



'Glossolalia', 2009, inkjet print, 68 x 100 cm

## Profiles in Print – OLGA SANKEY

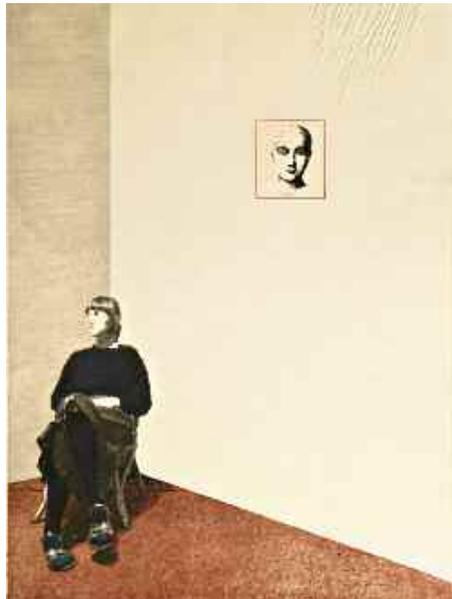
In her printmaking techniques, Olga Sankey embraces intaglio methods as well as photopolymer plates, digital inkjets and sandblasted perspex as strategies for expressing her imagery. Text by Professor Sasha Grishin.



'Irreversible', 1980, lithograph, 29.5 x 42.5 cm

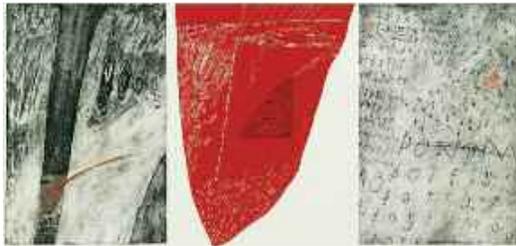
**O**LGA Sankey is an artist who belongs to an artistic dynasty. Her father, Vojtěch Marek (1919-1999), was a prominent ecclesiastic sculptor and graphic artist who gained a reputation as one of the artists who came closest to capturing the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and the new Roman Catholic revival in art. Her uncle, Dušan Marek (1926-1993), was a painter and filmmaker and was one of the major Surrealist artists in Australia. The Marek brothers were born in Bitouchov, a small village in Northern Bohemia in Czechoslovakia, and later studied in Prague where they embraced surrealism, before fleeing the country and the Soviet occupation in 1948 and emigrating to

'Lost Thought', 1980, lithograph/screenprint/embossing, 46 x 34 cm

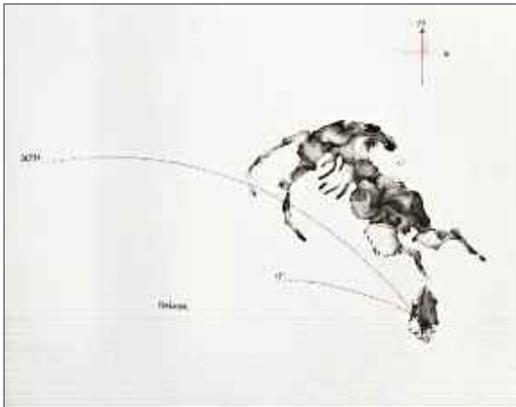




'Pursuit', 1988, lithograph/etching, 37 x 60 cm



'Irregular Verbs #1', 1996, etching, 29.5 x 63 cm



'Horse Latitudes', 1981, lithograph/embossing, 24 x 32 cm



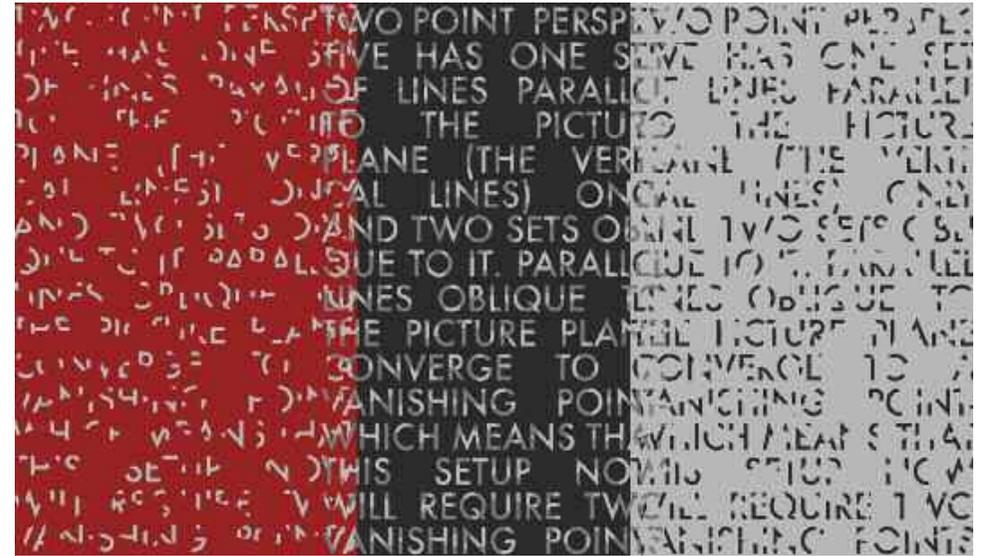
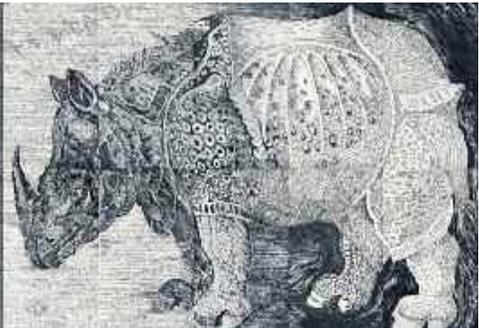
'TENET', 1999, etching/etched metal plates, 130 x 380 cm



'Results of Action #1', 1993, relief etching, 63 x 44 cm

Australia. Their other brother, Eugene (born 1924), joined them later in Australia.' Olga Sankey's mother, Vera née Podperova (born 1926), was a city girl from Prague, a ballet dancer, student and translator, who married Voitre Marek in 1949 in Adelaide, where the following year their daughter Olga was born.

Unlike children of other artistic dynasties, such as the Boyds or the Lindsays, Olga Sankey did not consciously set out to emulate in her art her family's artistic heritage, although arguably it has played an unconscious yet significant role. She describes her father as 'an eccentric and extremely religious, who actually converted to Roman Catholicism in the late 1940s' and from the early 1960s through to 1972, when he suffered badly in an automobile accident, made a successful career out of providing religious art to the newly built or newly reorientated Catholic churches throughout Australia'.<sup>3</sup> Her childhood was dominated by prayers and worship with the daily saying of the rosary and attendance at Mass. At the age of five, Olga and her younger brother Ivan (born 1953) lived with their parents for three years



'He said/she said', 2004, inkjet print, 80 x 144 cm

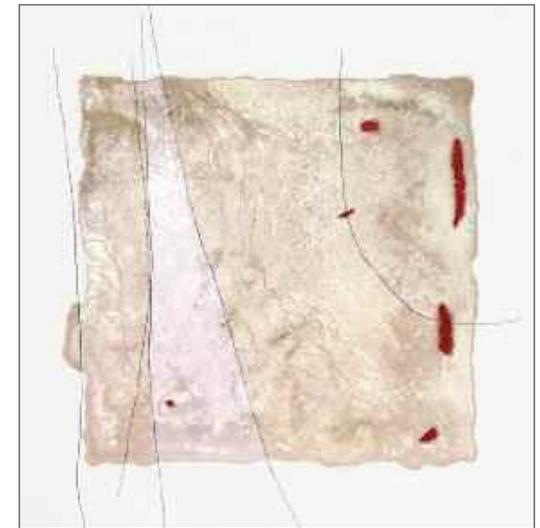
in fairly remote locations on Kangaroo Island, where their father worked as a lighthouse keeper. Later she went to the local catholic schools, where academically she came top of the class, but still struggled as a migrant child from an economically underprivileged background, to fit in with the rest of her peers. In retrospect, when speaking about her upbringing, she wrote: 'I recited prayers in Latin – mysterious incantations in Czech – equally mysterious, since the language bore little resemblance to the domestic, "pass the butter" version we spoke at home, and English either frighteningly graphic – "Blood of my saviour, bathe me in thy tide", or peppered with what at the time were incomprehensible words and phrases such as "hallowed" and "trespasses" and "perpetual succour"'. But whatever the language, the power of prayer was absolute.'<sup>4</sup> Today she describes herself as an atheist.

Although art was a strong part of the home experience, with Olga frequently assisting her father with his commissions and there were regular visits to exhibitions and film festivals, she did not want to become an artist. On leaving school she attended the University of Adelaide, where her studies focused on English and music. Subsequently she travelled abroad to Europe. On her return from Europe in 1973 she moved in with her future husband, an American student Tom Sankey, into Dušan Marek's house in the Adelaide Hills (when Dušan and his wife left to live in Tasmania), and became apprenticed to a commercial graphic designer. The following year was spent working as a graphic designer and in 1975 Olga and Tom left for the United States.

The American experience was not particularly rewarding, living and working in rural Wyoming, and Olga Sankey, now married to Tom, returned to Adelaide the following year and in 1977 commenced her studies at the South Australian School of Art. About a decade earlier she had gained some experience in printmaking at a summer school and now was convinced that this was the artistic path that she wished to follow. The head of printmaking at the art school, Franz Kempf, she found as 'fantastic, a fabulous eye and an inspirational teacher ... there was a creative energy coming from the student cohort, that

included Bernhard Sachs, and printmaking was the thing to do at the time with the big lithographic stones and large screens'<sup>5</sup>. Many of Sankey's early prints are self-referential, slightly melancholic and with a subdued and somewhat European sensibility. Her frame of reference frequently draws on literature, particularly William Blake and Ted Hughes.

'All of my work has always been very heavily influenced by literature, the word is always in the titles and the titles drive the images. This is one thing that I love about printmaking, you read the title on the print as you look at the image. The image text/relationship is there straight away.'<sup>6</sup>



'Perfect Flaw', 1982, lithograph/embossing, 44 x 38 cm



'Dapple #2', 2003, inkjet print, 24 x 88 cm

In art school Sankey developed an early love for stone lithography, which preoccupied her printmaking through to the early 1990s. In *Lost thought* (1980), there is a certain literalness in the imagery with a photograph of the artist rendered through a silkscreen combined with lithography and some embossing employed to accentuate the surface texture. Tightly structured, even a little claustrophobic, the figure appears as awkward and trapped within the space, alienated and contained. The colours and the compositional structure evoke a contemplative, somewhat enigmatic mood with a touch of spiritual introspection. The four years which she spent in art school in Adelaide, subsequent studies in Bologna and Urbino and graduate studies again in Adelaide, were accompanied by intensive reading, with favourite authors including Ted Hughes, Henry James, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus and Naguib Mahfouz and his Cairo trilogy. When looking at Sankey's art of the 1980s and such lithographs as *Irreversible* (1980), *Horse Latitudes* (1981), *Perfect flaw* (1982) and *Pursuit*



'Prayer for an Inland Sea', 2007, inkjet print, 79.5 x 95 cm



'Neverendingstory' (detail), 2004, relief etching, 75 x 700 cm

(1988), there is an unpretentious beauty in the work and a layering of narratives. While to some extent the lithographs are diaristic and commenting on loneliness and introspection, emotion is externalised – it's neither cathartic nor confessional – but controlled and distilled. The note of darkness that prevails throughout her work may relate to the artist's Bohemian gothic and surrealist heritage, but it is kept firmly under check and is never given free rein. While it may be Romantic art, but it remains an art of containment.

After a year of teaching at Newcastle in 1988-89, fortuitously Franz Kempf retired from the South Australian School of Art and in 1989 Sankey successfully applied for a job in printmaking in the institution in which she herself has been trained. Sankey has been teaching there ever since. In her prints of the 1990s there is a growing interest in structural linguistics and the whole idea of the gap which lay between the signifier and the signified and the arbitrariness of the link between the word and the meaning attributed to it and the slippage that could occur between these. Sankey was particularly struck by Aboriginal breastplates – the brass crescent-shaped "badges of distinction", introduced by Governor Lachlan Macquarie to reward so-called tribal leaders – and their inaccessible meaning to the Aborigines who wore them on their chests. Breastplate-inspired shapes occur in a number of her prints, including *Results of Action #1* (1993) and *Irregular verbs #1* (1996). In Sankey's thinking the meaning of images could be informed through secondary texts, such as in Dürer's amazing woodcut of the rhinoceros, which he made in 1515 based on a sketch and a description of an animal found in Lisbon. In fact Dürer's print had a fairly limited fidelity to reality, but became one of the most widely known images of a rhinoceros for several centuries. Sankey called her monumental print based on Dürer's rhinoceros *TENET* (1999), with the connotations of a tenet held as an article of faith, regard-



'Doubletake #5' (diptych), 2006, inkjet print/sandblasted glass, 25 x 100 cm

less of its accuracy. She shows the animal against a sea of text, which remains largely inaccessible to the viewer. She notes: 'The relationship between the printed image and text is something that continues to interest me. The printed word helps to shape our vision of reality in a two-fold manner. In some of my prints, the text is legible and the meaning specific, while in others calligraphic marks suggest the presence of text as a structural and visual element within the work.'

In her printmaking techniques, Sankey has increasingly embraced intaglio methods as well as photopolymer plates, digital inkjets and sandblasted perspex as strategies that help her to separate levels of meaning and also to suggest that meaning is rarely totally fixed or locked into a specific and universally infallible interpretation. Within a broader philosophical perspective she was challenging the existence of absolute truths, whether in language, religion or morality and was suggesting that all codes are to some extent subjective and relative.

Many of Sankey's more recent prints, including *Dapple* (2003), *He said/she said* (2004) and *Glossolalia* (2009), all digital inkjet prints, are conceptually quite complex, while at the same time possessing a lucid clarity. One could argue that her father's death in 1999, also marked a certain watershed in her development as an artist as she increasingly started to question her own categorical rejection of her religious heritage – 'You can't deny your roots', she observed later.<sup>8</sup> The beauty of the word, the majesty of the theatrical and liturgical act and the sense of visual parable, where text remains endlessly ambiguous with meaning, in a deconstructionist sense, never fully fixed, all of these became the key aspects of her art. Sankey noted recently, 'It is only after 2000 that I had a clearer image of what I was doing; before that I was only making images. I realised that everything was a construct and we needed a tolerance in how we approach things and the authority of language – religion, ideology and morality are relative, very relative.'

#### Prof. Sasha Grishin, AM, FAHA

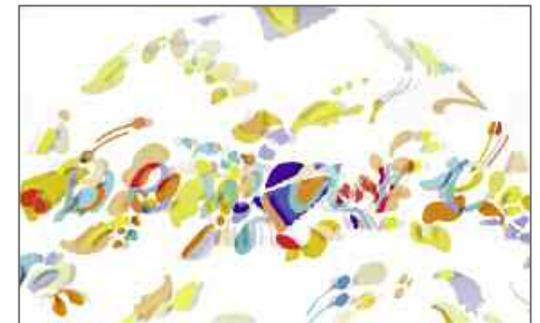
The Sir William Dobell Professor of Art History,  
Australian National University

#### NOTES

1. See *Stephen Mould*, The birth of love: Artist brothers Dušan and Vojtěch Marek in Czechoslovakia and post-war Australia, *Adelaide, Moon Arrow Press, 2008*
2. Their parents were not religious and brought up their three sons without strong religious convictions and Vojtěch Marek converted to Roman Catholicism before leaving Czechoslovakia.
3. *Olga Sankey*, taped interview with the author, *Adelaide, 29 iv 2009*.
4. *Olga Sankey*, artist's statement in Sunday best, catalogue, *Nexus Gallery, 2001, p.13*
5. *Olga Sankey*, taped interview with the author, *Adelaide, 30 iv 2009*.
6. *Olga Sankey*, taped interview with the author, *Adelaide, 30 iv 2009*.
7. *Olga Sankey*, letter to the author, *30 July 2000*
8. *Olga Sankey*, taped interview with the author, *Adelaide, 29 iv 2009*.
9. *Olga Sankey*, taped interview with the author, *Adelaide, 30 iv 2009*.



'Channel', 1990, lithograph, 56 x 76 cm



'Xanadu', 2006, inkjet print (2 layers), 69.5 x 121.5 cm



'Forked Tongue' (diptych), 2007, inkjet print/sandblasted perspex, 104 x 154 cm