



'STORM SURGE' (Carborundum, 45 x 58 cm)

MARY GILLETT

Mary Gillett is a printmaker and painter with a passion for etching. Her subject is landscape, often imbued with the social history of the area of Devon where she has lived since childhood. Her prints are painterly and time-consuming, going through ten or fifteen proofs over several months before she is satisfied with the image. She likes the flexibility of etching, with its potential to change the composition or scrape the surface of the plate. She revels in the physicality of the process and loves those accidental things that happen, which give each print its unique character. "It is often the imperfections that make a piece of work exciting. The anomalies draw you in and make the work more engaging." As an etcher she does not search for perfection, her priority is to communicate the message of the work. Unlike many printmakers she values the slight variations in colour or tone that can occur even in a small print run of fifteen or so.

Much of Gillett's work is black and white but she also uses colour. On a table in her workshop sit wonderful large translucent rubber rollers which she uses to roll and skim colour across the surface of her monochrome prints.

Increasingly she works with collagraph because it has a visceral quality that prevents her from getting too precious about her etching. The immediacy of this process allows her to work through ideas very quickly. The rawness and fragility of the collagraph surface, a card plate textured with cement, polyfilla and glue, often means that only one or two prints can be made, thus instilling a sense of improvisation that can be carried over into the subsequent etchings.

Mary now lives on the edge of Dartmoor but she grew up on a farm in the Tamar Valley and it is countryside that she knows intimately. As a great admirer of Turner, she has walked the routes he took locally when he visited the area, and she has drawn and made prints of those well-known landscapes. In her studio a photocopy of a drawing Turner did of the countryside in about 1813 sits tucked inside a plastic sleeve. Her subject matter is frequently connected to the copper and tin mining in the Tamar Valley and in Botallack in West Cornwall. She grieves for the hardship endured by the tin miners. Working in Botallack Mine they extracted tin from beneath the surface of the sea and in both locations suffered early deaths through exposure to arsenic which was produced as a byproduct of mine waste.

Using sketchbooks Mary gathers information for her prints by making drawn landscape studies, written notes and taking photographs. "I love to write notes in

sketchbooks because it is so difficult to get to the essence of something when you are dealing with the elements. Writing is quicker."

Alongside the freedom gifted to her etchings by the use of collagraph she has spent time in Cornwall drawing on the expertise of the painter Ray Atkins. Working en Plein Air - outside in all weathers - was another way of loosening up her mark making and "stopping her getting caught up in irrelevant detail". Achieving a looseness of style is something of an obsession with her and she cites as influences the early work of Peter Doig, partly due to a mutual connection to Canada, Caspar David Friedrich, Gerhard Richter's landscape and seascape paintings and Anselm Kiefer. What also attracts her to Doig is that "there is something about the looseness of his style and the fact that he seems able to stop working on a painting before he gets to the stage of over-refining it".

Gillett translates her use of slabbed oil paint into her printmaking so there is a clear relationship between the different techniques she uses and the message she wants to communicate. A closet poet, she has collaborated with other printmakers on a couple of very beautiful handmade books combining letterpress printed poetry and prints made in response to the poet's words.

This sensitivity to poetry has a presence in her prints. The lyricism that is inherent in her landscapes sits comfortably within the Romantic tradition.

Eschewing narrative, her love for a small corner of the south west of England radiates out of her prints, yet they communicate a universal understanding of the beauty, wildness and unpredictability of land, sea and the seasons.

Fiona Robinson

'SCRIBING EARTH AND SKY'

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