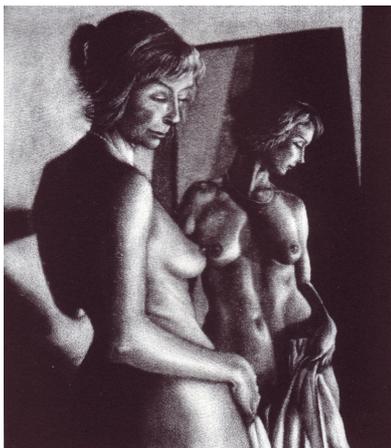


Ambrose Gibson visited Martin Mitchell in his Norwich Studio to discuss his work and influences.

Martin Mitchell moved to Norwich in 1989 and quickly established himself as one of the leading artist printmakers in the region. In 1995 Mitchell set up the Norwich Print Fair (www.norwichprintfair.co.uk) with the aim of supporting and developing the work of fellow printmakers at the same time promoting understanding and appreciation of fine art printmaking. The annual Norwich Print Fair, now ably organised by Louise Elvin, H.J. Jackson and Gary Martin, is now well established as part of the cultural calendar of Norfolk.



Mitchell's own work is firmly rooted in the traditional process of intaglio and relief printmaking. His well known etchings of representational landscape have led, in the last two years; to the more demanding engraved process of Mezzotint producing acclaimed atmospheric tonal landscapes of Norfolk and Suffolk. "I have never really considered my landscape work in a strictly topographical sense, although I can point out the scene on a map. The final image is removed through several stages, by of the processes of etching from the real view, also my method of collecting source material. I would walk and cycle all over Norfolk and Suffolk producing rapid spontaneous sketches. With the long bike rides, unlike a car journey, you can feel the day, expense its moods, hot or cold, windy or still, silence and bird song you are all ready preparing to work before you arrive. I would return to the same scene over a period of several weeks if not months



until I had five or six plus sketches and drawings done at different times of day, weather conditions even seasons. Then in the studio working collectively from them all, often using soft grounds, spit bites and sugar lifts. Trying to express the essence of place. Of course now that I can't go for walks, unless a friend with a car can take me to a place with wheel chair access. Now my landscape work is as much about the memory of place. I will often spend an hour or two with an old O,S Map following favourite routes and walks. My memory of course of place is there but it's as much the sense of time and place, of man in the environment. So there is an inevitable undertone of melancholy running through my recent work. but I still miss my walks.

When I asked Martin what it was that first attracted him to printmaking and particularity etching. He smiles at the memory and says. "I got lost in the British Museum. I was only 18 or 19 at the time and had gone principally to look at Greek and Assyrian sculptures but having got myself lost I was quite happy to amble at will and ended up in the Print Rooms looking at Rembrandt's the "three crosses". There were five different states, one printed on vellum in which, over the centuries; the ink had bled, staining the parchment with magentas and warm sepias. Standing there was the moment that I knew I would be an artist and had to learn about etching and printmaking."



"So what was it that made you turn to Mezzotints." I had for several years admired Mezzotints; bought several that still hang on my wall, but never thought I would have the skill or patience to work in such a demanding medium. However due too disability I am unable to stand for very long periods, or short ones for that matter. As you will appreciate wobbly legs and trays of acid are not a great combination. So borrowing a 30-gauge rocker I played around for a couple of days and was delighted by the results. Here was a wonderful way to work, sitting at a bench, working quietly and methodically away. I was well and truly converted."

Mezzotint and the Art of Darkness

A curved serrated tool, called a rocker, is used to engrave a ground in to a copper plate. A fine line of dots is engraved in too the plate, as well as a bur of copper is throne up proud of the plate. The whole plate is covered, so a even, uniform texture is created, its the depth of the dots and the height of the burs, that will hold ink Producing a beautiful deep velvet dark tone. A 30x40cm plate will take up too 12 hours. Using a variety of sharp blades scrapers & burnishers. The image is selectively scraped and burnished back working from dark to light a tonal design is produced the deeper the indented areas remain, the darker it will print. Where the plate is polished smooth, no ink will adhere and so will appear as high lights. This is Months not weeks of fine work. because of the fragility of the fine copper burs very few prints can be produced an edition of 20 is doing well.

Mitchell has an almost evangelical enthusiasm of promoting original printmaking, I become so frustrated when I hear the words "Its only a print!" and then see Reproductions masquerading as original. How can a print, by its nature a multiple, be an original? First, the work must be conceived as a print, using any one or combinations of the many print mediums, using the inherent character of the medium. Secondly the artist should work the block, plate, stone, screen etc, from which the print is taken. Third the final print (which is the artwork that ends up hanging on the wall) is taken from the said block, plate, stone, screen, etc. Each print taken individually by hand. Although every effort is use to make every print in the edition as uniform as possible there will be small variations. The number of prints in the edition is dictated by the limitations of the process, For example a Mezzotint, which can take up to, two months plus to engrave and prepare the plate.

Then over forty minutes to ink wipe and print. In contrast a reproduction, often referred to as "limited edition print" or "giclee" (primarily to make the buyer think they are purchasing some thing of more value), is a work in any other medium, whether it's an oil painting, watercolour, pastel drawing etc. Then using photo mechanical means, the same as to print greeting cards, glossy books etc. The industrial print press will produce as many or few as the operator commands. Often a limited print run is required to artificially inflate the sale price. I am not against the use of modern technology to produced works of art. Computer added design and digital manipulation can, and is producing exciting and dynamic work. The point is it must be used creatively not merely as a reproductive process. Ultimately a work of art transcends the ink and paper from which it is made. Do you want a work of art on your wall or a picture of a work of art?

E-mail martinmezzotint@yahoo.co.uk