

STILL LIFE: PAUL COLDWELL IN DIALOGUE WITH GIORGIO MORANDI

Paul Coldwell

The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown caused me to reflect on both my practice and some of the key influences on my work.

I have had a long association with the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, in particular with their collection of works by Giorgio Morandi, a key influence on my work for over four decades. I curated the exhibition 'Morandi's Legacy: Influences on British Art' for them in 2006 and over the years, have contributed several catalogue essays and gallery talks. As part of their plans to reopen in September 2021 after being closed due to COVID, I was invited to rehang their Morandi collection alongside the work that I had done in lockdown.

I wholeheartedly embraced the opportunity to present my work alongside Morandi's. Centred on the idea of still life, I wanted to explore similarities and differences between our works, most prominently to contrast the enforced restrictions imposed by lockdown with the self-imposed restrictions that Morandi had worked under. It also caused me to reflect on the nature of the studio as a place of self-reflection and play.

The work I presented consisted of small plaster sculptures, woodcuts, and a series of four photo-etchings, all engaged with the idea of still life. The objects I featured included picture frames, bottles, miniature furniture, and asthma inhalers, a veiled reference to the fact that COVID attacks the lungs. Furthermore, and a radical departure for me, I included several poems that I had written during lockdown. My illustrated talk will explore the ideas that underpinned the exhibition.

Along with millions of people across the globe, I was hugely impacted by the advent of COVID and the subsequent lockdown, both as an individual and an artist. From March 2020, for the next year, I worked in my studio in my house in London while teaching and supporting my students online with varying degrees of success. With little in the way of actual social interaction, I became increasingly aware that my physical world was contracting but,

conversely, that my imaginative life was expanding. My senses felt heightened, as when returning from a trip away, when everything familiar seemed fresh and new. The world in lockdown seemed a new, uncanny place. It was quieter, with no planes, fewer cars, empty streets, and little actual evidence of the pandemic beyond our masks and the daily news reports.

My artistic work fits predominantly within the genre of still life and the reductive tendency in art, saying more with less. I regard myself as a poet rather than a novelist. During lockdown, I increasingly found myself reflecting on the work of Giorgio Morandi, the Italian metaphysical painter whose repertoire of simple landscapes and still lifes from



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and information

Figure 1: Giorgio Morandi, Still Life with Drapery 1931, Etching 27 x 34 cm, With the kind permission of the Estorick Collection ©DACS 2022.
Figure 2: Giorgio Morandi, Natura Morta 1944, Drawing, 22.4 x 31.6cm With the kind permission of the Estorick Collection ©DACS 2022.

inconsequential bric-a-brac have been so important to me throughout my career. This has included writing several catalogue essays and papers on his work, and in 2006, I curated *Morandi's Legacy: Influences on British Art* for the Estorick Collection in London.¹

The Estorick Collection had been closed throughout the pandemic, but as part of their plans to reopen in October 2021, the director, Roberta Cremencini, invited me to rehang their collection of Morandi drawings and prints alongside a selection of the works I had been creating during lockdown.² As you can imagine, I did not need to be asked twice! I wanted to explore similarities and differences between our works, most prominently to contrast my enforced restrictions imposed by lockdown with the restrictions that Morandi had worked under throughout his life. It also caused me to reflect on the nature of the studio as a place of self-reflection and play.

Morandi worked under conditions of self-imposed restrictions, living and working in Bologna, rarely travelling, and living with his three sisters in an apartment where his bedroom served as his studio, complete with an etching press. He predominantly worked from observation, and within this, he restricted himself to either still lifes consisting of everyday objects such as bottles, jugs, and tin boxes or landscapes created either around Bologna or in the summer from the balcony of his summer house in Grizzana, where he went to escape the heat of the city. In terms of printmaking, the vast majority of his work was done using hard ground and cross-hatching and from a single immersion in the acid. This narrowing of possibilities was offset by a lengthy process in which he arranged his still lifes, adjusted them, allowed dust to fall, and even, in some cases, painted the objects themselves before etching or painting them. So, while he kept the technical side of etching to a minimum, the images had a long gestation to bring them to completion.³ This parallels my practice, but in my case, it involves both the manufacturing of material for my still lifes and the extensive manipulation of the image on the computer before outputting the final analogue prints.

During lockdown, my sense of the studio as a place to play and of introspection intensified. I re-read Xavier de Maistre's *A Journey Around My Room*, and my dear friend Anthony Rudolf published *Journey Around My Flat*, which examined the contents of his life. I also looked again at Giacometti's drawings and the late work of Philip Guston, who took the space of their studios as landscapes to explore. Giacometti views the studio as another space to map, populated by random objects, furniture, and his sculptures, as in this drawing of 1932, while in this late drawing, he maps out the eerie space of absence within a hotel room. Guston treats the studio as a mental space, a container of anxieties. His studio is populated by what seems like things modelled just sufficiently to register meaning, as in the lithograph *Studio Forms*, created just before his death, in which boots, canvases, and other objects all seem to be made out of the same matter, as observed by Michael Semff:



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

1. *Morandi's Legacy: Influences on British Art* was an exhibition at Abbot Hall Art Gallery Kendal from January through March 2006 and at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, London from April through June 2006. It was accompanied by a book of the same name published by Philip Wilson Publishers.

Other published writing on Morandi by the author include: 2019 *Giorgio Morandi Various Objects on a Table*, *Art in Print*, 2008 *The Animation of Silence 2001*. In: *Giorgio Morandi, The Collectors Eye*, London Estorick Collection. This was translated into Italian and published in *Da Boccioni a Morandi*, Palazzo Ducale, Genoa.

2. In lockdown, I was invited to be in conversation with the director Roberta Cremencini <https://www.estorickcollection.com/news/2021/05/11/giorgio-morandi-through-light-and-shade-series-recording>

3. For further reading, Janet Abramowicz *Giorgio Morandi: The art of silence* (New Haven and London) Yale University Press, 2004.

Figure 3: Giorgio Morandi, *Natura Morta* 1929, Etching 14.5 x 19.5 cm With the kind permission of the Estorick Collection ©DACs 2022.

Figure 4: Alberto Giacometti, *The Studio* 1932, Pencil 32 x 49 cm, With the kind permission of the Kupferstichkabinett, Kunstmuseum, Basel ©Succession Alberto Giacometti / DACS 2022.

Figure 5: Alberto Giacometti, *Chambre d'hôtel II* 1963, Pencil 50 x 33cm With the kind permission of the Kunsthaus Zürich, Alberto Giacometti-Stiftung. Donated by the artist, 1964 ©Succession Alberto Giacometti / DACS 2022.

...a visual inventory consisting largely of everyday things, if repeatedly placed in strange combinations. This lends the mundane an unusual ambivalence without prejudicing its legibility.⁴

During lockdown, I had limited facilities and began making and casting objects in plaster as material for my still lifes. These took the form of groupings of objects on bases, some of which took the form of builder's palettes or rafts, a metaphor for an isolated world. They also referenced the Gericault painting of the Raft of the Medusa, a sense that all was not well in the world and we were clinging on.

These sculptures predominately shared the frontal address of Morandi's still lifes, but also, I hope, reflected the disquiet in his work. My repertoire of objects featured blank photo frames, miniature bottles, furniture, and frequently a cast of an asthma inhaler as a sideways reference to the danger of COVID to the lungs.

I created a number of these sculptures in which the various elements were finally fixed together into groupings, but I also used the cast and models as objects to arrange and photograph. These in turn became material to be taken into the computer to be further modified and reworked. Crucially, I imposed a halftone over the image, both to reference how a photograph can enter the world of print and to impose a distance between the viewer and the image. I finally settled on a group of four compositions that were outputted onto film; I then made photo-etching plates. These were printed by Brian Hodgson and published as a portfolio entitled *The Studio*.

I wanted to unsettle the viewer by playing with scale and creating a feeling of the uncanny. I wanted the viewer to sense that something was not right in terms of the scale of the objects relative to one another and certain inconsistencies in the way the light was used across the composition.

As I was creating these works, I was also developing my vision of how to present them alongside Morandi's work. As a teacher, I frequently challenge my students to imagine their work alongside that of the artists they admire or feel they have a great affinity with. This was my chance to apply these demands to myself and 'walk the walk'. I had two galleries to use, one the mirror of the other. I wanted to establish a conversation between the works rather than a specific comparison. For this reason, I presented my work on the wall opposite Morandi's, and alongside the prints, I showed two sculptures in each gallery. It was a quiet hang, I hope in keeping with the meditative nature of Morandi's work. Uncommonly amongst printmakers, Morandi worked on his prints as individual works rather than as parts of series or groupings. In contrast, I invariably work on groups of prints held together by common themes.

A further aspect of lockdown and one that connected to this project was a renewed need to write and develop these thoughts in the form of poetry. To coincide with the exhibition, the Estorick published a boxed

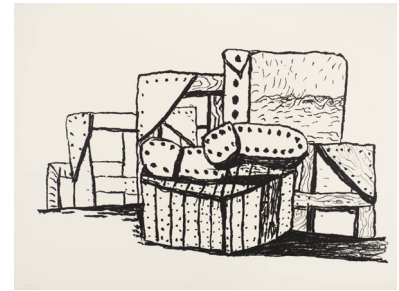


Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure 6: Philip Guston, *Studio Forms* 1980, Lithograph on paper 81.3 x 106.7 cm, © The Estate of Philip Guston, courtesy of Hauser & Wirth
 Figure 7: Paul Coldwell, *Untitled with side table* 2020-21, Jesmonite and wood 21 x 27 x 20 cm ©Paul Coldwell
 Figure 8: Paul Coldwell, *The Studio I* 2020-21, Photo-etching paper size 56 x 76 cm, ©Paul Coldwell

4. Semff, M., (2015) *The Prints of Phillip Guston*, Munich: Sieveking Verlag, 2015, p.11.

set of my poems alongside photographs of 13 of my sculptures. Each was printed on separate sheets so that the owner could put the poems and prints in order.⁵ Two of the poems were presented as part of the exhibition.

Morandi is often described as a visual poet. I take this to refer to both his reductive language and the way each element is placed, with as much care as a poet has for the positioning of a word. I hope that this sense of placement is both apparent in the sculptures and prints and felt in the use of language in the poems.

I will conclude with one of these poems, which articulates some feelings the reader might recognise from lockdown. The title references Xavier de Maistre's book, *A Journey Around My Room*, written in 1794, in which the author writes about circumnavigating his room.

A Journey Around My Room (for Xavier de Maistre)

I've paced this room endlessly
 each step measured out in time
 drawing the space, leaving a trace, a line
 as I circumnavigate my shrinking world.
 Walking the boards,
 nudging the furniture into new constellations,
 discovering new locations
 for a magazine or an open book, as if waiting.
 Left as if a thought had passed this way
 or an empty stage awaiting the play,

We are all characters rehearsing our part
 remembering our lines
 remembering to stay two meters apart. Hard for tragedy,
 harder for a romantic scene.
 A rhetorical kiss seems too obscene
 to encompass lips and tongues touching in-between.

And here's the thing
 there's no one to witness the changes I bring
 just endless games of solitaire
 while these four walls return my stare.
 Like at a séance asking Is anyone still out there?

Now
 under sheets
 nights drawing upon reserves.
 Thoughts out of place, missing things
 still lives with every object cast in white.
 A bleached world, names erased,
 names cut in the air
 later a time to be chiselled in stone
 before being left to lie alone.



Figure 9



Figure 10

Figure 9: Paul Coldwell, *The Studio II* 2020-21, Photo-etching paper size 56 x 76 cm, ©Paul Coldwell

Figure 10: Installation of *A Still Life*, Photo courtesy of the Estorick Collection.

5. Paul Coldwell. *A Still Life*. Boxed set in an edition of 100 copies, signed and numbered, comprising ten poems and 13 printed photographs. Published by the Estorick Collection 2021.

The blinds (how aptly named),
the blinds turned down, closed against the window sky
draw lines like a school punishment across the walls and ceiling.
Repeat a hundred times
I must not stop believing.
I must not give up.
A textbook for my inner feelings.

It's more than gravity that now pulls us down.
The clock at night at quarter to four takes on a frown
or the grimace of a lonely clown.

I'm not afraid of the dark
but what the dark contains.
The pearl-handled pistol alone on the desk,
the bullet or the ball
with my name etched. Unplayable they said,
nothing could be done.
Accept it,
it's fate.
Left to quietly atone
seeking solace
before another morning breaks.

A Journey Around My Room (for Xavier de Maistre) © Paul Coldwell

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Paul is Professor of Fine Art at the University of the Arts London, UK. His practice includes prints, book works, sculptures and installations, focusing on themes of journey, absence and loss. He has exhibited widely both in UK and abroad and his work is included in numerous public collections, including Tate, V&A, British Museum, the Arts Council of England, Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva and MoMA (New York). Much of his work has involved researching within collections including at Kettle's Yard Cambridge, and the Freud Museums in both Vienna (2016) and London (2017). He has curated a number of exhibitions including Morandi's Legacy; Influences on British Art (Estorick Collection London 2006) and The Artists Folio, (Cartwright Hall, Bradford 2014) and is on the editorial board of Print Quarterly.

He has been a keynote speaker at a number of international research fora including Impact 7 International Printmaking Conference, Melbourne, Australia 2011, SNAP 3 Third International Print Symposium, Bentlage, Germany 2015 and Why remember? Ruins, Remains & reconstruction in Times of War and its aftermath. Sarajevo

2018. His book *Printmaking: A Contemporary Perspective* was published by Black Dog Publishing in 2010. *Picturing the Invisible*, co-edited with Professor Ruth Morgan was published by UCL Press in Jan 2022.

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IMAGE GALLERY



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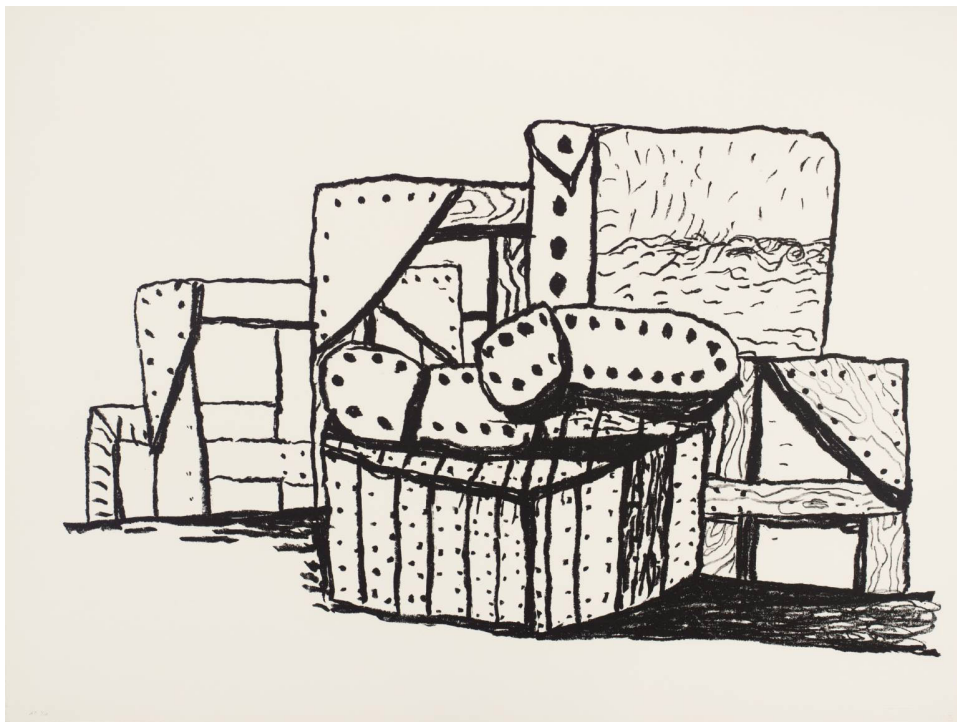
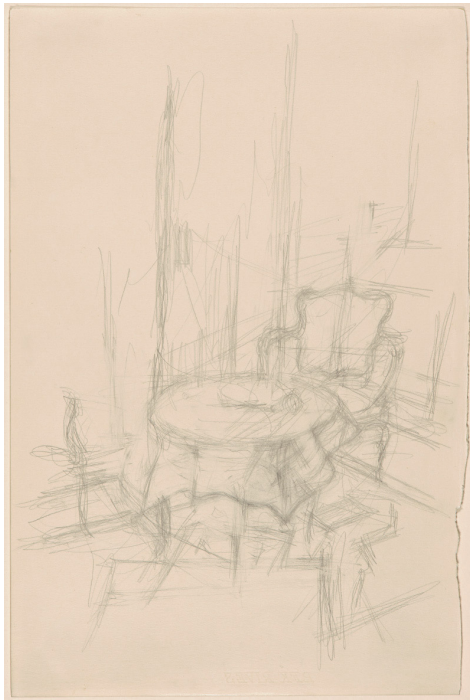


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