

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

NO. 123A

ETCHINGS ETC. - WALL LABEL

Over forty years ago, a revolution took place in printmaking when Stanley William Hayter, seeking new ways of gravure, broke the bounds of traditional intaglio through radical experimentation with combinations of engraving and soft ground etching. Hayter's Atelier 17 became the center of a collective movement which was to spread and perpetuate his teaching. Since that time, many printmakers have tended to concentrate on the intricacies of the media and produce work that has become increasingly removed from the contemporary aesthetic.

In the last decade, at the hands of artists who are generally well established in other media, intaglio has quietly undergone yet another revolution, marked by the return to uncomplicated techniques and the pursuit of simplified, even austere images. These artists have brought newly liberated attitudes to the printmaking studios; their use of the medium is dictated by well-formulated individual aesthetics. This selection of prints, from various countries and of diverse styles, indicates that the current developments in intaglio are not the product of one particular school, but express the basic concerns of mainstream contemporary art.

While there is still a healthy disregard for tradition, the spirit of exploration has been tempered to the point where intaglio is used as a viable art form in a time of clean, uncluttered art. Technique is so well integrated with image that it becomes unself-conscious. This is not to infer that the prints are mechanical, but austerity is wedded to a sensuousness peculiar to etching and engraving; the ink stands above the paper's surface, reflecting the subtle dimensionality of the grooves, pits, and burrs of the plate.

(more)

Many artists whose work is fundamentally linear have found the properties of the acid-bitten line to be compatible with their aesthetic concerns. Their approaches differ widely: Hockney draws with a tense, wire-like line accented by passages of delicate aquatint; Dine describes his fetishes with bales of hairy, scratchy lines seductively juxtaposed with photographs by Lee Friedlander; LeWitt's familiar grid becomes structural or invisible, depending on distance; Jasper Johns's terse but eloquent skeleton is fleshed out and engulfed in the second state with washes of aquatint that explore the range of gradations attainable within a single color.

Color Field painters, such as Frankenthaler and Zox have utilized aquatint to execute succinct variations of their large-scale themes. The minutely pitted surface of an aquatinted plate transfers ink to paper with the density of velvet and great brilliance of color. In white on white, Ryman exploits the painterly nuances possible in this extremely versatile medium.

Numerous artists of the sixties and seventies have dealt with transformation and the mechanics of perception, often using popular images, the mass media, and photography as subject matter or as direct substance. Richard Hamilton, the master of metamorphosis, titillates memories when he uses a familiar newspaper photograph as his source material, translated into a montage of etching, aquatint, photoengraving, embossing, and collage. Gerhard Richter's work can be read on two levels: he conceptually alters land masses on photoengraved plates with bands of color; the resultant images are reminiscent of the painterly quality of early twentieth-century photographs. Paolozzi makes photoengravings of images surrealistically taken out of context and subtly alters them with etching. Colin Self's transformation is achieved largely by scale in a blown up version of a photoengraving with huge halftone dots of aquatint.

(more)

These artists have initiated a transformation of an art form which was showing signs of lagging far behind the contemporary aesthetic. Through imaginative exploitation of the intrinsic qualities of this many-faceted medium, they have further explored the significant aspects of their own art and added new dimensions to a vital means of expression.

Carol Giamartino