

Emily Hunt

*Bad Ems*

The Commercial Gallery, Sydney

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exhibition text by Daniel Stacey

The genesis of this exhibition starts in India, where the artist Emily Hunt travelled and studied for several months in 2016 to learn the craft traditions of the region, and from a small collection of Renaissance engravings from the early period of European reproductive print making.

Traditions of reproductive printmaking are an important part of Emily Hunt's practice, from Flemish woodcuts to comics, and the series of silk monotypes exhibited here scales up this interest with an intense focus on micro-details.

India, in its rush to embrace a unique, anarchic capitalism, has largely forgotten about its miniature art. Ajay Sharma, a crotchety and demanding painter Hunt studied under in Jaipur, is one of the last masters. In his classes, Hunt was scolded for creativity and pulverized into an obedient and begrudging disciple, much like the gold and lapis lazuli that India painters grind to make their precious pigments. Mr Sharma's atelier is a forgotten place, swallowed in the chaos of Jaipur, a dusty jumble of slums and crumbling palaces. His workshop barely clings to the surface of modern India; it is in the process of becoming a sedimentary layer of art history. As a pedagogue, this has made him desperate and demanding. The fine details of his art, painted with a single squirrel's hair, contain the essence of life and death.

The silk for Hunt's monotypes was sourced at Mangaldas Market in Mumbai, an even more overwhelming place, and from street stalls in Jaipur. It remains unwashed, with its stains and defects. Bright silks are rare in Western settings, but India consumes vast quantities of them. Beggars and maids dress in elaborate silks on occasion. Women selling fans at Delhi street lights can, in the right season, be seen sporting raw silk saris, gold earrings and elaborate torcs studded with rough cut rubies and diamonds. For Hunt, who has always fixated on ornament and fashion, visiting India was a homecoming, but also an impersonal and overwhelming experience that prompted a focus on minutiae.

The details in these monotypes, while inspired by Indian experiences, are drawn from Renaissance engravings. One print in particular informs this exhibition, Giorgio Ghisi's enigmatic *The Allegory of Life*, which the artist was able to view in Melbourne's Baillieu Library collection. Ghisi's impossibly complex mélange of icons and monsters, a puzzle that has never been completely solved, is an intellectual riddle that would likely have challenged and charmed its patron, the Marchesa of Mantua. It bears a relationship to Virgil's Aeneid, but the immediacy of the image and the mysterious world it conjures up is enough satisfaction on its own. Likewise, the stories behind many Indian paintings are now lost. Howard Hodgkin, whose collection of Indian miniatures is outstanding, claimed to have deliberately avoided learning a thing about Indian iconography, so his instinct could grow attuned to authentic and original works as he sifted through thousands of pictures in old palace folios.

Reproductive printmaking has long been an effective medium to establish the potency of certain symbols and circulate prestige. Indian miniature painting, which is traditionally the product of ateliers rather than individual artists, is close to printmaking despite not using a printing press, and for centuries has churned out regularized copies of popular mythologies and court scenes.

Indian court artists were also exposed to European prints and religious paintings, and flourished this knowledge in peculiar ways. Jahangir (1569-1627), the fourth Mughal emperor of India, collected prints by European artists including Maerten van Heemskerck, Albrecht Dürer and Georg Pencz. Surviving paintings from Jahangir's court contain images of the god Neptune, Mary suckling Jesus, as well as Latin inscriptions.

Most famously, the enigmatic self-portrait of master miniaturist Farrukh Beg (c. 1545 – c. 1615) a loose copy of an image created by Marten de Vos (1532 - 1603), transfigures a melancholy European scene, in which an old man close to death watches a cat lap spilt milk, into something psychedelic, expansive and flushed with reincarnation.

Hunt's art practice is heavily influenced by architecture and interiors, and building together the skills and materials she collected over her journey across India, she retreated to Germany to the Schloss Balmoral castle, in Bad Ems, a geographic pun that encouraged her to closet her worst impulses.

The process of making a monotype is physical and unforgiving. A plastic substrate is inked, scraped, and then printed onto silk, which takes on the imprint of the printing table with its unevenness and remaining production traces. Each portrait was drawn from Ghisi's engravings, pulled from a pile of photocopies in the studio that the artist would glance at while scraping back the ink. With a monotype, unlike an edition process, there is only one chance to print.

These monotypes are also an act of proportion. The gesture is quick – an imprint, an impression – admitting an intense but short engagement with the totemic forces of Ghisi's reproductive art, which, like rich food or mannered speech, can be disgusting in large doses. These effervescence forms are also an antidote to the crass reproductions of decorative figurations that sell uninteresting objects and add heft to nasty ideologies. Hunt's monotypes reclaim the toil and burden of the copyist and craftsman, the decorator and the print maker, from the clutches of bad resorts. They re-establish a world that is more snobbish and unforgiving, where the totems mean what they say and access to them is forbidden to those who do not submit to the rules based order, to workplace etiquette, and the charms of silence.

Brooding before these banners [in a large pencil wall drawing of Schloss Balmoral in which Hunt currently resides is a collection of stoneware chairs glazed with Ebinger-Schnass glazes, the famous Bad Ems-ian ceramics company which, in its heyday, produced glazes for the Austrian artist, Friedensreich Hundertwasser (1928 – 2000)]. The chairs extend the luxurious and devoted ornamentation of engravings and miniatures into the world of touch, place and the home. These follies are fragile and impractical, combining the focus and dedication of the copyist with an awkward and improvised design. They are needy, failed objects, cul-de-sacs where the fruits of combined experience -- decorative scroll work, cross-hatching, and curlicues -- melt away into liminal sensations of pleasure, mystery and dread. They are the temptation as well as the putrefaction of a mental retreat into beauty. These chairs cannot be physically sat in, nor should the spirit try and replenish itself from resting on them, but there is a place for them somewhere and they could partly inhabit almost any home.

The exhibition space is an invented domestic space – playing with scale to demand squinting and rubbernecking. The monotypes are wrenched out from the fine details of puzzling and dizzying engravings. Intimate details have become impersonal, imposing. The chairs condense the grandeur of sprawling day beds and elaborate Pompeian armchairs into curios. Objects that are usually comfortable are now hard and dazzling.

The room unravels the intent of reproductive printmaking, which has traditionally taken frescos and architecture as its subject and transmitted their grandeur into foreign courts and workshops.

This space is a self-portrait. It hints at the slender possibilities for creative expression in a world of multi-layered facsimiles, where agency is under question and originality is a vanity, but where the sensation of renewal and revelation can still be teased out through instinct. Where the real thing can sit right before you.

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