

I Can Still Hear You

Michelle Keegan, Senior Lecturer in Printmaking at the University of Northampton

ABSTRACT

I Can Still Hear You is a series of etchings on copper made during 2018/19 by Michelle Keegan, Senior Lecturer in Printmaking at the University of Northampton. Her creative process is centred on the Sound Mirrors located in Denge on Romney Marsh in Kent. These are giant concrete structures hidden in a desolate and austere landscape that were the precursors to the birth of radar. Keegan examines her relationship with place and being permanently in transit. Keegan writes of her relationship with etching, and gives us an insight into the spontaneity of her approach to printmaking. The work explores conversations of loss and a remapping of space.

I CAN STILL HEAR YOU: ETCHINGS ON COPPER 2019

Romney Marsh is situated in the southern-most corner of England. It's a small area occupying 25 miles along the coast, stretching inland by 10 miles. It is a desolate, peripheral place that was a gift from the sea. There is always a threat that the sea may reclaim this territory one day. It remains sparsely populated, with large expansive skies expanding over flat lands. It also has the warmest, driest climate in Britain.

Romney Marsh is my spiritual home. I was brought up there. The hum of the nuclear power station at Dungeness, put-put of gunshot, bird song and ever-present winds are reminiscent of music dancing across ledger lines. Drainage dykes, sea walls, and electricity pylons are structures of modernity that traverse the flat expanses of the marshland. It is a strange place which was named the Fifth Continent by Thomas Ingoldsby in 1869 [the pseudonym for Richard Harris Barham] who wrote *The World*, according to the best geographers, is divided into Europe, Asia, Africa, America, and Romney Marsh.

The Sound Mirrors at Denge near Dungeness are

giant concrete structures hidden in a desolate and austere landscape. A couple times a year the public can visit to experience the sculptural structures. These mirrors are the birth of radar: concrete listening ears invented to aid the early warning of enemy planes, eventually replaced by radar and rendered defunct. Constructed between 1920 and 1930, they sit on RSPB land on their own island surrounded by water. When a metal drawbridge is released, it's then possible to stand by these astonishing shapes. The Sound Mirrors tower over the viewer. While there are obvious

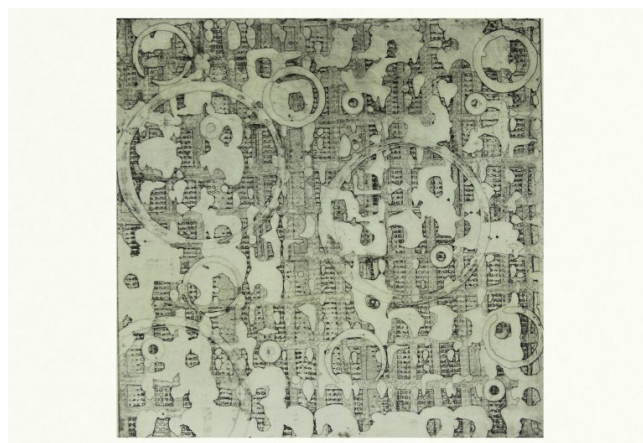


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. *I Can Still Hear You* [2019] by Michelle Keegan. Etching on copper, 250mm x 250mm

Figure 2. Sound Mirrors Denge. Photo by Michelle Keegan

signs of decay, graffiti and wear, they are magnificent and speak of a past war and lost communication. The largest Sound Mirror is 200 foot in length and 26 feet high; an imposing structure. Up close it's easy to place an ear against the wall and speak with another person 200 feet away. The concrete wall is curved and sound bounces in the same way as in St Paul's Cathedral's Whispering Gallery. On open days, strangers speak along the wall to each other, as if they are part of a performance, bringing the Sound Mirrors back to life. The walls listen again. I have returned to the island numerous times, sometimes unable to cross the bridge but still enjoying the loneliness and peace of the landscape.

The landscape of the Marsh is scarred with military defences and littered with Martello towers and the meandering Royal Military Canal; the threat of Napoleonic invasion led to this being constructed between 1804 and 1809. More recent additions of Pillboxes and Military Ranges contrast the tranquillity of the landscape with underlying reference to human combat and violence both past and present. These act as departure points for other beginnings of prints that are informed by the minimal geometry and idiosyncratic landscape.

I am in transit. I live and work in multiple places and drive from place to place. It's a liminal existence. I collect imagery when on Romney Marsh that informs a visual conversation. There is a strong connectivity between self and place. The conversation diverges and digresses from the representational to an abstracted and personal discourse that concerns both people and place. The conversation for the series of etchings *I Can Still Hear You* began with visits to the Sound Mirrors.

I begin with drawing, often rapidly in a small A6 sketchbook. I make numerous visits to the same place, in different seasons, weather and light resulting in 10 or more field trips. The repetitive fieldwork enables the place to be revealed and unfold alongside a broader and personal context for the work. The layers of complexity become a palimpsest, as earlier drawings are reworked like an etching plate, redrawn on top. These initial sketches act as departure points for more complex ideas and a remapping of my journeys. These sketches are the basis for ideas and multi-layered conversations about how we navigate place and space. The location enables a physical response to landscape and engages me in a dialogue of questions concerned with belonging, rootedness, and home.

I've often thought that etching is liminal. As a plate is being etched it passes between states. There is a moment when control is relinquished to the corrosive liquid that will bite the metal. Contributing factors such as temperature and freshness of the acid impact upon the marks. No matter how many years of experience a printmaker has, there is a moment of the unknown and mystery that will only be revealed when the metal is printed. That is the magic and alchemy of etching.

Once I have returned to my studio, there is plenty of time to ruminate. I begin with a series of square plates. The square shape is important, a deliberate strategy to depart from the mimetic and representational.

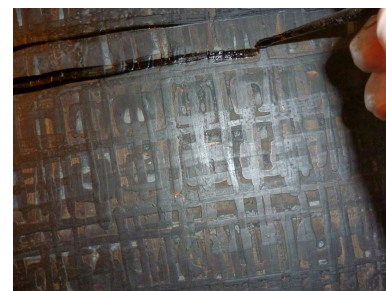


Figure 3



Figure 4

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Figure 3. Working on the etching plate
Figure 4. Copper plate *I Can Still Hear You* 250mm x 250mm

It is my intention to draw the viewer to something other, other than the literal. This is where abstraction begins. I depart from breakwaters, pylons, drainage dykes, sea and Sound Mirrors. It is now that I rely on memory and emotion. The prints look for balance using repetition of both circles and grids within a perfect square.

Printmaking is an essential part of my work as it is symbiotic with an idea. I begin slowly with liquid ground and paint shapes and marks. This leaves a large expanse of open plate that will open bite. With copper I use Edinburgh Etch. I have spent many years exploring less toxic methods, looking for a stable liquid ground that can be layered upon layer without losing stability and cracking when etched, but in vain. I paint numerous layers and etch for long periods of time, upwards of 30 minutes and sometimes even overnight. The layers can be 10-15 high before removal. It is essential the Edinburgh Etch is stable and will not lead to uneven etching or foul bite.

I will remove the liquid ground, take a printed proof of what exists, and rework the plate numerous times until I'm satisfied with the surface and the print becomes resolved. This is a time-consuming pursuit. It is not planned but responsive to the process. The etching process becomes one of spontaneous transcription, of feelings and memories, both familiar and elusive, which evolve as I work. If I am not satisfied with the balance or composition of the plate, I will grind the marks away using powertools; there's no such thing as an easy way of deleting a mark for an etcher. I'm not precious with the etching plate when developing the work.

In a review in Artists' Newsletter in 2014, Tom Hackett wrote,

'These prints are subtle... charged enough to make you look and to look slowly. And as your gaze lingers their elegance and poetry rises gently to the surface... The artist takes ... the grid structure to create a layered sense of place. Shapes, and forms, which appear at times to evoke the imagery of direct rubbings, are meticulously etched and printed into carefully nuanced lines which overlap to create a sensual essence of texture and interweaving.' (1)

The lines are heavily etched to ensure an indent is achieved around each shape. The plate is inked using a Charbonnel stiff dense black ink and printed on Hahnemuehle paper. The paper is soft and ensures every mark is evident, this will add to the subtlety of the final print.

The I Can Still Hear You series talks of conversations lost, of people lost, of conversations never begun, of things we wished we'd said. Elusive ghosts and deep seated memories are brought into being. The imagery is part in-memoriam, part remapping. I use the term mapping not in the sense of a literal cartography but rather as a feeling and emotional connection with place. The prints began with the Sound Mirrors but are not representative of nor mimicking the shape of the structures.

The making of the prints involve a meditation with fragments of memory, they are contemplative by nature. They retain fluid remnants

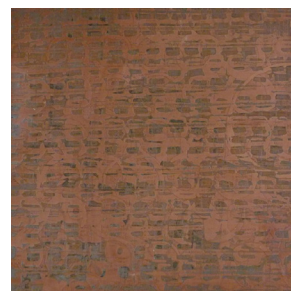


Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 5. Copper plate I Can Still Hear You 250mm x 250mm

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of shape and a gentle motion. The layering maintains a sparseness of sporadic marks and linearity. The implication of somewhere or someplace subtly intersects with textures and line. The scale of the etching plates is 25cm square. This is small in comparison to the mammoth structures that inspire them. The intimate scale suggests a more private approach. It is a place for listening. A place of belonging. A personal cartography.

APPENDIX OF TERMS

Open Bite is an etching technique where open areas of metal are exposed to a mordant such as Edinburgh Etch. The result is that the plate becomes corroded to a certain depth by the mordant, such that the plate now has variations of thicknesses. The deeper areas will hold flat tones of ink, with ink accumulating around the edges of shapes which are higher.

Foul Bite is unintentional marks which appear on the plate due to the action of a mordant, usually because the chemical that protects the surface of the plate is cracked or has small holes in it. The result can be uneven marks or fine dots.

Edinburgh Etch is Ferric Chloride and Citric Acid. This is a type of mordant which is used to bite an etching plate.

4 litres of ferric chloride solution + 1 litre hot water mixed with 300g citric acid powder creates a 42–45 Baume mordant. The Baume scale describes the specific weight of liquids, and by implication the strength of the mordant, and can be measured using a hygrometer.

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FOOTNOTE

(1) Hackett, T. (2014) a-n The Artist's Information Company: News.15 August. Available from: <https://www.a-n.co.uk/reviews/michelle-keegan-a-place-between-5/> [Accessed 5 August 2020].

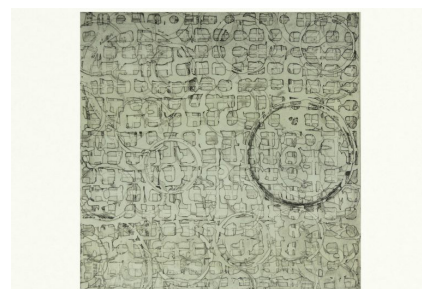


Figure 7

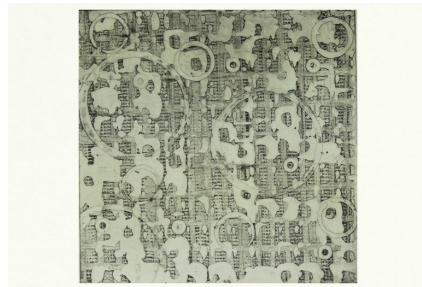


Figure 8

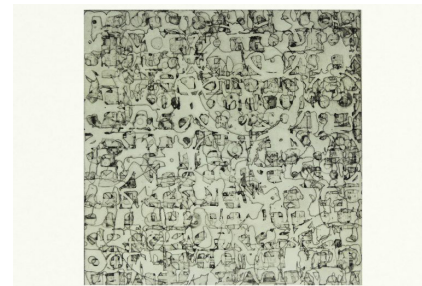


Figure 9

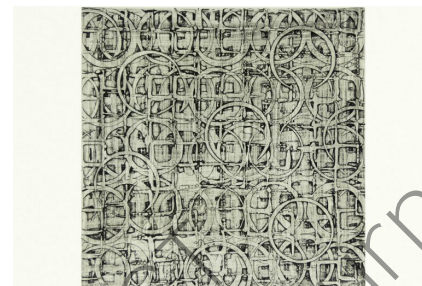


Figure 10

Figure 7. I Can Still Hear You 9 [2019] by Michelle Keegan. Etching on copper, 250mm x 250mm
 Figure 8. I Can Still Hear You 9 [2019] by Michelle Keegan. Etching on copper, 250mm x 250mm
 Figure 9. I Can Still Hear You 9 [2019] by Michelle Keegan. Etching on copper, 250mm x 250mm
 Figure 10. I Can Still Hear You 9 [2019] by Michelle Keegan. Etching on copper, 250mm x 250mm

AUTHOR

Michelle Keegan studied Fine Art at the Kent Institute of Art and Design, graduating with first class honours. She specialised in printmaking immediately, having been intrigued by the possibilities of process, and exploring unconventional ways of making marks. Michelle continued her postgraduate education at the Slade School of Fine Art. For the past 25 years she has made prints and exhibited widely. Michelle is Senior Lecturer in Printmaking at the University of Northampton, tutor in printmaking for Open College of Arts and guest tutor at numerous print workshops.

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IMAGE GALLERY



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Figure 2. Sound Mirrors Denge. Photo by Michelle Keegan
Figure 3. Working on the etching plate

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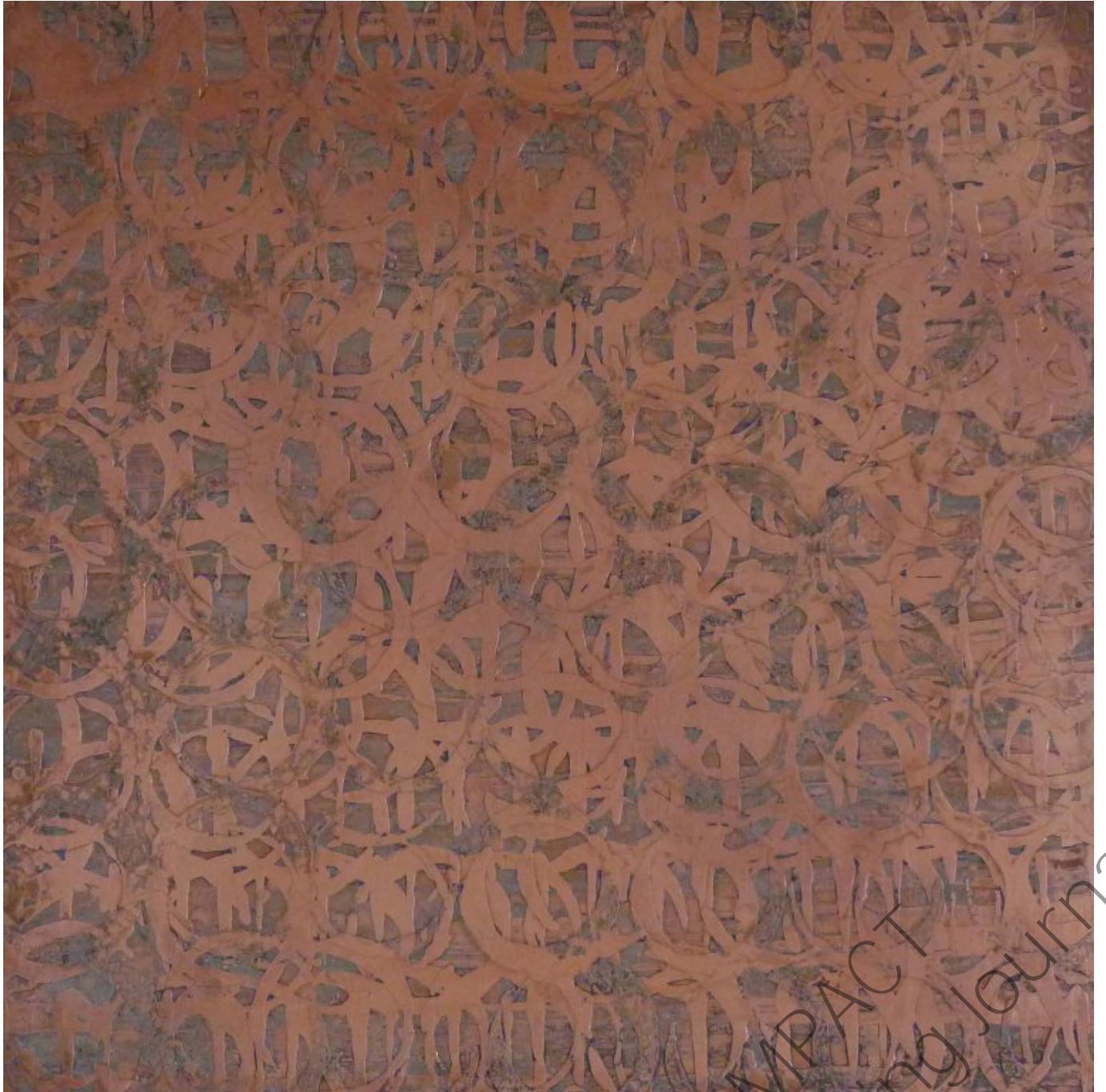


Figure 4. Copper plate I Can Still Hear You 250mm x 250mm

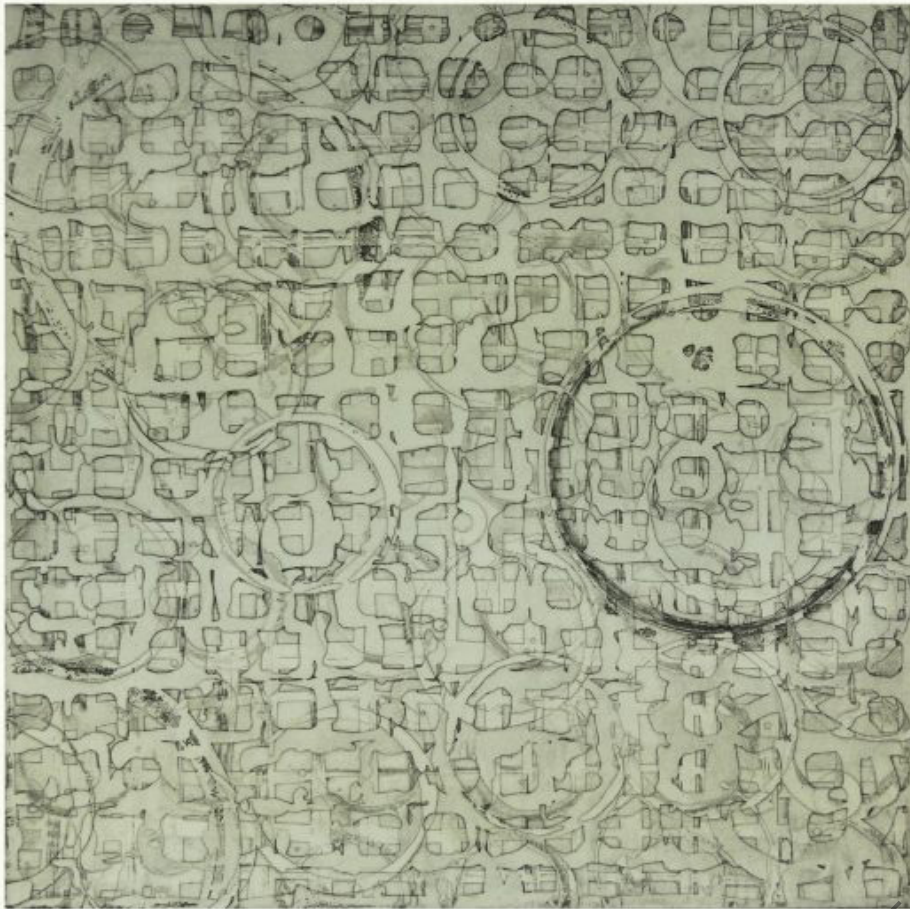


Figure 5. Copper plate I Can Still Hear You 250mm x 250mm



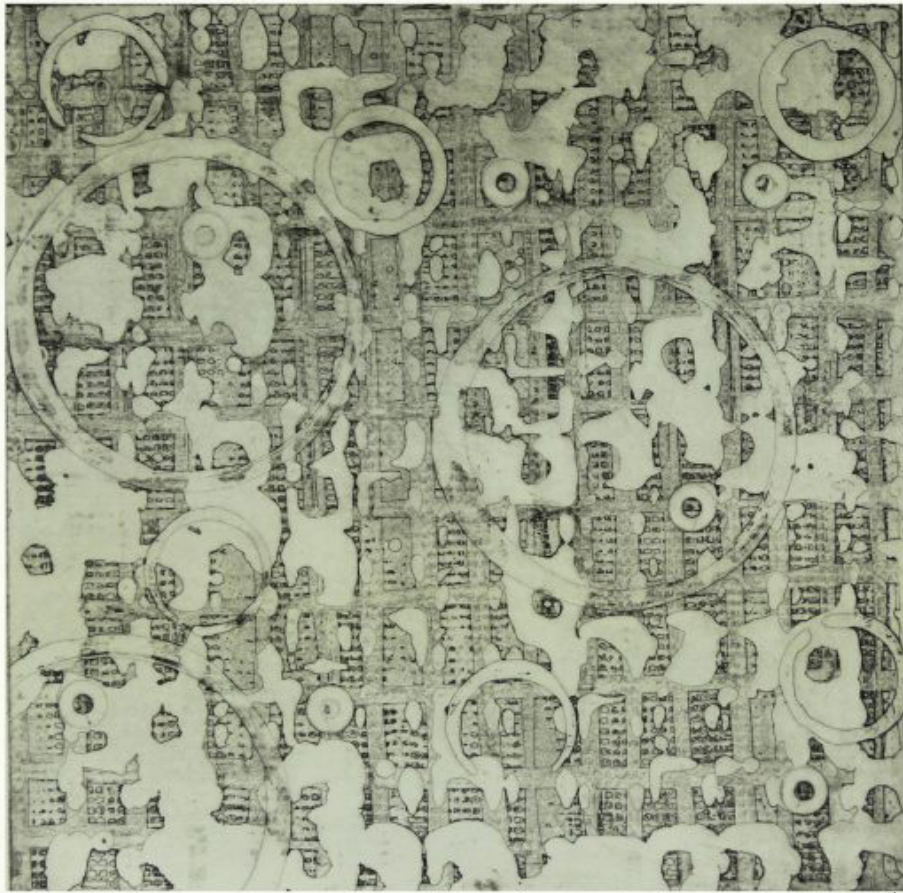
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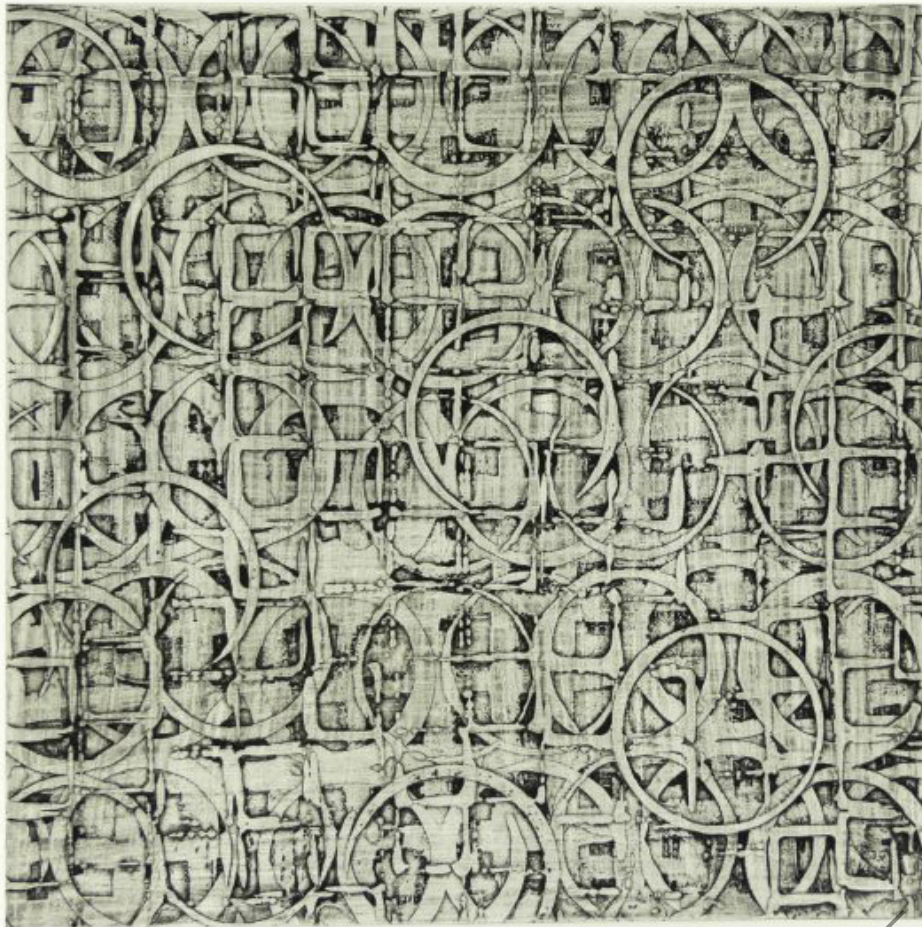


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