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Lucinda Tanner, *Mandorla Study VII*, 2019,
woodcut, 76 x 56 cm, unique state.

Seeking Kaleidusa

*The imagery and description of Carl Spitteler's epic poem Olympischer Frühling (Olympian Spring) inspired **Lucinda Tanner's** recent body of woodcut prints.*

One hundred years ago, the Swiss poet Carl Spitteler (1845-1924) was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. I had never heard of Spitteler until the buzz of activity surrounding the jubilee year of his prize-win brought him to my attention. Learning he was born in Liestal, a neighbouring town to where I live in north-west Switzerland, further raised my interest.

Through my printmaking, I have explored ideas of cultural heritage. For a time I was concerned with honouring objects of tangible cultural heritage by translating them into print. My inquiry then led to the intangible aspects of heritage. In 2017-18 I produced a series

of prints inspired by the iconic landscape paintings of Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918). Hodler was a peer of Spitteler and painted a portrait of him in 1915 dedicating it as a gift to Spitteler on his seventieth birthday. This link between the painter and the poet, combined with the jubilee year and the local connection of Spitteler's birthplace signalled to me that responding to the words of Spitteler was my next assignment.

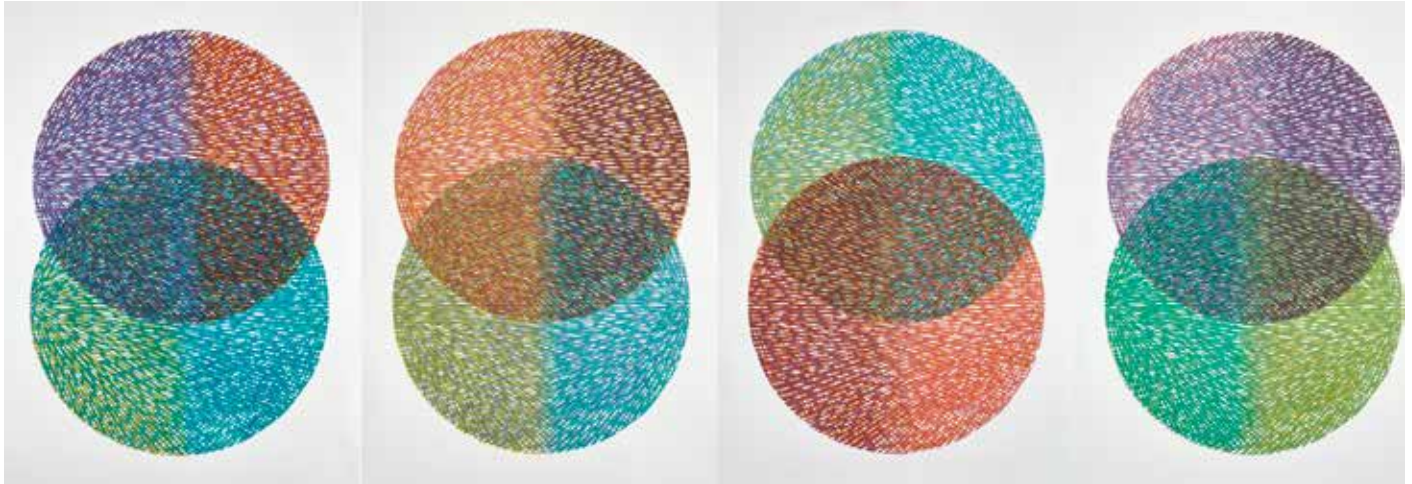
Between 1900 and 1905 Spitteler wrote his masterpiece, the highly imaginative and romantic epic *Olympischer Frühling* (*Olympian Spring*). Published in five volumes, the picturesque narrative tells how the Olympian dynasty of gods

emerged from the underworld to wander freely throughout the world. However it is not in ancient Greece that the activity takes place. With much description and invention, Spitteler transports the mythology into a fantasy world inspired by the lakes and mountains of central Switzerland.

It was chiefly for this poem that he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. On account of that, it was the piece I chose to work with. However, how does one respond to a poetic epic of 20,000 lines? My scope was conveniently narrowed when looking for English translations of Spitteler's work. My research revealed that an English translation of selected

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Lucinda Tanner, *Über Berg und Tal Afternoon; Evening, Dusk*, 2019, woodcut, each 112 x 76 cm, unique states.





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Lucinda Tanner, *Where the Magic Happens III, IV, V & VI*, 2019, woodcut, each 76 x 56 cm, unique states.

poems had been published in 1928.¹ The book proved at first elusive but eventually, funnily enough, I was able to buy it from an Australian antique book dealer. The book included two extracts from *Olympischer Frühling*. It was the episode *Hylas and Kaleidusa über Berg und Tal* (*Hylas and Kaleidusa over Hill and Vale*) from one of the cantos of Book III that fired my imagination.

Hylas und Kaleidusa über Berg und Tal tells the story of lovers Hylas (brother of Hermes) and Kaleidusa (a wood-nymph). Enchanted with each other they spend their days wandering Earth's hills and valleys from dawn to moonrise, delighting in all around them. On one such day, Kaleidusa learns from the tree of fate that Hylas will one day abandon her. She is distraught about this future betrayal and wishes to die. As a wood-nymph, however, she is immortal so cannot die but can only be transformed into forms such as morning scents or dews. All night she agonises on what best to become so that Hylas is reminded of her every day. It is Pan who will execute the transformation and in the morning she asks him to

change her into a beautiful ray of light to forever captivate Hylas

*To some bright ray that comes from everywhere
And seems to Hylas as myself, and so
Will make his yearning and his love grow.*

It was this, the sparkling rays of Kaleidusa shining over the land as Hylas seeks her endlessly over hill and vale, that I wanted to portray in my woodcuts.

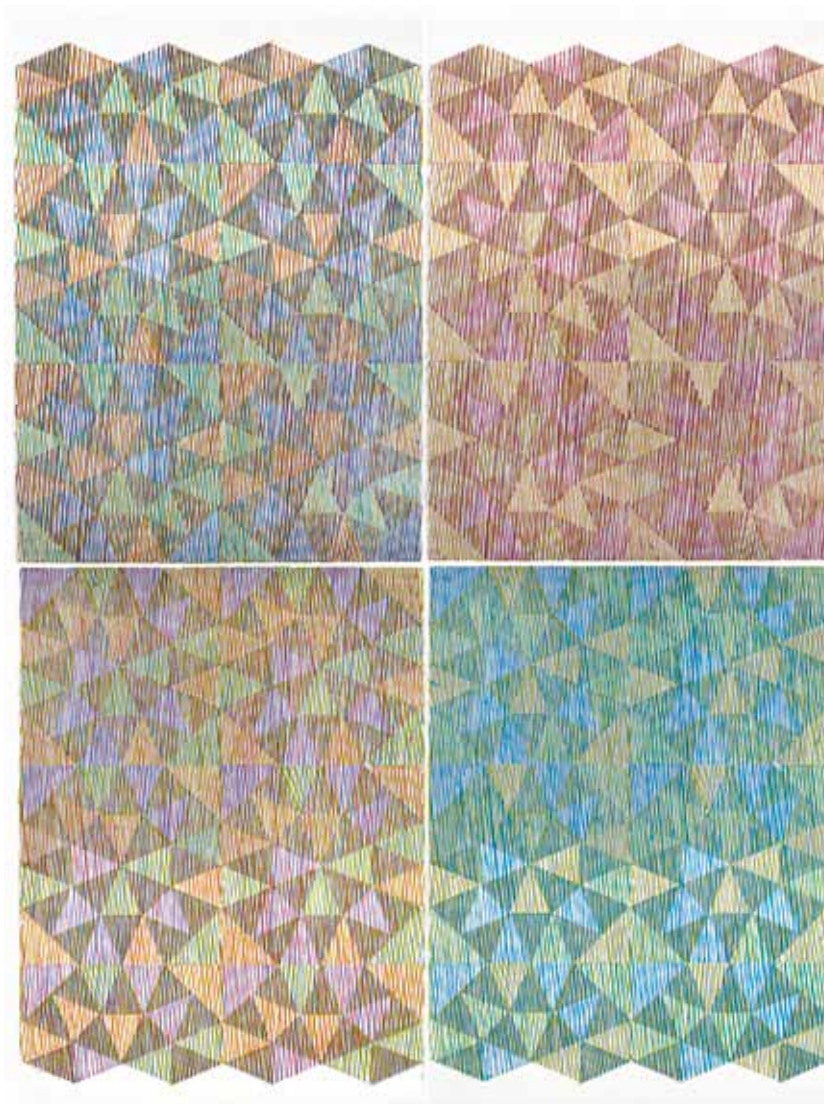
*'Look up!' And lo! in one heart-warming ray
He knows his Kaleidusa—and away
With longing arms he rushes...
Hapless wight!
Never shall Hylas touch the radiant sprite;
Though oft he thinks to grasp her, she
will still
Elude him. Running swift o'er vale and hill.*

Earlier in the episode, when Hylas is heading home to Olympus after passing a happy day with Kaleidusa, he is challenged by some envious hedge-nymphs. They taunt him about his attachment to Kaleidusa and suggest that

he could take his pick from any number of more fair nymphs. Hylas explains his infatuation by describing how he is delighted by the colourful, sparkling light that shines out from the bead that Kaleidusa wears on her little toe.

*I'd better speak my mind.
On Kaleidusa's toe—the little one—
She wears a bead, and this will catch the sun;
And when it does, the path seems all ablaze
With colours which to my enchanted gaze
Are lovelier far than sunlight. I should grieve
To part with hues like those, you may believe.*

The expression 'the landscape was a kaleidoscope of changing colours' comes to mind and one wonders was there a link between the wood-nymph and the optical instrument whose titles share the same compound *Kal-eido*. Invented in 1816, kaleidoscopes became popular during Spitteler's lifetime. Mesmerised by the ever-changing patterns of beautiful colours and shifting images, did Spitteler



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Lucinda Tanner, *Now Evening Says to Afternoon 'My Turn' II*, 2019, woodcut, 152 x 112 cm (four panels of 76 x 56 cm), unique state.

find his inspiration while peering through the eyepiece of a kaleidoscope?

For certain, the idea of the kaleidoscope informed the direction of my response to the poem. When looking through a kaleidoscope, objects are seen in an endless variety of symmetrical patterns due to repeated reflection. For the works *Kaleidusa* and *Now Evening Says to Afternoon 'My Turn'* I sought out a geometrical pattern to suggest fragmented light sparkling over the landscape. By designing this pattern in repeat, I could print components of a larger composition, indicating the landscape unfolding onwards for eternity. *Kaleidusa* is comprised of eight repeating panels of varying colourways, while *Now Evening Says to Afternoon 'My Turn'* is made up of four. This tiling appealed to me as a way of validating the multiples of printmaking.

Of these two works, *Kaleidusa* was printed first. Three layers of densely crosshatched lines interact to reveal the colourful pattern. The crosshatching gives an energy to the colours and an appearance of movement that resonates

with vitality and radiancy. I then re-worked the plates and added an extra one to create *Now Evening Says to Afternoon 'My Turn'*. By removing each second line, I opened up the crosshatching into a broader 'weave'. This resulted in a shimmering, ethereal effect that hints at the ephemeral moments of the day.

As Spitteler describes Hylas and *Kaleidusa's* movement over hill and vale, much attention is given to the play of light over the landscape and the succession of changing hues during the phases of the day. Pre-dawn grey gives way to the fiery red rays of first light; the blue of day is cloaked by evening's purple. This language inspired the use of colours in my prints.

*Now evening says to afternoon: 'My turn!'
So saying, spreads her pair of dusky wings
And broad on sunlit banks their shadow
flings;
Lets fall her purple cloak, whence
darkness creeps,
Lured from the shimmering borders where
it sleeps.*

*'At last across the sky swept morning's blue
And lit sad earth with many a laughing hue'*

Bold and adventurous experimentation with colour was a key component of this body of work, as both a challenge to myself to expand my utilisation of colour and to meet conceptual objectives. It was an in-depth study of colour. Every tiny variation in hue and saturation had an impact on the multiple colour interactions. I worked in a fairly liberated and spontaneous way in making colour selections in order to push myself from falling back to 'safe', tried-and-true schemes. Along with the many gratifying surprises that came out of working so freely with colour, there was also the flipside of unpredictable outcomes: not every combination was successful.

My woodcuts are executed using the European method of applying oil-based inks to the plates by roller. However, in these prints it was the characteristics of Mokuhanaga—translucency and the layering of colours—that I called upon to achieve the vibrancy I desired.



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Lucinda Tanner *Kaleidusa I - VIII*, 2019,
woodcut, 224 x 152 cm (comprised of
eight panels), unique state.

The *Mandorla Studies* and *Where the Happens* were forerunners to the other larger works. I used them to develop this colour language and to test the effects of the crosshatched lines. I experimented with different types of lines: fine, regular lines for the *Mandorla Studies* and a freer spray of marks for *Where the Magic Happens*. Only a single plate, repositioned and printed a total of four times, was used to create the image. In these two prints the symbolic form of the mandorla has been used to represent healing and wholeness. The zone where the circles overlap is where the four layers meet to create colour magic.

With *Über Berg und Tal* I employed a pattern of layered diamonds to capture that magic and express the glimmer and gleam of light playing over the landscape. Three plates interact to form the Argyle pattern, which has been set into a

framework of an arch. The arch conveys the physical landscape referred to in the title of the verse, it's form portraying both *Berg* (hill) and *Tal* (valley) depending on orientation. The symbolism of the arch—of moving into a new phase of life, of transition and change—also spoke to me.

I created these works in my studio and in the print atelier Druckwerk in Basel. I prepared my artwork and cut my woodblocks in my studio, then transported the materials to Druckwerk to print, making use of the large-format press located there. I used poplar plywood for the printing plates and cut all of them by hand. The earlier *Mandorla Studies* are printed on BFK Rives 250gsm and the other works are printed on St Cuthbert's Somerset 300gsm. For this project I decided on using the standard sheet sizes of 76 x 56 cm and 112 x 76 cm rather than taking paper from the roll.

Letting my imagination roam free in the mystical and fantastical landscape of Spitteler's invention was a richly rewarding journey. This immersion was a fitting tribute to the poet in this year marking the centenary of him being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

A selection of these prints can be viewed at Queenscliff Gallery and Workshop as part of the summer exhibition: 28 November 2019 until 23 February 2020 (open daily except main holidays).

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Note

1. Spitteler, Carl. *Selected Poems of Carl Spitteler*, translated by Ethel Colburn Mayne and James F. Muirhead (London & New York: Putnam, 1928).