

# Printmaker Mary Gillett and the Tamar Print Workshop

Kari McGowan

In spring, Calstock's Limekiln Gallery – overlooking the River Tamar – was the venue for 'Fresh off the Press', the fourteenth annual exhibition featuring latest work by the artists of Mary Gillett's Tamar Print Workshop. Thirty-one artists exhibited over 130 works of sweeping diversity which demonstrated such immense and varied skills that it was unsurprising to learn that a comment overheard was to the effect that 'the quality of work here at Tamar Print Workshop, is equal to – no, surpasses – that of any current national printmaking show you can think of!' The exhibition also made it impossible not to think about how little is really known about the very many printmaking processes, and a certain confusion surrounding the different meanings we attribute to the word 'print'.

With this in mind I visited Mary Gillett, founder of the Tamar Print Workshop, in her Mary Tavy printmaking studio. There I met three members of the group and found out a lot more about the many aspects of the discipline. I also gained an insight into Mary's inspirational teaching which has enabled so many students successfully to learn the complex techniques involved while developing their own very individual ideas and ways of expressing them through the art of printmaking. The diversity of the work of the various artists in the group is testimony to Mary's ability as a teacher to nurture her students' unique talents.

Mary Gillett was brought up on a farm in Gulworthy. Having studied and lived in other parts of the country, she returned to her home territory where, in 1992, she set up the Tamar Print Workshop. Her workspace was the old calf shed where she recalls, as a child, bucket feeding the rough-tongued calves. She moved to her workshop near Mary Tavy in 2010 where, with an expanded workspace, she continued to run courses and provide access to printmaking facilities for her loyal students and friends, also attracting many new ones. The space is described by one of the group as 'a fabulous resource'; Mary is very keen on the idea of a shared community space and has entertained school visits in the studio.

Painter/printmaker Dorothy Hanna, working there when I visit, talks about the almost inevitable isolation experienced as an artist



Passing through (etching), Mary Gillett

when working frequently alone, and how much it means for creative growth to be part of a supportive group providing constructive feedback and productively exchanging ideas.

Mary is a painter and printmaker with a passion for etching and her subjects are the wild, remote landscapes which have surrounded her for much of her life – Dartmoor and the north Cornwall coast – landscapes which bear witness to the depredations of weather and the workings of human beings. Her images are, in her own words, 'contemplations on how our surroundings can reflect our histories, our moods and our thoughts'; the metal plates she creates 'look as though they have been eroded by the elements themselves... scored and furrowed, scraped, burnished, re-scored and re-furrowed until their history is symbolic of the very subject that confronts me.'

Mary's paintings and etchings convey powerful, often uncompromising landscapes. Largely monochromatic, a stern lyricism pervades her work, ultimately speaking beyond place and season to express a universal truth about the persistence and poetry of wild places and our response to them.

Dorothy Hanna, a painter, also creates monotypes – the printmaking technique nearest to painting itself, where the artist creates individual, unique prints by applying inks to a plate in layers which will then be transferred to the paper surface. She sometimes includes a fine handmade paper which adheres to the printing



Night approaching (collograph), Mary Gillett



Printmakers at Mary Gillett's studio

PHOTOGRAPH LEY ROBERTS



Rich pickings (etching), Ley Roberts



Monotype, Dorothy Hanna



Somewhere else (etching), Ley Roberts



Boar (carbordundum, drypoint and lino), Alli Eynon



Linocut, Beth Munro Linocut, Gay Kent

surface during one of the pressings, a process known as chine collé. Central to Dorothy's approach is to resist too close a plan at the outset, but instead to explore the play between spontaneity and control and respond creatively to what develops.

Ley Roberts, originally from North Cornwall, who with her husband runs the Limekiln Gallery, is a children's book illustrator and an award-winning printmaker. She has developed a body of work inspired by, among many things, rugged landscapes and the wildlife that inhabits it, evoking the beauty of the passing moment and fleeting light.

The third member at work when I visited was Yana Treval, a painter, printmaker and performer preoccupied creatively with expressing the interconnectedness of all things, whose work seeks to recall a visual and emotional experience exploring the energies that connect past and present, the natural and the artificial. She told me about the Tamar Valley Printmakers who have an upcoming autumn exhibition at Plymouth's Theatre Royal. The group evolved from members of Mary's Tamar Print Workshop, and in 2020 they participated in events staged to mark the 400th anniversary of the voyage of the *Mayflower* – twenty printmakers from the Tamar Valley and twenty printmakers from Cape Cod produced a touring exhibition, 'Journey, A Mayflower 400 project', commemorating what Fiona Robinson, President of the West of England Academy, described as 'the common thread of human endeavour, resilience,

determination and fortitude'. Fiona, in her introduction to the exhibition catalogue, describes printmaking as 'a journey with an uncertain outcome'. This seems to me to get to the heart of this creative undertaking. Here – perhaps more than in any other of the many two-dimensional image-making processes – so much is invested in an often complex preparation process: be it preparing an etching plate, cutting a design into a piece of lino, the layering of different surfaces to create a collagraph plate, adding and removing printing ink from a surface in order to form the image to make a monotype – yet accepting that success will be determined ultimately by the relationship between the application of the ink to the prepared surface and the action of the press, with its attendant uncertainties.

I was fortunate enough to be in the workshop for what I imagine is always a nail-biting moment – when Ley Roberts turned the handle of the large Rochat etching press to produce her etching capturing her experience visiting Birmingham where she was showing her work as part of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists Print Prize exhibition.

Over the years, members of the group have had work accepted at the Royal Academy of Art, the Royal West of England Academy, The South West Academy and the Bankside Gallery, amongst many others, and have received prestigious awards.

Mary was keen to clarify the often misleading terminology surrounding prints and printmaking

and made the really important point that an original print is not merely a reproduction of a work already created in another medium (for example, a painting). It is intended to be a print from the outset, using one or more of the printmaking techniques. Often, a printmaker will produce multiples of the same piece which they sign and number. This is known as an original edition. A reproduction print of a painting is completely different. Even though it might be signed and numbered by the artist it is a copy of a piece of work and not the original work itself. Printmaking is a separate and distinct discipline involving an enormous amount of time and skill to make new and original work which is usually hand pulled by the artists themselves, or by a master printer.

Mary explained some of the main printmaking terminology.

- **Intaglio** A family of printing techniques which transfer ink from deeply engraved grooves made in a printing plate onto a paper surface using a printing press. Etching is an example.
- **Relief printing** Techniques where ink is applied to the raised surfaces of a plate to be printed from – linocut is an example of relief printing
- **Monotype** A unique image is painted upon a smooth plate using painting processes and transferred to a paper surface often using a press. A second 'pressing' can give a 'ghost' image.
- **Linocut** A relief process in which an image is inscribed into a block of linoleum and the uncarved top surface is inked and printed using a press or by 'burnishing' by hand.
- **Etching** An intaglio technique, where marks are indented on a prepared plate to be inked and put through a press. Methods include coating a metal plate with wax which is drawn into and the exposed metal subjected to corrosion in an acid bath before being put through a press to produce an image.
- **Drypoint** A process in which a plate, sometimes perspex, is incised by a sharp point before ink is applied all over and rubbed off selectively before the incised plate is put through the press.
- **Collagraph** Materials of varying types and textures are 'collaged' (applied with glue) onto a printing plate – often card – which is then inked and put through the press. ■

To find out about printmaking courses and to see Mary's work, visit [marygillet.co.uk](http://marygillet.co.uk).

22 August–1 October The Tamar Valley Printmakers Exhibition – Theatre Royal Plymouth Find Tamar Valley Printmakers on Instagram.