

Exhibition Guide

Franz Gertsch Woodcuts
Second Floor Galleries
29 March – 14 May 2006

Swiss artist Franz Gertsch, born in 1930, lives and works in the village of Rüscheegg, near Berne, Switzerland. He is known particularly for his photorealist painting (meaning that his paintings have the quality of a photographic image) and more recently, for his large-scale woodcut prints, made with similar meticulous attention to detail.

Gertsch's earlier interest in metropolitan life, focused on artists and other bohemian figures, gave way in the 1980s to a less spectacular concentration on the natural world and portraiture. Images of transvestites, prostitutes and pop stars, were followed by a subject matter more in tune with the rural circumstances in which Gertsch found himself. He became increasingly drawn to woodcut printing and this exhibition features nine works made during 1987–2002. Information about the artist's early work is available in the Visitor Resource Room on the Second Floor.

For Gertsch, the process of printmaking starts with photographs that he has taken which are projected onto the surface of the woodblock, fixed vertically to his studio wall. Working in an upright position, he sketches the image onto the wood, often turning the projector off so that he can work from memory. He then cuts out areas from the grain with a sharp tool. This process takes between three and six months to complete. The woodblock is taken to his print studio in Berne where a specialist printer inks the block, the gouged out sections remaining ink-free. The image is printed, usually in one colour, onto a huge piece of Japanese paper, hand-made from mulberry and linen fibre.

The portraits are images of young women, friends and acquaintances of the artist. Identified only by their first names – *Natascha IV*, (1987/88), *Dominique*, (1988), *Doris*, (1989) and *Silvia*, (2001/02) – they have a beauty reminiscent of early Renaissance paintings. They are extraordinary for their calm confidence, returning the gaze of the viewer, and the artist, directly, without guile or hesitation.

The woodcuts of the natural world – landscapes and details – are inspired by places very familiar to Gertsch, in and around his home. He encourages the viewer to look closely at that which might otherwise be ignored or marginalised, things that become remarkable through a process of looking that is not unlike meditation. *Pestwurz* (1993), featuring wild flowers from the artist's garden, is reminiscent of countless images of similar subject matter by Japanese and Chinese masters, with the same meditative quality. The images *Schwarzwasser I* (1990/91) and *Diptychon (Schwarzwasser)* (1995) depict rocks and water, two essential elements of the natural world, similarly carried out through thoughtful observation, the rippling fluid surfaces beautifully tracing the effects of wind and light.