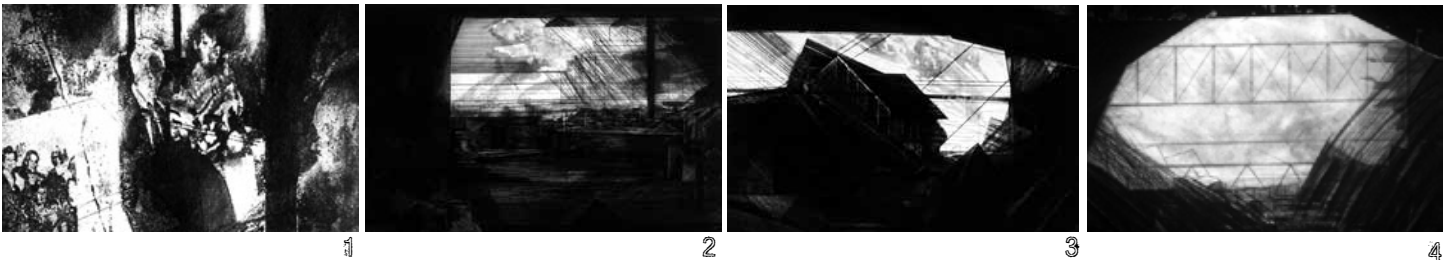


# Divergent Consistencies

## The Studio and Community Art of Hugh Merrill, 1969-2009

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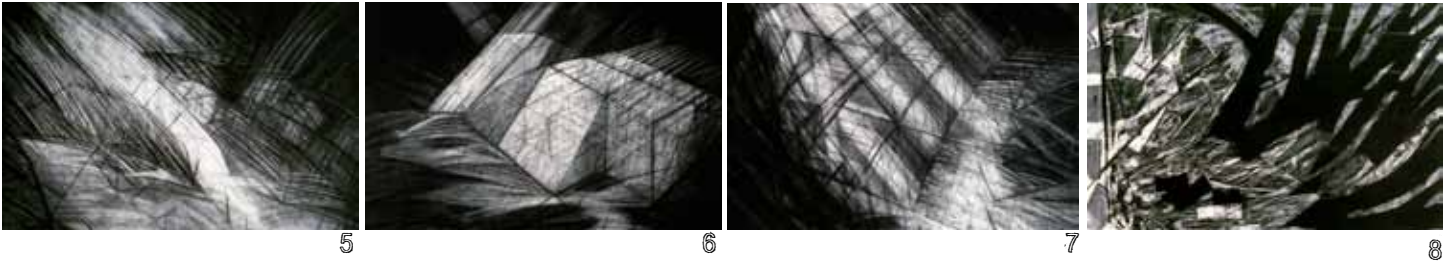
### Etching



I do not believe that a creative journey is chosen by the individual/artist but that the artist is chosen by the opportunity. I had no reason or background that would have led me to become a printmaker. It is as if a portal opened when I first started making etchings, images flooded my thoughts and the slightly disconnected manner of working in printmaking simply made sense to me. I knew no more of ceramics than I did of etching in 1968. Ceramics remained cold and uninviting for me while print trumped drawing, painting, sculpture and all other mediums. There was something about the quality of dialogue and the method, I would draw on the plate then place it in the nitric acid bath and the process would take over. The work was outside of my control and I would be forced to respond to the material as it evolved independently of my influence. I had the opportunity to work with John Cage while in school and he taught me to allow the process to have its own voice in my work, to allow chance to come into play and replace control with dialogue and interaction.

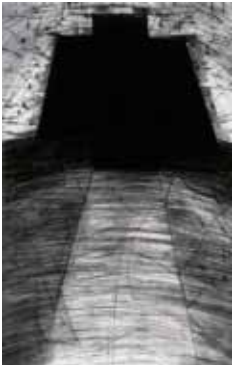
The ethos of making when I entered the Maryland Institute College of Art in 1968 was strongly influenced by Abstract Expressionism and the underlying quick and physical gesture. Etching and printmaking in general are considerably more cumbersome mediums. Their progress towards a finished piece is delayed and compared with painting or sculpture can be over technical. Robert Motherwell told me that drawing was like the crack of a whip; drawing was gestural and made from body knowledge.

The slowness of printmaking begins with the mark, a physical gesture, drawn forcefully on the plate. The plate has to be placed in an acid bath where the length of time and the potency of the acid make the final determination as to the depth and tone of the drawn mark. The time a plate spends in the acid bath allows the artist to consider the options and qualities of the work. What is given up in directness and immediacy with a work is countered by the strength of the material and its intuitive sequential process. Etching on a metal plate provides a durable, sculptural surface that can take a great deal of physical manipulation.



The etching plate is a memory surface. When I complete a drawing and pull a print, then scrape down the surface of the plate, a ghost image and remnants of the previous work remain. The ghost image then blends with newly added drawings creating an unexpected relationship and quality. Working on the plate creates a dialogue between my ideas, a history of the marks and the evidence of the printmaking process.

As I worked further in printmaking I became more interested in the journey of the plate, with its sequential narrative, rather than in producing a final print with an ending edition of beautiful images. I was deeply influenced by the prints of Peter Milton, who I came to know at the Maryland Institute College of Art, and his method of creating a series of states from his plates.



10

Unlike Milton's perfection, I was drawn to the richness of the inherent decay of the plates' surface determined through the sequential state making process. Rembrandt's dry points and etchings provided the model for light and change and further helped to hone my vision. Both artists were deeply involved with landscapes and figures in social settings, architecture and narrative, all qualities I would consider and learn from in my own landscape-based images, the Western Garden Suite of etchings. In this series of etchings I created a world devoid of trees and nature filled with images of a receding industrial space. No people populate these areas and the skies are framed and criss-crossed by the chaos of telephone wires and support cables.



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Often the viewer looks out from the mouth of an industrial tunnel or from beneath some vast architectural structure of unknown purpose. It seems to always be twilight, as if the sun has just gone down or is hidden by late afternoon November clouds. This realm contains no art or nature, its design is functional and seems exhausted by entropy and overuse. The etchings reference both Rembrandt and Piranesi in the quality of light and the overpowering presence of architectural ruins. The scene is familiar on the outskirts of cities where the train tracks, cranes, warehouses, chemical plants and landfills are viewed against the winter sky. It is a metaphorical space describing the relationship of mankind to nature.

I see "landscape" as a romantic ideal based on the beauty and power of nature, an ideal that is not in sync with the degradation and pressure we humans have brought on the planet. From my first landscape etchings in the late 1960's I have been occupied with the relationship between nature and the built environment. In 1972 I felt that landscapes no longer existed, we had begun to live in a real estate-scape where all land had a value based on its economic and resource extraction value. We value a forest that burns down by assessing the board foot of loss lumber. We do not know how to value or calculate the loss of the immeasurable.



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In 1985 the more universal social narrative of the Western Garden, Objects and Mall series of prints related to landscape. In my next body of work specific historical narratives replaced memory and environmental concerns. My goal was not to directly illustrate the historical event but to use it as an emotional resource. Music does not easily illustrate an event but it does with magic intensity capture the deeper reality of the narrative. Music is abstract but its “meaning” can be very specific, the notes do not stand for something but when combined together they can capture the emotional burden and weight of an event as complex as the holocaust. In the late 1980’s through to 2000 I created series of sequential etching suites Lucky Dragon, Raoul Wallenberg, Rosa Luxemburg, Due Unto, Torso and Facts of Fictions. All these suites carried a specific historical narrative and or social theme as starting points.



17

Sequential etching is a narrative drawing/print process that provides both continuity and change. It is a process of altering a single etching plate by producing a drawing, processing the plate, printing it then changing the plate through the addition of new information or removal of the existing drawing by scraping and grinding away the metal surface to bring about a new image. Each print is unique, a progressive series of monotypes. A narrative is created documenting the progression of images, ideas and the studio narrative. I pull a print, and then

change the plate pulling a new impression. Only one impression of each state exists. The plate is worked over again and again producing a series of different but related images. I discovered in the sequential process a mechanism for sustaining an investigation, creating and focusing my studio dialogue. Each day as I changed the plate I became more deeply involved in the subject, the physical and emotional experience. The process of struggling each day to conclude an image records and documents my studio narrative. This narrative is the act of making and remaking and is always an act of discovery. It records both changes in the material and the interaction between the plate, the subject and myself. At the end of the sequential suites the plate becomes so thin that they can no longer sustain reworking.



18

--Edited by Rebekah Callaway

1. Etching, 4x6 Agnew 1969
2. Etching, 18X24 Western Garden 1972 Oliver Street
3. Etching, 18X24 Western Garden 1972 Elm Street
4. Etching, 18X24 Western Garden 1973 Lake Place
5. Etching, 18X24 Western Garden 1975 Profane
6. Etching, 18X24 Western Garden 1975 Sacred
7. Etching, 18X24 Western Garden 1975 Royal
8. Etching, 18X24 Western Garden 1975 Dark Woods
9. Etching, 24X36 1975 Object 1
10. Etching, 18X24 Mall Series 1976
11. Nelson Atkins Museum, 1986, Lucky Dragon exhibition
12. Etching, 24X36 Lucky Dragon 1986
13. Etching, 24X36 Lucky Dragon 1986
14. Nelson Atkins Museum, 1986, Lucky Dragon exhibition
15. Etching/installation, Torso, 1991 Leedy Voukos Art Center
16. Etching/installation, Due Unto, Leedy Voukos Art Center, 1991
17. Etching, Rosa Luxemburg Suite, Print Works Gallery Chicago, 1996
18. Etching, 24X36, Facts of Fictions, 1997