

Peripheries and Hierarchies

By Chloé Wolifson

Ben Rak's artworks are neither simply paintings nor simply prints, but contain elements of each masquerading as the other. For Rak, the print is a form of self-portraiture, a way to investigate the act of 'passing' for a particular identity by masking one's own, in order to boost one's social agency and avoid marginalisation for the characteristics that define the authentic self.

This masquerade starts with an unintended scratch on an etching plate. Known as 'foul bites', such scratches are small but vicious, for they often elicit in the audience an effect that is the opposite of what the artist has intended. While an artist may slave over the details of a print, it is the accidental mark that will often catch the eye of viewers, capturing a spontaneity that seems 'authentic' to them and is closer to their preconceived notion of painting as a gestural practice than of printmaking as a technical one.

This attitude reveals an inherent bias in an audience that has long held the singular nature of painting superior to the seriality of printmaking, a bias that Rak exploits through a series of manoeuvres in his *Paintings of scratches*. He snaps these foul bites with a smartphone camera, building up a library of digital images that are then used in repetition to develop screen-printed compositions. In the absence of any deliberately etched imagery lie gritty fields of abrasions. Atop these float a number of geometric shapes – solids with planes rendered in unblemished flatness – conjuring up three-dimensionality. One would think that these shapes, so cleanly executed, are the product of the printmaking process. However, they are actually painted.

The result is a gestural, spontaneous-looking field of background markings consisting of harvested, repeated and printed scratches, and a foreground of perfectly smooth geometric forms that have been painted by hand. This switcheroo creeps up on us as we view the works, and its ultimate recognition is the moment when the print has failed to 'pass' – the deception causing us to bring into question our own values and why they matter to us.

Another suite of works, *Halftone it down*, takes this ruse a step further. Under a title alluding to the action of 'toning down' the performance of self, Rak has made a series of calligraphic brushstrokes and used these to frame sections from his paintings, which have been screen printed using halftones. These daubs appear to float and jostle on the paper like cells in a petri dish under a microscope – microcosmic symbols for Rak's experimental practice. In some panels, the halftone dots are invisible until examined closely, as if the dots are attempting to conceal their printed identity. In other panels, the dots are exaggerated, overtly suggesting to the viewer that the work is a print, shouting its identity loudly and proudly.

The plot thickens when we consider Rak's choice of colour palette. It is hard to avoid tuning in to it, and intentionally so. The lolly-bright turquoise, pink, blue, and yellow scream kitsch, rather than the sober tones that many associate with printmaking and its use throughout its storied past. In *Scratches #2 (2017-2019)*, a large-scale multi-panelled piece, Rak presents a veritable liquorice allsorts comprising dozens of smaller works in which a single painted solid floats atop a field of screen-printed scratches. Rak's use of seriality calls to mind the work of pop art giant Andy Warhol, whose repeated screen prints of ubiquitous and mundane imagery, from a dollar bill to a can of soup, performed a kind of reverse iconoclasm, elevating elements of the everyday and kitsch to high culture,

where Warhol felt they belonged. Rak's practice follows in these footsteps, pushing repetition to its limits and conjuring up a new type of 'authentic' value in printmaking from the scratches he has harvested from the periphery.

In the series *Pulling the Wool over your eyes*, images of foul bites have been repeated to the point where the marks obliterate each other, creating a void in the centre of each print. These works crackle with static electricity, the echoed markings causing the viewer's gaze to flit from edge to edge before being sucked into the middle. This dense layering is the confluence of accident and intent, and, like all of Rak's works in *Passed Failures*, serves as an allegory for the complex nature of performing one's identity and the difficulties that are inherent in navigating one's differences – in Rak's case, as an immigrant to Australia and as a member of the Jewish diaspora – in an attempt to 'pass'.

Layering the mechanical and the organic to an extreme degree, Rak intentionally confuses and confounds in order to cause viewers to confront their own preconceived notions of social hierarchies.

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