

# Parting Thoughts of a Printmaker

Brian D Cohen

## ABSTRACT

Two years ago I was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. From the day I learned that the disease had relapsed, I have spent nearly every free moment in the studio reworking, preserving, and documenting the etching plates I've made in my lifetime. But what to do with all of it, those 800 pieces of metal and 5,000 pieces of paper? I've heard stories of artists' entire life's work being thrown in dumpsters, and others who, with vast means and vainglorious egos, founded museums devoted to their own achievements. How should I resolve my archive, when the end is in sight?

limited time and financial resources, and because I continued to work in many states over the years and seldom felt an image was finished. I canceled only one plate, ever, and even that plate I later reworked. This past year I've gathered, polished, reworked, inventoried, and proofed every square inch of the many plates I've ever etched and engraved. Afterwards, I grease each one, slip it into a plastic bag (much like struggling into a wet swimsuit) and then into a Tyvek envelope, label it, and file it away.

## PARTING THOUGHTS OF A PRINTMAKER

I learned from a restorer of vintage Porsche sports cars the value of applying wax with one's fingertips, all the better to tell if any grit had made its way into the mix. This knowledge, and many other seemingly useless bits of advice, I managed to retain and now use on a daily basis.

Two years ago I was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. From the day I learned that the disease had relapsed and what that meant (almost exactly one year to the day after receiving a bone marrow transplant) I have spent nearly every free moment in the studio reworking, preserving, and documenting the 800 or so etching plates I've made in my lifetime. Like an Egyptian embalmer, preserving the Pharaoh's viscera in canopic jars for eternity, I rub petroleum jelly with my fingers into my etching plates to protect them, making sure no grit enters the mix. In this way, like the Egyptians, I aspire to a mythology of immortality.

## A PERSONAL ARCHIVE

I have always kept my plates, lugging them around as I moved from studio to studio, as they became tarnished, bent, and deteriorated. It was unusual for me to print full editions, in part because of



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. Brian in his print shop. Photo by John Highstreet, 2022  
 Figure 2. Master Printer Joshua Tangen pulls a print as Brian looks on. Photo by John Highstreet, 2022

## COMPELLING MYSTERY

It's the tactility of intaglio, its texture, its relief, that initially drew me to etching -- the mysterious and compelling topography of the plate surface, shaped by the action of chemicals -- and touch is now my final point of contact with the medium I have loved. (I gave up etching with acids when I got sick. The thought stuck with me that I might have made myself ill from exposure to chemicals --that is, until my first cousin came down with the same rare cancer. Genetics, not benzene). The only new plates I begin these days are in drypoint, though I've revisited many of my older plates with mezzotint and engraving. Things don't necessarily go any better in my work now than they ever did, but I am certainly pushier and more determined.

But what to do with all of it, those 800 pieces of metal and 5,000 pieces of paper? Two older friends, both very fine artists, died within a couple years of each other. The wife of one artist opened up his studio and let anyone take whatever they wanted. This was a wonderful thing for me, as I admired him, his work, his books, and his tools, and I accepted her offer with self-imposed restraint, though unrestricted access to his creative output and possessions made me a little queasy. The second friend's family monetized every scrap of his artwork they could find immediately after his death. That made me uncomfortable as well. I've heard stories of artists' entire life's work being thrown in dumpsters, and others who, with vast means and vainglorious egos, founded museums devoted to their own achievement, taking no chances on the caprice of posterity. Their pyramids.

## PRIVATE COLLECTION

I have collected prints my entire life. Oddly, my collecting compulsion has increased during my illness. I've become increasingly competitive and acquisitive, and fulfilled the pursuit of a dream print or two. The dilemma of what to do with my collection is in some ways even more vexing than what to do with my own work. At least, I don't expect anyone will want all of my work.

I approached one college museum about taking my print collection, and they responded that they were running low on storage space and would rather come over to choose what they'd like. A museum assistant picking through my dearest possessions, acquired on a teacher's salary over forty years, did not appeal to me. I contacted another institution, who, although enthusiastic at first, haven't followed through on the commitments they made. In the meantime, I've tried to interest my children, one a physician and the other a rock 'n' roll musician, in the anachronistic and arcane world of prints. It seems to be working, a little.

## SECOND LIFE

I've found a blessing in all this, the looking back, and it's that I like my work. That may seem a little naïve, but it's a big deal, because I won't be



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3. Master Printer Joshua Tangen pulls a print as Brian looks on. Photo by John Highstreet, 2022.

Figure 4. Brian scrapes a copper plate. Photo by Haptic Pictures, 2022.

Figure 5. Brian burnishes a copper plate. Photo by Haptic Pictures, 2022.

making much more of it. I said what I had to say, the way I meant to say it. And I would love for it to be seen. I didn't manage much of a career in this life. I was busy teaching, raising kids, and making the work to get it seen and sold much, and I'm sure there were other reasons as well. I shy away from video games, but I like the idea of a Second Life for my work and a posthumous career for me. I am putting together a retrospective exhibit and catalogue, a way to assemble the best of it and put it back out into the world.

I got to the bottom of the pile of my 800 plates after a year of working through them. The reality of getting through them all, a task which at first seemed without end, caught me unawares. I wasn't sure I'd get there. But everything ends. I still don't know what to do with it all.

**Brian D. Cohen**

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**AUTHOR**

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Brian D. Cohen is a printmaker, painter, educator, and writer. He was graduated Phi Beta Kappa and magna cum laude with high honors from Haverford College and completed his MFA in Painting at the University of Washington. In 1989 he founded Bridge Press to further the association and integration of visual image, original text, and book structure.

As a printmaker, Cohen has shown in over forty individual exhibitions, including a retrospective at the Fresno Art Museum, and has participated in over 200 group shows. Cohen's books and etchings are held by major private and public collections throughout the country, including Yale, Harvard, Brown, and Stanford Universities, Middlebury, Smith, Wellesley, Swarthmore, and Dartmouth Colleges, the University of Vermont, The New York Public Library, The Library of Congress, the Victoria & Albert Museum, and the Philadelphia and Portland (Oregon) Museums of Art, as well as the United States Ambassador's residence in Egypt. Cohen was a winner of major international print competitions in San Diego, Philadelphia, Mexico City, and Washington, DC., was awarded the Best Book in Show at the Pyramid Atlantic Book Fair. He has received grants from the Vermont Arts Council and the Vermont Community Foundation.

Cohen was an art teacher at The Putney School from 1985 until 2011, where he was Dean of Faculty and founding director of The Putney School Summer Programs. In 2001 he helped found Two Rivers Printmaking Studio in White River Junction, Vermont as its artistic director. Cohen's teaching experience has also included classes and workshops at schools and studios throughout New England.

Cohen is the illustrator of two popular natural science books,



Figure 6



Figure 7

Figure 6. Brian prepares printing ink. Photo by Haptic Pictures, 2022.  
Figure 7. Brian in his studio. Photo by Haptic Pictures, 2022.

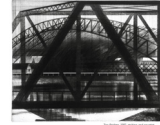
Reading the Forested Landscape and The Granite Landscape, and has contributed artwork to literary reviews and other publications, including the Paris Review. His writing on prints, books, and arts education have appeared in the Huffington Post, Art in Print, Parenthesis, and other print and online journals and magazines.

Brian lives in Kennebunk, Maine.

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BRIAN D. COHEN  
A Retrospective



November 4 - December 11, 2022

Opening Reception  
Friday, November 4, 5-8pm  
Artist Talk and Poetry Reading with Chad deNiro  
Saturday, December 3, 5pm  
MITCHELL GIDDINGS FINE ARTS  
101 Main Street, Kennebunk, Vermont  
mitchgiddingsfinearts.com

Figure 8



IMAGE GALLERY



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Figure 1.



Figure 2.





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Figure 3. Master Printer Joshua Tangen pulls a print as Brian looks on. Photo by John Highstreet, 2022



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Figure 4. Brian scrapes a copper plate. Photo by Haptic Pictures, 2022.





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Figure 5. Brian burnishes a copper plate. Photo by Haptic Pictures, 2022.



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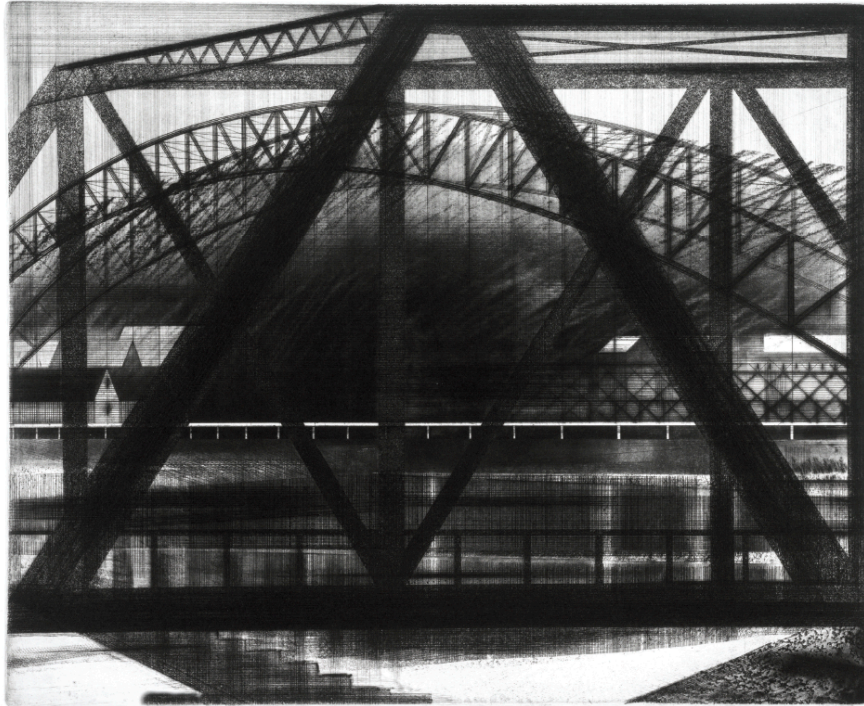
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Figure 6. Brian in his studio. Photo by Haptic Pictures, 2022



# BRIAN D. COHEN

## A Retrospective



*Two Bridges, 1992, etching and aquatint*

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**Friday, November 4, 5-8 pm**



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