TRANSCRIBING DARKNESS

THE WORK OF MIKE BIRCHNELL

Mike Birchnell, formerly Senior Lecturer and Head of Printmaking in the School of Contemporary Arts at the University of Western Sydney's Bankstown Campus, is currently the Head of Fine Print at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin.

A PROFILE BY MARILYN WALTERS

Negotiating the surface of one of Mike Birchnell's drawings or etchings is intriguing. The unease aroused by a confined pictorial space, carefully yet obsessively mapped, draws the viewer into the picture, alerting the senses and engaging the intellect.

Mike Birchnell is best known in Australia as a printmaker, but his drawings call attention to the interrelation of drawing and etching apparent through the compulsion towards inscription of the surface and the definition of shape and space which he brings to both mediums.

The velvet blackness of the drawn surface arrived at through patiently inscribing four layers of cross hatching, together with the regimentation of repeated shapes, is confronting but at the same time engages the viewer with the process of drawing itself. Indeed process is very important to Mike; the reductive process of drawing and the accumulative process of etching, mirror one another throughout his oeuvre. The stages of drawing, the preparation of the paper, the planning of the image and the time spent in its execution are inherited from printmaking where the stages of grounding, inscribing, biting must each be methodically worked through. The extent of this disciplined
involvement, the actual work of art making, is evident in these carefully mapped surfaces.

Many of the images that appear in Birtchnell’s etchings and drawings are the result of visual stimuli, glimpsed in passing, stored, condensed and re-visited. A tree encased in a protective metal cage becomes, through its sheer absurdity, a metaphor for the caging of spirit, of space, of thought. Figures trapped in space beneath an umbrella shaped cover, oddly recall Frances Bacon’s combative relationship with pictorial space. The umbrella protects yet confines, shelters and at the same time defines the parameters of movement within the picture plane. Shapes confront one another in a bristling, territorial visual standoff.

The viewer is drawn into this conflict by the uncertainty implied in the shifting edges of these abstract shapes, which are not at all static, but rather, jostle with one another and with the surface itself. For this confrontation to work, the trapped space between two shapes or between the object and the surrounding space must be right. It is the product of intensive visual and psychological mapping.

Mike Birtchnell’s work is not site specific; it is the absolute denial of locality. The space of his work is an inner space, an intensively negotiated, buzzing, and visually noisy enclosure, in which the accumulation of observation is distilled, sifted, sorted and the essence of visual experience extracted.

Both the space of the picture and the physical space in which it is made deny the outside. Birtchnell works in a dim room with blinds drawn to exclude outside space entirely. It is as if outside space and outside light are too big, too distracting, too undisciplined. Light
and space are limited to a square of white paper. He relies on an Inner Light, that of the paper and of his own imagination to delineate and indicate the edges of limitless darkness. I. Within this space a drawn line can have many meanings, none of which need survive outside the space itself. The precise, sacred geometry and the intensity of entrapped light and space in the work of Agnes Martin, have been profound influences.

There is no conventional perspective in Mike Birtchnell's drawings and prints, rather, space is calculated on the surface, and calculated precisely. In many instances evidence of the decision making underpinning the final image, hovers near the surface, a faint yet firm graphic specter of the ritual of its creation.

This awareness of surface he attributes to two years spent studying printmaking under H. Andrew Freeth R.A. while a student at St. Martins School of Art in London. From Freeth, Mike inherited an intimacy with and respect for process, the visual love affair between the artist and the surface, which culminates in the image.

Working with Freeth also imbued Mike with a fascination for the eloquence of the medium of printmaking and strengthened his conviction that the work of making art was an honourable activity.

Ever since Mike Birtchnell first entered Walthamstow School of Art in East London, having abandoned several offers to read English Literature at various English Universities, he has been intrigued by the work ethic of art making. To him, art is what an artist does. It is the artist's job to make art. You do it every day, and you do it to your best ability. There is a sense of honour involved in a day's work well done. Being a student at
St. Martins in the 1960s where discussion and concept were de rigeur only served to further convince him that the making of art was what ultimately endured, beyond the thought and well beyond the language of art.

Art is not about "intellectualizing", Birtchnell claims, yet his work is an intense engagement of fine intellect and an extraordinary raw sensitivity.

References.


Dr. Marilyn Walters