 170 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Untitled II (Painting of Scratches), 2016. Acrylic painting and silkscreen on canvas, 130 x 170 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The platonic geometry in this new show is a bold departure from the icons of cultural and subcultural identity that appear in Rak's previous works. His earlier work has used reproductions of kitsch souvenirs, landscapes surf art as a way to identify contemporary strategies of performing identity. *Hula Bobble* from 2014 features a Hawaiian dashboard decoration printed in barcode, drawing attention to the mass production and commercialisation of culture in a critique of globalism's diminution of authentic forms of cultural and subcultural identity.

Rather than appropriating iconography for *Pictures of Scratches*, Rak has invented a new visual language using the quirks of etching and screenprinting as signifiers of an historically marginalised subculture – print media artists. In an interview with Abdullah M. I. Syed in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Rak outlines his objective to test the “media hierarchies” that seem to marginalise print media. Compared to art forms such as painting, print media has a strong history as being marginalised due to the mechanical process that mediates between the artist's hand and the final artwork, in addition to print's tendency towards multiples rather than unique products of artistic genius.

In *Pictures of Scratches* these media hierarchies battle it out. Screenprints face paintings as opponents and some works are hybrid print-paintings on canvas. However, the development of the work suggests a gradual immersion into painting as the room moves clockwise from *Scratches* to the screenprinted *Pictures of Scratches*, culminating with increasingly sophisticated *Paintings of Scratches* including an anomaly of the show, a shaped canvas combining screenprinting with acrylic painting, *Untitled III (Painting of Scratches)* 2016. The exhibition culminates in two major paintings that build on the achievements of the others while incorporating ambiguous narratives, colour and a more complex figure-ground dynamic.

At first, the commanding presence of these larger paintings feels contradictory to the intention of Rak's exhibition. *Untitled I* and *Untitled II* by far steal the show. The artist's impressive development as a self-taught painter suggests he has converted to painting by a progressive development of masking, glazing and experimental mark-making. The paintings' large scale makes them viewable from a distance, but an intricate texture of the scratches invites closer inspection from the viewer but beware, this closer inspection might reveal more about you than you are prepared to admit. After some close examination of the paintings I realised that most of these scratches are actually printed onto the canvas. I was immediately disappointed that the painting had been “shortcut” by the silkscreen and that the labour of painting I had admired was not at all made by the artist's hand.

Rak anticipated this reaction and skilfully made it the point of the exhibition. However, rather than a didactic critique of media hierarchies, camouflaging it within the minimalist form means that when the message is received the work pounces on the viewer not conceptually but *affectively*.

The strength of any good art is to show rather than tell. This work does exactly that. It avoids the didacticism prone to a lot of conceptual art. A subtler approach, such as this, is easier to swallow and far more profound.

***Pictures of Scratches* Manly Art Gallery and Museum 28 October–4 December, 2016**

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