

The Copper Plate

Several extracts from "The Movement of Leaves" by Anna Jeretic, 2004

I like copper-plate etching, which is a rather indirect, cerebral activity. This work has its spontaneous and sensual side, however. I love drawing on a delicate sheet of paper, superimposed onto thin soft waxy varnish. Here etching already has less heady appeal. The copper is then eaten away in the acid bath exactly where you make your drawing. The rough pencil marks are thus transmitted spontaneously onto the plate. And the toasty smell of soft varnish perfumes my workshop.

After having made a certain number of these kinds of etchings, my adult students say they now see the world around them etched on a copper plate. I'm surprised that this happens so quickly. But this goes to show how much of an organic quality the soft varnish technique has. There are crevices in rocks, spaces between fur on a mammal, tree bark, leaves that cry to be etched in soft ground varnish. Nature itself is one of these etchings. I'm also thinking of the neon green moss that descends the black lava hills in the Icelandic highlands, like an unsharpened green pencil on a black sheet of paper.

Another favorite technique is sugar aquatint. It consists of painting with some sugar, ink and gum arabic directly onto a plate. I go out and paint the trees in the forest with the copper plate my hand. I sit on a moss-covered log and sometimes rain drops fall and

integrate themselves into the gooey sugary ink (the ants are already on their way towards it). There is also a reflection of the top of the trees in the orange-tinged metal. One way to commune with nature... In any case, this outdoor painting can bring a certain freshness to the work. Then one covers it with varnish and lets it dry. When the plate is placed in a bath of hot water, the sugar mixture pops out. The now uncovered area, ready to be etched by the acid, becomes the forest painting made directly onto the copper.

This is an aesthetics which attempts to catch the freshness of nature. The result is not always effective the first time: the image sometimes turns out simplistic and rough. But the process itself, a kind of unconscious absorption of nature's subtle vibrations, will certainly serve as nourishment for work to come.

Nature in etching

Accidents in the course of our work, that is, deviations from original vision, can bring a certain organic quality to etching.

Like glazes in ceramics, there is an element of surprise in etching. We don't have full control over the result as we do in painting. We can even allow them to happen more frequently if we have the acid attack the copper in an uneven way ; for example, leaving oil here and there (the acid eats away the copper more slowly in oily parts), or spreading the varnish more lightly in certain spots (the acid attacks belatedly, therefore more lightly), can bring on this irregularity. We can let the cat walk over the wet varnish, or give a plate to a lion to scratch and distort, and then see how it prints up.

Sometimes I let the acid roll down the plate slowly, watching it make ramifications like that of a tree or veins on a leaf. The print is rich, uneven, and captures the nature of nature.

Vision of light

We move on to two-plate color etchings. We make drawings with two complementary colors, like blue and orange, purple and yellow, or geranium and yellow-green. Each color represents a zinc plate which we will etch separately and then print one on top of each other.

With these colors, and then yellow-orange and blue-purple or red-orange and turquoise or red-purple and yellow-green, we can produce both a sense of drama and harmony, a perturbing paroxysm. I show some etchings where this harmonious unity is achieved by using two copper plates of two different complimentary colors. For example, there is one with leaves in purple, and a background of yellow with some yellow leaves that range from yellow to gold to purple in infinite tones. The light looks like it pierces the leaves where there is no purple at all, only yellow, and the leaves that are purple look like they're in the dark. And there are the different shades of the two colors that when brought together in different degrees make infinite shades of browns and burnt colors. This is analogous to the infinite shades between black and white.

There is a special spiritual moment, when we print the two plates one after another on top of the same paper, and watch how the two colors work together.

I find the transparent remnant of color on the unetched portions of the plate to be the most fascinating aspect in metal plate etching. It seems that the powerful transparency of the metal (a pleasure only for the eye of the artist and / or printer because the

copper plate is rarely exhibited, especially not when it is inked up), is transferred onto the paper. The copper becomes pure light rosé wine. A little like oil painting when you wipe off newly applied paint, and a transparent color appears.

Here is a vision of light, a vision of another world.

Forest tapestry

Sometimes in the woods where there is many trees of one type and one light suffused throughout, I see a vast harmonious tapestry of a mixture of only two or three colors. This unity can be achieved in color etching, because all the colors fuse together. The colors are fewer yet the combinations of them are infinite. Blending colors together throughout the whole surface does not always work as spontaneously in painting.

The same hands

As I wait for the varnish to dry on a copper plate, I play the piano.

The music fills the empty space, and even after the piece comes to a close, some of the chords linger there, suspended, like shadows of leaves on a white wall, swinging with the wind.

In silence, our heart, no longer our ears, listens to the resounding music.

The playing permeates into my drawing, because they are the same hands. Painting and music then have a hidden yet real connection. It has to do with senses and nerves.

Monotype experimentation

After two-colored etchings, we move on to monotypes. This relaxes us after heady multi-colored etchings.

I give the students each a medium-sized copper plate, and they paint directly onto it with a paint-brush or their fingers in an abstract way. There is a beautiful palette of messy colors available because of all the printing we've been doing. Then we take three sheets of paper for each painted copper plate. We make three prints without reinking the plate. The first one has very strong colors, almost too vivid. The second passage seems to be always the most interesting. Some of the colors become transparent and luminous. There are also some vivid colors left, which make a good contrast with the lightened areas. The third passage is always a little too weak, but often very harmonious.

Rituals

For a show, I put some etchings behind glass and place them vertically into wood with rich grains. I make one full print and then several partial prints, that is, I roll the press only so far onto the copper plate, and then roll back. It looks like the side of the print fades into nothing at the point where you stop the press and this can create a luminous effect. Then I do the other side of the plate. I use these prints as different panels. They look like theatre wings. They have become one of a kind. At the same time, the object is very print-like, because there are more than one print within: a visual reminder of the printer's studio, where many identical prints may be seen spread out on a work-table.

At night we put candles behind each panel.

The best thing, however, is when the print is exhibited in the woods : if the sun is out, you can watch the shadows of leaves fall on the glass and etchings. This to me is the ultimate ritual.

So I build a glass shrine for this series of work: a pentagon-shaped glass house without a roof, open to the sky, in the middle of my woods as a showroom, a kind of a temple for nature.

During the day in the sun and wind, the branches and leaves swerving in the wind leave reflections on the glass walls and the smaller pieces of glass protecting the etchings. The printed leaves and the reflected leaves work together and render a new composition.

In the evening, I put candles behind them.

I also have an artist book with etchings on thin Japanese paper with no backing behind them. By putting lights behind these pages, I have the same transparent, luminous effect. The pages are written with the coptic-like alphabet that no one besides myself knows how to read. That way no one understands the poem, which may be for the best.