

Etching and Rewards of Uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

The process of etching is physical and elemental, requiring force and pressure, inviting aggression and then delicacy, conjoining fire, water, earth, and air. There is something about setting an image into metal that implies permanence, duration, and enduring presence, and I hope my images mirror the medium in that sense. I embrace themes of loss, futility, destruction, and unexpected, redemptive beauty, themes tied to the tradition of printmaking, whose imagery has always tended toward critical commentary and serious contemplation, and often toward humor and irony as well.

Fail; fail again; fail better

Samuel Beckett

No battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy

Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke

INTRODUCTION

I have been making prints for over 30 years. I began to make prints because I had to: a printmaking course was part of the curriculum of the first year art program at the school where I was hired to teach. In order to learn, I began to make my own etchings, and soon fell in love with everything about the medium. I learned from books and from the often ill effects of my own teaching on student work. The craft, history, and language of etching grew on me, and though my prints were clumsy, I accepted that as a beginner I wouldn't be good right away. My early prints were full of surprises, good and bad; I saw that I couldn't easily get what I wanted. Whether I would eventually be able to etch well, and with confidence, I thought, was simply a matter of making more prints.

Only that it wasn't. I've made at least 500 prints and I still don't get what I want. And that is what I love about etching. My own expectations don't seem to matter all that much. My competence, which I take

on faith has increased with repetition, doesn't seem to help much either.

Etching, at least as I practice it, presents several in-built barriers to predictability. The most obvious is that the matrix you spend so much time developing is not the art: it's simply a method to get to the art. Left-right reversal is the next interruption to expectation. You can certainly plan for it, at least when not working from life, but you'll have spent so much time looking at the plate during its creation that the reversal will always come as something of a surprise. Another inversion is the darkness of the ground, whose job is to protect the plates to keep it light, while the shiny plate itself, left untouched so that it can be exposed

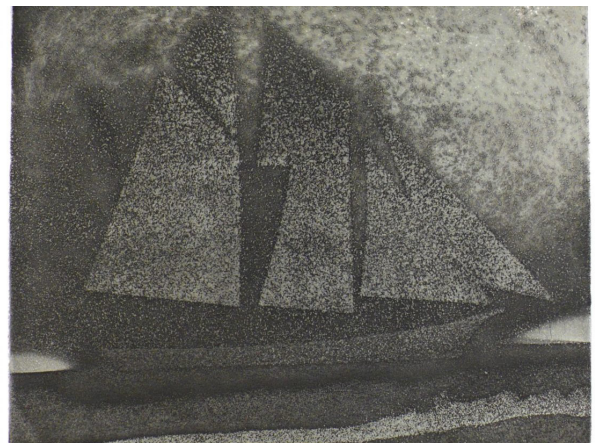


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1: Ship in Fog, by Brian Cohen. Etching, 200 x 250mm
 Figure 2: In The Wood (1989) by Brian Cohen. Etching, 330 x 483mm

to acid to create dark tones, appears perversely light. What's created is not obvious until you print.

EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH

I developed an approach to starting a plate by working with stencils to define broad shapes. With an airbrush I spray liquid hard ground (Charbonnel Lamour Black Covering Varnish, cut with naphtha) through hand-cut stencils onto a blank plate to define light areas. Sometimes, conversely, I will start with a plate completely covered with ground, and use an air eraser (a Deldent miniblaster, a dental implement made to aid in adhering dental materials) to remove the ground so that the plate is selectively exposed. The open areas of the plate can then be covered with an aquatint (which will create dark areas), or, alternatively, left to open bite in ferric chloride. Open bite creates dark areas on aluminum but surprisingly light areas on zinc or copper, and, interestingly, can result in great variations and unpredictability, especially along the edges of the stencil where overspray creates a transitional terrain. This irregular terrain, a kind of shoreline where sea and land meet, abounds with nuance and suggestion, and is where the image comes to life. (Ship in Fog, etching, 200 x 250mm)

For me, one of the main attractions of etching is that the range of mark-making extends well beyond, but encompasses, deliberate marks made by hand. Etching is an expanded definition of drawing. In *The Wood* (etching, 1989, 330 x 483mm), I created the tangled vineyard represented in a passage from Dante's *Inferno*, from Canto XIII, in which Dante steps into a rambling thicket, each twisted vine the petrified remains of a suicide.

We moved on into a pathless wood that twisted upward from Hell's broken floor. Its foliage was not verdant, but nearly black. The unhealthy branches, gnarled and warped and tangled, bore poison thorns instead of fruit.

Dante's *Inferno*, Canto XIII, from the translation by John Ciardi, New York: A Mentor Classic from New American Library, 1954

Mistrustful of the deliberateness of my hand, and trusting to chance, or gravity, to make better marks than I can with intention, I took lift-ground (also called sugar lift, which I mixed in the studio with India ink, gum arabic, sugar and hot water) in a squeeze bottle and poured it over the plate, tilting the plate so that the ground streamed in unpredictable rivulets down the metal, later choosing what to keep and stopping out stray or confusing marks. Lift-ground is the only etching technique in which what looks dark will eventually print dark, as, after covering the plate with a hard ground, the lift-ground is removed, exposing the plate, which is then aquatinted. The streams of lift-ground became the tangled vines.

In *Water* (2007, etching, 305 x 229 mm), I used D'Uva Lithocoal (discontinued, formerly available from Takach Press), a powder that, placed in suspension in a solution of alcohol and poured over the plate,



Figure 3

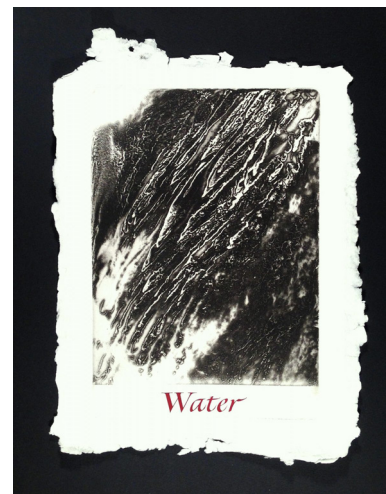


Figure 4

Figure 3: *Tree Trunk* (2000) by Brian Cohen. Relief etching, handcoloured with watercolour, 229 x 152mm
 Figure 4: *Water* (2007) by Brian Cohen. Etching, 305 x 229 mm

dries in unpredictably complex patterns and is fixed with heat using a heat gun from below (as it will disrupt the powder if used from above) as a durable resist. I poured that solution dozens of times over the plate, wiping it completely off each time until the pattern and direction of textures suited the effect I wanted for the plate. I then applied a light aquatint, heated the plate, etched it, and proofed it. This plate required little further work, apart from some selective scraping and burnishing. Accepting that a chemical process, rather than my purposeful draftsmanship, could make an image was an adjustment for me, but I was learning that the particular chemical and physical behaviour of various materials could speak for me.

Tree Trunk (2000, relief etching, handcoloured with watercolour, 229 x 152mm) started as a botanical illustration for a treatise on plant communication via symbiotic root fungi. I worked in as much detail as I could with a needle, but my line betrayed too much purpose, too much effort, which for some reason didn't seem as obvious when printed in relief, with no loss of detail. I have on several occasions printed an intaglio plate in relief, salvaging some clarity from a muddied or compromised intaglio plate. This is not just a desperate means of salvaging a plate in which I invested so much time, though sometimes that is the case; it is instead discovering a new means of bringing out what is in the plate through an alternative printing. Same words, different language.

WEALTH OF POSSIBILITIES

What results from all this experimentation may be, no doubt, a multitude of captivating effects and textures, but my governing intention keeps things moving toward some imagined end ("I know it when I see it," Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously opined regarding pornography). The wealth of possibilities in etching is both boundless and endlessly tempting, and finding a direction within those potential outcomes remains a matter of constant inner recalibration, made always more uncertain by the difficulty in apprehending what will later appear in print from a plate in its formative stages. I reject most of what comes my way. (I think of Albrecht Dürer, who mistrusted etching, objecting on moral grounds to the (then) new technology in which imagery could be freely and directly drawn on a plate without the discipline and premeditation that engraving required and rewarded). What governs my decisions, and my selectivity, is that, above all, I am depicting recognizable objects within a believable space, and that I am looking for textures and marks that are, at the least, credible.

I continue to stumble upon makeshift approaches to etching in an ongoing effort to tame and guide the unpredictable nature of the medium. Though I often don't know exactly what I'll get, I have found ways to guide the unexpected and potentially satisfying things that may happen on a plate, and I'm loathe to exclude the accidental or the momentarily inspired ahead of time. The process of etching is physical and elemental, requiring force and pressure, inviting aggression and then delicacy, conjoining fire, water,

earth, and air, and the mysterious alchemy of the material world. There is something about setting an image into metal that implies permanence, duration, and enduring presence, and I hope my images mirror the medium in that sense.

The process of etching is physical and elemental, requiring force and pressure, inviting aggression and then delicacy, conjoining fire, water, earth, and air. There is something about setting an image into metal that implies permanence, duration, and enduring presence, and I hope my images mirror the medium in that sense. I embrace themes of loss, futility, destruction, and unexpected, redemptive beauty, themes tied to the tradition of printmaking, whose imagery has always tended toward critical commentary and serious contemplation, and often toward humor and irony as well.

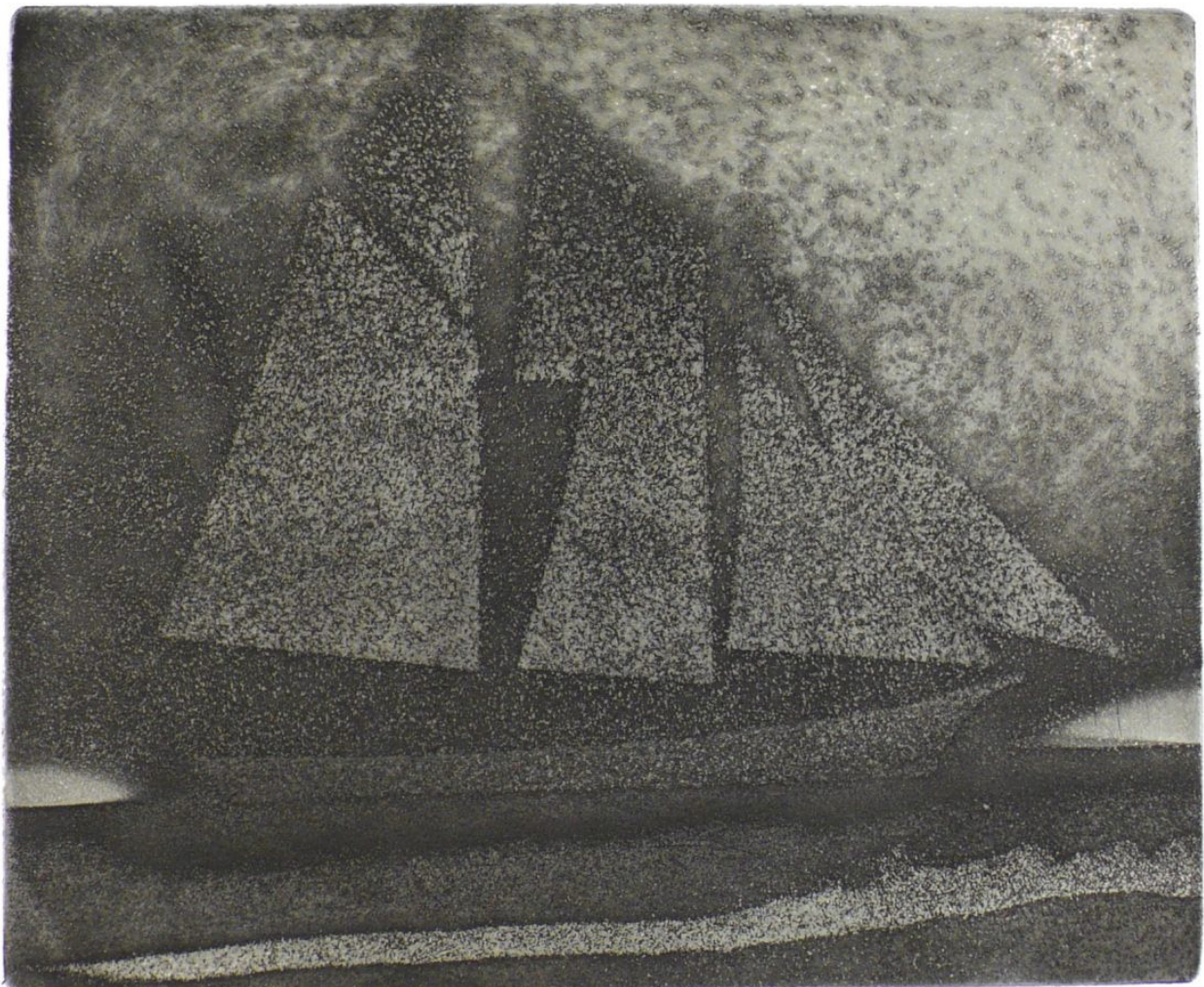
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IMAGE GALLERY



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Ship in Fog

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Figure 1: Ship in Fog, by Brian Cohen. Etching, 200 x 250mm



Figure 2: In The Wood (1989) by Brian Cohen. Etching, 330 x 483mm



Figure 3: Tree Trunk (2000) by Brian Cohen. Relief etching, handcoloured with watercolour, 229 x 152mm

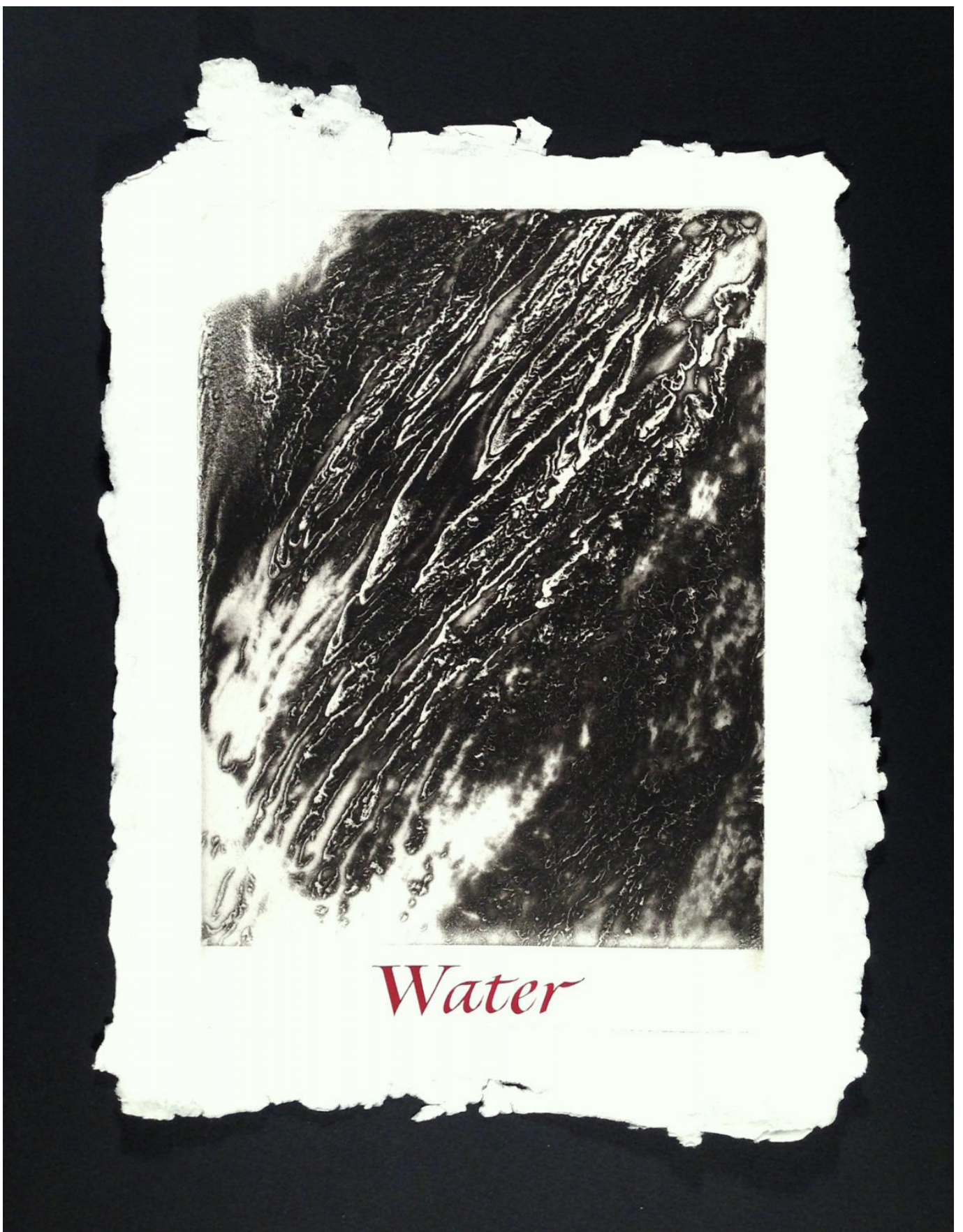


Figure 4: Water (2007) by Brian Cohen. Etching, 305 x 229 mm