

Unfamiliar Ground

New worlds in contemporary printmaking

May – October 2014

Unfamiliar Ground brings together the work of three innovative young artists – **Chris Agnew, Rebecca King** and **Bronwen Sleigh** - who are challenging the boundaries of traditional printmaking in a variety of exciting ways. This exhibition presents etchings, lithographs, screen prints and digital prints, where materials, processes and technology are playfully explored to create wonderfully rich artworks.

A strong connecting thread to *Unfamiliar Ground* is the artists' engagement with the environment – the natural and human-made. Landscape has inspired artists for generations and is constantly being re-presented as a way of exploring the human condition. From landscape as a backdrop to religious narrative during the Renaissance, through Romanticism in the nineteenth century and Land Art in the twentieth, to addressing the urgency of environmental concerns today, the theme of landscape is rich territory for artists.

In *Unfamiliar Ground*, the conventions of traditional landscape art and printmaking are questioned by each artist in very different ways. Rather than describing the familiar, the three artists here create pictorial worlds that make us look again and invite our imaginations to wander.

Chris Agnew

Chris Agnew builds worlds of contrasts and paradox, reflected in his method of combining etching and painting. His technique of etching on icon panels gives the work an immediate look of art from a previous time - mountain vistas and architecture from medieval painting, or 18th century art depicting 'the sublime'. This is then disrupted by brightly coloured geometric structures piercing rock or a lone cow standing in front of a block of flats. Are these scenes from the past or the future? Are they secular or religious images? Is nature in harmony or conflict with the human world?



Chris Agnew *The Ark, Ahora Gorge* 2013

'The development of my panel etching technique began whilst studying etching at Leeds University. I was looking closely at printmakers such as Frank Brangwyn, Albrecht Durer and Gustav Dore, paying particular attention to their use of line and contrast. During the printing process, I found that the inked plate had an authenticity that the print it produced did not. There is an inherent permanence in the process of carving out an image or text into a surface that does not exist when making marks on a surface. The historical association of the etching process with the dissemination of information is also an essential part of my practice. Etchings were used in newspapers and mass-produced books to reproduce images long before photographs or paintings could be. The medium is also used to produce unique images that are almost impossible to reproduce, such as in passports and on banknotes.'

When standing before a work by Agnew, one is aware of it being an object as much as a picture; a sense of its 'inherent permanence' perhaps. The use of icon panels, which Agnew makes himself, resulted from his move to Bucharest and seeing how commonplace icon paintings are in Romanian family homes. He was interested in how they are cherished as objects, regardless of how religious a family might be. This experience fed into his interest in the construction and deconstruction of belief systems, and how we come to believe something.

'How do we come to the conclusion that we believe something? At what point do we think that that we have accrued enough knowledge about a story or another person, that we are willing to act on our beliefs? And how willing are we to challenge the faith that lies at the centre of our being?'

Agnew is a voracious collector of information as source material for his work and often places historical events and people at the forefront. He negotiates a route towards knowledge through a complex sifting process from collective and personal sources, from past and present, and from a position of questioning. The use of structural elements in Agnew's works – towers, tessellations, geometric patterns – echo attempts to place order on the world around us: as Agnew states, a desire to *'seek and observe rhythms and patterns at work in nature and particular events.'*

Many of these structures in his works are incomplete or at odds with the surroundings, be they set within mountains, a forest or garden. There is a tension between the natural and the man-made. They are reminiscent of Victorian follies, or works by Bosch or Breughel, such as the Tower of Babel. This biblical story, of course, describes the building of a tower to reach heaven. Perceiving their intentions as self-serving rather than spiritual, God scatters the people of the world, confusing their unified language and causing them to speak different languages so they would not understand each other. Very often the function of art is to accommodate different languages, different voices, in one place – in a painting on canvas or print on paper for example. In Chris Agnew's art – a hybrid one of printmaking, painting and drawing – we sense the nuanced chatter of voices from past, present and future; the push and pull of visual information as it engages our eyes and intellect.



Pieter Breughel the Elder *The Tower of Babel* 1563

Agnew's works draw us in as viewers. They are finely crafted, beautifully detailed, with a rich pictorial sensibility. His drawing of foliage, rocks or architecture is highly skilled and the process of etching into the panel combined with oil painting develops a multi-layered image, refined in its execution and visually enticing. The process of their making is a vital component to their success as artworks.

The wooden panels are primed with a traditional gesso (using rabbit skin glue, chalk powder and titanium oxide). The artist then engraves the sanded down surface with a fine point, rubs black oil paint into the grooves and wipes off excess paint. The resultant etching often has a textured surface typical of mezzotint prints, where the grain of the gesso is revealed. Further painting develops the image, resulting in an artwork which takes us back through history, recalling early printing methods, combined with the uncertain truths of our modern day situation. Indeed Agnew cites influences in his work to include historical etchings and classical painting, German Romanticism, Dutch landscape painting, Baroque and Renaissance sculpture. The many threads of research are then '*...woven together to produce an enigmatic tapestry of contemporary life in the dark shadow of history.*'

Bronwen Sleigh

Bronwen Sleigh makes prints, drawings and objects, taking inspiration from industrial architecture found in the unused and forgotten urban spaces at the edge of the city. Her work aims to provoke a dialogue with these places, often vast engineered constructions which have invaded the natural landscape. Sleigh's process towards an image is achieved by extending and abstracting buildings and details she has seen. The weathered surfaces of metal or concrete are present in her prints as well as the structural elements depicted by line. She sees the work exploring space rather than describing it, provoking new ways of looking at the ordinary.

'I have conflicting opinions about urban and industrial space. On the one hand, I see the destruction of nature, I see pollution and ugliness. On the other, I marvel at some

of what we have achieved and see it as a glimpse into the future. I see lost overgrown waste-land and places that nature is claiming back. I translate these places by folding, twisting and abstracting them. This sees the work exploring space rather than describing it, challenging perceptions of the overlooked by presenting it in an unfamiliar way.'

Whilst Chris Agnew imaginatively recreates narrative from historical sources, Sleigh responds directly to physical places. Starting out with a number of photographs of a chosen location taken from different angles, she will often proceed to make an architectural model inspired by it. From this she will make drawings which develop into something akin to architectural blueprints. All the while this process keeps her eye looking and her intuition making adjustments. When the etching plate itself is drawn prior to printing, she will happily accommodate the accidental scratches, marks and scuffs which accumulate through its working.

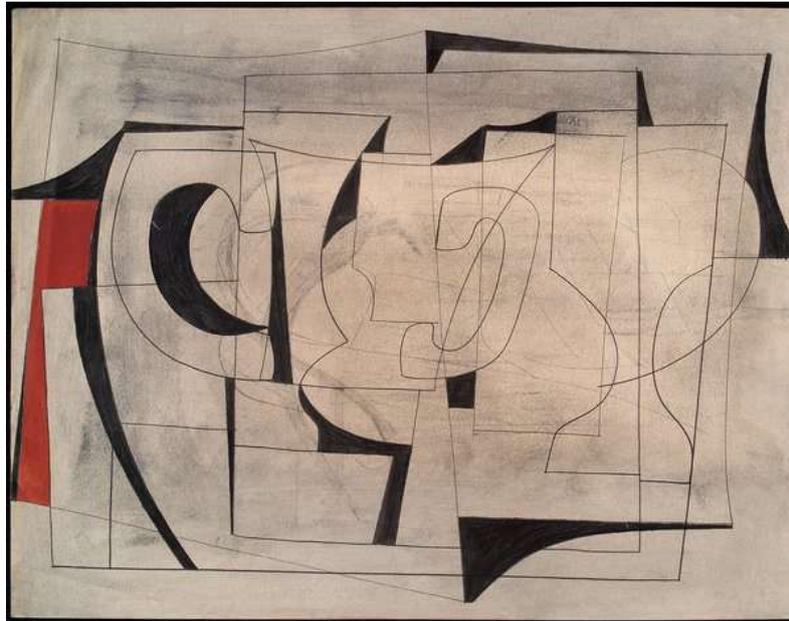
Sleigh's prints share a finely honed drawing skill, with images built up from hundreds of etched lines to create pictorial structure. The titles often give the name of the place where she has been – '*Exhibition Way*', '*Paris, Charles de Gaulle*' – but these are not topographical studies or architectural plans. Her prints develop more of an imaginative space where a spiral staircase becomes a whirling tornado of marks, where a decorative architectural detail becomes a harlequin-like pattern cascading across the surface. There are visual echoes of Agnew's tessellation and improbable structures, but Sleigh's work carries more of a Modernist ideal within it. An ideal that she questions as flawed. The early 20th century revolutionary ideas of Constructivism for example, have not widely delivered a fairer society or a more humane built environment. As industrial progress has moved inexorably onwards, the aesthetic of a better future has more often not delivered beautiful surroundings.



Bronwen Sleigh *Exhibition Way II* 2013

Sleigh's printmaking itself might be described as a small-scale industrial operation, using as she does, a range of metal plates, acids and solvents, tools and heavy machinery (the printing press). What makes her an artist, rather than a manufacturer, is the fact that her art arises from reflective experience – a looking and re-looking at the world around her. In her artistic practice there emerges a re-

presentation of reality, an interpretation of existence. Her imprint on the world is one derived from a process of receiving, of listening, and in front of her work we become acquainted with a harmony of rhythms and visual movement which we otherwise might have missed. There is a restrained beauty to her work, a kind of poetry or musicality which we might perceive in the work of English modern artists such as Ben Nicholson.



Ben Nicholson *10 November 1951*

In a statement of 1948, Nicholson defines his own interest in *'...the kind of painting which I find exciting is not necessarily representational or non-representational but is both musical and architectural, when the architectural construction is used to express a 'musical' relationship between form, tone and colour; and whether this visual 'musical' relationship is slightly more or slightly less abstract is for me beside the point.'*

Rebecca King

For **Rebecca King**, childhood memories of the chaotic hustle and bustle of Nigeria inform her fascination with creating cosmopolitan spaces bursting with a *'kaleidoscope of abstractions'*.

'Cities are enticing places teeming with contrasting built forms and flowing with pragmatic human activity. They offer an abundance of experiences and sensations, which are constantly in flux and shifting. It is this flux that interests me. This is represented in my work through a cascading wave of abstracted shapes and lights captured in a moment of sensory stimuli.'

King's urban landscapes are colourful, energetic, busy places. Her prints are densely worked images, bursting with visual information. She is immersed in a

contemporary urban world of technology and her printmaking process is one which utilises the tools of the computer and Photoshop. Her drawing skills are manifested in complex layering and composition of hundreds of photographs from a number of sources. Tower blocks, offices, neon advertising signs, urban motorways, car parks and crowds jostle for position in her über-cities.



Rebecca King *Takunya's Changeover 2012*

There is a quality to her constructed images reminiscent of the 1982 film *Koyaanisqatsi* by Godfrey Reggio. The film, subtitled 'Life Out of Balance' presents slow motion and time lapse footage of cities and landscape across the United States, with an accompanying sound track by Philip Glass. The film has an epic quality, presenting a world of human interaction with natural and urban environments. Industry, transport, technology, manufacturing, consumption and leisure activity are collaged into constant movement. Clouds rolling above skyscrapers, crowds of people queuing in railway stations, cars speeding along highways, conveyor belts and assembly lines are in perpetual motion. The cinematography varies from panoramic to close up and immerses us in macro and micro worlds of human activity, where collective behaviour and individual gestures are juxtaposed. It is a beautiful movie, but we are not immune from the undercurrent of anxiety within it. This sense of anxiety – about how we manage the environment and communities on a global scale – seems even more prescient today.

Rebecca King's constructed cities are rather beautiful, exciting places. The addition of colourful geometric shapes to each composition and laser cut elements in the paper give the work a visual and emotional lift. There is a sense of a positive human spirit, or nature, present in the swirling, flying stars, cubes, ribbons, flowers, tessellations – as if some giant party popper has just exploded:

'Nevertheless, it is all placed sporadically within a whirling patchwork of abstractions, where I am continuously trying to reinterpret what the image means within a fluctuating world of interchange.'

King's prints draw you in and the smallest detail becomes important to see. There is humour and playfulness in her images. What also becomes apparent is the fact that these are not just images on a computer screen. Their physicality as objects – as prints on paper, with intricate shapes removed, held within a picture frame – is integral to their presentation as artworks.

This is true for all the artists in *Unfamiliar Ground*. Each of their works has a physical presence which is important to acknowledge. We can get close to them and see fine detail, the surface of paper or panel and wonder how they are made. We can move back from them, get some distance and consider what each artist might be saying. We can reflect on the three artists together and discern a conversation between them in the light of what we bring ourselves – our knowledge, our intuition, our experience and our own taste. What is always important in looking at visual art, in this case prints and painting, is to give the work our time and attention. To be receptive to the unfamiliar and perhaps when we leave the gallery look at the world in a slightly different way.

Chris Agnew studied at the University of Leeds, followed by an MA at Wimbledon College of Art in 2010. His work has been shortlisted for the Jerwood Drawing Prize in 2009 and 2010, the Clifford Chance Postgraduate Printmaking Prize in 2010 and Saatchi's New Sensations in the same year. He is represented by Kristin Hjellegjerde and divides his time between Bucharest and London.

Bronwen Sleigh studied at Cardiff and Glasgow Schools of Art and graduated in 2008 from the MA in Printmaking at the Royal College of Art. Sleigh lives and works in Glasgow and has exhibited widely in the UK and internationally.

Rebecca King studied printmaking at the University of Brighton, graduating in 2011, and is now based in Bristol, working out of the Spike Print Studio. She has won the Gainsborough Prize for Graduate Printmaker (2011), and the Nagoya University Degree Award.

Unfamiliar Ground is part of **Art Unpacked**, a series of touring art exhibitions created by Chrysalis Arts, that brings the very best of contemporary art and craft to small and unique galleries in the north.

Unfamiliar Ground is curated by Martyn Lucas.

Text by Martyn Lucas