

# Velvet

## *the secret world of mezzotint*

by Nan Mulder

There are not many techniques in printmaking that are practised with such singular devotion by so few artists as the mezzotint. Long before the artist can start work on the image, days or more, often weeks are spent preparing a rough surface on the plate with a toothed chisel-like tool, called a 'rocker'. It is interesting that in prints produced in this rare and beautiful technique one often can find similarities in its subject matter. Maybe the technique chooses its artists: printmakers with a contemplative nature; dreamers who during the many solitary hours of 'rocking' the plate, turn inwards and when they are finally able to start on their image, it reflects the depths of their faraway thoughts and the endless care with which the ground was prepared.

In 1642 in the Netherlands, Ludwig von Siegen, an officer in the Hessian army, made the first mezzotint. He used an assortment of toothed wheel-like tools, like roulettes, which he would roll over a metal plate like a pencil or brush. By doing this in different directions he was able to produce ranges of dots and indentations, which when printed, produced a variety of tonal gradations. Roulettes had been in use for centuries by metalsmiths and other craftsmen, but had never been used by a printmaker. Instead some artisans had engraved series of single dots in an attempt to find a technique that could achieve the tonal qualities of a painting. This however never caught on, as it was far too laborious. Initially Von Siegen kept his invention a secret. It is not clear if he ever met Prince Rupert of the Rhine, a nephew of Charles I of England, but one way or the other we know that in 1657 Prince Rupert produced a mezzotint and introduced the technique to England, where it flourished in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. It is also known that Prince Rupert no longer used the roulette, but being aware of the importance of the burr as opposed to the indentations or dots, introduced a different tool that covered the whole plate with a 'ground' of burr, which is the small amount of raised copper around the dot. This tool was probably similar to the 'rocker' still used by today's printmakers.

The artists here on show have all used a mezzotint rocker to prepare their plates. The rocker, with its rounded edges and sharp teeth, is slowly moved over the copperplate, from side to side the way a cradle is rocked. Thus the artist can cover the whole plate with a field of closely-knit dots and burrs. This is an extremely time-consuming job, as the artist has to cover the plate in many different directions until the original copper is no longer visible. Depending on the width of the teeth of the rocker, this is done between 30 to 70 times. When printed like an etching, the burr will hold the ink and produces a velvety black. By scraping and burnishing the burr, the artist can render a rich variety of tones: from the intense black of the untouched burr to a glowing near white in which traces of all those original dots are still faintly visible. The artist draws the image directly on the prepared plate and then carefully starts scraping the lighter areas. Work has to be done from black to white, and the image slowly appears like a photograph in the developer. As in all printmaking techniques, the image has to be made in reverse. Corrections are difficult and a mezzotint artist normally tries to avoid this. As it is hard to judge the exact nature of the tonal gradations, the artist has to print a number of proofs to assess the work in progress. This is done in the same way, as one would print an etching: the plate is inked and cleaned, covered with damp etching paper and then printed on an etching press. After each proof the scraping and burnishing can continue, till the artist is satisfied with the result.

Stuart Duffin, Nan Mulder, Judith Rothchild and Kouki Tsuritani have all spent many hours rocking their plates to produce the wonderful velvet blacks and greys you can see in their prints. Even though these artists work far away from each other and have very different cultural backgrounds, it is not only the technique, but also something in the way they tell their visual stories, that unites them as printmakers. Maybe this is due to all that rocking and dreaming.

The Japanese artist Kouki Tsuritani, born in Tokyo and trained at the Kanazawa College of Art, named this process in which the subject matter internally distilled, when he described his way of working as 'visual Chinese whispers' with him as the last one in line to make the image. In his work he references the Edo period in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Japan, and the heydays of Ukiyo-e, 'the pictures of the floating world'; an ironic illusion to 'the sorrowful world' of the earthy plane of death and rebirth. Its themes reflected contemporary tastes, concerns and innovations, while at the same time referred to classical, literary and historical sources. It was both populist and sophisticated and the artists of this period transformed the ordinary into the extraordinary. Tsuritani uses the European mezzotint technique, but reaches deep into himself and his own Japanese artistic heritage to show us scenes in which everyday objects are transformed to become props in a theatre of the absurd and unexpected appearances recall the circular movement of existence. The Japanese craft of origami is also used to help build walls and vessels for his isolated human characters, playing their roles in these striking versions of a modern 'floating world'.

Stuart Duffin too, sees beyond the everyday streets that inspire his work. Trained at Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen, Duffin has been a member of staff of the Glasgow Print Studio for the past 25 years. In 1996 he became Artist in Residence in the Jerusalem Print Workshop, a period which led to a large body of work. But the Jerusalem of his prints is not only in Israel or Belfast (where Duffin was also Artist in Residence in 2004 and discovered a Jerusalem Street), but is also a city of the mind: a lost Eden, heavy under the burden of history and politics. Graffiti, the language of the streets, covers the walls, which contain the planes of his prints. Singular words become loaded statements: 'Zion', 'faith', 'arms', 'why'. Duffin too uses objects, but rather than transform them, he imbues them with a symbolic value. His representations of Jerusalem, he says, 'are a barometer to our own spiritual welfare, not only as individuals, but of society as a whole'. Thus the maps of Jerusalem contain much more than the streets of an ancient city. By placing them next to contemporary walls and carefully chosen objects such as skulls and eggs, Duffin asks us to read them as maps of the past, present and future; maps of warning and maps of possibility. And the skilfully rendered, rich tones of the mezzotint are the perfect form to express his profound and complex ideas.

This tension between the sacred and the profane can also be found in my own work. Born in the Netherlands, trained in Amsterdam and Krakow (Poland) and a resident of Scotland since 1977 (with a 5 year break while living and teaching in Dublin), my prints are informed by the places in which I live and to which I travel. During a number of trips to India and Nepal, I collected many items with a religious and sacral meaning, and took photos in temples of offerings on altars or in the hands of my friends. Somewhere in the depth of my unconscious these connected with memories of my youth, and could thus resurface into a visual language, in which the sacred was transformed into the personal. Landscapes too can deeply move me and fill me with nostalgia and remembrance. 'Kapiti Island', the New Zealand bird sanctuary of my latest print, is such a place. Like Duffin I combine the mezzotint with intaglio printing, but add colour through relief printing, chine collé and gold leaf. The colour red is often used to contrast with the black of the mezzotint, and at the same time has a symbolic value. In 'Temple Doors' the glimpse of red between the doors alludes

to a secret room. Bright yellow walls try to distract the viewer from this revelation, while the eyes on the doors (often seen in Nepal) allow the inside world to observe the outside world.

The work of the American artist Judith Rothchild, who lives in France and was trained in New York and Vienna, looks in the first instance quite different to the other artists. There is no symbolism or unusual juxtaposition here. However, it is very much the work of a contemplative artist who carefully observes the world around her and whose precision and patience is so suitable for the technique of mezzotint. She rocks her plates with one of the finest rockers available, which has 100 teeth to an inch. Rothschild's eye for detail and the realistic nature of her work recalls the chiaroscuro of the still lives by 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch masters, though here reduced to a single item and without the sexual or morbid undertones popular in the reading of those 'natures mortes' of the past. Her plants and vegetables are like objects caught in the beam of the lighthouse of Virginia Woolf's novel, which changes them momentarily into subjects that question the nature of reality itself: are those onions dancing there in the night? Is that a cabbage?

During those long hours, when there is just the artist, the copperplate, the rocker, music, and thoughts, the image waiting to be made roams through the unconscious and conscious mind and the eye of the artist is distilled, transformed, mixed with memories and emotions, until it becomes like the language of dreams. The technique, with its precision, intensity and sublime monochromatic possibilities, add to a nearly unworldly representation. No other technique has such a velvety, nearly sensual beauty in its tonality. This exhibition offers viewers a rare chance to enter the secret world of mezzotints.

Edinburgh, 2008

Bibliography:

*Mezzotints*, Cyril Davenport, F.S.A. Methuen and Co., London 1904

*The Mezzotint, History and Technique*, Carol Wax. Harry N.Abrams Incorporated, New York 1996

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/ukiyo-e/>