

Questioning assumptions of institutionalised art

By SASHA GRISHIN

The River Styx, National Library of Australia, ending April 11.

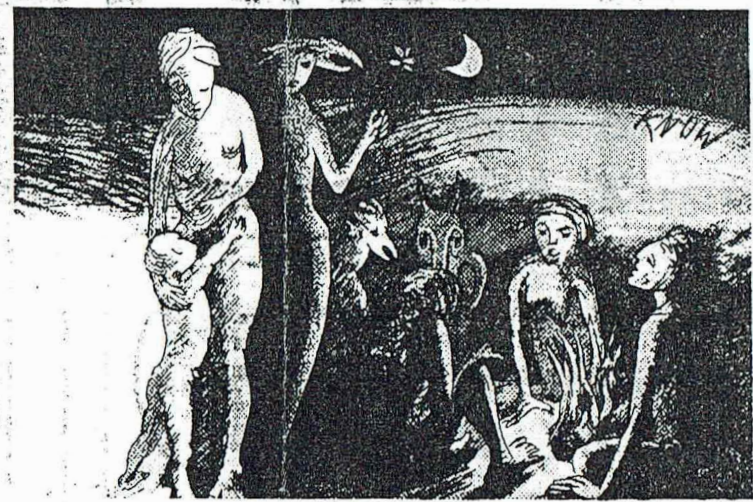
THE CONCEPT of the artist's book over the past couple of decades has conditioned us not to expect a series of illustrations between two covers, but to anticipate the widest possible range of materials in virtually any imaginable format.

This exhibition is organised by Les Petersen, the director of Raft Press, who takes the concept of the artist's book to mean anything which communicates meaning, sensibilities or experience. A very broad concept indeed, so that the title of the exhibition, *The River Styx*, (referring to the river which in mythology encompasses Hades), suggests a crossing, something which communicates from one place to another. Semantics and "arts-speak" aside, it is a fascinating, challenging and thought-pro-

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voking exhibition where about 40 Australian and New Zealand artists have been brought together. While there may be little stylistic, conceptual or formal unity to the show, there is an overall prevailing mood of questioning many of the assumptions in institutionalised art.

Most of the objects are on an intimate scale and make demands on the viewer to examine them and decipher their levels of meaning. Tim Rowston, for example, carves his book out of grey slate creating an enigmatic script. William Cumming, a New Zealand artist, in his *Soliloquy of a boulder*, constructs his boulder out of cast paper. Giovanna Ianniello, a Canberra artist in her *Mapping a landscape*, presents a combination of a metal-welded



A paper etching by Patricia Wilson titled *In Order to Arrive*.

frame and found objects making a sort of cover for a landscape.

In its sensitive handling of materials, Martin Hodge's book fence is

outstanding, where objects resembling decapitated heads appear suspended on a flimsy fence constructed of grass and twigs. It is like a

number of objects at the exhibition, which have a strength and power which is difficult to communicate in words. There is a beautiful, quiet and effective *Journal* by Margaret West and an absolutely brilliant *Dead Language* tin plate book by Olga Sankey, where the images are separated by layers of perspex.

Jonathan Nix and Les Petersen have jointly made a superb visual-sound box installation which they have titled *The Driftwood Tree*. In the more traditional book format there are strong provocative prints by Dianne Longley and by Patricia Wilson. The list of other highlights must include the work by Sandra Appleby, John Barnett, Sebastian di Mauro, Stephen Duke, Elizabeth Serjeant, Catrina Vignando and Penny Carey-Wells.

The River Styx is a significant exhibition which brings credit to the National Library for offering it a venue.