



## The Moonlight Mezzanine

ANDREW FOLAN uncovers specific traces of sculptural strength in a new series of prints from Gerard Cox at the Graphic Studio Gallery this November

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I was fortunate to visit Gerard Cox in 1994 while he was working on *Craobh* one of the largest woodcarvings ever made in this country and now sited in the National Botanic Gardens. A gigantic oak, felled in a storm, provided the five-ton trunk, which he was gradually transforming into a sculpture. Perched on top of the trunk with chisel and mallet, the artist was selectively revealing the contorted chronology of growth from within this vault of organic history. On completion (after two tons had been chipped away) the structure was exposed and the story of the oak's formation celebrated. This was now a distinctive Cox sculpture, controlled by the artist yet yielding so much of the original tree. On a separate visit to his workshop, watching him systematically carve with the rigour and tenacity of a Buddhist monk, I witnessed a spiritual closeness between Gerard Cox's life and art. To mark the beginning of each work sequence he jumped up and struck a bell that hung from the studio roof. His travels in Korea and Japan and his interest in Eastern Culture have had a profound influence on his work.

Coming from the dynamic practice of the sculptor to the precise discipline of printmaking requires fundamental changes in approach. Once again the chisel is used, though perhaps with greater focus and restraint. The woodcut process, by its indirect nature, slows the realisation of ideas and confines the cutting to surface perforation and shallow texture. For Cox the grain of the wood is always a feature, appearing in his prints as a subtle, veiled backdrop. The flatness of the timber plank reveals a graphic sense of the tree's growth, as distinct from that of his sculpture, which follows the contours of the grain, emphasising the internal structure of the tree.

Taking a sheet of timber Cox inks the entire surface and prints it as a pale rectangle. The porosity of the wood yields different quantities of ink (Fig 4), the varying densities of the grain revealed through depth of saturation. From this seminal source, the artist gradually devines his image (Fig 5). By systematically reducing the surface and repeatedly overprinting (usually in a sequence from light to dark) the subject emerges.

When I visited the Graphic Studio in July, I was surprised by his approach to his new series of prints. Wood-cut printing has marked two significant shifts in his practice – that of figuration and colour. In the current series 'The Moonlit Mezzanine' there is a gradual shift from abstraction to representation. A distillation of his former gestural approach now reveals his sources, including Islamic art. Dynamic juxtapositions of floating elements are evident in *Poolside Happyhour* (Fig 3) and *Bazaar* (Fig 1) which are playful in their free style yet evocative to the subjects they portray. Organic forms are juxtaposed with architectural elements introducing a romantic atmosphere in *When Stars Turn Blue* (Fig 2). The use of pattern is significant and evident throughout the work. Most of this celebrates the structural sources of the subject matter and its translation into print. Thus the perforations of decorative tracery are carved from the printing block leaving an elevated surface which transfers ink as a mask. The printed pattern both conceals and reveals what lies behind or beneath it. For Cox, who trained and worked as a



- 1 Gerard Cox  
b.1954 *Bazaar*  
2008 1/12, plate  
39 x 28cm  
paper 65 x 50cm
- 2 *When Stars Turn Blue*  
2008 1/10  
plate 42 x 30cm  
paper 65 x 50cm
- 3 *Poolside Happyhour*  
2008  
1/10, plate  
38 x 25cm  
paper 65 x 50cm
- 4 Woodblock after printing *Tunisian Vine*  
26 x 22cm  
birch plywood
- 5 *Tunisian Vine*  
2008 1/12  
plate 26 x 22cm  
paper 65 x 50cm

sculptor for most of his career, the introduction of a full chromatic spectrum in his prints was a challenge. His distinctive and lively use of colour introduces an emotive energy into the two-dimensional work. There is also a formal understanding of the substance of the oil bound pigment. The printing paper when pulled from the viscous printing ink reveals a lustrous surface, which appears to resonate according to how it is viewed. This quality intensifies as the layers of ink are over printed – the surface becomes more glossy yet always retains a stippled texture as the paper is stripped from the inked surface. This veiled quality is acknowledged by Cox and used to excellent effect in *The Moonlit Mezzanine* series. There is evidence of sequential overprinting, revealing the history of decisions made throughout the production of the print.

Sculpting from a solid block and the cutting back of a printing surface both entail a reductive approach – a practice of eliminating the unwanted, rather than the more usual cumulative processes of modelling and painting. Here the analogy ends however, as the understanding of three- and two-dimensional form are put to very different purposes. The flat surface of the print initially presents a barrier to three-dimensional thinking. It is in overcoming this that Cox demands so much from his prints. Even the position he adopts while working has had to change. When sculpting he would usually stand, confronting a form measuring his height or taller. He currently works on a table cutting with a horizontal, converging gesture. He

avoids creating a spatial impression and instead concentrates on flat planes lying in relation to one another.

The evidence of Cox's sculptural background is always present, even in his two-dimensional work. It has given him a close understanding of space and materials which gives his prints much of their curious quality and dynamism. Their sparse combination of colour and form belies the complex origins of their making. ■

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Photography © Jonathan Hession.

Gerard Cox, 'The Moonlit Mezzanine', Graphic Studio Gallery, Temple Bar, Dublin 6-29 November 2008.

