

Manhattan to the bush — a search for inspiration

Ironbark and ghost gums are driving printmaker Kim Westcott's creativity, writes **Louise Bellamy**.

Ten years ago leading Australian printmaker Kim Westcott was living in Manhattan. Now she lives and works in the bush near Wangaratta in a corrugated iron shed meant for hay, not art.

The outdoor shower is surrounded by a clutter of ironbark branches. The toilet is outside too — whatever bush you choose. Westcott and her husband, painter Robert Hirschmann, bought the land in the Warby Ranges three years ago, starting off in swags, then a tent and finally the prefabricated shed, modified to create studio space.

With their first baby due in November, they're building a house, but it's the landscape that matters most when it comes to making pictures.

Westcott, 36, points to a luminous ghost gum. "Isn't it

magnificent? This is it, this is everything that my work is about now."

Her latest solo show comprises 26 prints based on observations of the land, its space, light, shade, shadows and, of course, the trees, which she renders in figurative and abstract forms. The images are the product of 15 years using dry point, the technique of scratching or scoring marks into the surface of copper plate. They portray intimate twigs and bushes, but they also echo elements of her previous work, which was dominated by complex horizontal lines and dots. The lines, she says, symbolise "the land meeting the sea", while the dots are "the heartbeat, the organic rhythm from one point to another".

Using instruments such as diamond or tungsten-tipped

is going to look." And the formula worked.

Very early works were completely abstract black-and-white grids, but soon some started to tenuously mimic the visual representation of a musical score.

In 1989, Westcott joined the Australian Print Workshop as the assistant to director Neil Leveson, whose vision was to give prints artistic credibility in a climate that rated them on a par with postcards. Here, for three years, she worked full-time as a master printmaker with prominent Australian artists such as William Robinson, Tim Maguire and Dale Hickey, pursuing her own work after hours.

"I sacrificed everything for printmaking, at huge emotional and personal cost. I'd work all day in the workshop, grab a couple of hours' sleep and then start on my own work."

"I never had the time to buy clothes or go to restaurants. I worked like a dog. But printmaking is a spiritual thing

needles, steel-pointed tools with sharp edges, and electric die-grinders, angle-grinders and drills, Westcott creates ridges to which she later applies ink, which holds in the scored lines and shapes.

Westcott sometimes works on the copper plates in the studio shed on a large desk. She also works outside on a table protected by shade cloth which hangs between an orchid house and a shipping container she uses to store her materials.

Since moving to the bush, with electricity only just connected, she has had to crank up a generator to use her tools and travel to her West Brunswick studio to print the plates.

Westcott admits the process has been "hellish" and that she could not have contemplated working like this until now.

In her Melbourne studio the copper plate is heated and a technique of inking and wiping begins, resulting in a surface that holds the image. The copper plate is then placed on the

for me, something I couldn't let go of."

At 24, after Leveson's death, she was invited to be master printer at the prestigious Garner Tullis Workshop, New York City, where she worked with artists at the forefront of contemporary American abstraction.

In 1994, Tullis was quoted as saying of Westcott: "I think that next to Jan Senbergs and a couple of people, she's 'it' in Australia. It's too bad they don't realise it, but we realise it here."

Australia soon got the message. Returning after a year in the US, she held a benchmark show featuring her horizontal line and dot format at Tolarno Galleries in May 1994. Two works were singled out by *The Age's* visual arts critic, Christopher Heathcote, as "among the best prints made in this country over the past decade".

Then she moved to Sorrento to live alone with the aim of letting the environment be the sole influence of her work. She



Kim Westcott.

PICTURE: CATHRYN TREMAIN

etching press and paper applied on top. Under immense pressure the paper is pressed and moulded onto the plate and the image created on paper.

Westcott's works are more figurative now; in fact, she says, they are the "complete opposite" of her early work, which was influenced by the Russian Suprematists,

started working with beeswax, which she would paint onto a canvas already treated with iridescent pigment. Using a heat gun to heat the wax, she would print the images from the copper plate directly onto the canvas to create a more textured, sculptural surface.

Now the Warby Ranges are Westcott's influence. When the house is finished, her printing press will be moved to the studio and a cabin, already built on the lake, will provide accommodation for visiting artists.

Westcott's mornings start with a long walk, then drawings or photographs of what she has seen. The afternoons are when she'll start "harassing" the copper plates.

"My priority is making the image. I walk through the bush and want to be lost. I get lost in it, come back another time and see something else."

Kim Westcott's *Dividing Range* is at Australian Art Resources, Southbank, until July 30.



A Westcott print titled *Hume 1*.

particularly Kasimir Malevich, who obsessively explored form — the square, rectangle and triangle — to stir emotion.

Westcott originally chose the horizontal line and the dot as her means of expression. She once said: "I'm going to limit myself, use the elements, the dot and line, to step into the dance and see how that rhythm