

Franz Gertsch ranks as one of those artists who have not only explored new stylistic paths but also widened the technical horizons of their craft and art. This is true of Gertsch's large acrylic paintings of the 1970s, his tempera works of the past decades and in particular, of his woodcuts. The extent to which Gertsch has pioneered new territory with his woodcuts is amply documented and honoured in literary sources. Yet the colossal effort and work invested in the technical mastery of the monumental wood engraving should not mislead us into deeming this artistry as an end in itself. The technical intelligence of Gertsch's graphic works culminates in original creative masterpieces. Committing photographic images to wood plates to create engravings goes far beyond merely reproducing photographic images. As in the paintings, photography is revealed as no more than pale matrix, whose treasures are yet to be unlocked, to assume a creative form and unfold their full potential.

In 1986 Franz Gertsch temporarily switches his focus from painting to woodcuts. The first motifs are monumental portraits of young women. The various prints are all in different colours and thus assume the character of individual sheets. The models are no longer extravagantly exotic as in the paintings of the past (*"Irene"*, *"Patti Smith"*), but fleeting chance acquaintances from Gertsch's immediate rural neighbourhood and sphere. It seems as if Gertsch, having long devoted himself to artificial contrived worlds and life forms, turns in the mid 1980s to focus his art on naturalness and the quest for freedom and spontaneity. In this spirit, (from 1988) landscapes from his close environs (*"Rüschegg"*, *"Schwarzwasser"*) soon join his palette of motifs, finishing with plant studies and a monumental nude (*"Maria"*, 2001).

Franz Gertsch has always rejected art that recognises no limits, rules or constraints. He confronts the bold gestures and revolts of the 1960s with self-assurance, creating disciplined painting that moves within the creative parameters of the selected technique, patiently feeling his way, trying out and optimising the possibilities. The tension between artistic creation, inspired within the specific bounds of the selected medium, deriving and developing its spirit of freedom from these very constraints, is what lends Franz Gertsch's work its greatness. And so it is with his woodcuts. The optochemically photographed image is projected, pixel by pixel, to take on a new physical form. The shifting modulations, nuanced shades of the series of individual prints, evoke a beauty and discreet visual richness that surpasses the realms of the possible and imaginable.