DRAWING AND ETCHING PLACE:
WHAT ARE THE EXPERIENTIAL AND MATERIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF
BRITISH CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE AND HOW DO THEY EVIDENCE
RECIPROCITY BETWEEN DRAWING AND ETCHING?

WENDY RHODES PICKEN

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Abstract

The thesis is framed through an interpretation of creativity realised through the fine art practices of drawing and etching. The research was initiated on the unexamined presupposition that drawing is a natural starting point for the medium of etching. In examining the role that drawing plays in investigating and challenging the representation of place, the research identifies reciprocal characteristics in etching practice. The case studies, Norman Ackroyd, Ros Ford, Bronwen Sleigh, Ian Chamberlain and Jason Hicklin provide accounts of their own experiences and enlightening descriptions of the tacitly understood and explicitly known details of their practice. Research was qualified through studio practice, examining my own work and the practice of David Sully. The cyclical generation of case study research and developing theories, explored through an appropriation of the terminology of etching practice, is instrumental in recognising reciprocal actions of creative research as working proof methodology. Creative practice provides evidence in this thesis of tacit understanding, material consciousness and domain shifts; proving that learning by doing and embracing the transference of values from one area of an artist's practice to another, reciprocally enriches both aspects. The elements of tension and conflict, resistance and challenge, are also shown to have a vital role in reciprocating creative productivity in drawing and etching. The research identifies the multiplicity of reciprocated characteristics employed in practice and places those qualities firmly in an experiential context; thereby advancing the current understanding of the aesthetic and practical experience of drawing and etching. The research concludes by presenting a provisional taxonomy of the characteristics of reciprocity identified as a tacitly synthesised experiential and material exchange.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“I shall not be misunderstood if I first account for the preference which for many years I myself have had for drawing as a pursuit, and for the point as a medium of expression” (Haden 1878:6)

Aims of the research

This thesis is presented as a body of new knowledge, interrogating the duality of practice employed by artists who both draw and etch. The thesis aims to reveal the material and experiential characteristics of drawing and etching within British contemporary practice. By exploring both etching and drawing as experiential studies of practice through the evidence of the practitioners themselves and accounts of their own experiences. The wrestle from one medium to the other is an enlightening and fascinating insight intended not only for etchers but for the wider printmaking community and includes many examples of evidence of reciprocated benefits between drawing and etching. There has long been a supposition that good drawing is a natural starting point for the medium of etching but through previous research I found that it was frustratingly difficult to find adequate reasoning for why this should be true. The frustration was felt deeply and personally because there is so little documentation about the experience of making etchings and I was unable to find out why I was so in thrall to this discipline. My aim is that the content will offer a different perspective on the position of drawing within practice and enable the contemporary etcher to develop their ability to be reflectively self-critical. I will use my own practice as an artist printmaker as a sounding board for the case studies and as an expert witness able to unpick the process and practice. This will allow me to be an empathic interviewer supported by a practical understanding of the technical methods employed by the case study artists, by my own experiences of walking and drawing in the British landscape, and by all the frustrating challenges and wonderful discoveries that the duality of practice brings. Above all I aim for this to be an honest piece of work that has the potential for a real impact on the practices of artist-printmakers; assisting their understanding of their position in the (art) world, enabling them to find that they are not alone in their creative struggle and pointing to a deeper understanding of their own practice.
The research question:

*Drawing and etching place: What are the experiential and material characteristics of British contemporary practice and how do they evidence reciprocity between drawing and etching?*

The research question is constructed in three portions.

The title *Drawing and Etching Place* aims to provide a succinct overview of the subject area in question and states that the subject of all the artwork under scrutiny is informed by place. This thesis will focus on how drawing and etching support artistic practice in combination, informed by observing place at first hand; it was necessary that the case study artists selected use both disciplines at the core of their practice.

As the thesis evolves, the second portion of the question comes into sharper focus. It becomes evident that the most significant and consistent characteristics informing place-based drawing and etching practice were those which encompassed experiential and material characteristics. The experiential characteristics are found to be evident at every stage of the creative process, from the initial rapid sketches made *en plein air* to the proofing stages in the print room. Material characteristics provide form and direction for the experiential evidence. The diagram below begins to set out the key material concerns that are expanded on in Chapter 5.

![Diagram: Material characteristics]

- **Material properties**
  - *'Doing to'*
  - What artists can do to materials

- **Qualities of materiality**
  - *'Working with'*
  - What an artist can do with materials

- **The practitioners role**
  - Concepts + ideas + materials
  - Artists as conduits between the idea and the materials
The third portion of the research question constitutes its essence and sets out the position of the contribution to new knowledge, that of the reciprocal benefit between drawing and etching. The thesis will go on to prove that experiential aspects of practice, when combined with material characteristics, provide evidence of reciprocity.

The following questions set out the underlying concerns of the research:

- How does an artist etcher process their experience of a new landscape, or place, through drawing and what does this tell us about their practice?
- What does drawing bring to the artist etcher; what can they learn from their practice?
- What are the characteristics of drawing on a paper substrate or metal plate? Are there differences or similarities between the two activities?
- Is drawing a familiar and reliable tool for the artist? Is reciprocity identifiable within the benefits and challenges of drawing on paper substrates and etching plates?
- Do the skills learnt through drawing have a reciprocal benefit when applied in the context of making an etching in the print studio, and where are such skills situated?

Throughout the thesis the noun *reciprocity* will be understood, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, to be defined as, “*…the practice of engaging things with others for mutual benefit*” and as the verb *reciprocate*, to “*…respond to (a gesture or action) with a corresponding one.*” (Concise OED, 2011: 1200)

By exploring and comparing contemporary practices, this thesis will show that drawing provides a diverse system that informs practice in a variety of ways. The research aims to provide insights, explanations and illuminating exemplars of experiential and material characteristics that will demonstrate reciprocity between drawing and etching. The position of drawing in this thesis is expanded further on p. 38.

*Etching – definition*

Before proceeding, I will define my technical terminology, what etching is, and therefore the parameters of the review. The term *etching* is: “*…from the German word ätzen, meaning to eat or corrode, is a process by which a design is eaten into metal by acid, for the purpose of printing from it.*” (Coker, 1976: 8)
In this thesis, I will include only etchings in which the surface of the plate has been bitten by a corrosive mordant, most commonly ferric chloride or nitric acid. I will therefore not include engravings, drypoints, mezzotints or carborundum prints but will include aquatints and soft ground etchings. Furthermore, I will focus my study on those etchings where it is likely that the artist has drawn directly from the landscape subject itself, and where the drawing may have been made as a preliminary sketch or worked directly onto the plate. In addition, to be considered relevant will be the artist who has immersed themselves in a location, has first-hand experience of a place and whose etchings rely heavily on their autographic mark making.

Clearing the ground, some questions concerning the research direction

A phenomenological project?

The research question has evolved during the life of this project; the initial phrasing framed an assumption that the processes of etching and drawing were reciprocal. The first iteration of the question was: ‘Is the relationship between the processes of drawing and etching a reciprocal one and what implications might this have for an understanding of etching as artwork?’ This phrasing seemed satisfactory in the early days but became less comfortable as time went on.

My research question evolved and the reasons behind this reflected an inductive process as my enquiry grew into a set of observations which contained common threads and irregularities, propositions and oppositions. As an increasingly assured hypothesis grew, a number of variable conclusions began to develop; therefore re-phrasing my question became necessary. The inductive approach has enabled me to keep an open mind and allow the research to be guided by the richness of the case study material. I progressed to the working question: ‘Are drawing and etching reciprocal, and how is this evidenced through a phenomenological study of contemporary British landscape etchers?’ Whilst the question over reciprocity was more clearly posited, a larger query loomed over the use of the term phenomenological; was this methodological terminology applied with absolute conviction or should an alternative be employed? Most of my evidence would come directly from the case study work reinforcing not just the phenomenological understanding but bringing to the fore the experience of the research as a whole. As more responses from case study artists built up, and as my own practice developed, the term experiential nagged increasingly loudly.
The meaning, extrapolated from multiple sources including web based searches and dictionary definitions, behind the two methodological terms can be summarised as:

- **Phenomenological** – research which relies solely on direct, lived personal experience
- **Experiential** – research which is flexible and pertains to or is derived from experience

An experiential project?
The position this project takes is that the research could not have validity without the contributions from the direct experience of the case study artists; and if further validation can be provided through reflection on my own practice as an etcher then this research must claim to be experiential. From an epistemological point of view, Biggs (2004) discusses three types of knowledge that are “implied in practice based research: explicit, tacit and ineffable knowledge”. I have also found these three definitions to be appropriate to my collection of evidence and knowledge. The application of technical understanding, to both drawing and etching practice, employs explicit knowledge and understanding. It is relatively straightforward to describe these processes and therefore sensible to use linguistic expression (see Glossary, p. 257). The process of making a drawing or of making an etching and the material understanding involved in both processes is better explained through tacit knowledge; knowledge which can be explained linguistically to some extent. The experience of making or of being in a place, the aesthetic experience in achieving a pleasing outcome in making an artwork and in viewing an artwork is categorised under ineffable knowledge; an emotional response which is very hard to put into words. In uncovering the exact nature of the reciprocal relationship between drawing and etching I will cover all three knowledge areas and I will aim to provide some linguistic clues in understanding the ineffable. In making a final decision I am persuaded that experiential research strategies “increase the opportunities for analytical reflection.” (Wright, 2000). Reflection has come to play a very significant role in the quality of the evidence that has been gathered, both within the research, and as self-reflection when analysing the content gleaned from the case study practitioners. Therefore, the question at the top of this thesis states the case as an experiential study rich with first hand evidence and loaded with reflexive thinking. My intention is that the text will not only allow the reader to share in the experience of practice but will also encourage reflection on their own practice, skills, processes and personal research methods.
Place or landscape? – Defining place

While searching for definitions of the term place, I was intrigued to see the illustrative phrase, “I can’t be in two places at once” in the Oxford online dictionary. Whilst being the antithesis of the definition I was looking for, intriguing new possibilities presented themselves. I wondered if the practitioner does, in fact, find themselves in two places at once, inhabiting the conscious realm of their practice of drawing whilst, at the same time, they are physically present in their etching studio. The artist’s consciousness inhabits the memory of place during the making of a studio based drawing or etching.

I found more pertinent and pragmatic elucidation of the terms place and landscape in Tim Cresswell’s 2015 overview, Place: an Introduction, (second edition).

Landscape, used as a term within the definition of an art genre refers, as Cresswell (2015: 17) describes, to an “intensely visual idea”, where the viewer is “outside”, looking on. This implies that the viewer is someone viewing a scene; a visitor looking about them, without a full awareness of what they are looking at. They are not a participant and have no sense of belonging to the landscape. A tourist viewing a scene through the lens of a camera or a visitor to an art gallery will view a location depicted as a landscape. An artist seeing a vista for the first time before they have experienced spending time in a particular location will also be seeing a landscape. The transition from the term landscape to place is confirmed by Cresswell as being the moment when the viewer has become a participant; when they are inside the place and have a sense of belonging. I will go on to show that the case studies in this thesis demonstrate not just a sense of belonging, but an immersion in place. The landscape becomes a place that has meaning for the artist when they develop a sense of knowing and understanding a place. The time spent in a landscape is significant for all the case studies, for some this significant time can be a relatively short period, for others, a much more extended period. Artists immersing themselves in a landscape (to the extent that they begin to understand the landscape as a place) walk the terrain, move around, use transport and explore many observational angles; usually drawing, often taking photographs. Tuan explains that “place is pause...” (2011: 6); that place can be identified through a pause in movement. The length of the pause can be momentary, or a lengthy period. The artists in this study represent both of these extremes and many points in between. They build up understanding through feeling the place, both in terms of tactile and haptic understanding, through their feet walking the land or the corporeal experience of the weather. Such an experience of getting to know a place is augmented through research into
the social history of an area. When physical, tactile experience, the passing of time and knowledge are combined, the artist becomes immersed and landscape becomes understood as place.

Cresswell encourages the researcher to consider “the implications of the idea of place for whatever it is that is being researched” (2015: 161). My enquiry into the characteristics of the experiential and material qualities identified in drawings and etchings of place posited several strands of research that have implications for understanding each case study artist’s
relationship to place. Each case study will explore the artist’s individual understanding of place and the implications of that understanding in relation to their work.

The artist identifies a landscape when they first see a vista, terrain or structure that engages their curiosity. Then, as soon as they begin to draw, the time spent observing a landscape leads to a dialogue and a deepening experience. Landscapes are not always rural wild vistas and the reasons behind the artist’s choice vary from a deep-seated sense of belonging to a need to understand the world and their position in the world. For all the case study artists the connection of their work to an identifiable place is vitally important. To apply the label landscape to their work implies the misunderstanding that the artist is an outsider, a landscape interpreter who has superficial feeling for that which they depict. The relationship to a landscape is not that of a tourist taking in a view but of an immersion in place that seeks for, and finds, a much greater understanding. Indeed the artist seeks a dialogue with a place so that they might better represent the essence of their experience of that place.

“We base our individual discoveries on the idea that both the place and we ourselves are new, or renewed by the dialogue between place and ourselves... Only by our deep experience...can we keep the soul of the landscape.” Sinclair (2010: 23-24)

**Defining tacit knowledge in the context of drawing and etching place**

My understanding of tacit knowledge (or tacit knowing) is derived from Michael Polanyi’s lecture, *The Structure of Tacit Knowing* (1965). In this research, I employ the notion of tacit knowledge to refer to the characteristics and qualities of a drawing and etching practice that are ineffable. An ineffable quality is one that is, quite literally, hard to put into words. Some characteristics can be explained linguistically, such as the difference between a hard and soft pencil or which tool creates a specific mark in a hard ground. For a skilled practitioner, however, many moments in drawing and etching cannot be put into words, explicitly. These include the moments when the artist senses a solution to a difficult portion of a drawing, or the sensory knowledge of how much pressure to exert on pencil or etching tool in order to achieve a required tone or mark. I will show how integrating the elements of practice, skill and experience leads to greater understanding of processes, and how the interplay between explicit and ineffable understanding leads to tacit knowing.

In the table below, I have explored the key elements that lie at the foundation of the thesis and those questions raised concerning tacit knowing and understanding. To explain the connections I will begin with the subsidiaries – these are practical concerns that are
connected to the key elements but become subordinate to the knowledge and sensations that are derived from those connections. Polanyi explains this as:

“The relation of subsidiaries to that on which they bear is a logical relation similar to that which a premise has to the inference drawn from it, with the great difference, that the inferences arrived at here are tacit” (1965: 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From subsidiaries...</th>
<th>By integrating them...</th>
<th>We focus at...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience of place</td>
<td>How is experience recorded?</td>
<td>How is experience interpreted within drawing and etching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing and Sketching</td>
<td>Is it necessary for drawing to be practised en plein air?</td>
<td>Does the drawing inform work carried out in the studio?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etching</td>
<td>Is it necessary to refer to a drawing to make an etching?</td>
<td>Is the etching informed by the drawing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing and Etching</td>
<td>Can the two activities be creatively combined?</td>
<td>Are there reciprocal benefits between drawing and etching?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table: Initial questions concerning tacit knowing

When applied within the context of this thesis we can interpret his theory thus: the connection between the act of drawing en plein air, and the assimilation of the bodily experience of place, is logically recorded as a sketch. However, the knowledge required to understand the experience of the place, in such a way as to allow the artist to record how they felt, is where we find tacit understanding. Tacit knowing provides an understanding of the way in which these connections work, and the experiential knowledge they provide for the artist. An expanded corollary of table *Initial questions concerning tacit knowing* can be found in the Conclusion, p. 245

Polanyi further explains that, “…the focal experience arrived at by tacit inference, tell us the meaning of the subsidiaries in terms of a sensation that was not present before.” (1965: 12)

To illustrate this point I will refer to a scenario which will be explored further in Chapter 5, pp. 188-194. The meeting of a *problem* when working through the etching process induces *tension*. The subsidiary in this instance is the *problem*. The sensation that was not present when the artist excitedly began working on the plate was *tension*. The element of tacit
knowing comes from the integration of problem finding and tension, which, when recognised, leads to tacit knowing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tacit Knowing</th>
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<tr>
<td>From subsidiaries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem finding</td>
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| Table: Tacit knowing as problem finding |

Tacit knowing and understanding are often described, more simply, as knowing through doing. The evidence is provided throughout the thesis through the testimony of case studies. These studies illustrate the diverse ways in which gaining knowledge by creating a drawing reciprocally benefits etching. The difficulties in explicitly, and linguistically, pinning down the nature of reciprocity between etching and drawing, has been the motivating factor behind the research. In recognising that those difficulties lie in expressing tacit understanding, I hope I will convey the insights contained in the thesis more effectively and a greater understanding of drawing and etching practice will be achieved.

The context of the research - A rephrasing

On the American abstract landscape artist Richard Diebenkorn:

The etchings “...rephrase the problems posed in the paintings and represent unceasingly inventive variations, they formulate new questions about his work and invite comparison to the paintings. Yet the artist’s handling of intaglio, often so deliciously resonant, takes place on its own terms.” (Plous, 1979: 10)

“Suggestions of experience through landscape reference or figuration coincide as visual identity with the making of intaglio marks or surface in the overall perspective of the work.” (Ibid: 10)

The two Diebenkorn quotes provided early impetus in my quest to find out why landscape etching held such a magnetic draw for me and why, as an artist proficient in drawing, there was an assumption that I would turn to etching as the most natural printmaking medium for my skill set. Throughout my MA research I was unable to find an account of drawing and etching place through landscape reference which either described my practice or which served as inspiration or explanation for my passion. What I really wanted to discover was the first hand voice of contemporary artists who produced work of quality and interest, and whose words were inspirational.
The research will advance considerably the knowledge and understanding of etching as a technique with which to represent and interpret place and how drawing both supports and challenges that understanding. There is no one size fits all conclusion but an enlightening range of options posited by the case studies, enabling readers to find their own best fit. This research will advance the current knowledge of the subject of aesthetic experience in transforming drawing into etching. There are two works from the nineteenth century which are of particular interest because they are both written with the undiluted passion of practising artists and both form a critical defence of the art of making etching. P.G. Hamerton’s exquisite summary Etching and Etchers (1876) provides one of the best examples and is supported by F.S. Haden’s About Etching (1878); these two works will be referenced in Chapter 2. Unfortunately, this field has not been substantially expanded. Recent research is notably sparse; of just 48 printmaking related theses listed on the British Library e-theses online repository since 1987. None refer to the contemporary practice of etching (as of September 2018), and while some, such as Minne Tanaka’s 2008 thesis The twelve large colour plates of William Blake: a study on techniques, materials and context, focus on an historical context, none are written from the etcher’s viewpoint. Richard Godfrey produced an historical survey of British prints which, although mentioning in the introduction rather elegantly that etching provided the opportunity that “the hand may draw with perfect freedom” (1978: 10) the experience of making the prints is skirted thereafter. The bulk of recent writing on etching has formed an historical critique of an artists practice such as Katharine Lochnan’s The Etchings of James MacNeill Whistler (1984) or has relied heavily on technical advice such as Alan Smith’s Etching: A Guide to Traditional Techniques (2004). The first practice-led PhD was awarded in 1996 to Jon Pengelly, a printmaker, whose thesis, Environmentally sensitive printmaking: a framework for safe practice also reflects the technical approach so commonly explored.

My early research explored the international position of etching and in looking to American sources, it is possible to find a little more writing on etching. For example, Jim Dine’s 2008 memoir of working alongside Aldo Crommelynck has a richness of experiential content. The work done by Kathan Brown at Crown Point Press provided a substantial backdrop to my own understanding of etching processes and gave new insights into working with artists making etchings. The most significant relationship forged at Crown Point Press was with the American artist Richard Diebenkorn. I found his working methods and artwork to be fascinating exemplars of an artist who refused to stand still, who constantly challenged himself. This was an inspirational point from which I explored the British landscape context.
The theoretical ground

The thesis is framed through an interpretation of creativity realised through the fine art practices of etching and drawing; more specifically exploring tacit understanding and material consciousness. I will also explore the possibilities of domain shifts; how the transference of values from one area of an artist’s practice enriches another area. The case studies present accounts of artists own experiences; fascinating personal, anecdotal descriptions of the concrete actuality of their daily research and practice. As the research gained depth and breadth from a series of interviews with each case study it also became clear that the creative elements of tension and conflict, resistance and challenge, were vital in the development of their practices. As the research progressed I came to understand that one explanation of the nature of reciprocity between the etching and drawing practices may lie in a material exchange. This line of thought draws a thread through all the case study chapters.

Critical friends - Ingold, Dewey and Sennett

Guiding my progress along this path is the anthropologist Tim Ingold whose work Being Alive (2011) and Lines (2007) celebrates creativity through wayfaring and inhabitation; grounding my research to the nature of what it is to be human and to create. In his paper Anthropology contra ethnography (2017) Ingold writes:

“...an anthropology that is experimental and interrogative can combine with art practice in highly productive ways. What is crucial about both anthropology and art practice... is that they are not about understanding actions and works by embedding them in context—not about accounting for them, ticking them off, and laying them to rest—but about bringing them into presence so that we can address them, and answer to them, directly.” (Ingold, 2017)

This thesis addresses, explains and finds the qualities inherent in the actions behind the works and aims to bring them into an experiential context. In his keynote speech at the Art, Materiality and Representation conference (2018) Ingold refers to the dance between research and art as a correspondence, which, by extension, requires a reciprocal exchange of ideas and responses. By situating my writing within the experiential nature of drawing and etching, I aim to demonstrate that, in Ingold’s words,

“Art is not an action done, but an experience undergone.” (Ingold, 2018)
The research gains impetus from John Dewey’s work *Art as Experience* (1932) which sets out the philosophical and pragmatic framework for the characteristic effects of the arts; explaining the nature of aesthetic experience. This is supported by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi’s work during the early 1990s on creativity, aesthetic encounter and experiences of flow. The practical hands-on nature of the research finds strong support from fellow pragmatist Richard Sennett’s seminal treatise *The Craftsman* (2008) whose exposition on material awareness and tacit understanding underpins much of the anecdotal case study evidence. It is necessary to point out that, in all the quotes from Sennett, I will exchange the word ‘craftsman’ with the word ‘practitioner’ due to both the gender neutrality of the term and because I am presenting etching as a fine art practice.

**Mapping creativity**

Through my research into the many definitions concerning creativity, I became aware that, although the terminology and vocabulary varied from author to author, some of the lines of investigation travelled along similar paths. This led me to create a chart through which to map the various arguments and themes. (*Creativity – mapping qualities and components across theories*: Appendix p.286). Having undergone this exercise I pulled out strands which I felt would be particularly illuminating if explored in the light of this thesis. I made a decision to focus on the strands of tension and the transference of values, from the spoken evidence gathered through case study interviews.

A comparatively recent issue of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, published in the Winter of 2015, was devoted to printmaking but none of its articles dealt specifically with etching. The most significant references appear in Catherine Abell’s article. The editor of this journal edition commented,

“...printmaking has been given short shrift in contemporary philosophy of art. Other than brief treatment in such seminal philosophical works as Nelson Goodman’s *Languages of Art* (1976), printmaking has received little attention in the philosophical literature. The reasons that may lie behind the philosophical neglect of printmaking are probably one of the two following broad sorts: historical/procedural or ontological/relational.” (Mag Uidhir, 2015: 1)

This thesis will contribute significantly to the meagre body of historical/procedural research and provide much needed evidence in support of ontological theory.
The few philosophical and literary references which do appear cause confusion and have generally lead to the misapprehension of etching as a mechanical or technical process.

The direction this thesis takes is to address the creative activity of making drawings and making etchings – both the plate (substrate) and the print. Confusion in theoretical papers, including Goodman’s, is derived from the etymologically identical descriptors which explore both the transitive and intransitive verb forms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creative activity</th>
<th>Drawing</th>
<th>Etching</th>
<th>Intransitive verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resulting manifestation of creative activity</td>
<td>A drawing sketched</td>
<td>An etching printed</td>
<td>Transitive use</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unfortunately, even Ingold, whose writing I will make significant reference to is confounded on the topic of etching. In describing drawing in comparison to writing he says:

“Nor will I consider further the case of etching, which raises a number of rather technical issues that lie beyond the scope of the present study.” (Ingold, 2007: 124)

I will from time to time compare the qualities of the resulting manifestation of the creative activity but I will not consistently look to the outcomes of the process (the final print) in order to find my conclusions, I will give precedence to the process. An inductive ontology of the reciprocity between the creative processes of etching and drawing can be found in the Conclusion, pp. 244-246.

**Working proof methodology**

The research process itself illuminated the often confounding question of methodology. Methodologies developed inductively as the research grew and I began to discover that I was developing a version of action research which was practically suited to the direction of this study. After attending an action research workshop with Jean McNiff (2016) at UWE, I revisited notions proposed by Gray (1996), Haseman and Mafe (2009) and Haseman (2012). They suggest that practice-led researchers should look to their own practice for methodological templates:

“...questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using
"predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners in the visual arts. ” (Gray, 1996: 3)

The practical working methods used by an artist practitioner can be re-purposed and can gain authority as methodologies in their own right. If we acknowledge these methods and validate them within the context of research, practice-led researchers are able to have the opportunity to work within familiar parameters rather than research methods traditionally designed for scientific research.

With this authority in mind, I have borrowed a methodology from etching practice. It was McNiff’s (2016) definition of action research as “…generative, transformative, reflexive and evolutionary…” that prompted me to consider the role of the working proof as an alternative embodiment of action research.

“Research should not be seen as being in conflict with practitioners’ methods but an expansion of them. Perhaps separation is futile, as what we are trying to do is integrate and synthesise the best aspects of each into a critical dialogue, which needs two elements to create it: practice-led research is simultaneously generative and reflective.” (Gray, 1996: 10)

I began to recognise that the process of taking a print, a working proof, after each process embodied the principles of action research and worked as an appropriate metaphor for etching-led research. The working proof allows for the etcher to be truly reflective, responsive and proactive. Consideration of the results of an action on the plate by viewing the proof enables the etcher to reflect on what has been achieved, to consider the effects of their actions and to be reflexive in how intuitive they are able to be in the next sequence of actions. The working proof becomes generative, in that the etcher employ their drawing skills by over drawing on the proof in order to test the next actions; visualising in a practical and tangible way what the effect of the next action might be on the developing image. The working proof then enables transformative action as the etcher, informed by the drawing intervention, enacts the next process on the plate – forever transforming the physicality of the plate and informing the decision making for future etching or drawing actions. The working proof becomes evolutionary as successive proofs track the subtle changes and advancements in technique and knowledge that allows the artist to develop, to grow, to subtly change. The changes may not be apparent in the very next print but when an artist’s practice is reviewed over time the evolution in skill and style will be clear to see.
In order to apply the working proof model, I reflected on the early days of the research when the nugget of an idea presented itself, not fully formed but strong enough to be sketched out. I created written proof pieces – theories, sketched paragraphs, initial interviews, transcriptions and exhibition reviews. This gave me material which I could draw on, make notes, re-read and reflect upon, fulfilling Haseman’s concept of re-purposing:

“...a repurposing or conversion for use in a new setting is required as the context for both the practice and the work expands to meet the requirements of the research. Inevitably this represents something of a quantum shift in the creative researcher’s thinking.” (Haseman and Mafe, 2009: 215)

The cyclical generation of ideas and transformative notions continues as the research evolves and it becomes easier to see the progress that is being made. As a practitioner it makes better sense to me to view my research within the terminology of etching practice. Understanding a research step as a proof stage clearly directed my process. I stepped back and considered the nuances of possible directions I could take; enabling me to, as Gray says, reflect in and on action.

“...appropriate methodological approaches... have validated ‘naturalistic inquiry’, which places the researcher firmly within the research process, often as ‘participant’. Research approaches now in the visual arts can be much more pro-active, involving practitioners researching through ‘action’, and ‘reflecting in and on action’...” (Gray, 1996: 4)

In this way I was able to recognise and to take into account the reciprocal actions of creative research. Action research as a methodology seemed cumbersome but its application as working proof methodology clarified my research path.

**Case study research and methodology**

“I have kept in view one purpose only, the study of etching as an art, and have given space to etchers only so far as they have excelled in the art, or at least had the reputation of excelling in it.” (Hamerton, 1876: 124)

The artists selected for my thesis are based upon my own subjective view of visually arresting and successful etchings, where drawing is at the core of the production, made between 2010 and 2018. The view is supported by the professional standing and reputation of the artists chosen including: a Royal Academician, members of the Royal Society of
Painter Printmakers (RE), a Senior lecturer in Drawing and Printmaking and workshop tutors. All the case studies are dedicated artists who support their practice with a keen interest in disseminating their knowledge through teaching and giving talks. This aspect proved to be a great contributory factor in the time and consideration they gave to my questions and probing into their practice. The case study artists came with me on my quest to provide a new insight into the relationship between drawing and etching, we travelled this winding path together and they have become as keen as I am that a new understanding is brought to our various practices.

As the case study interviews developed, the exchanges became a “material dialogic”, as described by Sarah Scaife at The Embodied Experience of Drawing Symposium in Plymouth, April, 2018. Such conversations, mediated, through a shared material understanding which were respectful of others differences are rich with potential for a much deeper and holistic exchange of knowledge. My own technical and practical experience enabled a productive material dialogic. Csikszentmihalyi gathered all his evidence from case studies, stating that:

“...letting people talk at length about their experiences was a better way to determine what were the most important components of the aesthetic experience...” (1990: 21)

It has been my experience that a guided conversation with the printmakers was more revealing than a set programme of standardised questions. The most productive interviews were built upon higher order open-ended questioning which brought forth responses from which common threads could be drawn together. I found the least useful were questions which were posed to the majority of my interviewees for comparative purposes because they were not always pertinent to the topics discussed. Csikszentmihalyi cautions that:

“...words represent perceptions, feelings, ideas – in short experiences – that people reported having... statements of what people believe is happening to them, even though words are necessarily imperfect representations of states of consciousness.” (Ibid: xv)

In order to mitigate the possibility of imperfect representation I conducted a series of interviews with each practitioner. The discussions I had with the artists allowed time to qualify details and successive interviews added weight to respondent’s statements as thoughts were carried through from one interview to the next. It was through this conversational approach to the interviews that the practitioners began to discuss the thorny and personal issue of challenges that they faced in their practice. I am grateful to them for
their candid responses that provided new evidence concerning the role of tension within reciprocity between drawing and etching.

I will not offer opinions as to the effectiveness of any specific works as this would require another line of enquiry altogether, as discussed by Harrison (2002), and such a thesis would entail questions of idealism, perception and the role of the spectator. I will however, include accounts of what the practitioners aim to achieve through their etchings, both intentions and aspirations, as this will illuminate the methodologies that guide their drawing practices.

The case studies begin with Chapter 3, which will specifically explore the etching practitioner’s relationship to places that they are compelled to render aesthetically. I have included two artists in the third chapter for whom place is about belonging and self-identification and I will defer to Adam Nicolson (2001) writing in his memoir *Sea Room* for a description of place which provides an elegant narrative and which summarises the experience of the case study artists:

“If the word ‘here’ has any meaning beyond simply the label of a place where you happen to be; if ‘here’ can be the name for the place to which you belong for more than just a moment, then this was my here.” (2001: 45)

The first artist Norman Ackroyd RA has an immense affinity with the outermost islands of the British archipelago; believing himself to be, at heart, an island dweller. The second, Ros Ford RE, is a city dweller who notices and captures places which seem unloved and unnoticed by day-to-day passers-by all too familiar with their environment. These artists create strong visual representations which enable them to inhabit a place, and for the viewer to visit that place, for more than just a moment.

**The position of drawing**

This (unacknowledged) quote was taken from information boards in the *Drawn* (2017) exhibition at the RWA, and explains a position of universality I have applied in this thesis in that drawing is found equally in etching:

‘As a means of communication and navigation, drawing has taken on a universality and accessibility unlike any other medium. It is a building block of creativity, key to the visualisation and translation of ideas and practices, fundamental in making, doing, testing, designing, thinking playing and living’
During my research, I have come across countless ways of describing drawing; of what drawing is, of what it may become or what it has been. I took the twin headings: *Drawing is..., Drawing can be...* and I began to make lists of words that describe drawing (Appendix: p. 284-284). As I broadened my reading, I found authors who present successive definitions within their writing, including Taylor (2008), Petherbridge (2010), Phillips (2013), Rawson (2007), Rosand (2002). In order to initiate and expand on conversations with case study artists about the role of drawing in their practice I developed a list of words that aimed to be accessible, and provoked revealing and enlightening responses encouraging further conversation. My list, which broadly is representative, but not fully comprehensive, is included in the Appendix, p. 285.

‘You’re good at drawing, so it’s obvious that you’d become an etcher’ was a throw-away comment I often heard from fellow MA students and some teaching staff when I first started etching, but why should that be the case? What was the obvious link that means artists who etch are very often good drawers?

Chapter 4, pp. 121-163 also introduces a survey of the philosophical and psychological research carried out on the subject of creativity and begins to provide some clues and insights into aspects of practice that support the hereto unsubstantiated claim that an artist must be able to draw well in order to take on board the alchemical mysteries of the etching room. The experience of creative practice leading to aesthetic understanding and outcomes as described by Dewey began to reveal a concept that resonated strongly with the first hand testimonies of case study artists Ian Chamberlain and Bronwen Sleigh. Dewey describes the need for tension, or conflict, within any experience for an aesthetic experience to be truly purposeful:

“*The real work of an artist is to build up an experience that is coherent in perception while moving with constant change in its development....*” (2005: 53)

“But great original artists take a tradition into themselves. They have not shunned but digested it. Then the very conflict set up between it and what is new in themselves and in their environment creates the tension that demands a new mode of expression... out of reciprocal conflict and re-enforcement came new rhythms.” (2005: 165-166)
Creativity motivated on the impulse to draw

Both Chamberlain and Sleigh have created new rhythms in their etching work through their conflict with drawing. Both insist that drawing is a huge challenge and hard work, but both embrace this challenge as a central aspect of their practice; so much so that they also view their finished etchings as drawings. Drawing exists in every stage of their practice, as it does for the other case studies cited in this thesis, but these artists differ in the emotional tension that is set up through the activity of drawing. The intricate autographic involvement within their final pieces demonstrates how fruitful such a challenge can become. The examination of their practices also brings into focus the possibilities of embracing a domain shift; bringing into play tools from other disciplines. Sleigh expands the scope of this thesis further by exploring drawing in 3-dimensions.

An immersion in the materials of etching

The case studies present accounts of artists’ own experiences; personal interpretations of the concrete actuality of their daily research and practice and this is best exemplified through a close examination of the prolific practice of Jason Hicklin. Chapter 5 will therefore provide the most intimate case study of an artist whose work not only provides clear summative illustrations of all the points discussed so far but adds to the hypothesis by virtue of his self-reflexive understanding and desire to explore the processes of drawing and etching to the absolute material limits.

Hicklin explores islands and rivers; places which are challenging in every sense of the word. He embraces the difficulties presented by travel, weather and limited daylight; experiencing the most extreme conditions a landscape can present. Drawing is fundamental and furnishes every stage of his practice; he will often return from a trip with between 8 and 12 full sketchbooks, Hicklin is the only case study practitioner who returns to make drawings as artworks once the etchings are finished, distilling all his emotional energy of place into a close engagement with surface realised as an embodied memory. In every set of work he travels a path of reflection and analysis; each new place presents him with an opportunity to re-assess what he is aiming to achieve; and each set of etchings is a total immersion in his materials.

My interpretation of this anecdotal testimony is supported by the gallery owner Vincent Eames who shows Hicklin’s work. His insights add cultural value to this thesis; value that is accorded to the artistic domain through the appreciation of those who provide the
wherewithal for an artist to show and disseminate their work and by providing accreditation of that work.

**Studio practice as research**

Chapter 6 will draw together the threads of the thesis and establish pluralistic connections between concepts and interpretations of experience. This chapter will be written as an analytic autoethnographic contribution, as outlined by Leon Anderson (2006) in his article, *Analytic Autoethnography*, using my own drawing and etching practice to provide an authoritative platform as expert witness. My own contributions will be presented in a material dialogic with master printmaker and senior print technician David Sully whose testimony contributes significant expertise from the perspective of a dedicated practitioner and educationalist. Our dialogue has developed over a period of nine years (spanning my MA and PhD) during which I etched under Sully’s expert eye, in the print rooms at UWE. The aim in presenting practice transcribed through the print studio, is to provide points of impetus for the printmaking community in reflecting on their own practice and in the development of that practice. Sully’s own drawing and etching provides balance to the previous chapters by exploring a practice which is geographically situated close to home. A place based practice does not necessitate the expeditionary factor of long journeys; it is important to present evidence of practice which many practitioners, who do not wish to travel, can identify with. My practice has strong parallels with Sully’s, creating the opportunity for thick description, access to “insider meanings” (Anderson, 2006: 389) and “grounded opportunities to pursue the connections” (Ibid: 390). The chapter will also include examples where the two practices have been challenged, Sully’s through the use of unfamiliar drawing tools and my own through meeting the challenge of travel. Reflection on the combined findings considers an emergent application of theory within practice.

**In conclusion**

The thesis concludes with a summary of the findings from each chapter, establishing a hierarchy of developing knowledge, drawing together the multiplicity of threads of the research and identifying the experiential and material characteristics which evidence reciprocity between drawing and etching. In so doing I present a provisional taxonomy of reciprocal characteristics and present the theory behind *tacit synthesis*. This is a term which I have initiated to describe the interplay between ineffable and explicit material and
experiential knowledge and which forms the theoretical core within the body of new knowledge.

**Exhibition**

The conclusion draws to a close with the visual evidence from the exhibition *Drawing and Etching Place* (2018) that marked the culmination of the PhD research. The exhibition provides the ineffable, the non-linguistic content that will invite the viewer to bring their own experience of viewing drawings and etchings by the case study artists into their understanding of this thesis.

I will not provide any lengthy descriptions of artwork included in this thesis but will provide illustrations throughout. This will enable the reader to apply the thesis to their own work more aptly; a connection made with one’s own eyes is often very persuasive. The exhibition will enhance this aspect by presenting the artists’ drawings beside their etchings, providing the opportunity for viewers to be present within the process of creativity. “*I felt in a conspiracy*”, as a visitor to my drawing and printmaking exhibition, *Drawn to print* (Impress, Gloucester Printmaking Co-operative, 2016) so succinctly put it.

**Appendices**

The most rewarding area of the research was the interview process. It was a privilege to be welcomed into the private spaces of the artists’ studios, to be able to see work in progress and to discuss their practice in close detail. Hearing from an artist at first hand is a wonderful experience and one that is hugely informative and often influential on another’s practice. Many practicing artists, alone in their studio, crave the opportunity to learn directly through another artist and it is for this reason that I have included many excerpts of the interview transcripts conducted over the last 3-4 years. I have always found it most inspiring to read another artist’s words and the case study artists have expressed great interest in reading what each other has said. I hope the interviews will provide inspiration, companionship and direction – as required.
Chapter 2: Contextual Review

“It is not enough to see the leaf, or even the branch, or the whole tree; we must grasp the entire landscape, or we are powerless.” (Hamerton, 1876: 44)

In forming an argument concerning the reciprocity between drawing and etching I have found it invaluable to read texts and more importantly to view artworks in order gain an understanding of the widest possible picture of British landscape etching. To grasp the entire landscape of British etching would require a lifetime’s of research, so in this chapter I will present just a few powerful gems as examples to support my arguments.

Literary review

The available literature on the combined themes of etching, drawing and the resulting depiction of landscape/place is reasonably sparse. I have discovered brief descriptions chronicling British etching (Godfrey (1978), Hind (1923), Lister (1984), Lumsden (1924) and I have enjoyed the effusive and emotionally charged writing of key authors of the nineteenth century etching revival, including Haden (1878), Hamerton (1876), Sickert and Sitwell (1947). This has been supported by the measured writing and relatively recent research carried out by Chambers (1998). There is more literature available concerning the European tradition of etching and, in order to explain the origins of British landscape etching, the contextual review opens with the beginnings of landscape etching in Europe.

Contextual review – print collections

There are three print collections that have been particularly helpful due to their excellent online catalogues and accommodating staff; the Ashmolean in Oxford, and the British Museum and Tate Britain, in London. Each print study room has been a joy to visit and has contributed to the experiential content of this study. It is a wonderful privilege to be able to handle such prints and to be able to scrutinise them closely, becoming completely absorbed as the smallest detail of autographic evidence is revealed under a magnifying glass. Prints are usually stored and brought out for viewing in portfolio boxes of various sizes; each one feels as though a delightful gift is being unwrapped. I am grateful to Caroline Palmer from the Western Art Print Room at the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Angela
Throughout my contextual research, I found it was important to form an understanding of the formative influences on British etchers. Those who turned their hand away from facsimiles of great Master works, illustration and portraits, and the reasons for their gaze shifting to the great outdoors. I will also provide supporting evidence that will outlines the twentieth century context for the contemporary artists who will form the main chapters of this thesis as case studies.

**Contextual methodology**

I have endeavoured, through the following pages, to identify key prints in the historical development of British landscape etching. My methodology for was to look for images which qualified as an aesthetic impulse to represent the experience of a place. Representations also needed to show autographic characteristics. Those that did not qualify were those produced as an illustration, or as a vehicle for facilitating a dramatic or peopled scene. I limited my search to images that were intended to show the nature of the world, as experienced by the artist themselves. This process entailed much studying of relevant books: Chambers (1998), Dyson (2009), Godfrey (1978), Haden (1878), Hamerton (1975), Lister (1974), Lochnan (1984), Lumsden (1962) and Samuel (2016). The references included here list books that were borrowed from the extensive university arts library; there were a large number of other books that were disqualified due to the lack of landscape representation.

Library shelf searches, in turn, informed comprehensive web based searches and were helpful in moderating time spent scrolling through online catalogues. Searches of museum collections revealed vast stocks of prints in storage: a search for Rembrandt etchings via the British Museum prints and drawings database returned an impressive 3,005 results and a search for Haden etchings turns up 560 results. Tate images initially provided 681 search results for Ben Nicholson, which was refined through their holdings section to 82 images available to view by appointment. Having looked through these image lists, and found numerous etchings that appeared to have potential, double-checking was always required to ensure the prints were of value to this thesis. This inevitably meant viewing the images on the larger formats provided by the websites before booking appointments with the study rooms. I looked for autographic qualities evidenced as a certain fluidity of line - intuitive thought made evident through print, and suggestions in the linear mark making that the artist spent some time drawing in a place, at first hand. I also looked for compositions that
resonated as being informed by close experiential observation of place, often determined by one particular area of focus and detail. I disregarded those that were very formal, conforming to an intellectual or idealised representation of place, or those that were largely of the artist’s own imagination.

Samuel Palmer, who has a well-established reputation as one of the greatest late nineteenth century etchers, will not be included here because his work was visionary and imaginary. His etchings were informed by knowledge of nature but he did not seek to express the experience of one particular place. Hamerton elucidates this further:

“As for the thoughts which he has to express, they are pure poetry, and come from that rich realm of the imagination which only poets can find at all and which they find everywhere.” (Hamerton, 1975: 326)

Contextual research at first hand

Having made selections pertaining to different eras I have endeavoured to see many of those chosen prints at first hand, a richly rewarding experience which provides an empirical understanding of the artist’s process. My own technical understanding of the processes of etching, informed by my own practice, enabled me to decipher much of the technical and creative processes within these prints. Dine observes that:

“A print is not always easy to grasp at first glance. It takes some visual education to see the intricacies and also to understand the layers and different techniques. This knowledge doesn’t take away the joy of the first meeting... it is rewarding to know the complexities and various combinations of techniques. It can brighten your eyes.” (Dine, 2013:203)

The European origins of landscape etching

I will begin with a selective historical survey of the most influential artists.

The origins of the techniques of etching are European, specifically German, invented by a silversmith, Daniel Hopfer of Augsburg (circa 1470–1536) as a means by which to decorate armour. Impressions were taken as prints in order to share his designs with other craftsmen. Hopfer is believed to be the first to have applied the technique in order to produce a portrait using etching “as early as 1503 or 1504.” (Lumsden, 1924: 165)

The earliest evidence of a landscape etching explained by Thompson on New York’s Metropolitan Museum website can be found between 1518 -1522 by Albrecht Altdorfer,
whose etchings, “...were the first to celebrate landscape as the primary subject matter. Altdorfer’s Landscape with a Double Spruce marks the beginning of a long and harmonious marriage between the medium of etching and the subject of landscape.” (Thompson, 2003) A fellow German, from Nuremberg, artist Augustin Hirschvogel was also exploring landscape themes at this time and was the first to show atmospheric perspective through a variety of weight in the line; Lumsden claims “Here we have the beginnings of true landscape etching” (1924: 172)

Visscher – near d’leven

My interest, however, specifically begins where there is substantiated evidence of an artist making a print which is inspired directly by the landscape and where the preparatory drawing is claimed to have been made en plein air, ie: working outside, in the open air. Alexandra Onuf (2011) provides positive research on the Dutch artist Jans Claes Visscher (1587-1652) in his redrawing of a series of landscapes by Hieronymus Cock:

“The views in the original Small Landscape series appear to depict particular places and to concentrate their visual focus on the local terrain itself. The two title pages ... issued with his original series assert that the views were in fact drawn “naer d’leven” and “ad vivum,” respectively – that is to say, from life...” and this encouraged Visscher “...to represent his native Dutch terrain with a similar simplicity and specificity and, in so doing, helped to usher in a new mode of naturalistic Dutch landscape imagery.” (Onuf, 2011: 1-2)

In the spirit of observing from life, I was able to locate a set of Visscher’s prints in the British Museum’s prints and drawings collection. I went to view them in the study room. This is a grand room, located on the upper floor of the museum, furnished with the warmth of well-worn wood and hushed by carpets; the atmosphere has the welcoming familiarity of a town library. I admit that when I had the etchings in front of me I felt rather in awe to be able to handle such fine work made so long ago. I would wholeheartedly recommend a study room visit to all students of art as a way of getting to know an artist’s work intimately, far surpassing the experience gained from searching through books or the internet.

The Visscher prints warranted close scrutiny because of his desire to capture the scene more accurately than his predecessors; Onuf explains:
“...there is an obvious effort to render each detail of these structures and their setting with diligent accuracy ... he is at great pains to carefully replicate the specific topographic details of each scene.” (Ibid: 6)

Rembrandt – Directness of utterance

From Visscher it was necessary to study his more famous contemporary Rembrandt who provides much stronger evidence of the beginning of landscape etching as an art form for its own sake. Rembrandt not only embraced the practice of drawing out in the landscape, both creating reference drawings and working directly onto the plate but he also possessed a clear autographic style. Haden had Rembrandt in mind when he wrote of the special qualities to be found when drawing on a plate with an etching needle:

“...suppleness, liberty, rapidity and directness of utterance, and the faculty of keeping pace with the ideas as they are formed —. “ (Haden, 1866: 150)

Rembrandt sought to capture not just the topographical accuracy of the scene but the elemental feel of a place; he was the first artist to project an experiential response to place through his etching. Royalton-Kish (2000) describes Rembrandt as

“...an artist who was tireless in his search for the perfect composition, and who could expend as much effort on an etching as an oil painting.” (2000: 69)

I discovered clear links between the same location and prints by both Visscher and Rembrandt in an essay by Slive, The Manor Kostverloren: Vicissitudes of a seventeenth-century Landscape Motif, (in Fleischer and Munshower, 1988)

“In Visscher’s etching only Kostverloren’s tower can be seen looming above the estate’s rich grove of trees... We can be certain that when Rembrandt combined his lightly etched distant views of Kostverloren and Amsterdam churches in his Landscape with a cottage and a hay barn his objective was not to achieve a topographically accurate background for his etching...” (Slive, 1988: 135)
Comparison of Visscher and Rembrandt

I was able to compare the series of Visscher’s *Small Landscapes* and the Rembrandt etching *Landscape with a milkman* at the British Museum to assess their respective approaches to drawn representations of places. Once I had two prints side by side, one from each artist there were startling differences. Immediately noticeable was the gestural qualities seen in the Rembrandt; it was possible to discern an upward flick of the etching needle as Rembrandt described blades of grass at the edge of the path – I drew quick curved lines in my notebook to remind me of the energy implicit in such marks.

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1 The British Museum staff initially presented me with Rembrandt’s *Three trees*, being his most requested work. On my request to see the prints that I ordered the staff were surprised to find a different print would see the light of day, unfortunately *Landscape with a cottage and a hay barn* was unavailable but *Landscape with a milkman* was supplied instead.
The Visscher etching *Village Street* has an air of stillness; the lines appear carefully drawn and laboured; contouring on the ground was reminiscent of the accepted method of shading found in engraving. Rembrandt on the other hand built up the contours in response to the scene — rapidly drawn marks seemed as though they darted around the plate, gradually overlaying to create depth of tone. The overall weight of line in the Visscher was heavier, maybe bitten for longer or with a stronger mordant; the lightness of Rembrandt’s line and the variety of tone suggests a masterful handling of his materials and understanding of the etching process. The topographical similarities in both include the trees and tower surrounded by water, undulating thatches over small windows, raised roads and the distinctive Kostverloren tower which leaves us in no doubt that these were worked from the same locale, both artists being comfortably familiar with their subject matter. Whilst the
Visscher print retains the formality of an illustration Rembrandt’s depiction convinces the viewer that this was an image captured on a particular day. A spontaneous sense of a calm day in early summer, described by the strength of the shadow and the burgeoning vegetation. It was worth drawing attention to the detail beyond the milkman which is mere suggestion and on the far left of the Rembrandt etching the plate is left partially unresolved. This is also suggestive of a drawing made *ad vivum, en plein air*; the image is an interpretation of the reality in front of him, drawing the viewers gaze to the main focus of the study rather than a presentation of topographical fact. Crucially Rembrandt has presented prints alive with temporal and experiential resonance and sets the benchmark for centuries of etchers who follow.

**Place as a nostalgic aide memoire**

This point in etching history reveals a marked change in the purposes for which prints were made. Landscapes had commonly been used as an illustrative backdrop for fable, myth or gospel and were often imaginary constructs. I needed to ask why had it become necessary to represent landscape as a real, recognisable place. In Visscher’s case it was vitally important that he rendered these views sympathetically because his audience and market was to be found among a large group of dispossessed Dutch who were fleeing Spanish invasions of the Southern Netherlands during the Eighty Years war ([www.britannica.com/event/Eighty-Years-War](http://www.britannica.com/event/Eighty-Years-War)). The etchings provided a comforting memory of their homeland and nostalgia became the impetus for purchasing his prints. I believe Visscher’s work marks the first point of evidence of a landscape etching being produced purely because of the appeal of a specific place, accurately drawn because it needed to remain faithful and true to a an emotional or experiential memory. Rembrandt, also, was motivated to look at his landscape because he recognised the value of producing commercially viable prints. He understood that realism played on memory and feelings of nostalgia were stirred because he was a collector of art himself (Hamerton, 1975: 80, 94).

Viewing Rembrandt’s etchings at first hand enabled me to see that he brought a new sensitivity to his drawing that evoked a sense of the viewer inhabiting the landscape.

**The first identifiable characteristics of reciprocity**

These two artists demonstrate the beginnings of a reciprocal relationship between drawing and etching. In order to produce representational prints, sketches made *en plein air* became
a necessity. In Rembrandt’s case, we also see the beginnings of an experiential response to landscape that informs his drawing and subsequently his etching.

**British etching’s early days**

The representation of landscape in Britain, begins in the eighteenth century according to Godfrey (1978) with Francis Barlow (1624-1704) who is described, in comparison to engravers, as being “… more willing to exploit the directness and playfulness of the line possible in etching.” (Godfrey 1978: 22) Barlow, it seems, was one of the first British artists to develop his drawing through etching. Francis Place (1647 – 1728) followed soon afterwards, learning his trade from the Bohemian etcher Hollar and developing prints from his travels. A paper by O’Reilly (2009) sets out the evidence that Place drew in sketchbooks, *en plein air* and used the notations and sketchbook structure to conjure an experiential view of Pembroke.

“…ten drawings form an important part of the collection as they are the earliest images of Wales carried out on the spot.” (O’Reilly, 2009: 57) “…We know from correspondence of the period that our [a sketchbook worked in by Place] sketches were carried out on a tour of Wales and the West Country in 1678… Another interesting observation… was Place’s use of marks and devices to extend a panorama and thus his use of the sketchbook to create a wide open space.” (Ibid: 60)

There is now an emerging picture developing of artists expressing, through their work, a creative desire to depict the holistic experience of place, reciprocated in their etching.

Landscape etching in Britain continued to move forward with the pioneer of aquatint, Paul Sandby (1731 – 1809). Gunn (2017) explains that, having begun his career whilst serving as a military draughtsman in Scotland, Sandby made numerous small etchings depicting scenes he had seen as he travelled around. Godfrey (1978) expands his observations describing that Sandby had a keen eye for a view; he enjoyed details and working outdoors:

“… his lifelong delight in the knotty convolutions of trees and abundant foliage is expressed by an elaborate but precise use of the needle. A number are inscribed and etched ‘on the spot’…” (Godfrey, 1978:39)

This description usefully begins a journey tracing the provenance of British artists whose quality of drawing influenced their work stylistically and who worked directly from nature. It should be noted here that the term ‘etching on the spot’ refers to the practice of taking a
plate coated with a wax ground out on a sketching trip and then drawing through the ground whilst observing the view at first hand. It is unlikely that a mordant would have been carried with the artist; the plates would have been submerged and bitten back in the artist’s rooms. As mezzotint took over as the reproduction printer’s method of choice, the development of the landscape as subject matter took a back seat until the beginnings of the picturesque movement.

The legacy of the Picturesque

During the nineteenth century, leisure time and the ability to travel more widely brought about the beginnings of tourism for the privileged classes in search of Picturesque landscapes. Hewison (1976) explains that the term Picturesque was derived from the Italian word pittoresco meaning *in the manner of painters* and was popularised through the publication of Uvedale Price’s (1794) *Essay on the Picturesque* and the eighteenth century guidebooks by William Gilpin (1782 – 1789).

“The result of the fashion for the picturesque was a way of looking at landscape that involved, according to one’s attitude of the genre, either an active and creative sense of the inter-relationship between man and nature, or the sentimental appreciation of small ideas ... a way of looking at nature indirectly via pictures.” (Hewison, 1976: 35)

The passion for the Picturesque was reflected widely in the arts and promoted landscape as a subject matter in its own right. JMW Turner’s vast and sublime paintings, engravings and mezzotints caught the mood of the time reflecting the aesthetics described in Burke’s (1757) treatise, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*. Here Burke discusses a comparison of the sublime and the beautiful in relation to nature:

“For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions...the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly...and however they may vary afterwards from the direct nature of their causes, yet these causes keep up an eternal distinction...never to be forgotten by any whose business it is to affect the passions.” (Burke, 1990: 113-114)

King (1966) describes how William Wordworth’s poetry contributed ideals of landscape into this heady mix. He presents a newly awakened way of seeing the natural world, urging people to engage directly and physically with the landscape, to go out and walk the hills.
“…we exist within the very processes of creation, as if we were the artist inside his painting, who is being taught to see the sights around him and so continually to renew what his awakened sight can see.” (King, 1966: 32)

Etching and drawing faced a precarious future at this point, having been adopted by wealthy classes with leisure time to fill in pursuit of the Picturesque. Etching was viewed by many as a technical skill that served as an enjoyable hobby rather than as an art form.

The nineteenth century British etching revival – freeing the hand

In response to the academic theories of the Picturesque and as a rebuffing of the identification with leisure pursuits, Francis Seymour Haden and his celebrated brother in law James McNeill Whistler came to etching’s rescue. Haden had built up a large collection of Rembrandt etchings which he studied with Whistler and the influence of the Dutch master can be seen clearly in their work. Fellow artist Philip Gilbert Hamerton supported Haden and Whistler through his writing and, together, they became the leading protagonists of the so-called 19th century etching revival. In leading the charge to re-intellectualise, etching Haden and Hamerton wrote widely on the aesthetics of drawing with spontaneity on a metal plate. The inference was explicit; highly skilled drawing was necessary to succeed at etching. Wedmore recognised these sentiments and wrote, in a discussion of nineteenth century British etching, “The hand asked for the opportunity for the fuller exercise of its freedom.” (1893: 222) The revivalists were not simply calling for etching to be recognised but they were advancing new concepts for framing the practice of etching. In playing down the idea of etching as a technical hobby they aimed to elevate it as an art form:

“Liberation from the necessity to explain technical matters freed Hamerton to talk about etching as an art with its own aesthetic in a way which had not been possible in earlier writing on etching.” (Chambers, 1998: 34)

Whistler – freedom from the literal

Whistler is the one of the most influential artists of the time and it is instructive to look at his etching. Much can be learnt from his autographic, gestural drawing style. The view of Westminster Bridge from the west, (studied at the British Museum), which is shown below is typical of his etchings. He has employed an open panoramic composition, fluent line and mark making which is suggestive rather than literal.
“It was this method of describing landscape, focusing detail in the area of greatest interest, while giving more summary treatment to the periphery that Whistler and Haden derived from their study of Rembrandt.” (Lochnan, 1984: 70)

It is interesting to see that, in common with Rembrandt’s sketching style and compositional choices, that peripheral detail is drawn with a lighter touch, omitted even. This is particularly visible on the right hand side, allowing the viewers gaze to settle on the focus of the image; the Palace of Westminster and the bridge:

James Mc Neill Whistler Westminster Bridge from the West; the houses of Parliament to the I; two figures on horse-back in the shallows lower r. Etching on chine appliqué. Museum number: 1863,1017.173 by kind permission of The Trustees of the British Museum

The two close-cropped sections of the far left and right of Whistler’s etching throw into sharp contrast the omission of detail. It is possible to discern the speed of execution of a
sketch that has been drawn *en plein air*; particularly on the far right, there are spontaneous marks that have been made in the moment. The lines describing the warehouse which would be straight in a studio etching are curved and of irregular length. Here is tangible proof that Whistler brought drawing straight to the etching plate. He used his etching plates as sketchbook pages and from these prints the viewer is brought into the same moment, experiencing the view, sat on the shore or on a water barge, of the Thames in 1859.

**Theory of learned omission**

Haden and Hamerton, supported by the popularity and notoriety of Whistler’s work argued for etching to be raised up as an intellectual art advocating the beauty of the line. The use of empty space and the suggestion of form, for which they coined the term ‘learned omission’.

“*Haden advanced the theory of ‘learned omission’, arguing that the fewer the lines etched on the plate the greater would be the thought and creativity residing in each line.*” (Chambers, 1998: 4)

Haden himself went to some lengths to describe the facility and labour that is required in achieving learned omission, and secured the essence of his argument in this sentence:

“*His great labour is to omit, to keep his subject open, to preserve breadth to establish his planes, and to secure for them space, light and air*” (Haden, 1866: 153)

The two artist etchers and writers both advocated working directly from nature, often drawing directly into a prepared plate *en plein air*. For this reason Haden and Hamerton are of particular interest. Haden writes in his seminal notes *About Etching* (1866) on the skills required of an etcher:

“*It is the knowledge that is acquired by a life of devotion to what is true and beautiful – by the daily and hourly habit of weighing what we see in nature, and the thinking of how it should be represented in art. It is the habit of constant observation... and the experience that springs from it... It is the skill of the analyst and the synthesist... to combine and to simplify...to subordinate definition to space, distance light and air... and the skill to draw them – not separately – but together.*” (Haden, 1866: 156)

Haden’s devotion to observation from nature, the landscape, and his recognition of the drawing skills required to translate visual information through tacit processual application of techniques places him as an important voice in the context of this thesis.
Spontaneity

The qualities of spontaneity in drawing were thus established as being of great value in identifying creative work.

Haden...“used the affinities of etching with drawing to emphasise the spontaneity and creativity of the art and to emphasise the suitability of etching for plein-air work executed directly from nature.” (Chambers, 1999: 4)

Wedmore also acknowledged the immediacy of the sketch as a desirable quality and continues to extend the supporting evidence of the reciprocal value of drawing to etching:

“Haden’s most characteristic works – prints in which his vivid impression of the object or the scene before him has been most vividly or, it may be, subtly conveyed – prints, perhaps, which have his most distinguishing qualities of directness and vigour. The etchings of Seymour Haden are deliberately arrested at the stage of the frank sketch; but it is the sketch conceived nobly and executed with impulse.” (Wedmore, 1893: 222)

Sickert (edited by Sitwell, 1947) also wrote about Haden’s passion for etching and drawing, suggesting that for Haden there was no differentiation between the two. In asking

“Have we... any first rate drawings?... In Haden’s case, since copper was so essentially his medium that he might reply, in defence, ‘My drawings were done on copper’.” (1947: 262)

Taking this evidence into consideration it became necessary to view Haden’s etchings at first hand to view the nuances of his linear mark making and assess the veracity of the above assertions.

Haden – Working proofs

My experience of viewing the Haden prints was one of those rare occasions where the reward was much greater than the expectation. Again, at the British Museum, in the prints and drawings study room, a box file was handed to me which contained dozens of proofs of Haden’s prints. None were mounted or wrapped and they were as fresh as if they had been lifted straight from the artist’s work bench the day before. Each piece was printed on a delicate piece of paper torn or cut to a size not much larger than the print itself, only occasionally with wider margins. I could see immediately that Haden’s reputation was well deserved. His etchings had many characteristics of drawings found in artists’ sketchbooks.
They were, indeed, astutely observed, drawn with detail whilst preserving the sparseness and vitality of a sketch.

Francis Seymour Haden, View of Fulham and the river; trees trunks seen in the foreground to left and houses seen in the background. Etching with drypoint on chine 1859. By kind permission of the trustees of the British Museum. Museum number1937,0612.26

As can be seen from the museum image above, and my own photographs, below, I have documented sections of the Fulham print showing details and the various proofing stages. It was as if it was possible to read Haden’s thought process, so clear are the decisions being made between each print, particularly when dealing with the peripheral detail. The proofs move from lightly sketched outlines of foreground trees, lines testing position and angles, tentative distant roof tops to trees firmly realised and reinforced skylines. Once the decisions to include the foreground trees had been made, Haden set about describing the form with gusto, the trees are described with bold, speedily sketched lines, which were then bitten deeply holding a strong amount of ink. One of the joys of the Haden box of prints was that each etching could be turned over to see how embossed the page was, a telling indication of how deep the bite. Haden’s experience of sketching had clearly enabled him to apply aspects of the sketch to his etching. Darker, bolder lines would naturally be employed in a sketch to show foreground and the same drawing technique is evidenced in his etching. This is a reciprocal learning process – applying the knowledge from one medium to another.
Haden brought spontaneous mark making and gestural lines to his images through working the initial drawing on the plate *en plein air*, but this box revealed that he also drew onto his proofs as an integral part of the finishing of each plate. Whilst he was careful to record a scene from life, he was also keen to present an aesthetically pleasing final image and the proof stages show that his subsequent drawing was ripe with interpretation.

**Haden - Tacit Process**

The series of photographs below reveals Haden’s observational and tacit decision making processes while he was working on *A River in Werrington Park*. These proofs show graphite drawing used over the proofed image to be able to test the position of tree shadows, drawing in trees applying white body colour to sections to test whether areas should be softened or removed through scraping and burnishing back. This series provides clear evidence of intuitive responses to the memory of place; of an artistic mind searching for the
solution to what Haden must have felt he wanted to represent through the manipulation of
drawing on state proofs and on the plate. This series also provides evidence for a process of
oscillating between etching and drawing, back and forth, reciprocating the knowledge
gained from seeing the image both as drawing and etching.

A subsequent visit to the British Museum’s prints and drawings room enabled me to view a
second series of works by Haden. This visit not only provided further substantial evidence,
but strengthened the argument for reciprocal characteristics between etching and drawing
through evidence in a preparatory drawing taken into print.
Haden - Reciprocal drawing

The series Haden made from Harlech Castle was initiated with a fine and detailed drawing of the Castle on August 24th, 1874; then he proofed and completed the etching with dramatic use of aquatint in the same year. At first glance the drawing appears controlled, showing precise attention to detail, but closer inspection revealed fluid and gestural lines. This shows an accomplished artist allowing his pencil to find its way around the page while the artist’s attention remains concentrated on the scene. This is particularly true of the drawing seen on the rocky areas of the hillside that express the experience of being present in the landscape. In drawing the castle however he is much more careful, the lines are shorter, firmer and more staccato in execution. The over drawing, intended to reinforce decisions, reveals the artist’s attention to the page and a desire for representational accuracy rather than experiential authenticity.
In a side-by-side comparison, below, the etching is drawn faithfully from the sketch, allowing for an element of interpretation. The etching has been printed as a reverse of the drawing. It is possible to appreciate the reversal that has occurred; clearly Haden drew the plate from the original sketch without the use of the mirror. He has been selective in accentuating the drama of the landscape, and in so doing expresses a stronger sense of being in the place.
Through a study of Haden’s work it was possible to see how autographic evidence, the qualities of the sketch, were appreciated as an indicator of drawing inspired by nature. The artist’s personal response to the scene before him has become increasingly valued as an element within the work. Now the viewer has the opportunity to share in the experience of the place.

The RE Diploma collection

The Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers, the RE (formerly the Society of Painter-Etchers) was founded by Francis Seymour Haden in 1880 and holds an archive of its members work:

“Since its inception, every member has had one piece of work selected, providing a snapshot of the artist’s portfolio at the moment of his or her election. The significance of this collection increases annually and it is available to view at its home in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.” (www.re-printmakers.com/history-and-diploma-collection, 2018)

My visit to the Ashmolean Western Art Print Room enabled me to see a large collection of RE Diploma etchings from a wide subject matter. I looked for examples of landscape etching and examined the prints for evidence of spontaneous linear mark making, consistent with the artist having studied the scene by sketching outdoors. This enabled me to narrow my selection considerably. My first two choices present landscape as we, with modern eyes, would often expect to see it – a place represented as an atmospheric evocation. The drawing in these prints is sound with aspects of spontaneity, and it may be expected that the artists used sketches as reference.

Frances S Walker, Windsor castle, 1890 (image redacted for copyright reasons) and Charles Henry Basket, West Sea Marshes, 1911. Permission for use granted by Ashmolean. Photographs by the author

The underlying drawing is clearly visible as being from a particular artist. The linear style has both fluency and clumsiness; the quality of mark making has a unique autographic identity, an important element in identifying works for this thesis. The gestural mark used in the print
by Walker reveals a very fine use of directional line that has been spaced and built up to create tone. Cross hatching has not been relied upon, the tones are described by the closeness of the space between each mark and through the depth of the bite on each area. My suggestion would be that to create marks in this way continues to differentiate and remove the work from the traditional mechanical engraving processes of the early to mid-nineteenth century. Walker and Baskett followed in the wake of Haden and Whistler.

The Hon Walter John James *Wooded hillside* 1909 and Myra Kathleen Hughes, *Old Norwegian Bridge*, 1911 (image redacted for copyright reasons). Permission for use granted by Ashmolean Photographs by the author

The image above also shows the development of drawing styles within etching and the influence of the revivalists. The work by James, *Wooded hillside*, is reminiscent of the drawing qualities being sought by Haden. In another etching, the structure of *Old Norwegian Bridge*, by Myra Kathleen Hughes, it is possible to detect the influence of Whistler’s *Thames series* etchings. Linear work has become bolder, portraying a strength which may have mirrored the social confidence of the pre-war years. I was interested, but not surprised, to see that there were comparatively few women artists represented. The etching by Hughes was one of the exceptional prints and this persuaded me to ensure that this thesis aspired to a balance of male and female artists. As the collection moved into the artists of the 1930s there were more women exploring a wider variety of mediums, such as woodcut.

**Review of twentieth century etchings – place and autographic mark making**

In the early twentieth century there was a down turn in the quantity of etchings being made. There notable exceptions were among war artists such as Muirhead Bone, James McBey and
Christopher Nevinson. Bone’s practice, in particular, included drawing en plein air, he describes the advantages of making etching from the experience of place...

“...one gets a simpler, better statement if the particular sentiment or ‘theme’ of a scene by doing it from memory or a very rough sketch...” (Bone in Lumsden, 1962: 332)

In the years following the war shortages led to restrictions on the commercial viability of making etchings because there were constraints on the availability of materials. There were...

“...few established print publishers in the immediate post war period, caused in part by economic restraints and shortage of materials.” (Samuel, 2016: 72)

Post-pastoral depictions

During the 1930s a new aesthetic approach began to make its mark on etching. The direction that some of the prints of this period took, can be called post-pastoral. I will defer to Gifford (2012), who neatly explains the definition of this term in a literary context that can be applied equally to art:

“I could offer suggestions for six features of what I call “post-pastoral” writing about the countryside: awe leading to humility in the face of the creative-destructive forces of nature; awareness of the culturally loaded language we use about the country; accepting responsibility for our relationship with nature and its dilemmas; recognition that the exploitation of nature is often accompanied by the exploitation of the less powerful people who work with it, visit it or less obviously depend upon its resources.” (Gifford, 2012: 6)

My research now took me to Tate Britain. The experience of going to the Tate’s study room was very different to the other study rooms. I found that I had moved on from the oak panelling and carpets to a bright, airy room with diffused light and polished floors; altogether more modern, in keeping with the works that I saw.

Sutherland – the studio hand

Graham Sutherland’s neo-romantic post-pastoral etching, viewed at the Tate Gallery prints and drawings room marked a definitive move forward from all other works I had seen in the contextual review. His etching, *Pastoral*, firmly situates his work within an awareness of culturally loaded expressions of place and a recognition of responsibility for our relationship with nature.
Sutherland’s vision of a pastoral view is a relatively early piece but decidedly of his oeuvre. This image has many distinguishing elements including, as Cumming (2011) wrote in the Observer Newspaper “trees like organ pipes... organic forms, twisting and tortured...” (18.12.2011). Sutherland would sketch en plein air and then, having noticed a detail that inspired the image he would return to the studio to make his work. The experience of viewing fascinating natural forms comes through in the etching, but as Blake (2013) wrote in an article for the Financial Times, “…Sutherland’s studio hand moved considerably further from what his outdoor hand had seen” (20.08.2013). In looking to Samuel Palmer as inspiration Sutherland is on the periphery of this thesis, but his intricate and individualistic drawing seen in the semi-abstraction of form signals a modern and forward looking approach to what had been seen as a traditional medium.
I found that a study of Nicholson’s etchings at first hand to be very illuminating. Not only are they drawn from first-hand knowledge of place, but the sparseness of drawing tells us much about Nicholson’s fascination with line and authenticity of mark making. Haden wrote revealingly about the etcher’s line:

Ben Nicholson, Twelve Etchings 1965, 66 & 67, P02008 - P02019 photographs of Small Silent Siena, Turkish Sundial and column and Columns, with close-up of Column. (images redacted for copyright reasons) Photographs by the author, permission for use granted by Tate Images
“Every stroke he makes tells strongly against him... The necessity for rigid selection is, therefore, constantly present to his mind. If one stroke in the right place tells more for him... it would seem to follow that the single stroke is a more learned stroke.” (Haden, 1866: 153)

Nicholson has preserved the essence of spontaneity through his learned restraint. The reversal of numerals and letters on the sundial betrays the speed of execution and lack of reversal. There are fascinating details, shown on the close-up of Column, where lines cross each other or over-run their length and yet are left unburnished. Following Nicholson’s hand as the viewer traces the passage of drawing as they look over the etching and tracking his line guides us to the moment of creativity. The sparseness allows the viewer to share in the experience of place and the decisions made in the depiction of place.

Gross – exploiting the line

Anthony Gross, Winter grasses, 1972. Ref: P07251 (image redacted for copyright reasons) Photograph by the author, permission for use granted by Tate Images
The etching, *Winter grasses*, by Anthony Gross, in stark contrast to Nicholson, uses a plethora of line creating a chaotic first impression. Closer study reveals just one layer of line, each mark as honest and responsive to place as Nicholson’s was. Gross was firm in his belief and would support the notion that...

“...etching is a linear art... and that its expressiveness depends upon exploiting the line...”
(Reynolds, 1968: 8)

He also clearly saw that he had found a print medium that allowed him to draw. Whilst at the Slade he had been told to “treat your burin as a pencil and your burnisher as a rubber” (Reynolds, 1968: 8). *Winter grasses* showed little sign of burnishing, but bears the hallmarks of many tools employed to create the desired effects. Wheels, roulettes and engraving tools have most likely been put to use to represent the various natural textures in combination with a wide range of biting times. Gross aimed to achieve atmospheric distance through a combination of weight of heaviness or lightness of line. The thorns in the central foreground are particularly noticeable - drawn with deeply bitten lines, starting to open out, carrying a lot of ink. All that Gross knows of drawing practices appears to have been reciprocated in his approach to etching.
Doig – a painterly line

Peter Doig, Ten etchings, 1996. P11471 - P11480 photos of *White Out* and *Blotter*, with detail sections emphasising the variety of mark making. (images redacted for copyright reasons) Photographs by the author, permission for use granted by Tate Images
Peter Doig is a highly renowned contemporary painter and print maker and my only opportunity to see his etchings was through the Tate Prints and Drawings room. Doig’s etchings portray a peopled place resonant of autobiographical memories. His etchings bring this contextual review up to date through his application of painterly marks. Up until this point etching has, almost entirely, been presented as an art of the line. Doig’s prints, however, use a much greater variety of drawing technique including spit bite aquatints, drawing with the brush as well as a point. Unusually among artists up to this point, Doig relies heavily on photographs to support his first-hand experience, but it is interesting to introduce this method of observation. Adams (2008), writing in The Observer newspaper about his paintings of similar scenes explains:

“As a result his best work occupies some uneasy space between anecdote and abstract; it never lets you forget either its reference in the real world, nor its painterly surface” (Adams, 27.01.2008)

In a consideration not just of image but of surface and textural qualities, Doig’s work brings this review to the point where I am able to firmly advocate that there is a reciprocal link between the materiality of drawing and etching. The surface of the plate now declares itself true to its medium whilst, at the same time, containing an image fully evocative of the experience of place.

Review of the British contemporary field

Researching the contemporary field provided new challenges. Once I began researching, I found less and less published material, often only exhibition catalogues with little information. I became frustrated by the low-resolution reproduction of prints in catalogues and journals or the flattening effect caused by digital adjustments often found in online cataloguing. This made it difficult to discern detail or technique and complicated the selection of quality artists. In order to be sure that I was discussing practitioners who had strong autographic qualities and whose work provided a broad survey of experiences of representing place I had to see their work at first hand. The artists mentioned here therefore have been sourced through exhibition visits and personal contact - their work appears in both a practical and experiential context. I am not the first to struggle with a literary review in contemporary practice-led printmaking research and I refer to John Pengelley’s (1997) doctoral thesis where he states:
“A customary literature-based review as a result was thought to be limited given the objectives of this project. In order to encompass the possible diversity of the source material, which was not found to be accommodated in text-based format, the researcher has extended the review process. For the purposes of this thesis this review will now be referred to as ‘a contextual review’. (Pengelley, 1997: 10)

In the earlier days of the research as I searched for artists to engage with as case studies I believed, misguidedly that lesser known artists would be a good starting point. Whilst they were very willing to contribute, their time was often divided with the demands of busy lives. After a number of false starts and unanswered emails, I began to arrange meetings with artists who had an established reputation and I found that the professionalism of such artists meant prompt answers to emails and commitment to interviews. My review of the contemporary field looked for artists whose intention is, in the effusive words of Hamerton, to...

“...feel vividly, to be possessed for a few hours by some overmastering thought, and record the thought before the fire has time to die out of it – this is first condition of success in etching.” (1975: 59)

The wider contemporary field

It was with some regret that I was unable to follow up some lines of enquiry due to constraints of space and technical relevance, and there remain a number of artists who would have made excellent case studies, albeit in another thesis.
Among those in the contemporary field who deserve special mention are Emma Stibbon RA, whose work unfortunately, by mutual agreement, did not make the thesis because of the photopolymer method that she employs to make her etched plates. Stibbon’s drawings of place are sensitive evocations of the temporal fragility of landscapes in flux:

“...her drawings exist... as reflections and prints; they are not one view but a number of views therefore they are the re-envisaging of a place or an experience and therefore there is a certain honesty about it being her view... there’s a sense of the artist being in that place and taking the viewer to that place.” (Ainslie, 2017)

The light sensitive process that takes Stibbon’s drawings through to an intaglio print preserves the nuances of the original drawing but does not involve making any drawing on the surface of the polymer plate. Adjustments to the plate are not possible once it has been processed; the autographic mark, by technical necessity, is at a remove on the finished plate and therefore her work is absent from the remainder of this thesis.

The inclusion of the following artists is limited to this section of the thesis because the relevant attributes of their work duplicates some of those qualities discussed in the detailed case study chapters.


David Carpanini PPRE and Marianne Ferm RE are artists of interest because of their contrasting styles of mark making, particularly their use of aquatint. They both create sublime depictions of their experience of place exhorting the powerful forces of nature, tapped or otherwise. Carpanini’s etchings preserve all the characteristics of drawing and he is able to utilise all his practical, tacit understanding of working in other mediums to achieve his instantly recognisable mark making and imagery:
“The term Painter-Printmaker is, in my case, absolutely correct. There is no order of importance; each method of pictorial resolution allows me to explore different aspects of my personal vision... My imagery is drawn from my background and experience because it is what I know best” (Carpanini, 2014: 9)

In a more traditional vein, Austin Cole and Edward Twohig ARE draw highly competent etchings with contemporary references. They explore panoramic perspective and the visual textures of the world we inhabit, while maintaining a critical eye on the traditions of Samuel Palmer and Francis Seymour Haden.

Melanie Bellis ARE and Jemma Gunning ARE are emerging artists who produce fine architecturally inspired work located within the paradoxically complementary themes of construction and destruction. Bellis says of her work:
“Through the process of etching I can develop my drawings and achieve intense line and tonal contrast. The final image has a sense of impact, presence and place, capturing a point-in-time before the building is finished and takes on its final form.” (2018, http://www.southbankprintmakers.com/melanie-bellis)

Gunning’s work “…draws on a deep love of dilapidation, crumbling urban spaces awaiting demolition, mirroring the buildings’ decay with the enforced erosion of copper…” (White, 2018: 57)

These two artists would have been a perfect match for the themes that underpin my thesis but unfortunately, they explore similar imagery and themes covered by two of the case studies, Ros Ford and Ian Chamberlain. In the interests of a wholly informed and instructive survey through the case study chapters, I selected those artists whose practice provided a new yet relevant viewpoint. In 2014, at the time of making decisions about which artists to approach for the research, I also looked for artists who had established practices and proven longevity.
Chapter conclusion – the value of drawing as etching

This thesis continues by looking forward, towards breaking new ground, and will go on to concentrate on artists who are working at the boundaries of drawing and etching.

The subject of the future of drawing and printmaking came up during an enlightening interview with Meryl Ainslie, Director of Rabley Contemporary and Rabley Drawing Centre in 2017. Although we used the word drawing during the interview it had been established that Ainslie’s printmakers had drawing firmly situated at the core of their practice; therefore drawing in this context also refers to the print. This was a very important factor for her in selecting artists. With the future of print to consider Ainslie looks for these qualities:

“Honesty in a mark - always autographic and not reflective of another state. A drawing is only as good as its intention so if your intent is to appropriate and re-represent and in doing that to sublimate your autographic mark, that has a different value to a drawing that is about the notion of making an idea concrete. ...There is something about the autographic nature of the drawn mark that is very beautiful and emotional, it reflects its wearer.”

Ainslie explained that the position of drawing [and print] had changed over the last 20 years:

“...it’s now much more recognised as a discipline in its own right... There are so many different types of drawing, some are the first notion of an idea made concrete and some are finished pieces on prepared paper...In looking back over the last 50 years drawing is more popular now. In the last century there was another peak and in the last 300 years there would have been several peaks and troughs - all things are cyclical. During the 1960s-1980s, for 30 years, drawing was undervalued and secondary. The world realised what it was losing and then it was missed. By being missed it was seen to have value and so drawing began to have a resurgence - that is the cycle of things.” (Ainslie, 2017)

In setting out the historical and contemporary context for the thesis I have aimed to show the value of drawing and the experiential factors inherent in taking drawing into etching. The contextual review lays the ground for the following chapters which are intended as illuminating, optimistic and positive reflections of a way of working. I will present evidence that drawing as etching is shaking off the dusty coat of tradition.
Chapter 3: Practitioner and Place

“The calmness, the solitude of horizons lures me towards them, through them and on to others. They layer the memory like strata.” (Baker, 2005: 9)

Experience of place

In the Introduction I put forward the notion that the practitioner’s relationship to place can be a deep seated sense of belonging or a way of understanding their position in the world. This chapter will explain and expand on these ideas and set out propositions for the experiential reciprocity between drawing and etching place. Anthropologist Tim Ingold will be referred to throughout this chapter in order to facilitate an understanding in respect of the interrelationship between artist and places of inspiration. Ingold has written extensively (2006, 2010, 2011 and 2016) on the nature of how we live our lives; he takes an interdisciplinary approach referencing many research areas including archaeology, linguistics and the arts to inform his theories. I have found his descriptions of drawing and walking, gesture and trace to be highly informative in developing a greater experiential understanding of how, and why, we live in, move through and then respond creatively to what is seen, discovered and experienced. Ingold tells us that to be somewhere, to be in a
place, we must experience that place, but we can only fully appreciate that place if we have some other place to compare it to:

“Life on the spot surely cannot yield an experience of place, of being somewhere. To be a place, every somewhere must be on one or several paths of movement to and from places elsewhere.” (Ingold, 2016: 3)

**Topophilia**

A similar view is expressed by landscape artist and occasional etcher, Kurt Jackson and is based upon his own observations, applied to his own practice:

“The location may exist as a memory from other times or be one of a series, a string of locations forming a route, a course, a journey across the land. These links, these reasons to work in particular ‘places’ are therefore not simply topographic... but they can be topophilic resulting from the investment of time through one’s life... with nostalgia, fondness, attachment or connection.” (Jackson, 2014: 7)

The term topophilia was coined by WH Auden in 1947 (in his introduction for *Slick but not Streamlined*, a book about the English poet John Betjeman). Topophilia refers to a strong emotional connection and affection for place, which is often linked to notions of cultural identity. It is interesting to note that Betjeman’s places were English suburbs, which explains that a topophil does not necessarily have affection for a wilderness or a romantic idyll, the place can be any place. In this thesis I will discuss artists who could be described as so-called topophils.

**Artist’s choice of place**

The inclusion of a chapter which rests its identity on the word place leads me to address the importance of ‘place’ to this thesis. Why is the artist etcher’s relationship to place or places important, how does place impact upon their practice of drawing and are the reciprocal qualities clearer because of the connectivity with place? What are the experiential qualities that found in a place and what does the practitioner wish to express through place? In the course of the conversations with Norman Ackroyd and Ros Ford, the case study artists featured in this chapter, it became apparent that the subject of their art works are places that have strong emotional associations. When I first made contact with them, they both had established practices; were committed to their chosen subject and their individual practices could be defined through the subject matter of place. Places were selected with
purpose, through complex reasoning that had more to do with physical, haptic and tactile experience than notions of sentiment or nostalgia. The artists travelled knowing what they are looking for. They were not in search of some unobtainable arcadia but they do need to make sense of the wider world they inhabit and they share a desire to express the nature of experience in that world.

Wayfaring

From both a theoretical and practical source, and again with reference to Ingold (2011, 2016), I will describe that an artist’s notion of place is commonly linked to journeying, walking and moving about from one place to another. Ingold uses the term ‘wayfaring’ (2011, 2016) to “…describe the embodied experience of this perambulatory movement. It is as wayfarers then that human beings inhabit the earth.” (2011: 148)

Through movement, experience becomes embodied; thus movement becomes experiential. Working in the landscape requires the artist to move through the landscape following the line of a footpath on a map or a sea chart, looking out for visible lines left by animal tracks or following those invisible routes learnt through experience or passed along by word of mouth:

“…walking, observing, storytelling, drawing... they all proceed along lines of one kind or another.” (Ingold, 2011: 1)

The case studies in this chapter reveal that movement is one of the keys to inspiration. By embodying the experience of being in a landscape and following along lines of movement, the practitioner develops an experiential understanding of place.

The nature of movement can be well planned journeys on open seas, or walks through urban areas and along coastlines. Movement opens up new vistas and ignites creative intention; movement awakens sight and enables the artist to see places with new eyes.

“It is in this very forward movement that the creativity of the work is to be found.” (Ingold 2011: 216)

The experience of being in places, exposed to the elements and aware of shifting surfaces beneath their feet; enables practitioners to be alive to haptic sensation and gives impetus to drawings and sketches. I will show how movement through place, captured through drawing, is then translated into etching. Drawing will be seen to inform and enrich the
etching process and the memory of corporeal engagement and the depth of immersion in one environment will be shown to inform a creative material engagement in another.
Case study 1:
Norman Ackroyd CBE. RA. RE. b.1938 - Biography

Norman Ackroyd works from his home, workshop and studio in Bermondsey. He was born and raised in Leeds and went on to study at The Royal College of Art from 1961 – 1964. Having taught for many years Ackroyd now devotes much of his time to the Royal Academy where he was elected a Royal Academician in 1991 and was made Senior Fellow, Royal College of Art in 2000. Ackroyd has identified himself as an island dweller believing the British people to be island people. He is best known for his etchings of the islands on the furthest reaches of the Western British archipelago, favouring the Shetland Islands and the Outer Hebrides. His work is held in collections around the world and he has had numerous solo exhibitions. Influences include Rembrandt, Goya and Picasso and he has a sizeable print collection which serves as a daily inspiration. Ackroyd draws predominantly with watercolour but also uses pens, pencils and pastels, and he etches with copper in ferric chloride.

Devotion to landscape

My first case study artist is Norman Ackroyd, described by Cooke (2016) as “...one of the greatest exponents of landscape” and who Frayling (2005: 7) describes as “…single minded in being an artist of the landscape...” It is timely to introduce Ackroyd at this point in the thesis due to the fact that his work bridges an otherwise barren era for landscape etching. The historical context in Chapter 2 concluded with the works of Nicholson and Sutherland, pp.64-67, who were ushering in the post-war years with neo-romantic and post-pastoral works indicative of a new age. Sadly this did not translate into a vibrant new era for printmaking and, for Ackroyd to succeed, he had to buck the trend:
“He has remained steadfastly true to himself and his instincts to create a body of work like no other in his time... his total devotion to landscape has been unusual..., but so has his use of printmaking as his principal medium in a period when etching in black and white could scarcely have been less fashionable” (Cooke, 2016).

In the mid-twentieth century Ackroyd was one of the very few artists rejecting the colourful allure of Pop Art. Etching had grabbed his attention and the equally unfashionable subject matter of the British landscape became his life’s work.

He is “…a visual poet in the romantic tradition who has never surrendered to sentimentality or idealization, but who has relied on first-hand observation and personal experience.” (Frayling, 2005: 7)

Material immersion

Over the course of my research I enjoyed two long conversations with Ackroyd - the first (Appendix p. 288) provided me with background information and an insight into his material engagement, his delight in all things to do with etching from paper to press. The second (Appendix p. 295) was a focused discussion on the experience of making drawings and bringing that experience into the studio. On both occasions I came away with the impression of an artist who finds great joy in making work and who sees his prints as a celebration of the materials and tools of etching. As he often says “I love the stuff!” (2016, 2018)
When he speaks of his first encounter with etching he says, “It was a completely emotional thing... I loved this way of working” (Ackroyd, 2016). Now at 80 years of age he is still as passionate about etching as he was when he first began etching in Leeds College of Art in 1956. Ackroyd lives with his work, above the shop (in parlance). Quite literally he only has to go down stairs from his top floor flat to be in his studio and he is surrounded by etching wherever he is in his building. Upstairs he is inspired by some of his colleagues and heroes: on his walls hang etchings by Picasso and Whistler, a little woodcut by Bewick, and a large collection of prints by old friends. He has maps where he can plot his travels and everywhere there are his etchings – past and current. In short he is immersed in his craft.

One of the first things I wanted to understand was why it was etching that had captivated him. He told me that it was ...“The ethic of the medium, the scale of black and white honesty, truth to itself” (Ackroyd, 2016). He views the limitless variations achievable within his monochrome palette as having: “The clarity of a single voice – a single clear story like a glance” (Ackroyd, 2016), and this is what he finds both perennially appealing and continually challenging. Ackroyd also recognises that the clarity is akin to drawing en plein air, recognising at once that drawing follows a continuous cycle from place to plate.

**Placement – sea journeying**

A discussion of Ackroyd’s practice must logically start with place; equal in his devotion to etching is his passion for the British islands. Ackroyd’s place is to be found in islands, at the furthest boundaries of the British Isles and Ireland with the Atlantic, the outliers - inhospitable places which at one time were inhabited but are rarely so now. On a drawing trip he charters small boats for whole days, planning his trips in consultation with the skippers and boatmen. Ingold describes that immersion in place is gained by movement but that to be transported from place to place in a motorised vehicle, by “mechanical displacement,” (2011: 152) disengages a person from the movement. There is no such disengagement for Ackroyd. Crucially, journeying by boat allows this artist wayfarer placement - on absorbing the movement of the sea, the boat places, rather than displaces. His mode of transportation is felt haptically, mediated through the hull of the boat. His feet and legs absorb the tilt and lurch of the boat, just as a walker would respond to undulations on the ground and a rush of air is felt equally (maybe more freshly) to that of air moving across a hillside. The journey is, therefore, felt experientially. Out on the water, exposed to the elements, all the senses are alive to the journey and that intense experience comes alive in the drawings and is translated reciprocally into his etchings. From the comfort of his
Bermondsey studio Ackroyd vividly explained the sensations of experiential immersion in place and how the strength of those memories is brought into his etching:

“It’s all that. You know, we’re sitting here in a nice warm room but [out on the boat] it can be cold and rainy and you can be down-wind of a gannetry where it stinks to high heaven and it’s foul… and the row when you get up close! I mean the noise and the smell of the birds! And also the cold and maybe the fact that it’s raining, all these kind of things which you don’t get in the studio. They do come through the whole thing.” (Ackroyd, 2018)

Ingold reminds us that, when every sense is alive to the experience the same view can be met with many times and the experience of that place, especially a wild place, can be quite varied:

“As the weather changes, so these capacities [to see, to hear and to touch] vary, leading us not to perceive different things but to perceive the same things differently.” (Ingold 2011: 130)

Through my conversations with Ackroyd I tried to conjure a picture of the artist at work, out on the sea, circling the rock stacks and islands. Frayling’s account of a sea trip with the artist provides a most illustrative description of the immersion in place that Ackroyd experiences:

“...perched on the side of the boat with a roll-up cigarette in his mouth and a brush in his hand... drawing – very quickly and with the skill of a lifetime – tonal effects in his pad with washes of ink, to capture what he felt about the exact moment when the Atlantic swell hit the coast: drawing and looking intently at the landscape, both at the same time.” (Frayling, 2005: 8-9)

His knowledge of the coast is vast. At a Gallery evening hosted by Eames Fine Art in 2017 Ackroyd was challenged to a party trick; to recite the names of every place on the shipping forecast, in order, from memory. And so he began, a little haltingly having been given no prior warning, to list the names. Beginning in the North at Muckle Flugga, gradually making his way down the west coast of the British Isles. As he moved around the coastline the names took of the rhythm of poetry, the emphasis and timbre changed pace as the audience were taken from the north of Scotland to southern Ireland. The connection and affection that Ackroyd has for these places could not have been better expressed; it was a succinct and magical illustration of a man’s complete absorption with place.
Islomania

Ackroyd is passionate about his work, but even more passionate about his subject matter – the islands. The poet Andrew McNeillie (2016) describes Ackroyd as an islomaniac, someone for whom the love of islands can become obsessional. Conversations with Ackroyd soon turn to stories about sea trips. He delights in the geography of the islands; taking a well-thumbed and battered atlas from his shelves, he guides me on a sea tour through the Minch, the stretch of sea between the Outer Hebrides and mainland Scotland, from Mingulay in the south to Cape Wrath in the north. Ackroyd immerses himself in all aspects of the movement along the lines tracing his sea journeys and therefore inhabits his island places, both through the sea and the walking on land.

Poetic inspiration

“And so, I go out there and just get into a frenzy and poetry comes into mind a lot, bits which you know, then you find some poets who actually summed up what I’m thinking much better than I could do in words.” (Ackroyd, 2018)

Ackroyd, in company with the other case studies, place their work firmly in a wider cultural context particularly literature and poetry. My conversations with these artists have often touched on an historical piece of artwork or a poem or piece of writing; literature in particular plays a more significant role, often as a way of further articulating place.

"Here the information board tells us what to expect to see, what birdlife etc., and fact-checks signs of early settlement, devotion and war. Go in ignorance I say for the sake of it. Let what you don’t know work on you like the prevailing weather. Recollect emotion after the event, consult the field guide at your leisure."

Fieldguide, Andrew McNeillie, Eames Gallery of Fine Art, Sept 2017, photograph by the author

The above poem is an extract from Fieldguide by the poet and friend of Ackroyd, Andrew McNeillie that was displayed at Ackroyd’s exhibition Here and there. Ackroyd typically and
self-deprecatingly describes this poem as a good way to approach landscape. When out on a
boat circling an island Ackroyd likes to respond instinctively. He will say that there is nothing
intellectual going on but his pragmatic and honest reflections provide a rich insight into the
close links between his drawing and etching processes. In referring to his skill in capturing
transitory scenes as instinctive, he implies that such a task is akin to habit, just something he
does. McNeillie adds a poetic spin to the idea of intuitive mastery:

“He [Ackroyd] sees straight into and seizes things instantaneously as from mid-air,
transmuting onto paper and into art what’s always fleeting before eye and mind.” (McNeillie,
2016)

Instinctiveness

Sennett however explains the interactive processes that come into play when a practitioner
of Ackroyd’s standing embarks on a drawing:

“When we speak of doing something “instinctively” we are often referring to behaviour we
have so routinized that we don’t have to think about it... In the higher stages of skill, there is
a constant interplay between tacit knowledge and self-conscious awareness, the tacit
knowledge serving as anchor, the explicit awareness as critique and corrective.” (Sennett,
2009: 50)

Such interplay between tacit and explicit qualities is illustrative of a potential source of
reciprocity – the tacit knowledge needed to make a sketch and the explicit, unambiguous
critique required to transfer the sketch through the initial stages of etching a plate.

Corporeal experience – body as instrument

In common with all the practitioners cited in this thesis Ackroyd brings the memories of
drawing en plein air back to his workshop. The powerful corporeal experience of place which
ignites his creativity is at the tip of his fingertips as he sets to work back in his London
studios. This thesis builds on notions of an artist’s relationship to place and the importance
of being out in a place, to have experienced place. Wilson (2013) begins to define the
dynamic and reciprocal relationship between a practitioner’s corporeal experience and the
creative process. In the preface to the RISD publication *The Art of Critical Making* (2013), he
considers the critical purposes of drawing and materials, proposing a reciprocity between
the physical and the material:
“That for humans there should be an essential reciprocity between action and identity, mediated by hand is neither modern nor merely an interesting idea... the desire to achieve an artistic goal is invariably strengthened when the body itself is both the instrument and the focus of the work... when physical skill supports and enlivens the creative process, memories of place...movement and companions will always make their way into the fabric of achievements.” (Wilson 2013: 15)

It is possible to begin to see these ideas applied to Ackroyd’s practice. His physical and sensory experiences strengthened by distilled memories combine with stories and anecdotes about the islands. Reciprocity between the action of the journey and his creative identity shaped by immersion in place, coalesce and enliven his practice.

Reawakening memory

The board of images, titled Skellig revisited, was shown, somewhat unusually for a commercial gallery, by Eames Fine Art as a device through which visitors to Ackroyd’s 2015 exhibition were able to gain an insight into his experiential working practices. A collection of photographs, photocopied sketches, maps and state proofs were displayed in such a way as to represent a corner of Ackroyd’s studio. When he is working in his studios, he likes to surround himself with similar visual prompts that transport him back to the places he is etching, images that help to reawaken his memories of an island drawing trip. Guests at the exhibition private view were treated to a talk given by Ackroyd about the island and its history rather than an overview of his etchings and watercolour drawings. As Eames later told me:
“He stood in front of the board, not the pictures, and just let the pictures speak for themselves. It made sense to do it that way, particularly with the type of work he does... the preparation of a journey and a trip which is the back story to the work that emerges and that was wonderful.” (Eames, 2016)

I was privileged in sharing some of what those visitors had heard when I met Ackroyd in the gallery by chance the following day. As always, he was more animated about the physicality of Skellig and the experience of the visit than his finished etchings. On each occasion I met Ackroyd I came to understand that experiences - places and processes, provide the passion and the driving force behind his work. Experiences and recollections of being out of the studio, of sailing and walking, enhances his memory and creates an experiential engagement with a place. He explained the euphoria he experiences when drawing:

“It’s incredibly tiring in a wonderful way, and you get onto a high you know, you get into a wonderful state of mind - which I also do when I get back here and I’m working. I like to work at two or three plates at a time but then just focus on one and have things around that are half-finished.” (Ackroyd, 2018)

Photographs of Ackroyd turning the pages of his sketchbooks, taken at his studios, by the author

Watercolour drawing

The journey to place is therefore a vital aspect of Ackroyd’s immersion, and once there he sets about capturing that place. Most artists covered in the thesis turn to graphite as their drawing medium, but Ackroyd prefers watercolour: “It’s all drawing!” he often declares. Ackroyd works in handmade sketchbooks which he puts together from collections of watercolour paper. The books are made with practical expediency in mind. They lie flat, enabling him to work efficiently and the different papers allow for explorative mark making:
“Each book contains half a dozen [drawings], a day’s work. A lot of them are pointless you know, but it’s making the marks that matter. It’s the doing it. It’s a bit like you want to go somewhere, the journey is as important as getting there… I don’t throw any of them away.” (Ackroyd, 2018)

In not distinguishing between brush and graphite as a drawing tool, he follows in the tradition of English landscape artists such as Whistler, Brabazon and Steer. In the early years of the 20th century “there had developed a new appreciation of the ‘watercolour drawing’,” described by Feather in the accompanying catalogue to the 2017 exhibition Places of the Mind at the British Museum. She goes on to describe this new appreciation as:

“…a general sketch aesthetic, one which is defined solely in contrast to ‘highly finished, minutely observed and self-consciously composed picture making’ (Smith, 1997:25). This is a tradition which, despite the stylistic diversity of watercolour practice in the twenty-first century, has never been replaced.” (Feather, 2017: 90)

Ackroyd’s sketchbook practice falls firmly into this aesthetic tradition. His sketching is loose, reactive to the scene, unselfconsciously capturing the landscapes that fleetingly present themselves as his boat moves around from island to island. The sketch, drawn in watercolour and executed at speed provides a responsive drawing medium enabling the artist to capture moments, places glimpsed.

The subservient hand

Durer is recorded as one of the first artists who recognised time as a proactive element in drawing, “The faster the sketch the more subservient the hand” (in van Alphen, 2008: 62).

Ackroyd, as I have described, prefers to let the drawing take over. He explains that it is the subservience, the instinctiveness, that he’s after: “…when you come back you’ve no idea what you’ve got in the drawing books…and then you get a real surprise, sometimes you think ‘I would never have done that in the studio,’ and that is what you’re after” (Ackroyd, 2018).

Berger, in addition to these thoughts, writes eloquently on an artist’s responsiveness to subject and the reciprocal creation of experiential memories:

“…the lines on the paper are traces left behind by the artist’s gaze, which is ceaselessly leaving, going out, interrogating the strangeness, the enigma of what is before [their] eyes… The sum total of the lines on the paper narrate a sort of optical emigration by which the
artist, following his own gaze, settles... And if the drawing succeeds, he stays there forever.” (Berger, 2005: 47)

Eames recounts a conversation he had with Ackroyd, which I believe Berger would have appreciated, and which illustrates his point pragmatically:

“...it was an anecdotal, almost off the cuff, remark [Ackroyd] made that really brought things alive... He comes off the boat and he gives himself an hour and a half just to create one watercolour and to distil everything of the day before having a lovely supper... The majority of the pieces in the [Skellig revisited] show were these one and a half hour moments in every day, the one image he wants to capture that day and I just love the idea of him just settling down in a moment of calm at his table, in his hotel room, before he goes off to supper. People love that idea. It was a very evocative way of understanding Norman’s working day and that moment of peace where everything just comes together.” (Eames, 2016)

An enquiry into possibilities

Ackroyd cites his influences as Rembrandt, Goya and Picasso and says his curiosity grew as he wondered about their techniques, and gradually came to understand, how those great masters achieved the results they did. “The enquiry into possibilities...” (Ackroyd, 2016) reveals Ackroyd’s investigative approach to the medium. “… you can learn the rules, then you can break the rules.” (Ackroyd, 2016)

Paper goldmine

Ackroyd’s appreciation of the materials he works with is deeply embedded: “It was all the stuff! I started getting interested in really beautiful papers and I started getting into making beautiful inks...” (Ackroyd, 2016) As we were talking in 2016, he paused to open a plan chest drawer in front of where we are sitting and began to sift through a lovingly collected array of paper put down for a special print. Most of the papers were given to him - a Whatman from 1782, a book from 1800, a Millbone. He brought out sheet after sheet, held them for a moment to gauge the weight and feel the suppleness; rubbed them between his fingers, tapped to hear the snap and held them up to the light to inspect the intricate and beautiful watermarks. Papers were compared, one against the other, so that we could appreciate the variety of different whites and creams. The tactility of materials and, in his own words, “the love of the stuff” is amply demonstrated in his pleasure in this paper collection, his goldmine.
Seeing the respect with which Ackroyd handled his paper brought to mind Petherbridge’s truism:

“No matter how beautiful an unused sheet of paper… it is understood to exist in a state of desire for the line, which will simultaneously disrupt, mar and activate its surface.”

(Petherbridge, 2011:122)

This material interest is mirrored in his enthusiasm and engagement with his drawing materials: “The freedom that I got in etching in terms of drawing, especially using a mixture of line and sugarlift, I brought into the drawing from life and so it overlapped, working on paper with watercolour with different brushes... I do like working en plein air with those materials... The whole thing overlaps, but it’s all about drawing. You can draw with a brush as much as you can with a pencil or a pen, and the combination of those is wonderful, I find.”

(Ackroyd, 2016) “...and then you get something that’s really ethereal, something really strange has happened and you take that [drawing] in and dry it off, in the cabin. You work with drawing books and you can sometimes see, ‘gawd what’s happening here?’” (Ackroyd, 2018)

Behind every one of Ackroyd’s images is the cumulative experiences of all the journeys around the islands.

**Etching as a drawing medium**

The reciprocity between drawing and etching is, as I shall show through other case studies, often an ineffable notion. Ackroyd is in no doubt however that the two methodologies inform one another. I asked him if, when he’s working out on the boats, does he see something and think that’s an etching I want to make, does he start a drawing thinking about the end result - about the etching?

“I find that water colour is a drawing medium - it’s not a painting medium and I find that I’m almost thinking in an etching way, you know, my hands are thinking in an etching way. The distillation that comes from the aquatint, you know, [this drawing] could be done with etching, you actually think in the two or three stages that you will do. So what would be the first stage, what would be the second stage and... it helps the water colour that I think in an etching way.” (Ackroyd, 2018)
“When I’m doing a water colour I’m thinking about the subtle values because etching is all about drawings with subtle values and etching is probably one of the most beautiful of all drawing mediums.” (Ackroyd, 2018)

The photograph shows how Ackroyd occasionally makes use of photocopies to translate a watercolour into black and white tones. This isn’t always a necessary process because he can often foresee the print as he is making the drawing:

“Yes and then I don’t even make notes because you come back and say yes, I remember thinking about that how it would be three different aqua tints, the first state, the second state, the third state and then - you’re tightrope walking [from] there you know!” (Ackroyd, 2018)

For Ackroyd etching is “…one of those mediums that opens up the possibilities, but within the ethic of the medium – I’m not trying to push the medium anywhere it doesn’t want to go because it’s so happy within its scale of black and white.” (Ackroyd, 2016)

It was enlightening to hear him talk describe the stages in which he would approach a drawing through etching; using his watercolour technique of building washes to rehearse the process of the first few aquatint states. His reference to tightrope walking explains that it is only the first few stages that can be predicted and after that an artist has to respond to the plate as he sees it and feel his way through to the finished print. At any point it could fail.

Predicting a print whilst making a drawing isn’t explicitly the case for all the case study artists. Many don’t consider the etching until they are back in the workshop. It is instructive
at this point to bear in mind that this thesis posits a series of interconnected theories and strategies, and the reader should choose from the artists represented in order to assimilate information from an appropriate and useful angle.

**Surrounded by drawing**

One of the most practical devices which Ackroyd uses in order to maximise the impact of his experiential memory is to photocopy his sketches in colour and then paste them onto mount board.

He can then prop the boards around him as he works, in whichever part of the workshop he’s in, and he can think himself back into the sea journey:

“You surround yourself with the drawing books... its good enough, to surround yourself here as soon as you come back with all the experience and it just brings it back.” (Ackroyd, 2018)

The boards provide a concrete illustration of drawing contributing to the etching process in a very direct way. The gathering of drawing, a set of cumulative moments, feeds his creative inventiveness and enables Ackroyd to produce his etchings.

The notion of taking the plate into the landscape and working on location is familiar idea previously discussed with reference to Rembrandt, Haden and Whistler. Again, Ackroyd continues the tradition of working this way on occasions and has been known to take acid out with him and bite the plate there and then. Usually he takes a sugar lift solution and a pre-prepared plate...
“...the drawing never stops. It’s a lovely idea that you can think about drawing the bones of something onto the plate but not drawing the whole picture... sometimes you can do that directly on the plate, in situ, en plein air.” (Ackroyd, 2016)

Distillation

On a return from a drawing trip, Ackroyd accepts the time between the visit and the time in his etching workshop as allowing for distillation; “the distilling of an idea.” (Ackroyd, 2017) He relies on time to add clarity to his memories and experiences. Sennett writes of:

“...craftsman-time, the slow time that enables reflection.” (Sennett, 2009: 251) This idea suggests that time slows as practitioners first learn and then evolve their practice. Improvements in technique rarely happen in the blink of an eye and can take many years to refine. This is an idea which was expanded upon by Harper (2008), writing a post for Carnac’s web based forum, makingaslowrevolution, to include the fact that in the process of making time can feel malleable:

“All of your knowledge and experience flows together and coheres in the act of making. Instead of feeling cut off you become thrown into yourself, the outward looking attentiveness sits alongside a dreamy distance, in which our interior world is expanded. We seem to step outside of the flow of time.” (Harper, 2008)

When Ackroyd talks of distilling his ideas he at once feels removed from the place, ‘at a dreamy distance’ whilst simultaneously finding that the memory is sharpened: ‘his interior world has expanded’ to facilitate the idea. My assertion is that there is a reciprocal flow between knowledge and experience which takes Ackroyd out to draw and back to the studio to etch, and that time plays an important role in that reciprocation.

Evanescence

Describing Ackroyd’s work appears in the first instance to be straightforward, they are monochrome landscapes, but the more I look at one of his prints the less easy it is to capture their nuances and subtleties. I am inclined to agree with McNeillie (2016) who muses that: “...the trouble with the visual arts is that you cannot talk about them in their own language. They move on in silence and give pause to speech.”
In a 2017 essay on Ackroyd, however, McNeillie finds some exquisite turns of phrase to conjure one of Ackroyd’s etchings which he owns – “its storm-gloom, its boisterous sea-turmoil... - its paradoxical air of evanescence.”

Ackroyd himself has an eloquent turn of phrase in describing his own work:

Of a 2018 piece of the Stour estuary: “…and I just wanted the stillness of a winter morning…” (Ackroyd, 2018)

Conclusion to Ackroyd - in the fullness of air

Taken as a body of work we can see that Ackroyd has traced the sea routes of an island dweller around the British islands linking the effect of light seen through an Atlantic gaze. The sketches, drawings and prints provide waymarkers along those routes; embodied evidence of the experiential presence of the artist. Ingold suggests that an accepted notion of a purely physical presence in a landscape is a superficial view of the experience:

“To feel the air and walk on the ground is not to make external tactile contact with our surroundings but to mingle with them.” (Ingold, 2011: 115)

The word *mingle* is used emphatically to show that all senses are enlivened by drawing *en plein air*. Whilst *en plein air* is commonly understood to mean outdoors, the translation of the word *plein* is full; to draw in the *fullness of air* meets Ingold’s description more abundantly. Through this understanding an element of reciprocity is clarified – a full experience of being in the landscape provides such a strong physical, sensory, emotional and generative memory that the drawing in the workshop and studio is greatly benefitted.
Creating an artwork, taking drawing into an etching, then encapsulates a sense of belonging. The artist has identified themselves as being somewhere, as contributing to the ongoing narrative of place; the drawn waymarkers are signifiers and identifiers of their place in the world.

**Belonging nowhere**

A sense of belonging, to a place where one doesn’t reside has been touched on in this chapter. One wonders in this era of increasing urbanisation, when many galleries are city based what the appeal of Ackroyd’s wild and elemental etchings can be. “...the spirit of an age in which people belong nowhere, having been uprooted by history” (McNeillie, 2017).

(This is a theme that will be referenced Ros Ford’s work later in this chapter. It will also be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4 as I look at Bronwen Sleigh’s etchings and serves as a useful reference when considering the experiential appeal of Jason Hicklin’s work in Chapter 5).

Inhabiting the subconscious realm of practice, artists think themselves back to place and into the place whilst at the same time inhabiting their studios. Some of the contrasts between their working environments and the places of inspiration are extreme. Norman Ackroyd lives and works in an old leather warehouse in the heart of Bermondsey, tucked away in central London. From his top floor living accommodation he has a grand view across the city, but on the lower floors there is no exterior view at all and it is here that he can imagine himself back on a boat, on the swell of the sea, navigating the coastline of one of Britain’s furthermost islands. Ros Ford inhabits a shared space a windowless artist’s studio in a large modern Bristol warehouse conversion while her mind has recently been divided between Pembrokeshire and Naples, between a hand hewn coastline and a city enveloped by industry and history. Places that are visited and inhabited for a short while feed imagination. Sketchbooks fill and the artists establish a connection to ‘their place’. The choice of place is significant to each artist but proximity is neither a hindrance nor advantageous. The distance between Ackroyd’s places of inspiration and his workshop allows a “distillation of memory” (Ackroyd, 2017). The variable distances for Ford’s work allows her to weave a thread that joins her nomadic past to her present day situation. As this chapter progresses, the lure of place for the artist, the role of drawing and how information is recorded is examined in greater depth.

The second case study, Ros Ford, presents a nomadic and eclectic contribution to the understanding of the role place plays in drawing and etching as subject for an artist.
Case Study 2:

Ros Ford RWA. RE. b.1952 - Biography

Ros Ford works from her studio space at BV studios in Bristol. She completed her initial art training to MA level at Chelsea Art School and then travelled extensively, teaching in Crete and Egypt. Ford studied for a second MA, which she completed in 2008 at UWE, Bristol, because she knew there was more in her practice that she wished to explore. In 2014 she was shortlisted for the John Ruskin Drawing Prize and in 2017 was a featured exhibitor in ‘Trace’, an exhibition at the Bankside Gallery. In 2016 she became a Royal West of England Academician and in 2018 Ford was elected as an RE. Ford is best known for her views of neglected urban landscapes. Influences include Peter Doig, Julie Mehretu and George Shaw. Ford draws in pencil, sometimes on pre-grounded etching plates and etches on copper in ferric chloride and steel in copper sulphate.

Ros Ford, Shelter, Sparke Evans Park. By kind permission of the artist

Proximity to place

Ford on Place... “I like the hidden locations. ... I like finding places and making it my own and I get quite upset if somebody comes along. Even if it’s a big structure, I get possessive. It is about finding it and thinking that I’ve seen something that nobody else has discovered.” (2015, b)

In consideration of proximity to place-as-subject, Ackroyd’s work describes journeys that take him out onto the sea, while Ford combines both shorter and increasingly longer journeys. Tracking Ford’s increased travelling, over a number of years, has proved fruitful in
providing insights into her practice and this has been a significant benefit of cyclical case study methodology. My first conversation with Ford in 2015, focused on work that was all about places on her doorstep - the unnoticed urban landscape of Bristol. Over the last 4 years, documented through our conversations between 2015 and 2018, Ford moved her focus away from her local area. Initially she was inspired by Porthgain harbour in Pembrokeshire and then she journeyed to Naples on a travel bursary where she discovered the old steel works at Bagnoli. These experiences encouraged a much deeper analysis of her choice of subject matter and working methodologies; in Bristol she had been able to walk to sites of inspiration. Now she found that she had to rely on the information gathered while on location and has had to reassess her connection to place. An ability to explore a place on foot remains vital in her familiarisation and assimilation of a place; movement around a place enables the artist to gather visual information from many differing perspectives...

“...the thing that came across very strongly is [my work] is located in a place. The place is really important to how I see the structure within that whole place, and, this is quite interesting, which is where the walking comes in. Because it’s not about one view of a thing, it’s about a number of views.” (Ford: 2017, a)

Chambers, in writing about Whistler’s ambulatory practice, reinforces the idea that a corporeal engagement with the subject matter leads to deeper understanding:

“Whistler’s physical experiences of the city can be understood as an invisible ‘urban text’ written by the movement of the artist’s body through the city streets...” (Chambers, 1999: 134)

Challenging the Romantic tradition

Ford’s work appears to mark a departure from such contextual associations and particularly from the English Romantic tradition; her work begins to raise challenges to traditional ideas. Alfrey, Sleeman and Tufnell (2013: 74) address the ongoing redefinition of artwork concerned with place: “...landscape as a historical genre in British art was itself undergoing a critical appraisal.” They point to groundbreaking exhibitions held by the Tate gallery in the 1970s that questioned accepted beliefs surrounding topographic authenticity within works by Constable and Turner. Equally important were the landscapes produced by the war artists commissioned during both World Wars that presented an unromantic and allegorical post-pastoral approach to landscape. The British War Memorials Committee (WW1) and the British War Advisory Scheme (WW2) employed artists such as Paul Nash and printmakers
Christopher Nevinson and Muirhead Bone to record the events of war but required the artists to leave out images of blasted bodies. The necessity to discover symbolic ways of showing the horrors of war gave way to images which were non-idyllic and which brought in effects of human dominance and intervention on the land. Trenches, war ravaged buildings and blasted trees represented the death and destruction of war. Industrialisation replaced the pastoral scenes of farm labourers and followed in the footsteps of Whistler’s tradition of drawing and etching the working life of the River Thames. Ford’s work interrogates the nature of man-made industrialised landscapes where functional structures once dominated but are often obsolete and their narrative histories are somewhat side-lined. Ford stands a little apart from the traditional Romantic view; her work positions itself more closely to Richard Mabey’s interpretation in his 1973 book of The Unofficial Countryside:

“Our attitude towards nature is a strangely contradictory blend of romanticism and gloom. We imagine it to ‘belong’ in those watercolour landscapes where most of us would like to live... If the truth is told, the needs of the natural world are more prosaic than this. A crack in the pavement is all a plant needs to put down roots.” (Mabey, 2010: 19)

Influences – an adjusted lens

Ford acknowledges, respects and references artists and writers, and enjoys sharing a view of the world through an adjusted lens; our conversations often turn to snippets heard on radio programmes and read in novels. On one occasion we talk about Julie Mehretu and Ford quotes from The Drawings by Catherine De Zegher (2007) as an example to show that, although place and location are always a contributory factor, inspiration also comes from other practitioners:

“She began these one summer in Berlin at her dining room table around the time Cy Twombly dies. ‘As every artist knows, some of the best things are done when you have half a mind on something else.’”(Ford: 2017, b)

The appeal of Mehretu’s work is appositely explained by Seligman: “Mehretu’s drawing enacts a dialogue between tracings from architectural plans or maps and her own abstract marks and characters” (Seligman, 2016: 96)

More pertinently, Ford has been looking at George Shaw’s work. She explains that he has moved out of the urban environment, away from Coventry and London, to live near Ilfracombe, Devon...
“...his issues are still about the urban landscape. His particular urban landscapes though. It’s making me think about the particularity of a landscape or a place and how strong that is - how powerful that is, your childhood, or the places which have an impact on you.” (Ford: 2017, b)

Getting to the bones of place

Place, for Ford, encompasses an internally driven concept which informs the landscapes that she chooses to portray. Her own large etchings reflect many influences; acknowledge socio-political issues and present corners of a prosaic landscape that are closer to many city dweller’s experience of place. The scale of her work is the first thing that strikes the viewer; they are large, commanding etchings that are robust, brutish even, in the use of dominant architectural compositions and heavy shadows. Vigorous mark making is combined with finely drawn and intricately crafted details, including Mabey’s cracks in the pavement. The rich combination of mark making and multi-layered textures create a tactile vision of man and nature attempting to claim a place in the landscape. The scale invites the viewer to spend time with Ford’s subjects, getting acquainted with places which we may otherwise pass by without giving them a second thought.

“I do want to get to the bones.” (Ford: 2015) This is one of Ford’s characteristic phrases, by which she means that she is both getting to understand deeply what a place is about, not just how it looks but how it is – how a structure/building inhabits a place and what it means (for her) for that structure to be there.

“Generally speaking I go out drawing in February because it makes me speedy. When it’s cold I can’t draw for too long so it does get to the bones of what is there. I can go back and
elaborate but I actually find that doing drawings really quickly helps in the process of decision making about what I’m going to do.” (Ford: 2015)

As she points out, her drawings are executed quickly, forcing her to be selective and to make visual decisions in the heat (or chill) of the moment. Drawing decisions made in this way respond to the experience of place as well as the factual structure and in turn propose a truth about the way an architectural structure relates to its surroundings.

Ford’s work departs a little from the *plein air* tradition favoured by Ackroyd for whom the sketchbook is a vital document in its own right, having veracity, independent of the etchings. Drawings within Ackroyd’s books exist as artworks and he shows these as a significant part of his oeuvre. Ford’s practice is gently distanced from this mode of working. A sketchbook, in its traditional sense, is not as central to her practice and she only occasionally exhibits sketchbook drawings as supporting material. At times, she uses sketchbooks to record places but finds that drawing on individual sheets of paper can also be useful.

**Drawing on the plate, en plein air**

Ford does enjoy drawing small scale *plein air* etchings which describe the immediacy of thought present when having to make initial decisions through drawing. There are small-scale etched studies from the Pembrokeshire series which appear as though they are sketchbook pages on copper. As another artist may use a notebook or journal so Ford will take a piece of copper out with her to draw on. It is fascinating to note a similarly impulsive and intuitive quality of mark; drawings are worked on, into and over. The viewer can feel the decision-making in the stab and gesture as a line searches for, and finds, its way. The drawings that she gets from such plates bear all the experience of the moment. Her sketches *en plein air* are quick responsive memoranda picking up on the underlying structure or a feature of a place.
Drawing and Etching Place

Drawing as research

Ford supports her research with photographs and when she is working on an etching based in her local area she revisits regularly to gather information. The research is intended to find out how the structure is made – that is not to say that she is investigating architects records or digging out blueprints, but that in her own understanding she is getting to know how one wall supports another, or, for example, how finials fit to the edge of a roof. If convenient, she makes return visits to sketch details or take more photographs so that she is able to work it all out. The Italian work, from Bagnoli, Naples, marked a departure that required her to work efficiently while she was there in the place and then trust the information that she had when she returned to the studio. Her places are familiar places and if not initially familiar, such as the Bagnoli steel works, they will become so, through drawing. Drawing, in this preparatory sense, has always been a means to an end for Ford. It has, for her, been a way to “stop in a particular place and time” (Ford: 2015) to capture the visual detail of a place and the experiential and temporal qualities of place.
Revisiting the immersive moment

The reciprocal qualities of *plein air* sketching are complex and involve immersion in place and then revisiting that immersive moment, inhabiting a place in a material sense and then re-enacting a material experience. At each stage, there will be an interpretive shift between the first experience, *en plein air*, in place and the second engagement in the same place through memory, gesture and tactile engagement. Visual information recorded through observation and drawing can then be drawn again with new insight:

“*Its aim is thus not to represent the observed but to participate with it in the same generative movement.*” (Ingold, 2011: 223)
Back in her studio Ford often draws using a designer’s layout pad, which allows ideas to mingle and to be developed through over drawing. She supplements this with smaller rough planning drawing on any paper that is to hand, and in this way she works out her compositions.

“Once something’s in my head I do lots of tiny Post-it size and bite-size little drawings.” (Ford: 2015)

The use of layout paper enables a sense of freedom. The images below show how Ford has cut up a planning drawing and moved the chimneys of the old steel works to a new position creating a tighter composition and a sense of unity to the structure.

“What I do then is draw the size and then I start working out in the studio how I want it to be; distorting the perspectives and so forth... I’m drawing the structure.” (Ford: 2015)
**Drawing leads to etching**

Crucially Ford acknowledges that within her own drawing practice she is an etcher who draws and that the drawing is leading to an etching.

![Bagnoli II, etching. By kind permission of the artist](image)

In Ford’s practice a reciprocal dialogue flourishes between drawing and etching:

“...when I’m drawing, other ideas are coming in and also the drawing is helping me to discover what I want to extract from the subject. All the time I’m working with the drawing, because I’ve got the etching in my head and I know I’m going to etch, I’m thinking about how I want to approach the etching.” (Ford: 2015, b)

Once a practitioner has learnt the technical processes of etching, drawing can provide a way of thinking through the problems of how an etching should be started. The drawing can inform the process and allow the practitioner to make decisions visually and intellectually. The skilled practitioner begins to bring together experience, insight and perceptual understanding of their subject in what appears to be an instinctive way. This must not however be misunderstood as a consequence that mysteriously just happens. There is a complex reciprocal exchange between the qualities of a skilled and practised artist and creativity realised through trial and error; a generative process of improvisation and discovery, in the creative processes of drawing and in those of the subsequent etching.
“It is a question not of imposing form on matter... but of intervening in the fields of force and flows of material wherein the forms of things arise and are sustained. Thus the creativity of making lies in the practice itself, in an improvisatory movement that works things out as it goes along.” (Ingold, 2011: 178)

Drawing is not imposed on the materials of etching, but insinuates its generative action within etching, guiding which materials and processes to use and in which order. Ingold, again, expands this concept by considering the ways in which practitioners join in the creative process with the things they use as:

“...a process of working with materials and not just doing to them, and of bringing form into being rather than merely translating from the virtual [concept] to the actual” (Ingold: 2011, 10)

**Working proofs – over drawing**

Drawing is commonly assumed to exist as a sketch in a sketchbook or made on a surface of clean unblemished paper. This thesis confirms the presence of drawing at every stage of working with the materials of etching. In chapter 2 the over drawn proofs made by Haden were introduced and as the chapters continue examples of over drawing will be seen in the work of Sleigh, p.133, Chamberlain, p.156, Hicklin, p.203 and Rhodes, p.230.

![Studio photographs of Ford’s over-drawn proofs, by the author](image)
Ford draws quite copiously over her proofed prints:

“Then I’ll start drawing on proofs. I’ll start thinking about where I want the image to go and I begin to see it. I think the thing about print is the surprise element. I like to take the surprise as a good thing and work from that, not try to have too many preconceived ideas, let the image dictate. I’m drawing on the drawing.” (Ford: 2015)

Her practice, at this point is a clear demonstration of an improvisatory movement which enables her to work things out as she develops the drawing on the plate.

Annotation, memoranda, linear descriptions and tonal areas drawn over a working proof provide further insight into the process of bringing a print to a conclusion. Ford’s over drawing and notation show how drawing can be an active and reciprocal part of the printmaking process. Decisions are made in drawing which inform the etching process and the etched plate, printed as a working proof, provides the substrate for drawing and the vehicle for creative thinking. The process is kept live and allows for spontaneity, for decisions to be made as a response to what is seen in the plate, through the proof and allows the practitioner to access the qualities which often remain ineffable within the image.

“What I’m trying to do is to get the essence of something and what I hope my drawing does is to build on the essence of what I want to do…. I do want to get to the bones of something…drawing is really getting the feeling that I wanted of the place.” (Ford: 2015, b)

Reductive possibilities

Ford confirms the reciprocity of the process and also points to the reductive possibilities revealed through printing working proofs: “It’s feeling my way through. I might have to do a lot of proofs. [The print] can change very radically. The colour can change it very radically
and I might abandon the colour in the end. I call this drawing, when I’m burnishing – I’m drawing... Also, I suppose, the drawing is when I’m inking up. I’m really drawing each plate and revealing areas of the drawing that I want to come through and suppressing other areas through under wiping.” (Ford: 2015, b)

**Liberated from the literal**

Ford’s drawing on paper or plate provides a vehicle for her to explore the idea, test compositional elements and make decisions about perspective and detail. Most importantly her drawing enables her to begin to be liberated from the literal; to allow an improvisatory element to create an interpretation of place which is closer to her experience of that place. Ingold describes an inhabitation of place as being an immersive experience – not merely an occupation of a place but an awareness of every nuance which reveals a “...*continual generation and transformation*” (Ingold, 2011: 24)

**Itinerant inspiration**

Once started on an etching Ford’s immersion in that place is absolute and she protects her concept; “I keep it a secret until it’s finished!” (Ford: 2015) she says, but such a relationship is capricious and temporary. Here also is a point of difference, where Ackroyd’s overriding passion is for islands Ford finds itinerant inspiration in a great variety of locations, both rural and urban, wherever man’s intervention on the landscape is evident:

“The history of the place intrigues me and I’m interested because it’s local and I’m building on the history of the area... and I like to choose things that are close to me.” (Ford: 2015)

Her subject does not need to be geographically close; the Pembrokeshire and Bagnoli etchings exerted a different sense of closeness. In Pembroke, the harbours were places that revealed themselves as she walked from her rented cottage and she felt as though she had found them.

“I was scrabbling around on rocks, and, usually as a day tripper, you wouldn’t. You normally get an instant view... whereas I was investigating the different viewpoints; climbing up and down and seeing the tide, which was really important. It all changed radically with the tides. And the rain didn’t stop me... When I walked I saw the lagoon first... and then you come across brickworks, so the landscape is getting more and more industrial; and then you can’t see the harbour until you’re on top of it... with all the structure!” (Ford: 2017, a)
Belonging and dislocation

Once Ford had scrambled over the Porthgain rocks and investigated the area thoroughly she began to feel a sense of belonging:

“I thought everyone else is a tourist, and I was the one who was local. [Laughs]! I started to belong.” (Ford: 2017, a)

The need to belong, to feel an ownership of place is the point at which the artist begins to access the subject creatively. If the practitioner is connected to the place they can begin to impose their own understanding of the structure or terrain that they are (temporarily) inhabiting. In comparing the Pembrokeshire experience with the Bagnoli drawing trip Ford says:

“In Bagnoli I wasn’t in the landscape, I couldn’t walk in it, but I could walk around it.” (Ford: 2017, a)

Whilst feeling some aspects of dislocation she nonetheless found a way of inhabiting the area surrounding the Bagnoli factories. Ford explains how it becomes possible to inhabit a place that she has known for a short while by referring to a passage she had read:

“There was a piece by Barry Lopez in Granta magazine, autumn 2015. I picked this out a couple of years ago because it is very resonant. He was talking about travelling with indigenous people and how indigenous people don’t see their landscape, and how he as a visitor was viewing the landscape and the place. He was talking about staying outside the event and inside the event; talking all about the senses and the experiences of how we, as a Westerner, visualise a landscape and then we make our picture of what is going on in that landscape. Whereas indigenous people have a different view, he says here, ‘how my body’s extraordinary ability to discern textures and perfumes, to discriminate amongst tones and colours in the world outside itself, was dismissed by the rational mind.’ He was talking about the indigenous person going through a landscape and picking up so much information about that landscape which Westerners just don’t see. Or maybe within our own world we see it, and how we rationalise what’s going on, rather than just noticing. I think this is a really pertinent way of not just seeing a place, but being in a place, and I feel that is relevant to what I’m trying to do at the moment.” (Ford: 2017, a)
Dislocation and inhabiting place through movement raise the stakes when a practitioner is collecting reference in a limited amount of time and when revisiting the location appears to be an impossibility. Ford explains:

“... it’s enabled me to focus rather than respond to my emotional feelings about them, I’ve responded to the visual impact of the place... Whereas when a place isn’t local, and you’re not going to visit it again, you have to make decisions on the spot.” (Ford: 2017, a)

**Inhabiting place – being ‘there’**

Ford has discovered a way of inhabiting a place that allows her to discriminate about the details that imbue her work with presence. She is able, at times, through drawing and photography to put aside the rational mind and to discern the details that will lead her to create representations of a place that stay true to the experience of inhabiting that place.

Ford pays great attention to the compositional elements of her pieces and therefore creates work which has great presence and which demands scrutiny by the viewer. Her work is commanding, intriguing and somewhat mysterious and it is the structure of the place that is of paramount importance in achieving this. The identifying stylistic feature of Ford’s etchings is heightened perspective, not exactly a bird’s eye view but one that throws the viewer into the sky while somehow keeping us in touch with the ground. A sense of drama is described through intricate, bold shadows that play with the interior versus the exterior all at once, allowing the viewer a privileged aerial view of place; looking inside the structure while we are placed on the outside observing.

*Harbour*, etching and aquatint. By kind permission of the artist
Ford acknowledges the incongruous viewpoint:

“And which part of it do I want to be in? Although it’s a strange thing, because I’m creating a birds’ eye view - which implies I am in another place looking, overlooking something, or looking at something - but at the same time I’m there...” (Ford: 2017, a)

The Harbour and Lagoon pieces describe the drama and potency of Ford’s places without the formal architecture of a building. The mineral blue water and gently curving shape tease us with a suggestion of cool safe water, a perfect natural swimming pool, but the dark jagged rocks and narrow forbidding channel send a stark warning that this may not be a safe place at all. A place can be equally inviting and forbidding. Such themes follow through Ford’s work and become developed; it’s possible to see a maturing of style and a mastering of subject. Many of her places have strong references to an untouchable industrial world where we expect to see signs declaring ‘danger-keep out’, yet they often possess interiority. The interior draws the viewer inside through exposed beams, struts and windows.

The Pembrokeshire etchings may suggest a natural landscape but Ford’s motivation remains in the emphasis of the man–made features of place: “...the subject matter’s slightly different, they’re landscapes by the sea, but they still had the remnants of industrial buildings.” (Ford: 2017, a)

The Lagoon studies have greater strength in tone and form; the maturing artist’s drawing is increasingly confident and sure-handed. The use of bolder colour and stronger mark making hint at a continuously evolving craft but also the development of some sense of emotional distance.

The later etchings describe structures that are increasingly commanding of their space; these are buildings of great scale and they feel more convincingly substantial. The Bagnoli etchings, I and II, are the most recent and the most intricate.
The sense of abandonment is more tangible and there is a sense of time passing; the structures have inhabited their space only temporarily, already redundant. The passage of time has made them fragile and vulnerable, broken and decaying. Ford discovered the
buildings in a state of disrepair; the incompleteness enabled Ford to glimpse inside. Although a fence kept her out, she was able to anticipate the interior experience.

“I was thinking about that the other day – when I’m drawing or working on the inside of that building, I’m right inside of that building, visually I’m inside it. And that’s an important part. I’m in there, and I’m not looking at it as a viewer from the outside.” (Ford: 2017, a)

I had wondered if Ford’s aerial viewpoint puts her at a remove or enables her to see more. Her response to this was expressed with quite some feeling, revealing one of the strongest driving forces of Ros Ford’s creativity; the experiential made tangible.

“Oh, I’m completely there…

...I’m inside it, because I’m thinking “I have to go in, in here”. In these Bagnoli ones it was the qualities of the dark that I was playing with: it’s inside the structures, and that’s one place I go to. You know, it’s very strong that idea which you touched on, it’s…being there.” (Ford: 2017, a)

The structural and industrial elements are familiar themes, but what are the stimuli which inspire a drawing in the first place and then what drives Ford to make that drawing into an etching? There is not always one definitive answer, but a combination of observations and intuitions that become idea generators.
“If I go to a place and it strikes some sort of chord, that one thing. But then there’s another level where I feel I can be somewhere inside and I want to explore this further. I do a sketch or two, but what is it about this place which makes me want to spend a few months, or longer with it? (I mean sometimes you could spend years!) There has to be something else to relate to... there must be something underlying to relate to as to what this place is to me.” (Ford: 2017, a)

“I wanted the industrial elements of it, because for some reason, that inspires me; the sense of the history, and the living, human intervention with the landscape.” (Ibid)

When she has finished with a place, she says she can abandon it; the involvement for her has been primarily in the mark making. Harrison (2002) discusses the metaphors which have informed the landscape genre in a traditional sense, including “…metaphors of integration and dislocation, of presence and absence” (2002: 231). Ford’s work encompasses these notions in every sense. The ideas of integration and dislocation are her own personal responses as well as attributes assigned to a place:

“…in fact, my places don’t mean a lot to me! If I’m truthful about it, I can abandon them once I’ve done them…” (Ford: 2017, b)

She goes on to explain that her relationship to the place has shifted once she has begun drawing through the hard ground. Having experienced an immersive connection to place in gathering her information, once she has absented herself physically she also experiences an increasing sense of dislocation as she completes the work:

“I think the place is a vehicle for the mark making. Once the place is selected and the composition is selected, then the mark making is the focus. Then the print takes over, it dictates where it’s going to go itself.” (Ibid)

**Material exploration – mark making**

Ford’s practice moves away from traditional techniques where the surface of the plate is treated with a material respectfulness. Traditionally light is achieved by creating dark tones, by protecting the copper, rather than burnishing. Ford, in contrast, works the entire surface and the drawing takes on a more experimental and explorative quality.

“I’m enjoying my mark making and how I want to push that further” (Ford: 2017, b)
Her tactile, worn and eroded surface is achieved through many layers of drawing with a wide variety of drawing implements, from etching needles to hand held dremmel tools and dynamic tools, adapted to an etching purpose.

Tone is suggested through more drawing, often hatched, applied with roulettes, or painted with aquatint. The viewer can discern worn earth around the building and corrosive weathering of corrugated walls, all achieved through well-placed marks made with carefully selected etching tools and processes.

“The qualities of the rock suited the copper, the hard ground on the copper. That angular mark, and these textures drawn with a roulette, actually there, so I was really trying to explore it. At the same time, I knew that this was going to go into the acid, and therefore I could do open bites to reflect the texture... The intention of the drawing was looking at the structure specifically.” (Ford: 2017, a)
**Etching initiates momentum in drawing**

As her work developed Ford found that the process of etching comes before drawing. It was a difficult notion for her to describe but she maintained that etching helps her drawing to develop. Ford believes that the ability to apply resists in a wide variety of mark making techniques allows her to be more experimental because it is always possible to clean off the plate or stop the mark out before it becomes committed during biting. The pre-biting drawing processes in etching provides the potential to change and correct without the evidence of that correction being seen in the final print and, for her, that is “…*a freeing experience.*” (Ford: 2015)

“…being literal to the landscape. The ‘Bagnoli’ etching was removed from my personal and local landscape and the chopping up of the drawings liberates me from the literalness of the landscape.” (Ford: 2017, b)

Having established that Ford resolutely maintains that her etching is a drawing created on copper or steel, I began to wonder whether the etching remains inextricably bound to the observations within the original drawing or whether the print is allowed a life of its own:

“At what point does the print move away from the initial drawing? Immediately I start drawing on the copper. For me it just takes on its own momentum.” (Ford: 2015)

An unexpected quality of reciprocity can be suggested by this statement and that is that one drawing gives life to another, and in so doing enables the new drawing to become performative. Reciprocity need not necessarily be between two differing material engagements - a new form can be reciprocated in a similar engagement and that form has a momentum free of the initial observation and independent of the initial intention.
Chapter conclusion
Assumptions have long been made that the role of drawing in relationship to landscape and place is a necessary precursor to a finished work. Drawing *en plein air* has a long tradition and has at times been requisitioned as a hobbyist cliché, much as it was in the Victorian era. It has been heartening to find Ackroyd and Ford’s dedicated and enlightening approaches to drawing place. Petherbridge champions the practice, acknowledging its true value:

“Traditionally, landscape has been the genre within this graphic vocabulary that has been pushed to its richest manifestation, possibly because the fractal complexities of the natural world defy representation and invite conventionalised linear codes.” (Petherbridge, 2010: 113)

Lines of movement

In this chapter I have discussed the notions proposed by Ingold that place exists as points and pauses in a life of movement. The paths of movement between places are described as being *lines* by Ingold (2016). He goes on to explain that our lives are lived along lines leading between places; that we are wayfarers (Ingold’s coinage) as we move through our lives we create lines that track our habitation:

“The wayfarer is continually on the move... As [they proceed], however, the wayfarer has to sustain [themselves] both perceptually, and materially, through an engagement with the country which opens up along their path.” (Ingold, 2011: 150)

An artist, such as Ackroyd, moving around and through a place leaves threads of their movement, invisible lines on the landscape but plotted on maps as lines drawn with a fingertip following the movement of the walk or journey. These intangible threads become tangible traces through the sketchbooks and etchings that record, document and express the experience of place – the drawings become waymarkers. Lucas (2016) offers a useful adjunct to Ingold’s thinking:

“While in some instances Ingold uses ‘wayfarer’ as a pejorative here, rather than ‘navigator’, I argue that these modes co-exist much more happily within drawing practices, offering two poles for a spectrum of responses. Each mode of inscriptive practice occupies multiple positions within this overall territory, shifting according to the phase of practice engaged in at any given point.” (Lucas, 2016: 219)
“A way of knowing is itself a path of movement through the world: the wayfarer literally ‘knows as he goes’” (Ingold 2000: 229-230), “along a line of travel.” (Ingold 2016: 92)

When planning my original interview questions at the start of my research I held the misconception that an artist who visits a place briefly is a visitor or a tourist. Places, however, are “delineated by movement” (Ingold, 2011: 149) and people who frequent places are inhabitants. The transience of the visit is unimportant, as Ford has shown. It is the quality of immersion in place that leads to knowledge and to creative inspiration. Once the artist has experienced the place through all the senses, and has moved around and through the place, then they have inhabited the place, even if only for a while.

Place as pause

It is worth considering whether any sense of immersion is necessary for the place to be adequately remembered and worthy of recall through artwork. Massey (1994), in her paper A Global Sense of Place allows for a sense of place which is a point on a path of movement; a meeting point in a global community searching for something to hold on to. There is within her argument a sense that a place can be an active moment of passing, but within that moment there is an interaction that calls for a pause. Ackroyd and Ford, pausing in their respective landscapes will, in a parallel way interact and process a scene through their drawing materials, before they move on:

“It is, indeed, a meeting place. Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a larger proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent... And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local... If places can be conceptualized in terms of the social interactions which they tie together, then it is also the case that these interactions themselves are not motionless things, frozen in time. They are processes.” (Massey, 1994)

The experiential potential of challenging drawings

If place can exist as a process what happens when creative processing becomes challenging, what is the quality of immersion at such a point? These were questions asked by Mäki-Petäjä
(2018) in her paper Drawing to Remember presented at the RAI2018 conference. Her point was illustrated by describing bad drawings that she made in places which were hard for her to assimilate; new environments where she felt she had lacked the necessary skills to draw competently. To her surprise when she turned back to such drawings, she did not find them difficult to look at; paradoxically the memory of the place was far stronger than she expected. Mäki-Petäjä found that she had in fact experienced a deep immersion in place through the struggle of the drawing. The drawing challenge had heightened her embodied understanding, tension transformed experience into a profound immersion. These are points that I will return to; the positive role of challenge and the reciprocal characteristics enhanced by tension in the creative process will be expanded considerably in Chapters 4 and 5.

**Following traces**

For the practitioners discussed in this and future chapters, an immersive experience of place is re-visited in the studio through memories brought to life by multitudinous traces in sketchbooks, maps and literature. In the studio the artist inhabits the place again, moving once more through the place, following their drawn waymarkers, and in this way new drawings and etchings can be realised. Thus a line is followed tracing reciprocity between drawing and etching through inhabiting place, however transient that experience may be.
Chapter 4: The position of drawing

Drawing characteristics

This chapter will explore the nature of creativity and aesthetic experience in relation to drawing. Chapter 3 developed a consideration of the experiential characteristics of British contemporary etching practice, I will now direct this chapter as an exploration of drawing strategies; extending the perception of drawing contingent upon an etching practice. To enter into a discourse about one set of reciprocal characteristics will necessitate the inclusion of strands that have already been referred to in the previous chapters. My aim is to acknowledge the heterogeneous strategies, qualities and experiential stimuli that correspond to build a picture of the contemporary drawing and etching position. This chapter will introduce additional concepts for consideration including the role of tension in creative practice, material understanding, domain shifts and tacit knowledge while building on an understanding of immersion and belonging.
Challenges, tensions and domain shifts

The act of drawing has been proven through my interviews to be the crucial foundation from which the artists included in the thesis build their practice and the indispensable strategy that is employed in the creation of their etchings. Whilst unacknowledged in recent literature Haden’s assertion still rings true:

“... the moment the possibility of acting upon the plate by an implement used like a pencil was shown to them... they became Etchers.” (Haden, 1866: 147)

It is necessary to begin by considering the qualities found in artistic creativity and within that, the challenges inherent in drawing. Writers Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and John Dewey provided useful and pertinent guidance in unpicking the theoretical field in relation to the material, aesthetic and creative qualities of etching and drawing. Common themes from interviews with my next two case studies, Bronwen Sleigh and Ian Chamberlain were challenges and tensions within drawing and the transference of values through domain shifts. These themes were identified through my Creativity - Mapping qualities exercise which summarized common characteristics across a range of literatures including Boon (2014), Csikszentmihalyi (1990), Dewey (2005), Ingold (2011), Pope (2008) Runco (2012), Sennett (2009), Sternberg (2011) on the subject of creativity (Appendix, p. 286).

Flow

The psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1990) is best known for his advancement of the flow theory which describes a state of absolute focus (to the exclusion of all else) when engaged creatively. He proposes a set of conditions through which flow can be achieved including clear goals, immediate feedback through mastering materials and a balance between skill and challenge. It is important within his understanding that, through embracing challenge the skilled creative individual can overcome their anxieties of failure. Failure in this context would be an inability to achieve the aesthetic standard the practitioner requires of themselves. Challenge was described by Csikszentmihalyi and Getzels (1976) as problem finding; other authors find their own definition for a similar concept: Sennett (2009) as salutary failure, Ingold (2011) as improvisation, Runco (2012) as problem re-definition and Boon (2014) as divergent thinking.
Tension

Choosing terminology when addressing the practices described in this chapter has been carefully considered because the aim is to present creative practice as a stimulating and positive experience. I do not want to mislead the reader into thinking that practice is an unforgiving struggle without reward. The word challenge, as used by the case study artists, is interchangeable with conflict, resistance, opposition, divergence, accident and tension depending on which author you read. I recognise, however, that the term challenge is clothed with immovable negativity. Rather like a brick wall the challenge is thrown up and one has to try to get over it before moving on. Both resistance and opposition have very similar connotations. For some artists the term conflict may summarise neatly their daily battle within their practice often characterised by artists staring at blank sheets of paper unable to find the muse, but I don’t believe it to be true of the artists discussed within the body of this research. The word divergence may suggest blind alleys and accident leaves far too much to chance. Tension, however, opens up possibilities and opportunities, and is suggestive of momentary challenges; “…tension calls out energy…” (Dewey, 2005: 62). All artists can identify with the anxiety, pressure and the internal arguments that are synonymous with the term. The Oxford dictionary gives the meaning of tension as “The state of being stretched tight,” which confuses the concept somewhat until reading further a variant on the idea of being stretched is found … “2.2 - A relationship between ideas or qualities with conflicting demands or implications.” Tension in an artistic understanding and applied to drawing can therefore be extrapolated to suggest a relationship between the formal elements of drawing and the possibilities of materials.

Dewey – aesthetic experience

This chapter is substantially informed by Dewey’s series of lectures on the subject of aesthetics at Harvard in 1932, published under the title Art as Experience. His writing serves as a guide to the experiential nature of art and the constituent elements that equate to an aesthetic experience. This has been particularly illuminating in processing much of the information that I gathered. Dewey requires a series of constituent elements to be present for there to be a truly aesthetic and creative experience either in the making of artworks or in the subsequent viewing of art. Among these, there must be the intention to create; the artist must be fully engaged and purposeful. They must engage their intellect and their instinct bringing together all their memories and experiences and they must be able to transfer values from one area of concern to another.
Dewey advises:

“What is called the magic of the artist resides in his ability to transfer these values from one field of experience to another... and by his imaginative insight make these objects poignant and momentous.” (Dewey, 2005: 123)

Dewey is quite clear however that an artwork will not achieve the status of being aesthetic if there has been no tension or conflict within the creative process.

“The real work of an artist is to build up an experience that is coherent in perception while moving with constant challenge in its development” (Ibid: 53)

**Drawing is...**

In this chapter I will describe what drawing is... and what drawing can be... for two artists whose work positions drawing away from the accepted understanding of the sketchbook, away from the expectation of sketch as preparation, and locates drawing into different fields. Please refer to the Appendix, p. 285 for the artist’s selection of words that characterised drawing for them. This quote from Seligman (2016) goes some way towards describing both Sleigh and Chamberlains’ position:

Drawing is “... a continual process of discovery... both a vehicle for expressing and recording thoughts and itself a kind of thought process: a medium for thinking in.” (Seligman, 2016: 10)

It was most revealing that drawing posed a significant challenge for Sleigh and Chamberlain, given that I had identified them because of the quality and competence of drawing shown in their etchings. This is not to say that drawing is a weakness in their practice, quite the contrary. It is important to recognise that the challenge drawing provides fulfils the theoretical demands for producing highly creative work. It is their ability to embrace tension, as a constructive component within their practice, which informs this thesis.

**Drawing as a state of tension**

Preconceived notions concerning drawing assume that artists who place drawing at the core of their practice are highly confident drawers, and that drawing is a passionate pursuit. Alternative assumptions are made that drawing is only preparatory, relegating the importance of the role played by a preparatory piece. My initial proposition based on the often-heard supposition, “if you’re good at drawing; you’ll be good at etching” followed that artists who were good at drawing also enjoyed drawing – as, indeed, I did. The enjoyment I
have in drawing leads to a sense of fulfilment and gratification. On the evidence of all the case study interviews taken together, the position of drawing in practice differs greatly from one artist to the next. Sleigh and Chamberlain recognise drawing as being necessarily stressful but their commitment to drawing enables them to pursue their passion for etching. Chamberlain and Sleigh’s position on drawing therefore differs to the artists mentioned in the previous chapter. I will explore why Chamberlain and Sleigh make work using a process which continually places their work in a state of tension and how the material exploration of drawing, reciprocated through etching, leads to new insights about their work.
Case study 3:

Bronwen Sleigh b. 1980 - Biography

Bronwen Sleigh is a full time artist who has a studio in central Glasgow and produces her prints at Glasgow Print Studio. She also teaches at the Highland Print studio in Inverness. Bronwen is a regular speaker at conferences and has worked in residencies around the world including Canada and Iceland. Sleigh takes as her subject structures which defy easy understanding due to their incongruous locations and aims to make sense of these places through her depictions. Research trips have found Sleigh exploring intriguing locations in Quebec, Kampala, Iceland, Texas and the Scottish coast, amongst others. Influences include turn of the 21st century surrealists, Russian constructivism and Dadaism, also contemporary artists such as German painters Franz Ackermann and Thomas Scheibitz, mixed media artist David Thorpe, industrial photographers Bernd and Hiller Becher, and architect Paul Rudolph. Her work is held in collections nationally and internationally. She draws with pencil and water based fibre tipped pens and etches on steel plates with nitric acid.

Bronwen Sleigh, *Manic Cinq*, 2 plate etching. By kind permission of the artist

Sleigh’s drawing occupies a different creative position and mind-set to the other artists I have interviewed. The most immediate point of contrast is that she rarely draws on location; she doesn’t draw *en plein air*. Sleigh’s processes of observation, however, remain wholeheartedly concerned with the experiential qualities of place. She walks extensively, immersing herself in the sights and sounds; becoming familiar, getting the feel for the place. She takes multitudes of photographs, but the drawing waits for studio time when it is then fully informed by her memories of the experience.
Drawing energy – the heat of creativity

Back in the studio, there are further points of difference to artists discussed so far. In contrary to accepted practice, preparatory sketches are not made from the photographs. There are no unfinished or partly made drawings, as artists would expect to have, hanging around the studio as a reminder of an abandoned idea. Instead, Sleigh pins up photographs, single plate colour proofs, misaligned prints and finished etchings – all of which contain the germs of a new idea - but nothing unfinished. All drawing is seen through to completion and only rarely is something thrown away. Sleigh says:

“When you look at one of my prints they look like they’re quite well planned, but they’ve got a freshness to them that I know they wouldn’t have if the energy had gone into the planning. I would be bored if I had to do it a second time. I’m excited by drawing because I want to try and understand... And all of that is really fun and exciting. It’s there in the drawing.” (2017)

The notion that a drawing can lose its freshness intrigued me – on occasion, I have identified with this point of view. Petherbridge (2010) expands this notion, quoting Carl Gustav Carus from his writing on Caspar David Friedrich. Carus claims that Friedrich viewed preparatory planning sketches, referred to as auxiliary means, as allowing the imagination to cool. He preferred to allow the idea to grow; painting on impulse and passion: “He did not start his painting until it was vividly in his soul” (2010: 80). Sleigh also prefers to draw in the heat of creativity:

“I couldn’t do a preparatory drawing because the energy of the work is in the making.” (Sleigh, 2017) She couldn’t take a completed drawing forward into etching as direct facsimile because the struggle with the drawing, she explains is, for her, “the crucial thing...” (Ibid).

Man-made, out of place

For Sleigh, creative practice always has to start with a place, a corporeal investigation prompted by the experience of the place. Her printmaking work at the Royal College of Art was inspired by a visit to Cromarty Firth, during her BA in Glasgow, where was confronted by the unusual sight of oil rigs parked along the coastline. The very strangeness of the juxtaposition intrigued her; here was the man-made out of place. The rigs made no sense in that setting but Sleigh needed to understand this and so made a series of prints. At the RCA she cut the prints up and reassembled them, then displayed the paper structures as relief sculptures stretching out across a wall. Having looked at these and photographed them from
Different angles, Sleigh went on to make new structures, new spaces which fed into new prints. The process enabled her to explore and exploit form and negative spaces whilst always retaining the essence of place, key shapes and linking structural elements were purposefully maintained.

With the firm intention of exploring man-made structures, which impose themselves on a landscape, she has travelled to some challenging places such as Calgary, Labrador, Nova Scotia, Iceland and Kampala and she continues to explore her current home city of Glasgow. She says she always feels uncomfortable in the city but she does often see something new. New places are exciting; they introduce tension. New experiences awaken her eyes and the memory stays with her and makes the work exciting. The experiential aspects of travel, walking and lengthy road trips all add to the work and the sense of immersion.

**Revealing lines**

Revealed structures have provided Sleigh with some strong starting points such as the half built Glasgow Hydro and the Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome in Montreal. “*Half the work is done for me*” she jokes, but the complexity of these structures would be enough to discourage lesser artists. Most of Sleigh’s places have a sense of insubstantiality about them; aspects of transparency, the ability to see through to another part of the structure are common features.
Material engagement

Sleigh’s practice incorporates three different material engagements with drawing.

- **Drawings on paper:** Often the paper is pre-printed with a lithographic inky layer from one of her own unrelated prints that has an interesting structure. These are usually printed in a pale colour that acts as a resist to her drawing.

- **Drawings on etching plates:** Sleigh draws her plates without pre-planning. Once the drawing is finished, she carries them from her studio around the corner and along the street to Glasgow print studios where she etches and prints.

- **Drawings in 3-dimensions:** The exploration of linear inter-connections in 3-dimensional space with edges, rods and string enables Sleigh to re-envisage her drawing on paper and metal.

Appropriated tools

Drawings on paper and plate are made by Sleigh, with the appropriation of architect’s tools. Without formal architectural training and with only a rudimentary understanding of perspective she uses these technical implements intuitively. Sleigh enjoys the link back to the original concept, when the architect would have first envisaged a building and made their drawings. She employs the same tools - rulers, and curves in order to explore her mark making. Sennett (2009) writes about the appropriation of tools – if a tool used one domain, such as the architect’s ruler is then appropriated to another domain, in this case the artist’s studio; the potential for creativity is increased.
All-purpose tools

Sennett (2009) here is writing about a screwdriver as an appropriated tool, but the quote can equally be applied to Sleigh’s ruler:

“...in its sheer variety this all-purpose tool admits all manner of unfathomed possibilities; it, too, can expand our skills if only our imagination rises to the occasion...” and “…focuses especially on objects very simple in form that seemingly can do anything.” (Sennett, 2009: 195)

Sleigh’s tools, photographed at the studio drawing desk, by the author

The ruled, straight line often arouses misgivings, speculation over creativity is raised as can be seen in Taylor’s (2009) essay Aleksandr Rodchenko’s Lines of Force where he asks:

“...how successful was he in refashioning art as a technical, experimental activity... only when ruler and compass are put aside will the straight line quickly escape every mechanical effort to contain it.”

The implication being that more creative work may be achieved if the constraint of the tools is abandoned, dismissing the creative potential in all tools. Rodchenko himself asserts in 1919 that “I really need to apply myself to the ruler and claim it as my own...” an acknowledgement of the dynamic possibility of the ruler.
I was interested to read the following section by Lucas (2016) concerning inscriptive drawing practices that reveals the mark making capacity of such an all-purpose tool. Sleigh agrees that this describes aspects of her drawing practice well:

“The gesture I would like to focus upon here is the gesture of making a mark according to a template, such as a ruler. The steadiness of hand is focused on maintaining a stable angle for the drawing instrument against the template; the speed of the mark is also steady, as is the pressure applied. The character of the ruled mark is evenness and consistency; altering the angle part-way through will cause imperfections in the line and applying greater pressure might cause brittle mechanical pencil lead to snap or a drafting pen to apply an unintentional spot of ink. The beginning and ending of such lines is therefore fraught and risky: some opt for a gradually increasing pressure, feathering the line at the beginning, and a corresponding decrease at the end; others might place the instrument definitely – a dot at the termini of the line... An argument is made for the precision of such practices, but this is somewhat contentious.” (Lucas, 2016: 218)

![Details of Sleigh’s line work, demonstrating the character of the ruled mark. Photograph by the author](image)

A drawing by Sleigh is immediately recognisable and is characterised through linear form and spatial divisions, all of which are achieved by a distribution of line. The lines are achieved through an investigation of tools in a creative realisation of their potential for the artist not a mechanical drawing process which disengages the mind. The often densely placed lines have a rhythmic appearance; interruptions, punctuations, connections and disturbances animate these lines because they are drawn by hand.
“A line relates, connects. It is an integral means of determining rhythm.” (Dewey, 2005: 210)

Lucas makes clear that drawing with tools (in addition to a pencil, pen, or etching needle) can involve the same creative decisions as drawing without tools and questions the notion that drawing with a tool leads to precision that negates creative input. I refute this and add that drawing with tools has the same facility for achieving an autographic mark that is individual to each artist. The tools contribute, somewhat paradoxically, to a lack of control and invite elements of tension into drawing, the “fraught and risky” in Lucas’s phrasing. The hard square ends of Sleigh’s ruler creates marks through the hard ground and provides a scattered rhythm of unintentional marks; a trace which mirrors the movement and process of the drawing. Dynamic tools can lead to freedom:

“I just use my eye and respond using those tools. I’ve got a freedom in that which I really enjoy.” (Sleigh, 2017)
An additive process

Tools enable Sleigh to intentionally introduce random marks, visual interference and texture. The movement of the metal ruler scratches, her bracelets drag into the hard ground, she says she is *purposefully clumsy* - the method is not precious and the technique is allowed to show. She refuses to scrape and burnish; erasure does not exist within Sleigh’s vocabulary, her work follows a purely additive process. The resulting patina adds interest and tells of the movement of the ruler, adding temporality to the surface of the work - there is an implicit narrative in the groupings of the unintentional marks that her tools leave. The reciprocity here is between the intentionally drawn mark and the unintentional mark, which appears as the plate, is etched and proofed. This provides a fascinating material addition to an understanding of reciprocal qualities between drawing and etching.

Pre-printed lithographic prints with over drawing.

Orange ink resisting pink lines of water soluble pens. Photograph by the author

Resistance and layering

Material understanding has enabled Sleigh to develop the technical aspects of her practice. She has pragmatic reasons for her choice of investigation that has developed from the knowledge of how oil and water resist and create opportunities for transparency or opaqueness. The pen and pencil allows for resistance and overlay, and an oily litho-print rejects water-soluble pens whilst attracting and holding the chalky qualities of pencil. A pre-
printed surface is less flat and provides more variable textures, whilst etching allows for plates to be laid one over the other and for the biting times to be controlled, so that some lines are made bolder than others. Her work is open ended - one set of marks or an experiment with colour can lead to another set of marks or a new colour scheme.

Looking at the completed prints the process is intriguing because each print appears to have undergone meticulous planning in its composition and structuring. One assumes the planning to have been painstaking but the process allows for experimentation. Lines are drawn and early proofs are taken which allow time for reflection and from that point the process is reflexive and responsive:

“Through the act of drawing we are not only left a trace of the physical act but trace of the thinking process... the intention at the outset and any modification of this intention as the drawing has progressed.” (Taylor, 2008: 10)

Creative tactics

Sleigh’s process contains strategic decisions; employing terms of engagement that create tactical limitations. Emma Cocker, (2012) in her essay for the TRACEY publication Hyperdrawing, defines hyperdrawing as differing from a pre-planned drawing as one that develops without “…antecedent, stimulus or provocation...” This description is not entirely apt for Sleigh’s work, which begins with the actuality of place, but Cocker’s theory of situational limits does throw insight onto Sleigh’s practice. This calls for the artist to become “responsible for maintaining the conditions of the drawing” (Ibid: xiv). Etchers often speak of chasing the happy accident and, in trying to achieve an elusive alchemy, they surrender their habitual processes. Perhaps they are missing the more constructive solution of self-imposed limits. By limiting practice, rather than opening out, the etcher may chance upon more opportunities:

“For the restless line limits function as the leverage against which to work... The tighter the limit the more wily or deviate its means of making a way around. ... limits activate the process of looking for and producing loopholes for new lines of flight [which] often occur only when the situation demands.” (Cocker, 2002: xv)

Desley Luscombe discussed the properties of linear marks at RA2018, The Art Materiality and Representation conference, with reference to the Deleuze quote, “A line of variable direction which traces no contour and delimits no form.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980; 575)
Luscombe wondered at what point a line becomes representative. Is it when it has gone further than a line and is it the dynamic function of a line to provide a place for the eye to rest? Further examination of Sleigh’s practice provides elucidation on the reciprocal characteristics between the drawn and etched line.

Sleigh’s solution, her terms of engagement, exist as an ongoing pursuit of the opportunities within her mark making, a denial of the temptation to become passive. She keeps drawing through problems maintaining the restlessness of the line. The same approach is reciprocated in her etching; limits in one set of materials inform the scope and reach of the other.

**Investigative drawing**

Sleigh places her drawing into the category of the investigative; a way of finding out and trying to understand; a personal response to the world, questioning why buildings are where they are and the impact of those structures on the environment and place. In an article for the online *Interalia Magazine*, Robinson (2017) writes:

“I draw because I must, in order to understand. It is a way of knowing something.”

(Robinson, 2017)

Sleigh’s investigative strategy – her way of working out ideas requires time for reflection. She needs to solve problems as they appear, re-defining tensions in response to the work. It
is a reflexive and intuitive process, simultaneously drawing and reacting to what she has drawn, punctuated by periods of reflection. Questions are asked and solutions found within the drawing. Sleigh enjoyed the phrase “the human power to convert actuality into possibility” (Kearney, 1998:4) and felt that it was a useful interpretation of her practice. Drawing on paper does not necessarily happen before an etching, she says:

“Etching happens when there is something different to investigate.” (2017)

Making sense of place

Sleigh draws in order to try to understand the visions of architects and town planners, and drawing becomes her way of knowing a place. In making her drawings she takes apart structures in her mind’s eye and puts them back together again. The resulting compositions defy the laws of gravity and perspective but give her an understanding of the nature of their existence. As Berger suggests she is also trying to make sense of her relationship to places:

“Drawing is a form of probing. And the first generic impulse to draw derives from the human need to sketch, to plot points, to place things and to place oneself.” (Berger, 2015: 150)

The images are constructions; compositions built from many viewpoints, including internally experienced viewpoints. Her work is not imaginary, even the projections of experience remain Sleigh’s specific personal response. Photographs enable her to revisit the locations at a much later date, allowing the experiential and notional place to develop and mature over a period of time. There are parallels here with Ackroyd’s understanding that memories benefit from a process of distillation over time. (Chapter 3, p. 94)

3-dimensional drawing

The use of sculpture within the development of drawing marks another point where Sleigh’s practice diverges. Drawing is now positioned within a 3-dimensional investigation exploiting Luscombe’s question, exploring the potential for a line to go further than representation. Sleigh finds that by exploring a problem in 3-dimensions, the transference of problem from one domain to another (drawing to sculpture) enables her to see a resolution. Sennett refers to the bringing together of two unlike domains as adjacency and goes on to explain, “...progress is not linear. Skill builds by moving irregularly and sometimes by taking detours.” (Sennett, 2009: 238)
The sculptural domain introduces new tensions into Sleigh’s practice. She understands that she needs a struggle and a challenge, “…something to fight against…” to keep her work moving forwards:

“I’m aware of the challenge of making it work and it’s a challenge I definitely need…” (2017) said Sleigh of her processes and she continued, “If there’s not a challenge, then it’s not good. That is [immensely] important to how I work. I need to be trying to solve something or struggling against something. And that’s in every aspect.” (Ibid)

Sleigh draws using relief collage, wood, string, glass and casting. In some respects, she is exploring form and volume but only that achieved through the linear qualities of the form. Through sculpture, she explores linear edges, lines controlled by gravity and balance and 3–dimensional space. All these investigations are made in order to solve problems in the 2-dimensional work. While investigating her perceptions of how one element may interact with another she finds that working on something different feeds back into the familiar. She says, “…the medium I choose will lead the process.” (2017)

“I investigate three dimensions through drawing, as well, and I love the fact that you can make illusions of the two dimensional. One of the reasons I struggle so much when I’m working in three dimensions is because it’s real, isn’t it, in front of me? There’s no illusion at all.” (Sleigh, 2017)
An extended reciprocation between 2-d and 3-d drawing and etching

A recent set of work illustrates Sleigh’s practice beautifully. The images began with a trip to Kampala, in Uganda and Sleigh found herself continuing to ponder the intentions of architects and town planners:

“There are two reasons I want to continue working on it. One is because I’m very interested in the way that the city has developed to western cities. Kampala is forced into quick development and I’d actually like to do some more research into the way African cities have developed. Some of the architecture is in a really different style which is interesting – there are practical things such as all these interesting shaped windows with shades to protect them from the sun.” (Sleigh, 2018)

Drawing desk. Studio photograph of 3-dimensional investigation. Photograph by the author

Nile Avenue

The photographs and drawings (both 2-d and 3-d) on the following page are all based on the structures in Kampala that Sleigh describes. A wide range of visual explorations have been generated from the same source material and experience of an unfamiliar place. The sketchbook is used only when considering taking drawing into 3-dimensions and the reasons for this are practical - access to the sculpture studios is limited and materials are costly. The drawing helps to mitigate against attempting impossible structures.
Nile Avenue and related Kampala Studies, an extended reciprocation between etching and drawing. Photographs by the author and by kind permission of the artist.
Sleigh has found that the benefit of wire is the ability to turn the structure and view all the linear interactions; she picks up and turns the wire as she describes the window structure. Viewing her drawing in 3-dimensional space enables her to re-define challenges and problems:

“If I stick with etching all the time I think it would get dry. It’s the experimental 3-dimensional work that keeps things fresh and I’m really happy that I can make that other work and it will influence the work that I’m most familiar with. It gives me a new way of addressing the same question - all the processes that take me away from the drawing allow me to come back to that work in a slightly different way.” (Sleigh, 2018)

This extended process shows reciprocal influences of drawing and etching. Drawing in a variety of mediums and spatial situations informs the visual and haptic responses in etching and back into drawing again.

The etchings and drawings on etchings which have resulted from the Kampala experience continue to explore the repeated window form and the opportunities to describe the replicated shape; exploring the potential of the line. The final drawing, Nile Avenue Study IX, (p. 141) took months to complete, the shapes highlighted and moved forward and back until the turquoise/blue form (p. 139) was replaced by white chine collé and the drawing captured the essence she was after; an aspect of Sleigh’s experiential memory.

“Irrelevancies arise that are tempting distractions; digressions suggest themselves in the guise of enrichments. There are occasions when the grasp of the dominant idea grows faint, and then the artist is moved unconsciously to fill in until [their] thought grows strong again. The real work of an artist is to build up an experience that is coherent in perception while moving with constant change in its development” (Dewey, 2005: 53)

**Problem finding**

The limits Sleigh imposes also open up more opportunities for exploration. She sees her drawing as being transformative, both in terms of the translation of the original structure to her representation and also in the way each drawing moves her practice forward. Problem solving and problem finding are strategies that Sleigh uses to explore her limits:

“I do know from experience that some of the pieces of work that I’ve struggled with most have become the most successful. Where I’ve been forced to push past something that’s really problematic, I’ve had to push past my normal way of working ...there’s still that set of
rules or that language that I’m familiar with... I let it, and that method of working take the work forward.” (Sleigh, 2018)

Creative tensions

The ability for a creative practitioner to move from someone whose work stagnates because of challenges that arise and one who recognises the potential of tensions is a mark of a truly creative person:

“...the problem solver [themselves] must pose the problem before [they] can begin to think of a way of solving it... The primary mode of thought required is usually called imagination or creativity, although memory and reason play their part.” (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1976: 81-82)
Sleigh responds positively to this definition of her creative practice; limitations and challenges bring freedom to her work. Tensions within the work, allow her to take ideas further than she would if she was working within her comfort zone:

“I enter into that and it makes me feel quite free because whatever I do I’ll just work with it... it makes perfect sense to me that I’m a problem finder and trying to solve those problems that I’ve made is my way of creating.” (Sleigh, 2018)

Sleigh’s understanding of her practice harks back to Cocker’s notion of a wily line creating flight and freedom for creativity to grow. Dewey reminds the artist that tension can be highly constructive:

“Mere opposition which completely thwarts, creates irritation and rage. But resistance that calls out thought generates curiosity and solicitous care, and, when it is overcome and utilized, eventuates in elation.” (Dewey, 2005: 62)

An oscillation between etching and drawing identifies and solves challenges/problems. The reciprocal characteristic of identifying tensions through one or other of the two mediums brings solutions to the other. The addition of 3-dimensional drawing extends this beneficial reciprocation further.

**Tacit learning**

Sleigh’s practice is inherently tacit. She explores and moves forward by learning through doing. There is no preparation, no jottings or doodles – she starts, tests, and as far as possible sees it through. This process of making without compromise enables her to learn all the time. She is a restless maker who doesn’t like to stand still. The reciprocal movement, from one piece to another and back again, always teaches her something new.

**Nowhere places**

The place is important in the final work. Sleigh feels that the place has to still be in evidence because the drawings and etchings have come from that place and the experiential memory of that place. They are no longer a precisely observed drawing and sometimes their visual appearance has only echoes of the original place, but the prints are always named for that place. Sleigh’s understanding of this aspect of her work is nuanced because rumbling away beneath all this remains the concept of the dystopia, the *nowhere* place.
“I’ve looked at the work of the Russian constructivists; I did my dissertation on Utopia which in my thinking is a place which doesn’t exist. The reason I started thinking about it in relation to my work is because I was making non-existent maquettes of places, I was making a place which doesn’t exist. In more realistic terms, of my work – I often look at the built world and I wonder if what is currently in our world is imaginable to the people who designed it. I like the thought of a city being just a collection of different people’s ideas of the future and they’ve all come together in a jumbled un-planned way. Thinking about what it is like now, the building now is not what it was [originally conceived to be]...” (Sleigh, 2017)

This brings the thesis back to the idea of the contemporary artist belonging nowhere. (Chapter 3, p. 96) Motivation to make drawings and etchings of places which resonate with them allows artists to establish a sense of belonging; understanding a part of the world which they find interesting, confusing, challenging or inspiring:

“Drawing is drawing out; it is extraction of what the subject matter has to say in particular to the [artist] in [their] integrated experience.” (Dewey, 2005: 96)

Drawing as ambiguity

For Sleigh, drawing is a constantly evolving, self-reflective and responsive journey that aims to show the rest of the world something she has found beautiful and intriguing, or compelling and confusing. Harty offers a question worthy of consideration in answer to Sleigh’s enquiring practice: “…could drawing be the ambiguity through which we know ourselves?” (Harty, 2015: 51)

Ambiguity rests for Sleigh in the translation of the places. Her drawings and etchings depict place, the lines define forms and provide structures that are believable:

“Hence lines, even when we try to ignore everything else and gaze upon them in isolation, carry over the meaning of the objects of which they have been constituent parts... While lines demarcate and define objects they also assemble and connect.” (Dewey, 2005: 104-105)

If the viewer, however, were to visit the location they would find structures which only resonate with the artwork. Drawings are always open to translation; the artists always bring something of themselves, as does the viewer:

“[They come] with a mind waiting, patient, willing to be impressed and yet not without bias and tendency in vision.” (Dewey, 2005: 91)
Sleigh’s work brings another understanding of place; an alternative experience of how to view the world and its fascinating structures. The ambiguity in her finished pieces represents the processes of trying to solve an image and trying to solve the tensions and questions of an experiential and creative life.

The next case study presents another exploration of man-made structures which brings drawing and etching into tension with the motivations for building structures whose purpose challenges notions of beauty.
Case study 4:

Ian Chamberlain, ARE. b.1976 - Biography

Ian Chamberlain is Senior lecturer in Drawing and Print and M.A Multi-Disciplinary printmaking within the Faculty of Arts, Creative Industries and Education, University of the West of England. Chamberlain’s work takes the obsolete technologies of the Cold War and World War II as his subject, with recent projects focusing on information transmission and listening devices. New work explores the sea defences along the Atlantic wall. To research his subject matter Chamberlain must travel to the coast and finds himself confronting places on the periphery of land and occasionally at sea. Chamberlain is represented by galleries, including Rabley Contemporary and Jealous Gallery and he has won awards nationally and internationally. Influences include Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s fictitious etchings of Roman prisons, mid twentieth century Brutalist architecture, sculptor Richard Serra and the painter George Shaw. The print studios at UWE provide Chamberlain with etching facilities and he also works in his purpose built studio at home in Bristol. He draws with graphite, charcoal and ink, and etches on copper plates with ferric chloride.

Comparative practices

My interviews with the two artists in this chapter provoke intriguing comparisons. I meet Chamberlain at UWE, a habitual black coffee in hand, rushing into the room. His energy is bursting from him; he is hardly ever still, he admits that he is by nature impatient and, to some extent, obsessive. Sleigh, by contrast, began our interview after her morning yoga session; she is calm, speaks in a very measured way and seems wholly at peace in her
environment. Two very different people, who appear at first glance to take on quite similar challenges. The more one delves into their practice the more one finds that for all the similarities there are as many illuminating contradictions. This case study of Chamberlain’s work, when placed beside Sleigh’s practice, adds to an emerging picture of the reciprocal characteristics of contemporary practice and shows that each artist is a unique individual.

Etching - an expanded idea of drawing

Taylor describes drawing as “a tool of creative exploration that informs visual discovery and enables the envisagement and development of perceptions and ideas.” (Taylor, 2008: 9) This confirms an understanding of what drawing is. This study of Chamberlain’s work explores the experiential quality of drawing, its possibilities and how this is intricately entwined with that of etching.

During a lecture at UWE in 2016, Emma Stibbon offered further elucidation in reference to drawing within print. She provided validity for Chamberlain’s approach, “Drawing is a term that embraces print as an expanded idea of drawing.”

Chamberlain’s drawing is multi-layered, fine and detailed; every centimetre considered and attended to with great precision. The drawn surface is busy, alive to the hours of work that have gone before. There exists a tension of labour, but this is not overplayed - the lines retain energy and swiftness of execution. Whilst the viewer recognises the virtuosity of mark making we are not distracted from the overall impact, rather the details draws us further and further in so that in the end we are only aware of an intimate engagement with surface.

Etching plate surface, by kind permission of the artist
Investigative processes

Similarly to Sleigh, Chamberlain feels that his drawing is, at its core, an investigative process; a way of exploring places, the physicality of structures, temporal concepts and qualities and materials. He says:

“The etching process enables me to make a sustained enquiry into the subject’s structure, location and the effects of time passing. It becomes my own visual experience and a graphic equivalent to an observed moment in time.” (Chamberlain, 2017)
In an interview with the printmaking journal *Pressing Matters* (2017: 14) he observed that his practice allows him to investigate the subject more fully once the drawing is taken into etching: “...the printmaking image goes far beyond what I can achieve with drawing” (Chamberlain, 2017)

Through his drawing with pencil and charcoal, he investigates the formal elements that pique his interest: form, shape, light, composition and scale. In contrast to Sleigh, it is essential for him to go through this process, he says, “…if it’s not put down in drawing it won’t get done.” (Chamberlain, 2017)

**Revelatory drawing**

Once the drawing is completed and a layer of investigation has generated satisfactory visual direction he can move forward to the etching. His drawing on the etching plate introduces increasingly subtle investigations into surface, investigating solidity and fragility, erosion and impermanence. The drawn investigation, on paper, is now providing clues and references for a further, deeper exploration in the other medium of etching. Drawing on paper reveals his idea, his concept, and at this point he uses “…drawing as revelatory practice.” (Petherbridge, 2010: 432). The reciprocal characteristic identified here is that drawing reveals an aspect of knowledge that the artist was searching for and has been able to find through drawing. The drawing, which reveals understanding, can be the drawing on the etching or on paper; each reciprocates the other.

**Domain shifts as discourse**

There exists a significant domain shift for Chamberlain from drawing on paper with easily correctable mediums to drawing on copper. Drawing on paper with charcoal or graphite leave an immediate trace, the mark is seen in the instant it is being made. The practitioner will see the correctness of the mark or their mistake. In etching, the mark leaves no trace when it is first made, the marks are only revealed after being processed. Only once the plate is bitten in acid and then proofed, does the etcher see the effectiveness of their labour. As the etching progresses the investigative drawing moves subtly between linear, tonal and textural surface concerns. Petherbridge acknowledges the internal discourse which is set up as the practitioner moves to and fro, between abstraction and representation, within the drawing as it develops.
“The reciprocity and intertwining of the linear economy constitute the richness of drawing as practice and discourse” (Petherbridge, 2010: 117)

Internal tensions

The observational role of drawing provides an internal struggle for Chamberlain. The source of tension here is between a photo-realistic attention to detail and a desire to move towards the abstract. Chamberlain knows he is very analytical, as much as he likes the unknown and is not averse to risk. He also prefers to be in control and keeps up a battle within himself between pulling back and letting go. He confronts a tyranny of the real and recognisable through detailed studies, wrestling the form from the intricacy of surface appearance, always asking of himself: “How do I do justice to these forms?” (Chamberlain, 2018). The struggle to express the monumentality and the defunct nature of such an old technology is the challenge that also motivates him. At the London Art Fair (2017) Chamberlain described his intention to try to create a “memory of past existence – purpose, function, ruin.” Dewey describes the inner turmoil as;

“... the capacity to work a vague idea and emotion into terms of some definite medium” (Dewey, 2005: 78)

Chamberlain is trying to take the intangible notion of doing justice to an abandoned place and work it into an image which once again will inspire awe and respect. Dewey expands on
the role of tension in making ideas tangible, stressing the importance of the artist’s awareness of themselves as a constituent part of their creative capacity:

“But we also want the tang of overt conflict... For art is the fusion in one experience of the pressure upon the self of necessary conditions and the spontaneity and novelty of individuality...The self is both formed and brought to consciousness through interaction with environment... if free activities were not brought against the resistance offered by actual conditions, no work of art would ever be produced.” (Dewey, 2005: 293)

**Emotional energy**

Chamberlain’s drawing practice bears this out, albeit rich with a contradictory tang. His naturally competitive personality leads him to work obsessively hard at his image making. Interestingly tensions arise in this process because he always feels more vulnerable in a drawing; etching is a safer medium where he is able to relax a little, but still he claims that he loves and loathes etching. He wants to achieve more layers, more detail and push the potential in the image further and further. At the same time as recognising this obsessiveness, he acknowledges that the process is also methodical and necessary. The time and energy spent on his etchings is cathartic, and it gives him time to work through ideas. Dewey reflects on the role of contradictory human emotions in creative practice. He explains that only when a rhythm of resistance, energy and growth is established that aesthetic quality can justly be reached:

“Emotional energy continues to work, but now does real work; it accomplishes something. It evokes, assembles, accepts and rejects memories, images, observations, and works them into a whole toned throughout by the same immediate emotional feeling.” (Dewey, 2005: 162)

Etching provides a structure to the creative process which is reliable and allows for growth; an expansion of ideas. Some stages are well rehearsed such as grounding a plate or inking up to take a proof. This reliability conflicts with the unpredictable, resistant nature of the corrosive effect of ferric on copper, particularly when used as a spit bite. It is the unpredictability and the potential lack of control that are the very things which appeal to Chamberlain and this is where the energy resides. Boon offers a platitude for the moments of resistance, with a ring of truth, “Creativity is everything but an easy gain, offered on a silver platter.” (Boon, 2014: 92) Even less of an easy gain on a copper platter.
Material discourses – reductive processes

Tensions in Chamberlain’s practice are embodied in his prints that both deny and celebrate the etching process and exploit the material nature of his process. This aspect opens up the pragmatic and ongoing discourse within creative practice:

“...the idea that the artist/material relationship is itself a dialogue, in which both the artist and the material participate, listen to one another and evolve together.” (Dobson, 2013: 138)

In Chamberlain’s prints, objects and structures are paradoxically contained by a blind emboss of pure unmarked paper achieved by a perfectly clean unmarked area of copper plate. This is technically a very difficult quality to achieve in etching; so difficult in fact that foul bite (an accidental mark that appears when processing a plate) is often celebrated by the artist as showing the etching process. The edge of the plate is clearly represented by the embossed mark but its presence is marked by its absence of ink.

The discourse of participating materials continues through Chamberlain’s ‘un-marking’. For many artists making a mark is about applying line or tone to a light surface with a darker medium or something that will leave a trace of their marking the surface. To approach the surface reductively, that is to take out the darker tone or line, is a counter-intuitive drawing method. The mark has to be made in order to take it away, introducing a state of tension in which the artist may feel they are working against themselves. In this case Chamberlain is giving himself more options, more scope to unfold the image before him. He makes as much use of the burnisher as his etching needle, both the additive and reductive mark making create a multi layered, evolving plate, enabling a reciprocal discourse. Chamberlain also gains by retaining control over his image through erasure, allowing lines that have become camouflaged by aquatint to come back through. It was interesting to note that Sleigh never erases, scrapes or burnishes and maintains - within her terms of engagement, there is a full commitment to every line laid down on the plate.
Structural temporality

Further material paradoxes become clear when looking at individual pieces of work. Chamberlain explores an unfamiliar subject matter that would be unrecognisable if not rendered carefully. The Sound Mirror series is a good example of this. The shape of these Cold War acoustic listening devices (located in Romney Marsh) are monumental and abstract, resembling a sculpture that could have emanated from a follower of Barbara Hepworth. In Chamberlain’s prints, the balance of tone is nuanced so carefully that the unusual and unfamiliar forms make perfect sense. The shadows, which appear at first sight to be intense, densely worked areas, carve the structure and light rests on the surface of each, describing the bowl or the support structures as though they are hewn from rock.

The prints celebrating the extraordinarily statuesque Goonhilly Satellite dishes, Sat. I and Sat. II, deal with the temporality of the man-made structures situated at geographical extremes on the coast line of Britain.
These dishes are located on a Cornish promontory, open to the force of the elements roaring around the coast. A responsiveness to place is demonstrated in the fragility and erosion shown at the edges of these structures. Lines and marks which delineate the outermost details fade into the whiteness of the paper as though the structure is being worn away and breaking down at the point where solidity meets air. Chamberlain’s etchings appear to be at the mercy of their environment. The support structure of Sat 1 shows the watery marks of corrosion and the pitted evidence of abrasion. These effects are achieved with the adept application of spit bite and open bite techniques, sympathetically drawing parallels between the corrosion of the plate and the surface of the subject; reciprocating material and environmental effects.
The intricacy of drawing with finely worked details combine in a material discourse as layers of increasing complexity. Chamberlain began a new series in 2017, documenting and recording bunkers that make up the German constructed Atlantic Wall defence system. These new etchings demonstrate a network of structural drawing and loose painterly mark making seeping out from the edges and appearing through more lightly worked areas, reminding the viewer that these are drawings rather than photographic images. This provides an insight into process while expressing the transitory nature of coastal structures. Here the drawing is all on view; the erosion of the plate created through a variety of etching processes clearly suggests the physical erosion of the bunkers. The vulnerability of the structures is the strength of this work. Strong drawing and intense mark making combine to create fragile surfaces embodying tension in every stage. Chamberlain’s material discourse demonstrates further a reciprocal conversation between erosive, additive and reductive qualities.

**State proofs – finding the problems**

The process of developing a drawing is a different experience for the artist to that of developing an etching plate. The plates unfold over a lengthy period of time, up to 2 months for Chamberlain’s larger plates. The intensity of drawing and mark making with a wide variety of techniques feeds into the gradual evolving. The temporal aspect of review is heightened through etching by taking state proofs. Each proof stands as testament to a moment in time for the etcher and his process can easily be traced backwards to his starting point. The laying out of state proofs provides a visual diary of the unfolding of the image. Chamberlain takes many stages to complete a print; it is not uncommon for a plate to be taken through 20 states.
The role of the proofed image is an integral part of all etching practice and can play a strong role in the reciprocity between drawing and etching processes. A conversation with many etchers at work in the print room inevitably lead to a statement along the lines of *I’ll take a proof and see what I’ve got.* Working on metal plates can provide difficulties in assessing the image. As the printmaker draws back the blankets and lifts the paper there is always a moment of trepidation, particularly when another artist is in the print room looking over their shoulder. The moment of reveal begins a process, often a long process of review, reflection, self-doubt, critical self-analysis and much sighing. Then the proof is lifted from the press bed, put on the wall for reference and the etcher returns to the plate once more. All etchers are familiar with this cycle. For some there is real disappointment that the print has not worked as hoped and for new etchers it can be difficult to know what to do next. For an experienced and creative etcher, the moment of seeing the plate printed for the first time begins a process of problem finding and solving, a reciprocal cycle of drawing and re-etching. The first questions invariably require the artist to assess what their next move might be, to find the problems and, then, to decide how to try to solve the perceived problem. Runco (2012) identifies problem finding and problem solving as key aspects of creativity:

“In the arts problem finding may be a problem of expression. The work itself might seem to be exploratory, self-expression or an attempt to refine technique. Art is a reflection of the artist, however, and the artist may be searching.” Runco & Garrett (2012: 17)

Sleigh says that as soon as she starts drawing she is trying to solve a problem and that she needs time to make mistakes, she uses the process and responds to the process. Chamberlain (2016) more vehemently describes the whole process as “that energy - battle, wrestle; backwards and forwards; to-ing and fro-ing.” While he likes what he refers to as the
unknown in his work he also realises that he is sometimes too much in control and searches for ways to relinquish the control.

Active problem solving, working proof. Photograph by the author

**Working proof – notation and reflection**

Chamberlain employs notational methods which express a personal coding system and allows him time for reflection (a system also adopted by Ford, pp. 106-107). This provide him with opportunities to wrestle with the image and explore the to-ing and fro-ing of mark making. Chamberlain explains that stepping back from the etching plate and analysing the proof can speed up his working process and allows him a greater degree of certainty in how the images develops. Written memoranda and colour indicators, such as blue for areas that need re-enforcing, enable him to convert ineffable feelings about an image into explicit instructions that are followed when he next approaches the plate. As with Ford a reciprocal characteristic of Chamberlain’s drawing is explicitly realised through these etched, printed and annotated proofs.

**Transformative tools**

There are multi-disciplinary elements in Chamberlain’s work; who also borrows tools from other disciplines and uses them in his image making. Chamberlain employs fabrication tools
such as an electric Dremmel. This removes an element of control as the tool hits the surface of the metal plate it is inclined to slide across the surface. Concerns with the original intention of the tool do not enter into this particular material dialogue; it is the ability to exploit the transformative potential of tools that unlocks creativity and allows the artist to interpret its function to their own ends. A problem of how to create marks which mirror technical constructions are solved by using a more technical and dynamic tool.

Details of Atlantic Wall Bunker Series, demonstrating fluid, etched mark making. Photographs by the author
**Fluid problem solving**

The Atlantic wall series has seen Chamberlain, in a continuation of his investigation of drawing, appropriate the tools of the watercolourist. This was not with the intention of creating watercolour sketches as Ackroyd does (see Chapter 3, p. 88), but to explore the fluidity and liquidity that pen and ink offers:

“The pen and ink meant that I could only control so much. I’ve always been intrigued about how the etching process takes the image somewhere else. I was speeding up that process of materiality by using pen and ink. It didn’t give me a rigid form. It gave me a structure but there were small discrepancies and ambiguities which made it a process of visual problem solving. I had to go back in and adjust, alter it and that gave it a slightly different character… a fluidity.” (Chamberlain, 2018)

The fluidity of the marks were reciprocally inspired by pen and ink experimentation. While he was drawing, using a brush, Chamberlain diluted the ink with water and allowed the marks to spread as in a wet-in-wet watercolour process. The dissolving marks running down the flank of the bunker were informed by those similar marks achieved in the drawing. In the etching these are achieved through successive spit bites. In other areas of the drawings, Chamberlain used masking fluid to create lettering shapes in mimesis of a graffiti mark. His knowledge of how to achieve a loose, informal rendering enabled a reciprocal action in his etching. Instead of masking fluid he used sugar lift to create a similarly replicated mark. From ambiguities induced by investigating an alternative mode of drawing, Chamberlain entered into a phase of problem definition and solving. Through a reciprocal, material discourse combined with an assimilation of his experience of place, he embarked on a new series of works characterised by a shift in his working methodology.
Chapter conclusion - Haptic and tacit exchanges

My exploration of the practices of Sleigh and Chamberlain leads me to ask the following questions:

Is the nature of the reciprocity between drawing and etching based in the haptic experience of material understanding and therefore contributory to artistic practice as tacit knowledge?

Should the discussion revolving around the reciprocal nature of drawing and etching be conceived as being a haptic and tacit exchange rather than an intellectual transference of practice?

A reading of Petherbridge’s chapter on Material traces (2010: 118-152) raised a number of interesting points which serve to illuminate an understanding of problematic parallels between etching and drawing. The end products of drawing and etching evidenced in the work of the two case studies in this chapter, have remarkably similar qualities of line and mark to those found in drawing. There are physical similarities between the material results of drawing and etching which trick the uneducated eye. The resulting image from both techniques, traditionally, consists of a dark mark realised on a (light toned) sheet of paper. Such similarities, while intriguing can confuse the nature of an academic investigation into these processes.

Etching tools

The tools of etching, the stylus and brush, roulette or dremmel mimic in every respect the hand holding the pencil and therefore these...“experiences engender a reciprocity between drawing instrument and controlling body” (Petherbridge, 2011: 118). The tactile similarities often go further within the experience of handling and using the tools. A stylus gliding through the bitumen based wax on a freshly grounded plate has a unique feel but is not completely dissimilar to the feel of a pencil, as it runs across a smooth paper surface. An indentation, however light, will be left on the paper surface just as an indented line will be left in the wax ground.

Drawing tools

The tools required for drawing are collectively described, and difficult to identify from one discrete practice to another – a brush remains a brush whether used for watercolour or applying etching varnishes. The interchangeable nature of the tools allows for inventiveness
and freedom. Such tools have firm designations in many drawing manuals but when placed into the hands of experienced artists these tools are manipulated, interchanged, transferred and adapted. Tools are used in any number of inventive combinations, only dependent on the demands of the artist’s concept. Etching, and an understanding of the intricacies of the various techniques open to an etcher, allows for further invention:

“...artists take a tradition unto themselves. They have not shunned but digested it. Then the very conflict set up between what is new in themselves and in their environment creates the tension that demands a new mode of expression.” (Dewey, 2005: 165)

The appropriation of a tool, or a set of skills and experience, used for another purpose has variously been described as transference of fields (Dewey originally in 1932), intertextuality (Pope, 2008) and domain shift, a phrase coined by Sennett, (2009). These concepts will be expanded upon in Chapter 5. The skill of the etcher resides in their material understanding, as they become more open to the potential within other areas of their practice.

The materiality of tools

Limitations are inherent in the materials, discussed by Murdoch Mills (2009) and the exploitations of those materials heightens the viewer experience:

“The most successful ... contemporary work exploits .... limitations ... in order to heighten aesthetic response ... materiality is how art’s material qualities are sensed, interpreted and understood.” (Murdoch Mills, 2009:2)

Wet and dry are terms which are traditionally applied to drawing materials, under the assumption that all materials can be safely placed in one category or the other... where then does etching sit? The materials required for drawing as etching inhabit another land altogether and require a language comprising aggressive terminology of resist and bite, where semi-dry techniques are employed only to be submerged in liquid mordant. The categorisation is made more complex when considering viscosity exploited by the etcher – placing their inks, varnishes and resist materials somewhere between wet and dry.

Sleigh’s work inhabits the space between wet and dry in many respects – the line drawn with a water based fine liner, contradictorily employed as a dry medium, is applied over the surface of another oil-based line and provides resist within a dry drawing. Equally, she finds that a graphite pencil changes its mark where it meets the oil-based ink; the stylus that customarily epitomises the dry medium reacting uncharacteristically to the residual viscosity
of the oily line. The translucency and the physicality of the line changes; colours can appear brighter, or duller because one medium has rejected the other. The lines can appear to sink into the surface or stand raised off the drawing surface. Sleigh is able to exploit the potential and extend the possibilities of her materials, but is it intellectual engagement in the concept of the work that leads to such experimentation or is it the reciprocal tactile and physical sensation of resist between one material and another that sparks inventive thinking?

**Drawing as tacit knowledge**

Do these resistant methods speak more to the corporeal exchange of hand and tool, the physical drawing activity and the haptic sensations of mark making, than to an intellectual exchange of concepts comprising interpretations of line and form and representations of spatiality or context? Petherbridge suggests that “*Finished drawings inhabit the ideational end of the linear continuum*” (2010: 85), but the tacit knowledge found through the processes of drawing, whether on paper or plate, provides information for the practitioner which extends the continuum, forming a thread that draws together the artist’s practice.

Lee (1999) writing in the essay ‘*Some kinds of duration: the temporality of drawing as process art*’ describes that drawing is always drawing if the intention and the gesture behind that mark is considered by the artist to be drawn:

> “The ways to make a drawing – the conventional routes followed by artists and academicians alike – are outstripped by the sheer fact of the gesture itself. Here the question of what properly constitutes drawing, of drawing’s technics, is bypassed by the condition of its actuality. For the artist there is only drawing.” (Lee, 1999: 25)

**Tact understanding of drawing practice**

Drawing provides an area of oppositional comparison. Sleigh and Chamberlain both agree that they find drawing hard work, Chamberlain takes this so far as to say it can very stressful for him. He accepts his desire for control within the process which is in conflict with the direction he wishes his practice to go in. Increasingly Chamberlain is directing this tension into a material investigation aimed at answering his dilemma. In opposition, Sleigh actively searches out discomfort and revels in it, understanding that by channelling tension into her creative process she will discover more about where she wants her practice to go. Chamberlain’s meticulous planning contradicts Sleigh’s desire to allow her work to follow its own course. Her plates appear to be meticulously pre-planned leaving little to chance but
they are all worked out at the moment of their creation. Chamberlain’s work, by contrast, appears to be experimental, open to etching’s alchemy, but is in fact, meticulously planned. Sleigh \textit{just starts} and sees where to go following an intuitive framework. Chamberlain makes detailed sketches, and prefers not to start an etching unless a piece has been worked out in advance through drawing. Sleigh makes drawings but chooses only to take the idea through to a print when there is another factor she wishes to explore about a particular place. Consequently, the print will have similar elements but will be quite different to the drawing. Chamberlain allows the image to evolve from drawing to plate; Sleigh allows the image to evolve by drawing the plate. In attempting to decipher a reciprocal cause-and-effect methodology between drawing and etching it becomes clear that the process is far more nuanced and each of these two practitioners have worked out their own system.

\textbf{Place – at a distance}

Distance, both the physical and emotional distance from the place being depicted brings these artists together. Chamberlain (2017) discusses the potential for abstract ideas to develop in the work. The drawing can become less constrained by the actuality of place and memory can allow for a selection process to take place, enabling the practitioner to shape the concept with greater clarity. The materiality of the processes within both etching and drawing can become part of an ongoing dialogue that allows an image to evolve. Accessing memories, thinking back to a place visited some time ago, filters much of the collateral information and sharpens the key details of the experience. While the physical distance to place can become greater, the emotional distance can be reduced. Chamberlain, however, retains a sense of responsibility to a place. The structures he portrays are much photographed, well-known landmarks and he maintains a respectful truth in his depictions. He is aware that the depiction of structures associated with international war conflict comes with responsibilities. The innate ugliness of both their purpose and outward appearance is both appealing and repellent and requires careful handling in order to transform them into a meaningful artwork:

\textit{“Something which was ugly... is transfigured in quality as it becomes a part of an expressive whole. In its new setting, the very contrast with a former ugliness adds piquancy, animation, and, in serious matters increases depth of meaning.”} (Dewey, 2005: 100)

Sleigh (2016) discusses the issues of (dis)comfort in an unfamiliar place; that she enjoys finding a strangeness in a place. She uses her practice as a way of questioning how humans
inhabit places and investigates places that are not part of everyday experience. Immersion in the unfamiliar contributes to the attraction and enables interpretation. Sleigh considers the places she depicts to be utopias or non-places, but names her prints for the place because she wants the viewer of the work to know the inspiration was located in actuality and as a gesture of acknowledgement.

These points of comparison raise the question: does the information become easier to process when time has passed and memories of places can be organised; when sensory overload has waned and the vital features rise to the surface? Are the challenges of process more rewarding in terms of a purposeful output and has tacit understanding enabled an insightful material interpretation?

The following chapter contributes further evidence towards my developing argument that reciprocity between drawing and etching is contingent upon the following three characteristics:

- Experientially - explored in this thesis as immersion in place
- Performatively - evidenced in outcomes challenged by creative tensions
- Materially - tacitly realised through material understanding.

This will be scrutinised through the practice of an etcher who pushes the boundaries of the medium across all these areas.
Chapter 5: The materiality of etching

“*The modern world likes the complete, the systematic, the self-sufficient, the clarified and the unabsorbent. Softness and haze are things to be cleared away. Hard truths are to be revealed by stripping back obscuring surfaces. The landscape you see with all its fluff and uncertainty only hides the bones of a lurking reality.*” (Nicolson, 2001: 102)

This chapter will build on my investigation into the nature of creativity and aesthetic experience for artist etchers, their processes of *stripping back obscuring surfaces* as Nicolson says (in *Sea Room* his lyrical account of his time on the Shiant islands) to reveal the *lurking realities* of place. I will continue to look at the challenges that are sought out by a practitioner in the pursuit of a drawing and etching practice and how *domain shifts, dynamic repair* and *problem finding*, discussed by Sennett, (2009) contribute to an etcher’s creativity. Chapters 3 and 4 focused respectively on place and drawing, whilst this chapter will shift focus towards the materiality of etching. Consequently, I will develop the thesis by unravelling notions of material transmutability and tension as a productive aspect of practice. These ideas will expand on the interplay between tacit and explicit understanding and will be further illustrated through the role of proof states as temporal evidence. In so doing I will continue to reveal the nature of the threads of reciprocity which inform etching through drawing.
A singular case study

In clarifying that I had found a case study worthy of singular attention, I turned to the advice offered by Gruber and Wallace (1999) who offered three broad criteria for case study selection: a creative person is unique, creative developmental change is multidirectional and a creative person is an evolving system. Jason Hicklin has proved to epitomise all three of the above categories. Every artist is unique and I have endeavoured to avoid generalisations in this thesis as far as possible; the study of Hicklin’s developmental change and evolving practice reveals further instances of drawing and etching reciprocity. He has proved, through our interviews, to be an astute self-reflective practitioner. His developmental path has found him travelling to places that have challenged his creative methodologies, encouraged him to explore directions that he would not have predicted, and which have enabled his work to evolve radically. Hicklin, who identifies himself as an etcher above all other categorisations, is therefore placed appropriately within this thesis, as the focus of a chapter devoted to a case single study.

An epitome

In researching case study methodology, I found that Gruber and Wallace advocate selecting an epitome whose study will reveal tensions and discoveries:

“The narrative in the case study method will include an epitome, the aim is to understand the obstacles that our case faced and how he or she dealt with them.” (Gruber and Wallace, 1999: 101)

It is an ambitious aim to attempt, consciously, to seek out an epitome; to track the progress of a practitioner through a period of time that marks pivotal points in their development. Not least because such points would only be recognisable with the benefit of hindsight. In acknowledgment of this, I have been fortunate indeed to work with Hicklin and to observe the challenges that he has met and overcome. The scope of the extensive body of work that I witnessed during the course of this research provided the opportunity to explore the research question in some detail and provided a deeply illuminating insight into the challenges of artistic practice.

Research duration

There is no published work about Hicklin except for my own article Finding New Lands in Printmaking Today (2016) and short catalogue introductions written by his gallerists. All
evidence presented here has therefore been gathered through first hand interviews with him and research visits to his gallery *Eames Fine Art* (excerpts from the interviews are included in the Appendix p. 475). The sequence of discussions has followed, by necessity an inductive path. Each interview provided fertile evidence on which to build hypotheses that subsequently gave direction to the questioning that followed. Hicklin’s contributions during our meetings were thoughtful and my questioning developed in a responsive dialogue. My aim, as this chapter unfolds, is to capture Gruber and Wallace’s notion of a *creative life*, illustrating the themes of the study so far.

“The criterion of duration [in case study research] gives special meaning to the criterion of purpose, extending creative work over time and capturing the notion of a creative life.”
(Gruber and Wallace, 1999:94)

This chapter will continue with a focus on the corporeal experience of drawing with reference to the St Kilda drawings. After a discussion of materiality, I will consider tension as a necessary factor in productive creativity. The focus will then move towards exploring how drawing informed the Australian series. In so doing, the experiential and material challenges of two such diverse places will be taken into full account by placing them in context with Hicklin’s other work completed during the course of this study. A material investigation into etching must have a strong foundation if it is to be positively generative, and for Hicklin that foundation will always be drawing.
Case study 5:

Jason Hicklin RE, b.1966 - Biography

Jason Hicklin divides his time between his role as Head of Print at The City and Guilds College of London Art School and his private print and drawing studios at his home in Shropshire. He regularly lectures at symposia and teaches at print workshops around the country. Hicklin’s preferred subject matter is the isolated and inhospitable edge-lands of the Scottish and Irish islands. Born and raised in Wolverhampton he has developed a fascination with the coast and a healthy respect for the sea, but is inexorably drawn to expanses of water. He exhibits annually with Eames Gallery, London as a solo artist and has worked in Australia on a collaborative residency. His work is held in collections nationally and internationally. In 2016 he was elected as a Council member of Royal Society of Painter Printmakers (RE). Influences include the etchings of Francisco Goya, Otto Dix, Pablo Picasso and Samuel Palmer. Hicklin draws with graphite and predominantly etches on zinc with nitric acid.

Jason Hicklin, Eynhallow and Mainland Orkney from Rousay, 2015.
By kind permission of the artist and Eames Fine Art

Dependable methodologies

When I first interviewed Hicklin in 2015 he was established as a highly competent etcher whose work reached a loyal audience. His Orkney etchings (completed 2015) were very well received and at this point he realised he had developed dependable methods for making atmospheric prints with an autographic identity. I will describe how the series of St Kilda etchings (2016) shook up his practice by providing a challenge that required him to re-assess everything that he thought he knew about etching. The more recent series of Mersey (2016), Atlantic (2017) and Pacific prints (2018) presented even greater challenges in the etching studio and continued to energise his practice. Hicklin’s reliance on his drawing has always been extremely important to his work, but the translation of drawn reference into etching, within the most recent Australian work (2018), has brought that aspect into sharp focus. He has become far more ambitious in wanting new experiential qualities from his
mark making and the finished work. This case study documents the point in Hicklin’s career where he was ready to make changes:

“...if you want to move the images up to being something else rather than just pictures of landscape, I think there comes a point when that change has to be made. You have to start making that step up with them and that will hopefully create conversations about them... to pull at people’s emotions, to make them think ‘What is it about this? And what is it about these marks?’” (Hicklin, 2017)

Loch Roag, 2017. By kind permission of the artist and Eames Fine Art

Visual dialects

Hicklin’s work has a strong visual and descriptive language, identified by stark landscape forms and smoky skies. His striking graphic mark making describes the force of water and the structure of headlands. These visual identifiers reciprocate between sketchbook and plate and continue to be immediately recognisable across his oeuvre. They are very much in his own voice, but it is also clear that each series has gone on to develop its own dialect. The etchings may appear to have progressively stronger accents than before but this is because they speak more confidently of their origins; of the experience of transient places that inspired them. Hicklin’s gallerist, Vincent Eames acknowledges the strength of his mark making in a recent exhibition catalogue:
“Daring, rugged, almost brutal marks veer towards an abstraction. Searing passages of bright white jostle next to glowering blacks. This is muscular uncompromising printmaking.” (Eames, 2017)

Role of drawing in practice

From our first interview, Hicklin told me “drawing is fundamental”, and he has never wavered from the fact that without his drawing there would be no etching. My investigation into his practice was initially directed towards understanding where drawing is positioned and to what extent the drawing informed the materiality of his etchings. I hoped to find out just how fundamental drawing was for him. Through the next three research years, as I followed his progress through increasingly challenging projects, we talked about drawing from many different angles and began to uncover valuable evidence concerning the reciprocity between drawing and etching.

Sketchbook methodology

Hicklin begins each set of work by drawing in sketchbooks on location. The books contain his own personalised ontology of each place, which sits comfortably with Rawson’s definition:

“In so far as any drawing amounts to a positive, affirmative statement, it implies and illustrates the artist’s conception of reality...implicit in every drawing style is a visual ontology, i.e. a definition of the real in visual terms.” (Rawson, 1987: 19)

For Hicklin the drawings conjure and define the entire experience of the place. The key role of Hicklin’s drawing is observational. His research trips serve as time for observation and, he explains, drawing...

“...slows you down, it ties you down to a particular object, a particular place. A particular moment in time where you’re still and you are looking.” (Hicklin, 2016).

He has developed a plein air drawing system, pared back to the essentials, which is well-practised and one that has become utterly dependable. He travels with 10-12 sketchbooks on each research trip, one for each day, and he carries graphite sticks, water-soluble graphite pencils and a brush, and he uses rain or rock pools for water. His sketchbooks are chosen because they fit into his coat pocket and because they are tough:

“...if it’s raining it’s not the end of the world, my sketchbooks are tough enough to get themselves back into shape even if they get dropped in the sea.” (Hicklin, 2015, a)
“Before I go on the trip I order sketchbooks and they all arrive and I’ve got all the sketchbooks piled up and I just look at them and think ‘I haven’t done this trip yet, but those sketchbooks, they’re waiting.’ And you keep looking at them and you look at them. They’re all pristine and then all of a sudden you unleash yourself in that landscape. The sketchbooks, they’re the thing... They’re things that are very close to me.” (Hicklin, 2015, b)
preferring to trust in the marks that he made - because he was there, taking the time to look carefully. As he draws, the marks are sure and certain, the response to the land is immediate; an intuitive knowing conveyed through the graphite. When viewed in isolation, Hicklin’s drawings appear to be nothing more than a hasty note, jotted down in the face of the elements, the speedy execution being the only way to cope with the experiential impact of place.

“I deliberately wanted to rely on the drawings. When you’re on the boat you’ve got to get to the point... they’re working books, they remind me of everything... The sketchbooks are for me, they’re mine. I understand them and it’s not a photographic record. The point is that I remember it... you can’t dilly dally; you can’t sit and muse too much; you’ve just got to get on; you’ve got to record the information... I know I can’t nip back and get more...” (Hicklin, 2016)

Sketchbooks – a greater truth

A non-artist looking at these sketchbooks may be forgiven for assuming an abstraction whereas the artist sees the marks as honestly representational; a greater truth than topographical accuracy. The visual notes should be seen in context of the whole sketchbook and when viewed in this way all the information required to summon up the place back in the etching studio is at hand.

“There’s no back up, as it were, that’s all I work from.... And I think it adds a vitality to the etchings because I think the initial marks had to made so quickly that it has influenced the etchings.” (ibid)
Some days Hicklin stays in one location; the same bay or on the same headland, drawing the view from closely located points which enables him to fix the place, to satisfy his curiosity and really get to know the land. One book will often be devoted to one bay or one end of an island, generated by as much walking and drawing as Hicklin can manage in a day; reflecting the shape and feel underfoot to the climatic conditions and the transient subtleties of light.

“It’s my interpretation. But it is important that I walk it and record truthfully to myself. The images come from any inaccuracies.” (2015, b)

Macfarlane, in his book *The Old Ways*, expands on the haptic notion of walking as a means of reading the land and gaining a corporeal and reciprocal understanding of place:

“Touch is a reciprocal action, a gesture of exchange with the world. To make an impression is also to receive one, and the soles of our feet, shaped by the surfaces they press upon are landscapes themselves” (Macfarlane, 2013: 161)

Hicklin’s sketches remind him of how the sky is reflected on expanses of water, the geology of the land, how and where the elements of earth and sky interact. Each sketch contributes to the fuller picture and, when viewed together, give a holistic sense of a landscape. Hicklin’s sketches fall convincingly into the category Sickert (1947) identifies by being made with passion; in the heat of the moment:

“There are two distinct and different intentions with which a man may set about to etch... There is firstly, the draught from nature, made, as it were, at white heat... And secondly, there is the deliberately built up composition which relies on an accumulation of studies, on memory...” (Sickert in Sitwell, 1947: 235)

*Soay, St Kilda*, sketchbook 2016. Photograph by the author
Sketchbooks – corporeal understanding

Hicklin wants energy and vitality from his drawing, an essence of the experience, which in turn, will give life to the etching process. He wants that corporeal understanding to come through his work and to be reciprocated in the etching studio:

“When I refer back to those (quick) drawings every mark in there tells me something. There’s [a few] marks but I remember everything.” (ibid)

While looking through one of the St Kilda sketchbooks I imagined myself, on the sea circling the islands as one page after another opened up and gradually revealed the structure and form of the island. The sketchbook gave me a palpable sense of being on the boat making its way around the island to the harbour. If, as an outside observer the sketchbook can transport the viewer to a place, we can only imagine the strength of the experiential memory that those same sketches bring to the artist.

Pages from a St Kilda sketchbook, drawings made from a moving boat. Photographs by the author
Immediacy

When Hicklin is absorbed in a place, he has no need to erase, re-draw, correct. It is the visceral reaction to the place that is the truth being sought after; the experiential understanding that comes from knowing, because he was there. The tension inherent in any artwork’s creation is between habitual actions and innovation; too many corrections will confuse the sense, and lose the immediacy of the moment. Hicklin’s mark making, linear gestures and traces are so much a part of his practice that he can respond instinctively without over-thinking:

“... those linear codes that help to extend the spaces, ... and narratives of drawing, are so embedded in practice as to appear inseparable from perception and imagination. For practised artists they become naturalised and function equally unconsciously within representational drawing and abstraction.” (Petherbridge, 2011: 117)

(Un)favourable conditions

Hicklin prefers to time his research trips for points in the year where daylight hours are going to be short and the conditions will be unpredictable. These are the qualities of transience that he appreciates; the changeable light and the unpredictability of the weather means that a place is never the same from one moment to the next. He has a well-deserved reputation for carrying bad weather around with him and the reasons for choosing unfavourable conditions lie with the intensity of the experience that he wants to bring back
to the studio. Hicklin draws whatever the weather, confronting the harshest conditions to get the information he wants. He believes that:

“The better drawings are when the conditions are against you, when you’re having to say to the landscape ‘You’re not going to beat me, I will draw you. I will get the drawing I want.’ The deadest drawings I have made have been when the weather’s beautiful. The drawings get slack and they don’t have the tension.” (Hicklin, 2016, a)

Physicality of drawing

In contributing further to the experiential memory, Hicklin pushes the boundaries of physical comfort. His drawing is a physical engagement with the land as well as the atmospheric conditions. Through the speed of his drawing, he can record his responses whether he is sheltering or finding a place to keep safe:

“Often my drawing is relatively physical; I don’t make myself too comfortable, I draw quickly so I don’t have to. Sometimes I’m kneeling down in mud, sometimes I’m sitting down in wet grass and sometimes I’m lying down. Especially on St Kilda where the cliffs are so steep. They are some of tallest cliffs in Britain, so to get to the edge of some of them I had to lie down and put my head over – it’s not a place where there are safety rails... it’s a sheer drop and it’s so exciting to crawl and lean over.... Sometimes you are physical. You’re lying down. Kneeling, crawling, just to get the right view and to be safe so that you’re not going to blow off the edge. On the boats its physical drawing as well, the boats move so you have to balance yourself; you’re not comfortable. And then between each drawing is the walking.” (Ibid)
Every physical discomfort adds to the energy in his drawing and, in turn, that powerful experiential memory is re-animated in the etching studio. An essence of Hicklin’s corporeal and emotional self has been captured within the sketchbook and returns to help him as a vital aide-mémoire back in the studio. A characteristic of the reciprocity between drawing and etching, based on this evidence, can be one of a corporeally re-interpreted experience. The importance of the experiential value goes one step further when considering the role of the sketchbook. Ingold (2007: 3) suggests that we learn more about the world we inhabit by engaging directly with the stuff of the world, explained in under the sub-heading, Wayfaring, Chapter 3, p. 79. Within Hicklin’s sketchbooks the materials have become materiality; the book now becomes the memory and, reciprocally, the concept.

Materiality

The value of the drawing embodied in sketchbooks has been examined and the focus of this chapter shifts to material understanding and the materiality of Hicklin’s practice. All case study artists in this thesis have a strong appreciation of the material qualities inherent in etching that is contingent upon drawing as a fundamental and underpinning factor. It is necessary to consider qualities rather than properties. An exploration of the properties of etching lead only as far as what metal and acid can do. An investigation such as Hicklin’s explores the qualities of etching; that is working with metal and acid. The distinction is important and describes an immersive involvement with materials. Such immersion describes a practice that is a constant exploration; pushing the boundaries of the artist and the materials working together; exploiting the conceptual potential between their intention and the material possibilities. Eames (2015) recognises the distinctive materiality of Hicklin’s work:

“There are very few artists, who are so in tune, and what they do is so integral to who they are, and Hicklin really does embody etching for me.”

Material properties and qualities

Discussions with Hicklin illustrate the distinction between material properties and qualities. The following diagram was designed in order to clarify the material concepts discussed in relation to this thesis.
Hicklin will often personify (attribute the tools of his trade with human characteristics) his practice such as:

“I invited the process in and let it take its course, let it pull me around a bit” (2016).

This also echoes Chamberlain and Sleigh who discuss the struggle and the fight, (Chapter 4, pp. 137, 140-142, 155-156). Sennett also recognises the value of such personifications:

“The attribution of... human qualities... into materials does not aim at explanation; its purpose is to heighten our consciousness of the materials themselves and in this way to think about their value.” (Sennett, 2009: 137)

Hicklin’s material awareness stretches back to his childhood memories of his grandfather and have permeated throughout his practice. He recognises this and works with the knowledge:
“The smell of oil, when I first went in the etching studio, the smell of the oil, the cast iron, took me right back to the industry. It was the smell of my grandad. He was a boiler maker and he was a train driver and he used to come in in these blue overalls and that smell of oil. The minute I walked in the etching studio, you know, smells trigger memories... it’s everything about etching. It just feels right for me. It felt right the first day I walked in the etching studio. Nothing else has really grabbed me as etching did.” (Hicklin, 2015, b)

Tacit understanding

Material awareness has enabled Hicklin to develop an understanding and expertise that has been honed over many years of practice. Working with materials is described as tacit understanding, a form of knowledge proposed by Michael Polanyi (1967). Tacit knowledge is popularly considered to be a way of learning by doing. Smith summarises Polanyi’s work on the YMCA George Williams College infed website, stating that tacit knowledge comprises:

“...a range of conceptual and sensory information and images that can be brought to bear in an attempt to make sense of something”. (Smith, 2003)

Hicklin learns through trial and error until he resolves the image, often letting the materials lead the discovery. This happens whether he is out on the land, stick of graphite in hand or in a reciprocated learning process in the etching studio grubby with ink, breathing the smell of oil and surrounded by the machinery of etching. He has to be hands on, immersed in the stuff of etching, in order to learn. The deep involvement with his materials often leads to dramatic alterations to his plates, which is born of tacit knowing rather than cold reasoning.

“In the flux of practice, we grope towards an understanding that is not representational. Acts and decisions occur in the heat of the moment and not as the result of rational logic.” (Bolt, 2010: 50)

Sennett’s position on materialism discusses man as maker wherein routine enables tacit knowledge to develop, “…thinking and feeling are contained in the process of making.” (2009: 7) and he advocates that the maker develops a thorough understanding of how and why they are engaged in a task at the point of making, not once they have finished. Reflection and review is contingent with production and leads to “…a more materialistic engagement” (ibid). Making enables the maker to learn about themselves. Such tacit learning requires absolute involvement with the qualities of the materials and, in the context of etching and drawing, an understanding about what they might reciprocally generate.
Surface qualities – reworking plates

Gibson (1979: 23 in Ingold, 2011: 22) in a discussion about surface qualities describes a surface as having “resistance to deformation and disintegration” afforded by the surface at the point where energy can be absorbed or deflected. This provides elegant terminology for what happens when the materials of graphite create dynamic alterations to paper or where metal is licked by acid.

On several visits to Hicklin, I would admire a proof pinned on his wall only to be informed that he wasn’t satisfied with the image and intended to obliterate a large section and reassess the plate; to disintegrate and rework an image.

“Some of the greatest etchers of the past – Rembrandt being the most notable example – delighted in the continuous transformations that could be effected by reworking a plate...emphasising the process of making... The subtle transformations and brutal re-workings alike are each cherished for their own qualities.” (Livingstone, 2008: 27)

The above quote comes from a fascinating conversation between art historian Marco Livingstone and the American artist printmaker Jim Dine as they discuss working with master printer Aldo Crommelynck. Livingstone highlights Dine’s practice of transforming his plates. Dine’s enjoyment of the process was in the making, unmaking and discovery that etching allows for. In essence Dine was exploring the materiality of the process with as much energy and focus as he gave to the aesthetic impact of the resulting image. Hicklin subscribes to all such material qualities enjoying as much what the metal and acid can do physically as the image that is generated by the metal. He delights in the subtle transformations and brutal re-workings of etching process. The example below illuminates this point and raises a supplementary material quality - that of erasure.

Erasure

The series about the River Mersey provided a material opportunity for the sort of brutal re-workings favoured by Dine. Hicklin describes how difficult it was to get the light right and how he had reached a point of thinking the Mersey etchings were finished but realised something wasn’t right:

“I think the light is absolutely crucial to etchings, absolutely crucial, and sometimes you can get carried away by just making things blacker and darker. The way I’m etching at the moment [2017], using open bite technique, it’s a way of putting light back in... That’s what
the problem with the Mersey work was all about [-too much black]. The light in these has all been achieved by open biting - it reintroduces light. It’s like a big eraser... very much like drawing in that sense...It feels like a positive way to put the light back in.” (Hicklin, 2017).

Dynamic repair

While meeting the challenges posed by the Mersey series Hicklin had employed open biting in a much more dynamic way. Taking large parts of the etching back towards a flat plate, the varnish in combination with the acid served as the tool that allowed for an action of dynamic repair and was instrumental in stimulating a new phase of forward momentum in his work. Dynamically, repair is a term coined by Sennett (2009: 200) which describes the deployment of a tool when a piece of work isn’t progressing as expected. A dynamic tool does not need to be different to what was being used before – it can be a tool that serves many purposes. It is the way the tool is used that marks the dynamic shift. The repair may provide unlooked for or incidental results; in the hands of the curious practitioner, it can be powerful.

The dynamic effects of open bite, leaving traces of incidental marks. Photograph by the author

Incidental reciprocity

Hicklin often discusses breaking the surface of his plates. To do this he marks the plate by using the resists commonly found in the etching studio, in a relaxed and experimental fashion - rolling hard ground too thinly, overheating wax resists or scraping varnish across a plate with offcuts of card.

“When I first started work on the plates I made quite random marks – etched the plates quite deeply (if you’d printed them it would have been quite a mess) then open-bit, re-etched and
imposed the landscape on to these distressed plates. Some of the marks are incidental marks... It’s a way of breaking the surface.” (Hicklin, 2016)

Once the incidental marks are suppressed by exposing large areas of the plate to acid in an open bite, he is left with an underlying vocabulary of mark making which begins to set the scene for a series about a specific place. Hicklin’s additive and reductive processes create interest not only for the viewer but also crucially for Hicklin himself. The instances he refers to in the reference above are generated, to a large extent, by his control of dynamic repair. However, because tools are often used in combination, an incidental mark (positive or negative) can be achieved and will add crucial marks that begin to describe his experience of that particular place. The material, through deformation, is made less resistant and the etcher can now work with that material surface to introduce their own concept; material reciprocally gives way to materiality. There is a clear shift in his thinking that has brought together aspects of working in the domains of drawing and etching, that have established interchangeable and reciprocal parallels between the two.

Cyclical material processes

When a cycle of etching is completed Hicklin signs off a body of work by making large-scale drawings, bringing his process full circle. For Hicklin the large-scale drawings involve a physical engagement with the paper as he energetically works away at the surface with lumps of graphite. Pinned up beside his drawings are etchings.
Inspiration comes from activated paper surfaces. The printed surface is indented by the plate, and the print is raised in relief where the ink stands on the surface. Working from such rich reference informs the drawing physically and materially. Layer upon layer of graphite is built up and erased in a parallel of the additive and reductive processes that have been employed in the etching. The paper surface absorbs the dark tones. When lightness is required, Hicklin has to work against a surface now resistant to deformation, deflecting the energy of his erasing. It takes significant effort to reduce the embedded darkness, often leaving a trace of the original mark. This process is mirrored and reciprocated in his etchings.

Re-workings are not always brutal; sometimes the adaptations can be about the ink on, or embedded in, the paper. In other words, the tangible material nature of the print. When Hicklin finishes a series of etchings, the last action with the plates is to print them as a box set. The plates are re-considered through the tone of ink and through the positioning of paper on the plate and new reciprocal links are established between the sketchbook, the drawing, and the end point of the printmaking process:

“What I also wanted to do was really focus on the plate itself. So I print them without a border and print within the plate. So it really is about that intensity of what I wanted to see. ...It’s that bleed, and again it becomes like the sketchbook page. You’ve gone right to the edge it feels as if the paper almost disappears.... I like the idea of the paper disappearing. It gets so encrusted with ink its right in there. The paper’s just a support for this inkiness.”

(Hicklin, 2015, b)

Orkney box set, 2015. Photograph by the author
What is clear is that Hicklin is engaged with the material qualities of paper, metal, sketchbook or press as an immersive method. Surfaces and tools don’t just serve a purpose but help him in his quest to achieve his goals. Drawing necessitates an engagement with surface, be it sketchbook, metal plate or printing paper.

**Material consciousness – narratives of place**

Material consciousness is not solely contained within the practical, hands on aspects of making but is also present in the research and conceptual stages of practice. Hicklin likes to read around the subject of his etchings, finding news articles and books about each place he visits, feeding his curiosity. Background knowledge reveals the potential of the subject and provides validations for the methods and material approaches to his work. Hicklin related an anecdote to me when we were discussing the making of the St Kilda series that illustrates this perfectly:

“One of the stories on the island is of the keeper who wanted to improve the lives of the inhabitants. To do this he imported zinc to improve the roofs of the cottages to make them waterproof, which it did, but it also created condensation so the cottages became worse, with all this water, than they were before. So they ripped off all the zinc. All the etchings I’ve made of St Kilda have been on zinc. There was a nice feeling of the imported zinc which didn’t work, and I’ve dragged images into the zinc, making it work for me. When I was reading up on the island the word ‘Zinc’ zinged out at me - and it felt right to be doing this series in zinc because the zinc is doing what I want it to do. It was an odd feeling to be using this material that was completely bloody useless on the island... If the islanders were still there they’d still be saying that zinc’s bloody useless, that is! Probably the best thing you can do with it is dump it in acid!” (Hicklin, 2016)
Material understanding of place and process can create useful connections with social histories, embodying the creative process with a narrative which goes far beyond that of the artist’s experience of being on the island themselves. This layer of knowledge seeps through Hicklin’s memory of being there, of drawing a place that had proved to be very challenging for the people who lived there. Research and knowledge combined with experiential understanding enriches his image making. Material understanding doesn’t just teach the artist how to make work but can also inform that work at a much deeper, and profoundly more satisfying, level.

A fulfilling experience

Material understanding augments the experience of making and leads, as Dewey states, to a point of creative fulfilment:

“...We have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfilment. Then and only then is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution... Such an experience is whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience.” (Dewey, 2005: 36-37)

Material consciousness can be understood to function particularly productively when challenged (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, Dewey 2005, Sennett 2009); when tension is introduced creativity can flourish, as previously discussed in Chapter 4, p. 123.

Tension

For the etcher tension exists in three states. Firstly there is the tension which arises from material difficulties in researching and making the work and act as resistances to progress. Secondly there is tension which is created within an artwork in order to instigate a dimension of challenge in how the work is viewed and understood. Thirdly tension exists as an emotional and experiential undercurrent within the artist who challenges their creative intention. Hicklin exploits and thrives on all such states.
The diagram, below, visualises how all three forms of tension can impact upon practice:

“Resistances... can be either found or made. Both cases require toleration of frustration, and both require imagination. In found difficulties, to cope we will identify with the obstacle, seeing the problem, as it were, from the problem’s point of view. Made difficulties embody the suspicion that matters might be or should more complex than they seem; to investigate we can make them even more difficult.” (Sennett, 2009: 226)

Hicklin isn’t satisfied by simply mastering technical excellence; he is curious and always wants to be moving forward and is only able to do this by embracing challenges. He says that he doesn’t “...want to make a comfortable etching...I like to be agitated,” (Hicklin, 2016) and he understands that tension is necessary for him as an artist. The process is taxing, but after the series of prints is finished, he finds that he misses the creative intensity that the tension brings.

“You know when a piece isn’t finished, when you feel restless about it... because it’s not answering something that is within you...” (Hicklin, 2018)
Pushing the limits

On his return from a drawing trip the ability to create tension in the etching studio is a vital and central concern for Hicklin. His practice explores the pivotal moments between his intent and the vicarious control of acid on metal and tension is a powerful impetus in the development of his work. He proves that:

“The crucial task of the creative person is precisely that of transforming potential into actual problems.” (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976: 243)

By pushing process to the limit, he transforms creative intention into problems to be solved. John Elderfield (1997: 107) wrote of Richard Diebenkorn’s work that:

“Making actually meant correcting. Revision… was the means not merely of précising pictorial thought but of thinking itself.”

Throughout his creative practice Hicklin experiences moments of frustration; a common emotional response that anyone who has picked up a pencil, or who has lifted a plate from the acid bath, can identify with. The moment of standing back from one’s work is more often frustrating than rewarding, but the artist who continues to push their practice forward is indeed one who can intuitively convert tensions and learn how to find the problems, or more constructively, create new problems with which to challenge the existing difficulties.

“The capacity to open up a problem draws on intuitive leaps, specifically on its powers to draw unlike domains close to one another and to preserve tacit knowledge in the leap between them.” (Sennett, 2009: 279)

Problem finding

Runco (2007) believes that problem solving and problem finding contribute to the clarification of the ineffable notion that constitutes creativity:

“A great deal depends on how we define problems: If a problem is defined in terms of an obstacle between one’s self and a goal, then much of activity of artists could be called problem solving... finding a means to best express an idea or refine a technique... here no one sees the problem except the creator! This latter case is often described as problem finding.” (Runco, 2007: 15)
Printmakers, in general, are adept at problem solving but the most creative etchers, who produce the most revelatory work, are those that put themselves in the position of finding problems to work against. Hicklin subscribes to this point of view.

The painter and mezzotint printmaker Chuck Close is equally adept at creating challenges; invigorating his practice by finding problems to solve:

“One thing that makes creativity in my field different from other activities is the desire to not go with the conventional wisdom... In our society problem solving is greatly over appreciated. Problem creation is, in fact, much more interesting.” (Chuck Close in Meyers & Gerstman, 2007: 130)

Place as a source of tension

For Hicklin, tension begins with the drawing research and is reciprocated in the etching phase. One state of tension begins to inform the next and creative, original work is the result. We began talking about this aspect of his practice while he was making the St Kilda series, the circumstances of his visit to the island and the subsequent trials in the print room serve as an illustrative anecdote. Hicklin’s relationship to place often sets up tensions. In previous chapters, I have shown the artists to be immersed, curious or nostalgic for place. For him a place is about transience, a sense that humans are just passing through and that the etchings he makes are recording the briefest of moments. Often Hicklin feels that the islands have an antipathy towards him, rejecting him as they had rejected their past inhabitants:

“I don’t feel the land is a friend. I have mixed feelings when I read how people have written about landscape, as though it’s a friendly place or a welcoming place. I don’t see it like that at all. Sometimes you’re not meant to be there and it knows it and we know it and deep down we know it and fear it. I think the ocean scares us. It...is a frightening place. We’re just passing through, and we’re nothing... This land doesn’t care about us...” (Hicklin, 2016)

The St Kilda challenge

The St Kilda series had been challenging in every respect; it had been a very difficult journey to get out to the islands due to rough seas. Hicklin had to wait for a whole week on the midge-infested island of Lewis, in a torn tent, until he was able to find out that the ferry was running to St Kilda. The islands themselves challenged him in that he was familiar with the precedent set by artists who had previously made images of the islands and he knew he
needed to do something different. Once he got out to the islands, he was taken aback by their strangeness, jutting up out of the sea; odd shapes of hostile rock:

“There were no sweeping views to these islands; the perspective was very different. This land just bursts out of the water...” (Hicklin, 2016)

Further difficulties lay in that he only had two days and one night in which to record the place, he had been hoping for a week. The author Kathleen Jamie was also forced to curtail a visit to the islands that had seduced her:

“To linger on St Kilda just for the sake of it would merely have been romance.” (Jamie, 2012: 163)

“I did get there, I did stay on the island and it wasn’t easy. It was a really rough night, the wind!... it rained, my tent leaked for the first time ever, it was horrible - absolutely horrible; it was like being on a big old ship out in the middle of the Atlantic; way out there. It’s an unforgiving place.” (Hicklin, 2016)
Hicklin was forced to rely on his drawings made from the boat because his stay on the island had been so short. On his return to the studio he was once again confronted by the unique and much romanticised environment. He began the series by transposing etching methods developed through the Orkney series but St Kilda had proved to be so unusual in its physical presence that Hicklin discovered he needed to reassess his approach. He found that he was required to apply all his skills of tacit knowing and work with the qualities inherent in his materials, in order to do justice to the subject. Dobson sheds light on the need to establish a dialogue and respond to materials:

“...the human-to-material composite relationship and collaboration is of an imaginative, physical and energetic space that we know in some ways already. As we develop the skill of ‘listening’ to materials, observing them far beyond their surface properties, we also develop our liveliness and deeply engaged perception and action. We meet a material with force and it replies back with force: we work, we make something, we change.” (Dobson, 2013: 161)

The St Kilda qualities

The experience of developing skills and making aesthetic objects unfolds in unexpected ways. The progress isn’t linear and this thesis demonstrates that it should not be expected to be so. In the case of the St Kilda etchings the quality of a choppy sea reflecting light was achieved for the first time without aquatint; Hicklin had found a way to not use a technique that had been dependable.

However the drawings he had made contributed to the richness of the resulting printmaking through bolder use of tone, starker compositions and a new focus on the semi-abstract island shapes and which now dominate the prints.
“I had to ask myself why I was so excited about being there at St Kilda and it wasn’t the weather. The sea was important, and being on the sea was part of it, but it was these strange shapes. As a series I think it is the first one that is about shape.” (Hicklin, 2016)

Incidental traces

While working on the St Kilda series he experimented with starting points, imposing emotive mark making to give him something to work against, introducing tension. Introducing marks that required repair and that would open up the possibilities for creative interpretation of the island’s forbidding landscapes. In this context drawing on metal created opportunistic instances that Hicklin referred to as useless marks on a broken plate surface:

“I... put wax on, dragged things across and etched them ... but then I started putting these landscapes in, taking the useless marks out, so you end up with marks that are instances. It’s just what’s left in the plate... There’s a trace of things... The instances happened incidentally.” (Hicklin, 2016)

Challenges can lead to revelations; both Hicklin’s drawing and etching knowledge and experience were equally challenged and this contributed to solving problems in a reciprocal fashion. Hicklin’s material curiosity resonates with Besant’s rationale:

“Perhaps printmaking balances always on the fulcrum of destruction and rescue due to the very nature of its alchemy. Therefore our ability to stretch process beyond classification has the potential to respond always to the question arising from the ways artists embrace what lies at the very heart of printmaking, which is that inquisitive delight in investigation.” (Besant, 2014: 11)

When Hicklin was applying the wax for the areas designated for sky he treated the materials in a way that deliberately allowed the acid to bite through, creating incidental traces - effects that create tensions and moments of interest.
This image, above, shows a close-cropped section of sea which demonstrates just such an incidence. The central white highlight on the horizon was not wholly intentional, neither was the rise of the cloud behind it. Both sets of marks where introduced by allowing the materials to settle where heat and resistance guided them; the viscosity enabled a measure of resistance, and allowed acid to penetrate. The tension involved in working with materials and exploiting their qualities in this way gave Hicklin a moment in the print that he treasures.

The light on the horizon gives life and the cloud gives movement to the final print. The immersive approach to working with materials was reciprocated in an enhanced image and those materials gave a moment of delight back to Hicklin. Enlightened moments in the
etching studio, such as these, are born from immersion in process and through embracing tension.

Creative tension

Hicklin is consistent in his acknowledgement that he needs tension in order to fuel his creativity:

“...it’s important for what I do to have some tension and some challenge. I think every series I’m making at the moment is more challenging because I make it more challenging... The ease of looking at them isn’t important to me. I’m not concerned that people find them difficult or wonder where they’re supposed to be going with them or how look at them. That’s not really my concern now. My concern is the conflict and that tension in the studio.”
(Hicklin, 2017)

The Lewis etchings took their lead from the Mersey work and became a chance to consolidate an increasingly abstracted approach. The abstraction would come from a desire to maintain a tension within the mark making; exploiting the transmutability of the metal surface as far he could. Hicklin believed that because he was familiar with Lewis he realised that he had the opportunity to explore a series that could be more about the mark making than the place:

“I think there’s something there about the crucial marks I was making and the decisions I was making and I want that in the etchings. I want every decision to be a crucial decision and also a decision I have to earn. I have to really earn the right to make these marks at the moment... You don’t try and use all your tricks in every one. Your whole mark making language can’t be in all of them, the language is about different marks at different places.”
(Hicklin, 2017)
Aesthetic tension

When I visited the exhibition of the Lewis etchings I was struck by the different character; the contrast between the light and dark tones was starker and there was an engagement with visceral mark making that held the series in tension. Hicklin presented Lewis as an uninhabited place, rejecting human contact; a place where time appears to have stood still. He addresses the question of how to approach a place that remains apparently unmarked by illustrating the constant flux of erosion, weathering and light through which all such places evolve. He had created a transient landscape shaped by time and tide offering the viewer an experience that is visually described by deep, sculpturally etched mark making.

Despite the emphasis on the material qualities of metal, acid and ink and their dramatic potential when pushed to the limits of representation, the distant landmasses remain carefully wrought with precise drawing, grounding the image, allowing the viewer a way to access them. The bursts of energy and action apparent in the foreground drawing of water and land are expressive and more open to translation. Hicklin maintained an apparent immediacy in the marks creating further visual tension, belying the fact that the plates have been through many stages of adjustment and re-interpretation:

“...because this, now, excites me more in the way they’re made, the physicality of the etchings themselves, close to the physicality of the landscape. But again, the landscape is just a starting point for the way I’m thinking about etching.” (Hicklin, 2017)
The challenge of Australia

When we spoke in 2018, the challenges had become greater still but the work was also becoming increasingly rewarding. The series of etchings, which he had begun in 2017, based on the research residency to the Australian Pacific Coast, were to prove Hicklin’s biggest challenge to date. St Kilda had proved to be a strange landscape but the Australian environment was completely alien in comparison and Hicklin was required to call upon all his resources in order to make sense of this utterly different experience.

Hicklin had travelled to Australia on a residency with two other artists and was committed to making a series of works. The tension of deadlines combined with an enthusiasm for a landscape so utterly different from anything he had etched before became a tumultuous mix...
“…turmoil marks the place where inner impulse and contact with environment, in fact or idea, meet and create a ferment... To generate the indispensable excitement there must be something at stake, something momentous and uncertain... A sure thing does not arouse us emotionally. Hence it is not mere excitement that is expressed but excitement-about-something...” (Dewey, 2005: 69)

...and Hicklin experienced a lot of excitement-about-Australia. Everything he encountered during his visit was different. He is accustomed to feeling rejected by a landscape, but standing by the Pacific Ocean, he felt the vastness of the place, which in turn, reduced his sense of self. In coming to terms with the potential of this other, alien landscape, he decided to focus on a relatively small area around the Hunter Estuary and Newcastle Beach. His aim with this series was to produce etchings which had clarity and which reflected sun bleached land and shimmering water, rather than his usual tempestuous waves and glowering Scottish skies.. It became necessary to embrace the challenge of highlighting the difference between the Pacific and the Scottish Atlantic seas. Whereas the Lewis series had been about the materiality of etching, in the Australian series Hicklin wanted to continue to use what he had learned but to concentrate on bringing the drawing back in.

Re-engaging with drawing

To achieve this he went back to the sketchbooks with greater scrutiny in order to re-engage with the experience of being in Australia and interrogated the essential information within each drawing. The word Pacific, meaning to pacify became an important, telling descriptor. He looked for a quality of light, openness and quietude; unusually he wanted to achieve a smoothness to the surface of the water.
The drawing *From Nobby’s Beach* revealed a different sense of immersion that played on Hicklin’s experiential memory. For the first time on a research trip he was able to be immersed in the water, rather than observing it. The sketch, from Nobby’s Beach, reveals the calm and tranquillity of the water, virtually empty of mark making.

![Image of Tasman Sea from Newcastle Beach, 2018, etching. By kind permission of the artist and Eames Fine Art.](image)

Habitually he makes his initial drawing on a plate intuitively, spontaneously and aggressively; establishing tensions in the mark making which he likes to work against. With this series, he began by trying to find new ways to work the plates but while valuing the lessons they taught him. Much of his early Australian investigations were consigned to the scrap metal heap and the proof stages to the living room fireplace. Solutions to his newly found problems presented themselves not as an illuminating bolt from the sky but in moments, small instances within a plate that began to reveal a new sense of direction. The process is not always smooth:

“Yes, you wait for those moments, you really need that. You really need something... to happen, and you hang on it and keep it. And sometimes it’s not the right thing to keep; sometimes you’re onto something and you’re thinking, ‘Keep it, keep it’, but why? Why am I doing that? It’s leading you up the wrong path. And so the wrong direction can be as important as the right direction sometimes too. But then you make a mark and something just happens, you think that’s it, it’s got a sense, a quality that I really want.” (Hicklin, 2018)
Restraint

Hicklin was forced to meet the tension of resistance, the inability to etch as he had with the Lewis series, with uncharacteristic restraint. The etching *Tasman Sea from Newcastle Beach*, made from the sketch *From Nobby’s Beach* illustrates that restraint in the treatment of the water. The experience of immersion reciprocates itself in the etching; the sense of the water coming right to the edge of the print and the never-ending flatness of the calm sea is palpable.

By viewing Australia as land shaped by humans, Hicklin discovered a way to approach a place that challenged his understanding of etching knowledge informed by the Scottish Islands. Information about the history of the land was gleaned during walks guided by indigenous wardens. He could use the sketches made on location as starting points for expressing his memories of the landscape, just as the European colonisers used the land as a blank canvas and adapted it to suit their needs. The image of *Tasman Sea from Newcastle Beach* reveals strong sliding lines describing the rise of the land mass. These are not descriptive of contours but of open mining, the land slipping towards the sea through man’s intervention. Similarly, the prints based on *Nobby’s Head*, (discussed on pp. 202-203) provides a pertinent example. The flattened summit of the headland was carved into shape by prisoners who were quarrying stone; re-making the land. Walking once again gave Hicklin a way to experience place and bring that into his work.

“This trip was by invitation – we were invited to that landscape... and it was only by walking ... and understanding what we were looking at... that I could see there were drawings to be made...” (Hicklin, 2018)

Hicklin’s process has as always embraced the physicality of creating images from metal but most crucially this time he had to hold back.

“It’s about paring down to as little as I need to make these images” (Hicklin, 2018)
**Tactics of destruction, recovery and transformation**

In relation to sketching, Petherbridge discusses the combative strategies and tactics employed by the artist, proposing that:

“... this complicated journey of destruction, recovery and transformation call for a combative chain of counter-actions, which, like dialectical propositions, are resolved by the generation of a new form that holds contradictory aspects in tension.” (Petherbridge, 2011: 155)

In unpicking this statement, it can be understood that Petherbridge refers to the corrections, erasing and over drawing which most artists explore while making a sketch. We can see that Hicklin’s practice begins with sketching *en plein air* that places itself in a very different quarter whereby the research that has gone before, the walking, looking, and map reading leads to sketches that are quickly executed, corporeally responsive and suffused with the experiential qualities of place. His sketchbook drawings are not laboured; they are not re-worked, overdrawn or subjected to the destructiveness of erasure. However, the progress of the sketch translated to the etching plate quickly finds itself on just such a journey. The tactics employed in realising the image as an etching fully embrace destruction, recovery and transformation. Counter-actions such as open bite rescue complex passages of water or sky and re-application of aquatint transforms the structure of landmasses. As the process gathers pace Hicklin’s initial mark making began to be introduced with a measure of restraint so that there would, in turn, be less manipulation as the process continued.

**Dynamic tools**

In working through the series documented in this chapter Hicklin has reduced the variety of tools that he uses on a daily basis, to those that offer the greatest flexibility and most clearly reciprocate his drawn information. Those he uses most often include wax grounds, stop out varnish, aquatint and acid. (Images, overleaf, show Hicklin’s studio and his tools.) All have the potential to be used in a variety of ways; they serve as tools that offer dynamic repair possibilities. Dewey (2005: 57) explains that the word dynamic is used in relation to process and experience “…because it takes time to complete it, because it is a growth.” Etching is a medium which is governed by time, there are no instantaneous results; the plate has to be in the acid for a length of time, be that seconds or hours. Varnish, as a tool, acts as a resist to acid and as a way of letting some acid through to bite into the metal surface. Acid is used to create marks, the time required to corrode, to erase marks or flatten the plate is dynamically
adjustable. Shorter amounts of time create subtle effects, but a plate left in the acid for long periods can deliver a dramatic result.

Jason Hicklin’s studio, dynamic tools and drawing with soft ground over aquatint. Photographs by the author
Sennett’s argument develops from material consciousness to domain shifts and tools of dynamic repair, which assist us in further understanding the nature of reciprocity between drawing and etching. His concept of *arousing tools* (2009: 194-209), discusses how the practitioner deploys his tools categorising them as: tools which are fit for purpose, tools which enable *dynamic repair* and *sublime tools* capable of potency (having the capacity to open up the imagination).

Hicklin’s tools satisfy all three categories. Through a domain shift, the practitioner can work out how to use tools to change what has been made before; repurposing an existing tool. Thus, when an etching is proofed and the result throws up a new set problems:

“... we can tolerate the frustration because we are now also curious: the possibility of making a dynamic repair will stimulate and the multi-purpose tool will serve as curiosity’s instrument.” (Sennett, 2009: 200)

An often overlooked tool is the wax ground etching ball which, when sold, is advised to be used with a roller or a dabber. The wax ball is put to work by Hicklin as a dynamic drawing tool, a way of achieving a tonal ground, and as a resist - drawing light into an aquatint.

Once all dynamic tools have been put to work, a proof is taken and, at the point of lifting the proof, Hicklin’s curiosity is piqued. He will now ask himself many questions about how mark making effects have been created, which he wants to keep and which he wants to work against, and the tools of his etching craft become at once drawing tools and the instruments of his curiosity. Sennett summarises this by saying, “…the domain shift reengages us mentally” (2009: 280).

**Proof states - temporal evidence**

In preparing a paper for the RAI2018 conference, *Art Materiality and Representation*, I explored the role of the proof state as a piece of evidential etching which enables enhanced reciprocal understanding. The value of proofing is tacitly understood by all printmakers, but I recognised that its unique quality in etching is that it captures a moment of a drawing which is not fixed in any other form. This allows the etcher a moment of reflection; a piece of temporal evidence that exists concretely in proof states. The moments in the life of a plate cannot be replicated and cannot be returned to:

“When a print is taken from a plate a moment in the life of a drawing is caught and fixed. This ability to deliver concrete evidence of the progression of a drawing by printing a state...
proof after each revelatory process is a crucial and beneficial material quality of etching.”
(Rhodes Picken, 2018)

The following image shows the complete set of proof states for Nobby’s Head and Breakwater, which were retained by Hicklin to illustrate just this point. (Usually he would dispose of all his proofs once a series was finished).

It is clear in this set that the initial, incidental marks in the water has largely been bitten back to leave a trace before the same area is re-etched. Hicklin approaches his plates as many of us would approach a drawing, with a willingness to erase, re-draw and move key elements around. Open bite and aquatint are his two more commonly employed dynamic tools, one as a reductive tool and one as an additive tool. The temporal evidence shown here provides visual illumination of an etcher developing an interplay between tacit knowing and explicit understanding. When the proof of each stage is laid out, it is possible to track progress and determine the impact of each stage of the work.
Re-workings of the metal can be brutal as can be seen in the 9th and 10th state proofs; Hicklin has obliterated a large section through a bold application of open bite, erasing the headland completely. This enables him to redraw the land in a different position, as he says:

“I’m not being a slave to the drawings, but enabling myself to be open with the etchings.”
(Hicklin, 2018)

Proof states – material traces

The proof of the drawing is now seen in the print, and the proofs can enable the etcher to track the life of their drawing as glimpses of moments in the process; each state is caught as a material and temporal trace. A J Blackhall, (Appendix p. 481) master printmaker, agrees that a series of proof states provide a unique record of a drawing:

“...you can save it, almost like immortalising it at different stages. You’ve got something that was an initial sketch and you get to take a proof of it and then you work on it and that never really exists again although you see echoes in a drawing of what was if it was smudged and rubbed but you never have that one layer, that one moment in time back.” (Blackhall, 2016)

Proof states provide unequalled temporal evidence of the materiality of the artist’s concept and a tangible material trace of the processes that have been explored. The 3rd state proof shows Hicklin employing similar over drawing techniques (explored in greater detail by Ford, Chapter 3, p. 106-107 and Chamberlain, Chapter 4, p. 156).
The 10th state, however, shows evidence not just of a developing concept but of a physical interaction with the development of the plate. The proof is used as a stencil to draw the rocky foreground onto the metal.

**Proof states – reciprocal dialogues**

The proof now becomes a self-reflexive vehicle, a mechanism which works as an externalised dialogue between etcher and etching:

“There is that crucial moment when they have to work with what it is and then it becomes more of a dialogue and a response that they are actually seeing the proof, responding to it, making changes…” (Blackhall, 2016)

The sketchbook can be viewed as the first proof, the first state which the image existed in before it began its process of transformation. Hicklin likes to not pre-plan his etchings when he is drawing, but when he gets back to the studio he begins to notice the details which sow the etching seed. In the example from *Glenrock Beach* it was the diagonal strata-like marks across the headland which provided the initiating, generative mark:

![Glenrock Beach, sketchbook and etching, 2018. Photograph by the author](image)

“When I’m out with the sketchbooks I try not to think too much about what I’m going to do in the studio…sometimes the smallest drawing can give you an etching and you wouldn’t have thought it at the time…it’s afterwards I look and think, ‘How do I interpret that mark into etching?’” (Hicklin, 2018)

**Embodied reciprocation**

Reciprocity begins with making the first marks in the sketchbook. Without this experiential knowledge bound up in the materiality of the drawings, etching could not follow in such a productively creative manner. The final series of Australian prints retains freshness, lucidity, and a quietening of the printed surface reflecting, as much as possible, the character and
the experiential concept of the original sketch. In so doing Hicklin has provided a complete example of an embodied reciprocation between drawing and etching.

“Drawing is just drawing on graphite and paper; this is just drawing with acid onto metal. I don’t think there’s much difference in the two. And what I’ve been trying to do is bring them together, bring that sense of drawing into these pieces – with the process of etching. I feel they’re merged. I couldn’t do one without the other.” (Hicklin, 2018)
Chapter conclusion – old and new challenges

In the face of digital advances and multi-media practices, the depiction of a landscape or place through an anachronistic technique such as etching can be considered to be a less challenging way of addressing issues which surround humans in the modern world. To return to the quote that I used to open this chapter:

“The modern world likes the complete, the systematic, the self-sufficient, the clarified and the unabsorbent.” (Nicolson, 2001: 102)

The modern world may superficially appreciate systematic clarity but this thesis presents an alternative, in Nicolson’s phrasing, “…the bones of a lurking reality.” (Ibid) During my visit to Hicklin’s exhibition Ocean Part 1 - Atlantic a visitor remarked, “Technical, atmospheric but old fashioned.” This opinion prompted a conversation concerning his choice of phrase, old-fashioned, by which he was referring to the depiction of a landscape as subject matter. To approach landscape however, in a way that is creatively and technically demanding, must accordingly, seek out the new. Hicklin achieves a contemporary view of ancient and man-made landscapes, while paradoxically using a traditional technique to depict such places. It must be remembered that through the effects of weather, erosion, growth, decay or man’s intervention that landscapes are ever-changing and, therefore, always new. It has been my intention with all the case study artists to present landscape as a challenging, rewarding and contemporary subject; as places conveying ineffable messages about our contemporary world and our position in that world. Harrison, (2002) in his essay The Effects of Landscape, expands this point:

“…The legacy of the genre of landscape... lies not in the intentional forms of picturing by which it has been defined. It lies rather in the precedents that the genre provides for a continued engagement, in the context of the visible, with that which is contingently excluded from the possibility of being seen and represented.” (Harrison, 2002: 231)

The contemporary interpretation of landscape as place is not intended to be explicit, but through material interrogation, the viewer’s eyes are awakened to suggestions, remembrances and intuitive knowing. I have appropriated this quote (describing Ian McKeever’s etchings shown in the Alan Christea Gallery, 1997) to illustrate the notion:
“A bit like overhearing a conversation. You grasp something of what’s going on, but you can’t get all of it. And there’s an intrigue – to think through what was actually stated.” (Gilmour, 1997: 4)

Hicklin, along with the case studies contributes significantly to the intrigue of what is stated through a reciprocated material engagement between drawing and etching place.

Material curiosity and intention

Having challenged the depiction of place, it is necessary to challenge the material intention. How does an understanding of materials and materiality help our understanding of the reciprocity between drawing and etching? The following quotes have provided guidance in thinking about the material qualities in Hicklin’s work.

Ingold, writing about the textility of making, spoke of:

“...the tactile and sensuous knowledge of line and surface that had guided practitioners through their varied and heterogeneous materials...” (2011: 211)

It is Hicklin’s immersive material engagement that contributes such a productive dialogue, as expressed by Sickert:

“Now there are two things in etching. There is the value of an etching as a drawing, and there is its value as revelation of a sense of the medium.” (Sickert in Sitwell, 1947: 261)

...and Sennett who explains that our interest is greatest when we become conscious of materials which we can change, we...

“..focus on what makes an object interesting. This is the [practitioner’s] proper conscious domain; all his or her efforts to do good quality work depend on curiosity about the material at hand.” (Sennett, 2009: 120)

Hicklin’s curiosity about his materials and his complete immersion in material processes are driving factors in his practice, maintaining the fundamental role of drawing in his etching. When drawing engages with etching, all senses can be awakened to the potential inherent within the material interaction. In practice such interactions are experienced and recognised as reciprocated material actions.
Materiality and surface in synthesis

In writing this Chapter, I have presented drawing as an engagement between surface and experiential materiality. To expand the understanding of surface concerns within materiality, Gibson (1979: 23 in Ingold, 2007: 5, 2011: 22) describes a surface as “where most of the action is”. This is a provocative explanation of the process of making artwork which can usefully describe both etching and drawing. Through Gibson’s provocation, etching can be perceived as a reciprocated drawing which has been integrated with a paper surface. Synthesised processes have brought the surface into play through both drawing and etching.

Tension finding

Hicklin identifies challenges through his experiential research trips, through identifying the character of each place and developing methods that continue to interrogate his perceptions. He is a finder of problems. Once the appropriate tension is introduced limitations and provocations can lead to tacit revelations, insights into creative practice and understanding of technical possibilities. Identifying tensions and applying domain shifts enable the resulting etchings to answer the creative impulse.

Material possibilities

As I witnessed the progression of Hicklin’s practice during the study, I observed a greater commitment to the materiality of the process and which celebrates the physicality of the way in which etching is made. Where previously Hicklin appeared to have become a master of his medium it appears that he has now found new challenges and a re-discovery of the possibilities of the materials of etching:

“A healthy obsession... interrogates its own driving conviction.” (Sennett, 2009: 261)

Hicklin’s complete immersion in his work has enabled him to thoroughly interrogate the possibilities of its materiality. His drawing has become a searching mechanism, a way of finding the image in the metal. The scene that was observed and captured in his experiential memory is now inseparable from the physical, haptic experience of being in that place. The gestural understanding that was gained on the island or beside the river, as the artist walked and drew his way around a landscape, has been corporeally assimilated as he made the plates back in the studio. It is clear that the drawing remains sure but it is unlaboured, resulting in a freshness where every mark appears to be swept and dashed into the surface.
This intuitive approach has given Hicklin’s drawing greater flexibility for adaptation and alteration enabling a dynamic transmutability of the metal surface.

Through drawing-as-etching, haptic and tacit understanding, facilitate an exploitation of concepts and materials. A preference for one material over another comes from learning by doing; tacitly understanding what links the inner materials of experience, idea and emotion and the outer materials found in drawing and subsequently in etching.
Chapter 6: Studio practice as research

This chapter aims to present the research applied through studio based practice. By demonstrating research explored through examples of my own practice, I will show how an enlightened understanding of the reciprocity between drawing and etching can enrich the creative process.

Autoethnographic contribution

This chapter will be written as an analytic autoethnographic contribution satisfying the criteria identified by (Anderson, 2006). To qualify as an autoethnographic author; as a fully active participant embedded in the research, I must show that:

- I am a full member of this research group through an established etching and drawing practice (evidence is presented in this chapter).
- I am visible as a full member through published material and I am committed to disseminating the theories and knowledge gained from this study (Associated exhibitions/events organised as part of PhD investigation, pp. 256).

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2010) in their paper Autoethnography: An Overview consider the qualitative presentation of autoethnographic evidence and the intended audience, advising, 

“...make personal evidence meaningful and... by producing accessible texts he or she may be able to reach wider and more diverse... audiences that traditional research usually disregards...” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2010)
My intention is that by applying the research to my own practice it will be more meaningful and that the images will also serve as texts through which audiences increase their understanding.

As my research progressed, I often asked myself what I was learning, and what has changed in my understanding of the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between drawing and etching. I discovered that it was vital for me to ensure that I was always listening to the materials of both my practice and my research (Dobson, 2013 in Chapter 4, p. 151)

I also found that it was constructive to open conversations about this study with interested parties. Discussions with exhibition visitors, curators in galleries, fellow printmakers and MA students at UWE informed my process and encouraged me. A discussion with the curation staff in the Tate Prints and Drawings study room revealed their lack of knowledge about the material processes of etching and the need for research. In another exchange Eppie Short, artist and educator told me about her search for an elucidation of the relationship between drawing and printmaking. In a conversation at the SITselect Open Studios, 2018 she said:

"I studied drawing at Camberwell. When I’m drawing with charcoal on paper I experience an immediacy, and I would like to find a method of working with printing where I can feel similarly ‘in the moment’. I didn’t find anything that helped me and I gradually moved into other ways of making prints. It’s stayed with me though, that idea, and I’m still trying to get the drawing into print.” (Short, 2018)

Such exchanges are common and reveal the keen level of interest and the rich potential of the study as an inspirational and practical document. Working in etching often provides the opportunity to be a part of a community of printmakers. Studio practice encourages dialogues to develop between printmakers as their work is made and research can become a dynamic and reciprocated process. Over the course of my MA and PhD studies, one of the most productive exchanges; a true example of a “material dialogic” (Scaife, 2018, Chapter 1, p. 37) has been with David Sully, master printmaker. Sully is the senior print technician at UWE and has always been on hand to offer guidance in the practical and technical aspects of drawing and etching.

Returning to local places

Most practices explored in the case studies so far have involved ambitious and lengthy periods of travel, but that is not wholly representative of artists whose work is concerned
with place. It became important to explore Sully’s practice, and my own, because both are inspired by familiar places that can be found close to where we live and work. One of the aims of this research study is to be accessible to the wider printmaking community and an investigation of localised practices, such as our own, will contribute further towards this.

Sully’s own, localised practice is illuminating. He has a ritual drawing practice, repeatedly visiting familiar places by walking and drawing in Ashton Court Park during his lunch break. Every day, without fail. Return visits to place allow Sully to look again at details, over the years there can be as many as 20-30 drawings of the same subjects, such as a fallen oak tree. Sometimes a drawing can be initiated by “...picking up on a mark from a previous drawing” (Sully, 2017), which he wishes to explore again. One drawing barely scrapes the surface. If there is some detail which has caught his eye, that location will require multiple visits. Sully’s observations allow him to pick a moment and hold on to it in the etching. He says, “...it’s about the looking, not the drawing” (2017).
Place and movement

Sully’s commitment, regardless of the weather, has led to an astonishing output of work; as of 2018, he has accumulated 80 sketchbooks and can trace the same place from season to season.

Place, represented in works of art has long been understood as a static notion; a point one has arrived at and stays, a geographical position binding an artist to site. Ingold (2011, 2016) challenges this fixed idea of place:

“*My contention is that lives are led not inside places but through, around, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere.*” (Ingold, 2011: 148)

By stating that places are not concerned with static concepts but with the movement that activates place, Ingold suggests a new approach concerning how we might understand an artist’s relationship to place. In the context of this thesis, I have shown place to be a series of locations that a practitioner moves to and from, around and through, and from where they move to other places. An artist rarely inhabits one place but draws in a series of places. By focusing on a localised practice, place is interpreted and depicted by an artist, not just as a static representation, but also as a moment. A transitory visit, before the moving to another place. Places need not be far apart, the movement need not require large
investments of time or long journeys. Sully’s chosen place is an area of Bristol that is a relatively small topographical area, but it is rich with a multitude of locations that he moves around on a daily basis, exploring the place at an intimate level. This is far from being a limiting factor but one that brings a new insight on a daily basis.

“...although with each journey one may cover the same ground, each is nevertheless an original movement.” (Ingold, 2016: 17)

The sketch, Boundary Wall, complete with annotation re-iterates the concept of identifying with place; the notation increases the personal experiential content. Sully will remember the birds and all other aspects will come back to him.

**Habitual drawing - practicalities and invention**

My own drawing practice takes inspiration from Sully by similarly documenting a familiar place on a very regular basis. My focus is on the lanes and bridleways around my village of Avening. Sully’s perseverance in the face of severe weather conditions has encouraged me to venture out at all times of the year. Habitual drawing requires reliability, a dependable set of rules of engagement, and there is an intriguing element of needful invention in the management of drawing *en plein air* on a daily basis. If it’s raining Sully hooks an umbrella over a branch to leave his hands free to hold sketchbook and pencil. On very cold days he
warms a pasty for his lunch before he sets out, which serves both as hand warmer and nourishment. His small sketchbook and the practicality of his carpenter’s pencils are materials that he finds reliable and fit into his coat pocket (Practical drawing materials are also discussed in Chapter 5, p. 170). My small back pack is always stocked with drawing materials, ready for daily dog walks and my trusty fingerless gloves keep me drawing at all times of the year.

**Gestural flourish**

The material characteristic of a drawn mark is a central concern in both my own, and Sully’s practice. During a long discussion in the consideration of drawing terminology in 2017 we turned to the notion of a *gestural flourish*, a term which he found quite problematic. At first reading *gestural flourish* suggests a mark made to impress, drawn flamboyantly or invented. Sully demonstrates this by moving his arm in quick arcs from the point of touching pencil to paper to a higher point, throwing his arm away to his side. It concerns him that honest and representational gestural flourishes exist within his drawing in moments when a line comes away from a fixed point in an entirely natural manner and takes its energy from an established rhythm within the drawing. Such drawing contains inaccuracies but can be pinned down to the internal rhythm and temporal quality of the drawing. I have been aware of similar drawing moments, such as representing the way a branch moves in the air or the movement of the air itself on a breezy day.

Rhodes, *Dancing branches 1*, sketchbook, photograph by the author

“*Weather conditions are important, particularly the wind. I find the initial drawings made in these conditions make me aware of gesture, speed of mark, and the pressure applied to the pencil or etching needle.*” (Sully, 2016)
Experiential mark making

Gestural drawing is enhanced in extreme conditions when speed is of the essence and the drawing embodies the experience of working on location. Ingold (2016: 74-76) suggests that a flourish is “...intrinsically dynamic and temporal”, tracing not just an action but also an embodiment of the time traced in that movement. He goes on to refer to Klee’s well-known description of a line taken for a walk as one that is drawn freely without the restriction of joining two points. The resulting line is one that is the most “...active and authentic” (Klee in Ingold, 2016: 75). A speedily drawn, responsive line may contain an element of flourish for
the artist but will also remain true to the intention and the moment, a truly experientially drawn mark.

Experiential mark making produces drawings that hold performative qualities. Drawing is positively affected by the ability to hold a pencil in numbing fingers or keep a book still in a howling gale. The sketch is noticeably transformed and embodies the performance of elemental interventions.

Performative drawing

In the etching, *Hedgerow in the Snow*, the linear mark making (autographically characteristic of Sully’s work) provides an experiential rendering of a cold wind that has bent nature to its purpose and is whistling around the artist’s ears. He invites the viewer to take in the atmosphere, then to look at the details in his etching that make a place worth noticing such as the bend of a branch in the wind. The subject has undergone a transformative process from drawing through to print. This describes the performativity of an artwork whereby it develops, to some extent, a life and meaning that goes beyond topographical accuracy.

“…art is a performative, rather than merely a representational practice ... through creative practice, a dynamic material exchange can occur between objects, bodies and images. In the dynamic productivity of material practice, reality can get into images.” (Bolt, 2010: 8)
Performative qualities are possible to translate reciprocally into etching. The transference from sketchbook to etching place accentuates the material exchange and the experiential qualities of the sketch become enhanced on the plate.

“The etching becomes itself in the first hard ground; it takes on its own life, straight away. In the drawing [on the plate] there is something that happens unexpectedly.” (Sully, 2015)

I consciously extended a similarly performative process into etching, testing the possibilities. I purposefully began a piece of work on a very cold January day; the conditions were below zero and I had to slip and slide through ice and snow to my drawing location.

Rhodes, *Very cold, wind cutting into fingers*, sketchbook, photograph by the author

Rhodes, *The shape of the ground and Water damage/frosted*, sketchbook, photograph by the author

As I walked up the lane I voice-recorded my thoughts and feelings, and made drawings of the experience of the place, including the haptic sensation of each step, mediated through
my walking boots. Later, back in my home studio, I transcribed the recording and created a poetic word walk (my coinage). All strategies were aimed at transforming an ineffable experience into tangible concrete documents.

Rhodes, Weathered and worn, word walk, author’s own work

My creative process was fully reciprocated through the experiential evidence of the drawing and, on this occasion, the word walk. The set of responsive sketches led to an inductive process of experimentation in the studio that contributed to the performativity of the image. I found that by using layers of sugar lift and open bite I could generate a haptic surface on the plate, perfectly reminiscent of the icy puddles and eroded surface of the frosty lane.
Many glimpses

Repetitive observation; catching a scene in many glimpses is a recurring theme in both practices. In a conversation we had in 2015, Sully discussed reasons for re-drawing the same place, explaining that the place is never the same and there is an endless fascination in all the subtle changes.

Sketchbook practice allows place to be documented in a diarist’s format, drawing attention to moments that build to a whole. Habitual drawing establishes rhythms and an authenticity of the mark expresses itself. Drawing, therefore, becomes an autographic assertion of the self; a form of self-validation which is augmented reciprocally in etching. Berger expresses this notion with poetic elegance...

“Drawing is anyway an exercise in orientation and as such may be compared with other processes of orientation which take place in nature. When I’m drawing I feel a little closer to the way birds navigate when flying... or trees finding a way to the light, ...Drawing is...the human need to search, to plot points, to place things and to place oneself.” (Berger, 2015: 149-150)
...which is illustrated by Sully:

“To see the strength and shape of the wind as it tears the last leaves from the broadest oak tree; an ascending spiral. To see the landscape change throughout the year and to see the seasons overlap, the linear architecture of the trees in winter and their transformation in the spring and autumn.” (Sully, 2016)

Nan Shepherd wrote her acclaimed book The Living Mountain of the extended process of cumulative observation:

“I knew when I had looked for a long time that I had hardly begun to see.” (1997: 13)

Experiential distillation

Through tacitly gained understanding (learning by doing) I concur with Sully’s view that a place which has been visited a great many times opens up and distils the experience. To ensure the etching is true to the place Sully goes back out to re-visit a location, and makes a new sketch. Then, returning to the etching studio, he re-works the plate, keeping the drawing spontaneous. His advice, if a plate is not working, is to follow this model. Each new drawing brings a new glance at a place, enlivens the drawing and that new glance is reciprocated in the etching process.

This tactic of place re-visitation leads me to re-consider processual drawing-etching-drawing cycles as integral and reciprocal. The original drawing produced at the beginning of the etching process is brought back into the game as it is compared and contrasted with new
drawings made as the etching is reassessed. Newer drawings are not just informative vehicles enabling critical assessment but they are a reciprocal part of its making. Sketchbook pages supporting my etching, *Walking Steps Lane*, illustrate this:

Rhodes, *Walking Steps Lane*, sketchbook re-visits and completed etching. Photographs by the author

**Integrated drawing**

Following this evidence, I wondered if new sketches were artworks in themselves or an integral part of the final etching as artwork. Through practical applications of these ideas, I made the following observations:

- The decisions made in creating the drawings, the search for visual information and solutions, has parallels to discussions in the print room over a proofed plate. Re-visiting drawing locations reciprocally informs the progress of the etching.
Reviewing sketches compares to an analysis of proofs; reciprocally informed questions are asked by the practitioner that enable creative decisions to be made.

The development from drawing to print adds substance and energy, embodying temporal, corporeal and elemental experiences; “...gestural re-enactment of journeys actually made” (Ingold, 2016: 87). Applying this understanding to an etching plate, the tension between the mark making develops and accumulates; creating a network of drawing that is alive and vital. The work as a whole - sketches, proofs and etching, reveals a complete inhabitation of place.

**Tension – material reappraisal**

The role of tension and challenge has been explored widely in this thesis. Sully looks back historically for challenges to his practice and takes up the gauntlet thrown down by past masters. The influence of artists such as Fillipino Lippi and Roger van der Weyden, who drew with silverpoint has long been a fascination. The attraction of this medium is that a line drawn in silverpoint can appear as ephemeral as a lightly etched line in a piece of polished copper. Drawing in silverpoint reciprocally informs his etching:

“The pleasure within both methods rests on the tactility of drawing with a needle like point onto a silkily smooth surface.” (Sully, 2017)

The haptic action of a drawing point against a surface in one medium informs the other. An increase of pressure will not change the thickness or darkness of a line drawn on an etching ground, silverpoint also creates a line which has a uniform tone. Pressing harder does not alter the line. A line is non-erasable with either method but abrasive interventions can remove the line. Scraping the surface with a scalpel blade or sandpaper will remove silverpoint and an etching plate may be scraped and burnished.

Drawing in silverpoint has encouraged a material reappraisal of Sully’s practice and methods. There is a delicacy to lines drawn in both mediums and the opportunity for great precision. Both are challenging, requiring the image to be captured at the first attempt. The reciprocated haptic knowledge which is accrued when moving between the two mediums has enhanced his drawing. The tension of precision which could suppress spontaneity now enters into Sully’s etching in a more relaxed responsive manner. As Dewey explains, spontaneity is not always spontaneous:

“‘Spontaneity’ is the result of long periods of activity, or else it is so empty as not to be an act of expression.” (Dewey, 2005: 75)
Tension – temporal considerations

Rather than a material challenge, I embraced a temporal challenge, and I have seen a significant progression in my approach to gathering observations en plein air. I reduced my drawing time from 20 minutes to 2 minutes for each sketch because I was intrigued by how much visual information I needed to create a successfully experiential drawing, fit for my own purposes.

I reappraised the purposes of my plein air drawing, deciding upon the aim of creating a drawing which is an experiential response; a symbiotic expression of place, summarised in this quote from Berger (2011) (my own qualifications added with reference to etching):

“*The imaginative movement which prompts the impulse to draw [and to etch]… is a symbiotic desire to get closer and closer, to enter the self of what is being drawn [/etched] and simultaneously, there is the foreknowledge of imminent distance.*” (Berger, 2011: 156)
The Shetland challenge

My greatest challenge, taken on during this study, was a residency on the Shetland Islands. This was undertaken in order to gain a better insight into the experiential transference of place to plate, of confronting an unfamiliar landscape and finding my own connection and sense of belonging. To inform this section of my examination of studio practice my expert co-witness is Jason Hicklin.

From my earliest interview with Hicklin, I had difficulty identifying with the experience of translating drawings made hundreds of miles away, in an island environment, to his etching studio in deepest Shropshire. I was intrigued by the distance both physically and experientially coupled with the knowledge that it would be very difficult or impossible to return such islands.

Research in practice

I looked for an opportunity to replicate the process and found the Wasp studio website (www.waspsstudios.org.uk). I was excited to find that they had a studio on the Shetland Islands because I had spent some time there many years ago and I knew the potential for
drawing would match that of Hicklin’s experiences. After an application process, followed by a committee assessment of submissions, I was granted a residency for the month of August 2016, 2 years after applying. In the intervening time, I began to realise that Ford and Chamberlain were travelling more widely than when I first approached them and Sleigh and Ackroyd also took inspiration from places that required adventurous travel plans. The potential value of the residency in informing my research findings was greatly increased.

In practice – finding a visual vocabulary

During my first sketching walks on the islands, I felt a creeping anxiety about whether I would be able to see the islands in a way that enabled me to make a successful drawing. Everywhere I looked land appeared as mountain tops adrift in a flooded landscape. There was so much sea and equally vast amounts of sky; I wondered what I was going to do with it all. I remembered Hicklin’s advice to draw as much as possible, not to be concerned with the success of initial drawings but to try to get everything recorded.

“The first couple of days, there’s panic, I think how am I going to get this done? It’s about slowing down and starting methodically... exploring it logically. But there’s that horrible feeling of looking at the sketchbook on the first day and thinking that all I’ve done. After 3 or 4 days it all gets a bit more familiar and you do start relaxing, and you think - I do know this land now.” (Hicklin, 2015)
Hicklin’s advice about working methodically was reliable and after a few days, I too began to relax and found my own visual vocabulary for the islands, as these 4 sketches of Fugla Ness demonstrate. My focus shifted to consider distance rather than surface textures, and I explored perspective, situating the image in its landscape.

Rhodes, Fugla Ness, Hamnavoe, sketchbooks. Photographs by the author

Hicklin, similarly to Sully, also advised drawing when the elements are against the artist, to introduce tension, keeping things *edgy*. I agreed with him that extremes of weather provided some of the most exciting times to draw and therefore created the most memorable experiences. The sketch from the Voe of Sound, near Lerwick is an appropriate example, bracing against a gale in horizontal rain to draw on a narrow strip of beach.

Rhodes, Voe of Sound, winds 55mph, sketchbook. Photograph by the author
Empathic research and insight

The residency produced a significant amount of drawing, and very wet weather days allowed me to develop ideas on a variety of scales in the Booth studio. On my return from Shetland the production of etchings was a slow process, but gradually I came to understand Ackroyd’s maxim, that time allows a distillation of memory and images gain clarity. I recognised that my experiences of drawing en plein air for 8 hours a day became one of the most inspiring factors and that was the experience that I wished to translate. I could feel myself there, as Ford stated when talking about her Bagnoli etchings. I also began to see possibilities for interpretation employed by Sleigh and I empathised with harsh weather conditions in Hicklin’s work and Ackroyd’s aim to capture light in his etchings. One of my own responses, *Chill from the Flaes*, aimed to represent an hour of intense experience; a vastness of scale and a graphic interpretation of the force of the wind that swept over the land, chilling me to the bone.
Back in the etching studio, the Shetland experience also enabled me to road test working proof methodology applied to the etching process. Ford, Chamberlain and Hicklin have been shown to make effective use of over drawing in order to test the subsequent processes an etching plate may go through.

Rhodes, Working proofs, overdrawn and monoprinted, 2017, photograph by the author

**Handlability**

I enjoyed and benefitted from this reciprocal process of material investigation. Bolt borrows from Heidegger, to explain *handlability*, as a way of making discoveries through handling particular materials of practice, stating, “Material thinking is the logic of practice” (2012: 30). I became bolder with my mark making and began to introduce dynamic graphic elements; an application of performative drawing to proofs became a logical step forward. The results moved away from the physical truth of the scene and were informed through an experience of drawing in place. From a starting point of dependable observation, my etchings became mutable as I identified with, and utilised aspects of, material and experiential reciprocation between drawing and etching.

**Reflection on practice as research**

The dramatically different environment of the islands not only enabled an insight into the practices of the case study artists but the extreme environmental difference added an extra dimension of challenge, predating a much greater shift in my research understanding. I was, as Gray suggested (Chapter 1, p. 36) *reflecting in and on action*. 
The dialogic conclusions which can be drawn from studio practice as research bring into focus the notion that all aspects contribute to a larger understanding. Within reciprocal knowledge there must be qualities drawn from all experiences of practice and a working dialogue with other practitioners enhances and advances understanding still further. Dewey recognised this philosophically, while I have aimed at a practical examination of such concerns:

“An engraver... is in process of completion at every stage of his work. He must at each point retain and sum up what has gone before as a whole and with reference to a whole to come...

An object is peculiarly and dominantly aesthetic, yielding the enjoyment characteristic of aesthetic perception, when the factors that determine anything which can be called an experience are lifted high above the threshold of perception and are made manifest for their own sake.” (Dewey, 2005: 58-59)

On reflection I have made significant progress towards achieving the aims of the research in regard to my own practice. I have benefitted from working alongside expert co-witnesses, Sully and Hicklin, developing both conscious and tacit knowledge. I have applied notionally temporal, material and tacit understanding and the insights and understanding gained during case study interviews has been assimilated through my own practice.

Working proof methodology as research practice

Throughout the study I began to recognise parallels between my research methodologies and those of my drawing and etching practice. The application of cyclical forms of research, in my coinage: working proof methodology, (Chapter 1, pp. 34-36) provided valuable temporal evidence (Chapter 5, pp. 201-204) of my developing study, emergent knowledge and theoretical understanding.

Thinking space sketchbook showing application of working proof methodology, photograph by the author
The notebooks, above, show an example of how the method was employed. I appropriated a small sketchbook to make thumbnail notes of ideas and concepts, and titled the front cover of the book *Thinking Space*. Over time this developed as an interesting way to juxtapose new concepts, to make links from relevant literatures and to begin to draw ideas out of the study. A variety of coloured pens and post-it notes enabled me to observe progression temporally; the different colours recorded moments when the idea was sketched out.

The reciprocal nature of referral, an iterative back and forth, to and fro, between texts, notes and thesis writing was strikingly similar in its reflective processes to that of scrutinising state proofs while making an etching. Returning to texts throughout the research journey, re-reading and reflecting, transformed the pages into temporal documents revealing developing ideas. My reference books also took on the characteristics of a working proof, the overwriting bearing evidence of developing understanding and insight.

*Unbiased evidence*

I have been aware of bias in writing an autoethnographic chapter, therefore, in order to mitigate against personal bias, I endeavoured to find evidence to support the direction of the research from an unbiased point of view. A concrete example of this came from members of the wider printmaking community and was gathered in the form of visitor’s comments at the exhibition *Drawn to Print* (2016), which I curated. Third party evidence in this case is not entirely unbiased due to the scope of the exhibition, but the responses elicited were from the community of practitioners, collectors and gallerists, and academics to whom this thesis is directed.

The exhibition was part of Impress 2016, a printmaking festival that drew visitors from around the country. In hanging the show, I placed artist’s drawings next to prints, in equal prominence, and I prepared an information poster, *Talking about drawing and printmaking*, which set out some questions designed to provoke responses. I had many interesting conversations while I invigilated, which are presented here in condensed form, in the comments book. Enthusiastic responses such as “*a great insight into the artist’s process*”, “*great concept to show process/importance of drawing to print*” and “*very informative*” proved that print practitioners and collectors were keen to know more about the relationship between drawing and printmaking.
**Drawn to Print, 2016.** Informative poster, provoking questions

Drawings and etchings by Ros Ford and Ian Chamberlain, exhibited at *Drawn to Print, 2016*, photograph by the author

*Drawn to print, 2016.** Comments book responses, photograph by the author
Autoethnographic limitations

In writing this thesis I have been forced to address my own position; this thesis is practice-led, but such a methodology can prove problematic. There have been times during the research when I have, of necessity, put my own practice on the back burner whilst concentrating on the academic processes of research. At these times the study has begun to feel hollow and I have felt distanced from the process. I have had to get back to making in order to feel the strong sense of connection and ambition that lies behind this thesis. Autoethnography provided a methodology which enabled me to become embedded in the research and find grounded opportunities for identifying common characteristics and developing theories. However, there must be an awareness of the limitations. Anderson cautions that:

“Most of us... do not find our research interests as deeply intertwined with our personal lives as autoethnography requires.” (Anderson, 2006: 390)

Studying an expanded version of my own practice, as an artist researcher, there has been no issue with deep and committed involvement. The limitations of a review of this nature are instead, found in the guise of personal and subjective bias. A practice-led study requires the researcher to be present, to have their voice throughout and “implies that the researcher is a potential consumer of the research” (Biggs, 2004: 17). As such, I have had to consider how the research assists me in my own practice. I have not yet had sufficient time to explore the potential of viewing tools dynamically or to fully appreciate the rich potential of domain shifts, but I know these research findings will play a part. Borgdorff elucidates the notion of not-yet-knowing:

“Artistic research is the deliberate articulation of unfinished thinking... it is more directed at a not-knowing or a not-yet-knowing. It creates room for that which is unthought... Art allows us to linger at the frontier of what there is, and it gives us an outlook on what might be.” (Borgdorff, 2010: 25)

At this frontier of my future practice, I now recognise many of the characteristics of reciprocity discussed through the case studies. These include characteristics such as a developing material understanding and self-reflectivity that are increasingly productive. My tacit knowing runs far deeper than before, leading me to appreciate, for example, that a corporeal experience can be recorded as an experiential sketch. I am looking forward to my future practice, Berger’s imminent distance, which will be more tacitly experiential, informed
by an understanding of the reciprocity between drawing and etching. I have reached this research point with a positive outlook on what is, as yet, unknown.

A summative evaluation of the research evidence follows in Chapter 7.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

A summative outline

The landscape of academic study concerning contemporary British etching practices has been a desolate and underpopulated place. This thesis brings life to the field through drawing and etching practices which are innovative yet challenging, historically situated and emphatically responsive to modern issues of place and belonging.

This thesis poses questions concerning the evidence of reciprocity between drawing and etching in the depiction of place. Running throughout the research is a consideration of whether experiential and material characteristics of British contemporary practice contribute to the notion of reciprocal exchange. Evidence is presented that drawing can be understood and experienced as a creative, generative action on paper and metal. Reciprocal characteristics are shown to exist in the material processes of drawing and etching as contributory components of a holistic practice.

The research context is informed by a thorough survey of landscape etching from its inception in the seventeenth century to the present day. A transdisciplinary reading between the fields of art, philosophy and anthropology provides insights and provocations. Current thinking on the position of drawing and etching is informed and inspired by interviews with gallerists and attendance at conferences and symposiums. Practical and subject related methodologies are developed over the course of the research. The contribution to new knowledge is strengthened through the eloquent and generous testimony of five very different etchers, selected because each brings a new voice to the discussion, speaking to the broadest range of etching practices. The cyclical nature of both case study and working proof methodologies provides the scope for sequential interviews, studio visits, study of exhibitions and revisiting notes and ideas. The time available for doctoral research enabled case study respondents to evolve, travel and form new insights of their own. Initially unexpected results such as these were ultimately to the great benefit of the research. The temporal aspect also enabled testing of theories; Ford, Sleigh, Chamberlain and Hicklin were keen to follow up conversations and revisit questions posed in previous interviews further enhancing the iterative and cyclical nature of the study. Anecdotally most of the artists have reported that they have experienced a reciprocal gain to their own practice; reflecting in, and on, their own actions; discovering more about their methods.
Etching and drawing in synthesis

I began the study by working on the supposition that to be competent in drawing was an automatic qualification for being well suited to etching. The accepted position had been that drawing and etching were two discrete activities: drawing was preparatory, etching followed as a process of reproductive facsimile. The evidence within the thesis refutes this and establishes a re-positioning of etching as a mode of drawing synthesis. The research tracks a developing, understanding that drawing and etching are more closely embedded in a singular practice than was originally understood. The evolution of understanding may be visualised thus:

Diagram: Hierarchy of developing understanding - drawing in relation to etching

Drawing in this thesis has been proven to be a system which is utilised within practice in remarkably diverse ways. Within the context of place based etchings the most important characteristics of drawing are shown to be categorised as investigative and observational, but the manifestations of this vary considerably from practice to practice.
Initial findings

I have shown that:

- Drawing provides a way of processing the experience of our own or an ‘other’ environment; the familiar landscape and the unfamiliar. This in turn leads to an opportunity for an artist to identify themselves in their experience of the world.

- Drawing involves close material investigation and expressive exploration.

- Drawing introduces tension and provides an opportunity for discovering problems.

- Drawing provides the mechanism through which artists can become self-reflexive practitioners.

- When drawing is synthesised through etching all the above characteristics become accessible within the print studio.

Summary of chapter findings

Introduction - proposals

The introduction sets out a number of proposals for locating reciprocal characteristics within drawing and etching practice and introduces the notions of material engagement and experiential understanding informed ineffably through tacit knowledge. By deciding on a practice-led mode of study I have sought to provide a curious and empathic enquiry; an experiential account from a knowledgeable perspective enabling the reader to feel that they have, albeit at one remove, met the practitioners.

Chapter 2 – advances in autopgraphic and material concerns

Chapter 2 provides a contextual foundation for an investigation into the reciprocal characteristics of drawing and etching. My findings take their initial impetus from the nineteenth century Etching Revivalists, Haden and Hamerton, who wrote with passion and enthusiasm born of a desire to see etchers gain the recognition that artists in other disciplines enjoyed. Through viewing artwork at first hand, in national print collections, I was able to confirm evidence of spontaneous sketching and the theory of omission, both of which enhance the visual and aesthetic qualities of late nineteenth century plein air drawing and are suggestive of experiential characteristics. Following the revival there is little twentieth century British writing on the experiences of making etching, and even less of any
fervour. Tracking the evidence of experientially informed landscape etching through the twentieth century, by continuing to visit print collections and contemporary exhibitions, I was able to reveal advances in autographic mark making and a new awareness of the practitioner’s material concerns but a hiatus in academic acknowledgement.

Chapter 3 – Tacit qualities, immersion, inhabitation and distillation

Case study investigations are introduced in Chapter 3 and begin to move reciprocal understanding from the ineffable towards an interplay between tacit and explicit qualities. I show that Ackroyd thinks as an etcher while he is drawing en plein air and considers his etching to be an alternative medium for making drawings. Ford discovers that etching reciprocally leads to drawing and that drawing leads to etching by insinuating its generative characteristics into all her creative work. Both artists have idiosyncratic techniques for bringing drawing into their etching practices; Ackroyd employs a photocopier and Ford makes copious use of over drawing on proofs. Neither technique is unique to the artist but serve as illustrations of characteristics practical reciprocity. The necessity for immersion in place emerges as a common thread for the practitioner and the role of plein air experience is discussed in detail. This chapter explains how immersive experiences in place provide information which is reciprocated through sketches and etchings. The depth and duration of immersion in place is seen to be productive within varying time frames and geographical situations. Ackroyd and Ford travel widely and their experiences are vivid. A distillation of experience, through time and distance, enables both artists to apply their experiential, corporeal and sensory memory to their etchings; place is re-visited and reciprocally re-interpreted in the etching studio through drawing. Inhabitation of place and an identification of place is proven to be a complex issue for the contemporary artist through associations of belonging. Belonging ‘nowhere’ allows for drawing as etching to interpret and to identify with place, even, as Ford showed, if only for the duration of the creative project. Crucially I have shown in this chapter that drawing is proven not to exist merely as a preparatory system. The characteristics of drawing reciprocally act as a waymarker, tool and reflective device in the active production of creative etching. Drawing provides a system by which experience is synthesised in etching.

Chapter 4 – drawing, dynamic tools and problem finding

Drawing is a broad term, as demonstrated through the case studies explored in Chapter 4. The evidence shows that the material qualities of drawing and the engagement with those
materials have contributory reciprocal characteristics. Haptic engagement, the use of
dynamic tools and exploiting domain shifts expands the etching practitioner’s creativity
when drawing is seen as an investigative process. The notion of drawing as a preparatory
medium is shown to be totally refuted by Sleigh who believes that drawing, as planning, can
destroy the momentum of a piece. She prefers to draw in the heat of the moment, solving
problems as she goes; reciprocally drawing on all her previous experience. The appropriation
of tools, such as the ruler or pen and ink, from other disciplines reveals possibilities for the
drawn mark to be investigated both on paper and plate; the two substrates are not
approached discretely but reciprocally. Sleigh’s terms of engagement reveal the opportunity
for the artist to open out their practice and her drawing in 3-dimensions explores intriguing
ways of working through problems raised in 2-dimensional work. I have shown that for both
artists, limitations and innovative drawing methodologies work reciprocally in informing the
completed etchings by providing revelatory opportunities. It is useful to bear in mind
Chamberlain’s (2018) succinct assertion: “the print process takes the image far beyond what
I can achieve with drawing”. (Appendix p.367) I have shown that the experience of place is
consistently immersive and the reciprocated benefit in the studio remains vital. The
relationship to place is, however, complex; both artists are discomfited by their chosen
places, but explore them as a way of making sense of recent architectural and sociological
history. Sleigh and Chamberlain challenge the aesthetics of beauty and combine the
temporal elements of fragility and vulnerability with skilful mark making in depicting place
through structures. Reciprocated knowledge of the corrosive qualities of etching enhance
these aspects of their drawing. Chapter 4 also introduces the reciprocal characteristic and
effect of tension in creative practice. Acknowledging and re-appropriating tension as
problem definition allows the practitioner to incorporate challenge as a positive and aspect
of drawing. Chamberlain’s practice shows how contradictory elements, including emotional
concerns can feed into practice when recognised. Creativity thrives on a balance of skill and
challenge. When the two are balanced reciprocal benefits are enjoyed. By extension
embracing tension leads to a reciprocal expansion of applied methodologies within etching,
the artist doesn’t hold back but pushes forward with challenging techniques on paper and
on metal. The oscillation of haptic and tacit knowing is seen to benefit both Sleigh’s and
Chamberlain’s practice.
Chapter 5 - materiality and tension

The strands of reciprocity contingent upon immersion in place, creative tensions and material understanding are further scrutinised through the fifth case study that encompasses all such characteristics. The evidence of this chapter was strengthened through Hicklin’s testimony gathered over a period of 3 years incorporating distinct creative projects. Chapter 5 showed that the longevity of case study research provides rich evidence to support, test and expand on the theories posited so far. The understanding of drawing as a fundamental aspect underpinning practice was expanded. Drawing was also shown to be understood as an observational tool and as a physical experience mediated through walking. The role of curiosity in developing challenging image making is a characteristic informed by complete material immersion. This is evidenced in the tracking of three distinct projects, each of which demands fresh adaptations of Hicklin’s experiential understanding and material consciousness. Chapter 5 revealed that material awareness as an engagement with surface opened up possibilities for Hicklin and I showed that this was reciprocated between drawing and etching, and between the etched drawing, between one series and the next. Hicklin’s practice most clearly showed that through an extensive practice the self-reflective artist can become aware of the reciprocated learning between one set of work and another. Tension was revealed to be a vital and necessary characteristic of practice and was extended to encompass the artist’s relationship to place. Hicklin uses his practice as a way to connect to a places where he feels unwelcome and becomes aware of the transience of the place, and by extension, the human condition. This was shown to be challenged by his visit to Australia a place that continued to suggest a transient landscape but a place which invited him in. The experiential value, once assimilated, continued to have significant reciprocal benefit to both drawing and etching. Corporeal qualities and tacit understanding are revisited throughout this chapter and have been proved to be qualities which exist within both drawing and etching, working towards tacit synthesis.

Chapter 6 – practice-led research

My practice-led contribution to the understanding of etching in relation to drawing practices is documented in chapter 6. My research experience has been a richly rewarding journey, which as Dewey explains, has been a meaningful experience:

“What is intimated to my mind, is, that in both production and enjoyed perception of works of art, knowledge is transformed; it becomes something more than knowledge because it is
merged with non-intellectual elements to form an experience worthwhile as an experience.” (Dewey, 2005: 302)

A reflection upon my own practice in the company of expert witness, Sully, introduces evidence which shows that a parochial study of place has rich experiential potential equal to that of a place which involves journeying. A studio based application of many of the research findings provided an opportunity for a qualitative testing ground. A selection of the most informative characteristics which generated reciprocal benefits to both my drawing and etching included:

- Listening to the materials of research and practice
- Inductive development of working proof methodologies and the importance of the proof state
- Repetitive and habitual practice enhancing observation and experiential memory
- Material exchange and investigation leading to reciprocated performativity
- The development and acknowledgement of tacit knowing, using terms of engagement to expand possibilities
- Embracing challenge within practice, both materially and experientially

I also found that a growing awareness of the importance of movement, the qualities of surface and the potential of autographic assertion within practice enhanced my own work and was shown to be evidenced in Sully’s work.

I am aware that using my practice as testimony does not prove the veracity of the thesis but does show that there are practical and aesthetic lessons that can be learned from the research. Working alongside Sully and discussing the research in progress, as I did with the other case study artists, also lends weight to the value of this research. My original intention that the thesis should be useful and informative for a contemporary etcher therefore gains validity.

Curious and creative research

The practice-led research position of observing practice is believed, by Ingold, to exist between disciplines. He proposed, in his 2018 keynote speech at the RAI conference, that there should be a renaming of research within art as anthropological art, which encompasses the qualities of being inquisitive, curious yet caring and present yet enmeshed:
“Thus art and anthropology have in common that they observe, describe and create.”
(Ingold, 2018)

Anthropological art has the potential to create porous screens between disciplines enabling an unwrapping and peeling away of layers of understanding. I have brought together a group of diverse artists as case studies to illustrate how their practices join forces to represent the flow of our ever-changing landscape. The provision of transcripts in the appendix is aimed at enhancing understanding and provides the audience with further opportunities of unwrapping etching’s processes. The combined testimony peels back layers of obfuscat ing technicalities which have shrouded much of the twentieth century writing on etching.

Ontological findings

Ingold has also been helpful in suggesting structures for ontological clarification which “…assigns primacy to the processes of formation as against their final products” (2011: 210). With this in mind, using the evidence collated through this thesis, I have drawn up an ontological table (page 246) showing a provisional taxonomy of drawing and etching reciprocity. My taxonomy clarifies the location of the reciprocal characteristics of drawing and etching as formative processes into pragmatic language.

By placing characteristics of drawing in parallel with those generated in the etching studio, I have designed a practical guide for understanding the potential inherent in practice. Where the characteristics provide the same benefits, I have shown this to re-inforce the synthesised notion of the dual practices working as one. There are other characteristics that the transference from drawing to etching or etching to drawing can be seen to have transformative possibilities. By understanding, for instance, that a mark made generatively in drawing can provide a discovery in etching, or that the temporal pace of a drawing gives room for pause and reflection in etching, I intend that etchers will develop a greater insight into the potential of their own practice. I believe that this is a model that could be expanded to be of use to etchers and the wider printmaking community.

This taxonomy has informed my own work but has not been tested so far in a practical situation and is one of the strands of research that I am looking forward to developing in the future.
Tacit synthesis

The contribution to new knowledge is given a firmer foundation by developing an understanding of tacit knowledge contingent upon drawing and etching place. The following table is adapted from Polanyi's lecture *The Structure of Tacit Knowing* (1965: 4) as a tool for summarising findings (foregrounded in Chapter 1, pp. 28-30). The sub-headings are Polanyi's own, and the remainder of the content is my construction following Polanyi's model concerning the specifics of tacit knowing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From subsidiaries...</th>
<th>By integrating them...</th>
<th>We focus at...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience of place</td>
<td>distils as</td>
<td>experiential memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporeal experience</td>
<td>recorded as</td>
<td>drawing en plein air</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tension</td>
<td>redefined as</td>
<td>problem finding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haptic engagement</td>
<td>leads to</td>
<td>material consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials of drawing</td>
<td>adapted to</td>
<td>etching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>reciprocally applied through</td>
<td>etching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table: Reciprocal Qualities of Tacit Knowing contingent upon Drawing and Etching Place

To extrapolate an understanding of tacit knowing further, I propose the possibility of describing the reciprocity between drawing and etching as a form of *tacit synthesis*. The term *synthesis* can be understood as a point of resolution between the ineffable and the tangible, the implicit and explicit; a point where contributory characteristics are realised as a summative picture. The explanations presented in this thesis of a reciprocated experiential process contingent upon ineffable qualities or subsidiaries therefore can be described as *tacit synthesis*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From subsidiaries...</th>
<th>By integrating them...</th>
<th>We focus at...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ineffable experience</td>
<td>contingent upon</td>
<td>aesthetic expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic expression</td>
<td>applied through drawing and etching</td>
<td>tacit synthesis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table: Reciprocal Qualities of Tacit Knowing extrapolated as Tacit Synthesis
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drawing</th>
<th>Etching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Materially</strong></td>
<td><strong>Materially</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper substrate</td>
<td>Metal substrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark making tools</td>
<td>Dynamic tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing medium</td>
<td>Resists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eraser</td>
<td>Corrosive mordant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphite</td>
<td>Ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>Paper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performatively</th>
<th>Performatively</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mark making</td>
<td>Incidental marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing</td>
<td>Expressing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigation</td>
<td>Experimentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhythmic</td>
<td>Rhythmic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generate</td>
<td>Discover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsive</td>
<td>Inductive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>Opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td>Transmutability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experientially</th>
<th>Experientially</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual</td>
<td>Physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactile &amp; haptic</td>
<td>Tactile &amp; haptic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensual</td>
<td>Sensual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal pace</td>
<td>Temporal pauses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many glances</td>
<td>Many glances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineffability</td>
<td>Tangibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table: Tacit synthesis - A provisional taxonomy of drawing and etching reciprocity in pragmatic terms
Implications

The findings of this thesis has implications for how we see the practice of artist etchers who are pigeon holed into one materially defined box or another and may have further implications concerning the delivery of etching courses and study in the field. If an appreciation of working with materials leads to revelatory working practices and results then we can begin to understand that this occurs at every stage of the process. Using a stick of graphite to draw with is clearly understood to involve the artist guiding the material and there is both a corporeal extension and exchange within the making of the mark. Following this trajectory we can also understand that, etching is not just a technical exercise in 'how to...' create artwork. The same exchange and extension takes place. A similar application of thought and insight goes into the making. The investigation of ideas through drawing prepares the practitioner for extended enquiry through another medium. It is my belief that practitioners new to the process initially struggle to move beyond this point and it takes a level of expertise and understanding for the reciprocity to become fully productive. Kathan Brown refers to this in a Crown Point Press Newsletter, “...a sense of impermanence and possible disaster” (2012: 1), and is a point which many novice etchers would identify with as they contemplate the smooth surface of a new piece of metal.

The materials of etching are now understood to be synthesised as a set of expressive materials, the means through which to explore an identity, a notion, a concept, to witness, and to experience.

“For each art has its own medium and that medium is especially fitted for one kind of communication. Each medium says something that cannot be uttered as well or as completely in any other tongue” (Dewey, 2005: 110)

While Dewey’s statement has cogency it ignores the reciprocal synthesis enjoyed when an artist brings two mediums together in one practice. A particular reciprocal characteristic of drawing and etching is that whilst they have their own kind of communication to offer the dialogue between the two can be ongoing and at times the two mediums speak to a greater understanding of the same language and with a more authoritative voice.

Research relevance in a contemporary art context

This thesis is timely; my research began in 2013 the year that Norman Ackroyd curated the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, and now, in 2018 another printmaker, Grayson Perry,
has taken on the role. The status of these artists reflects a twenty-first century positivity, and enlivened interest towards etching and printmaking as a whole.

Marjorie Anne Kirker (2009), in her thesis, *Printmaking as an expanding field in contemporary art practice*, cautioned that “*... this field risks becoming an anachronism unless it is responsive and contributes to wider contemporary discourse*” (Kirker, 2009: 239) and concludes that her study “*...has been done in the belief that the time has come to overcome ‘omissions’ in art history and theory pertaining to the print*” (Ibid: 278)

I agree that research needs to be responsive and continue to build a wider discourse, but I believe that research should also be proactive and generative. As the study has progressed I have begun to form an increasing number of questions stimulated by the case study testimony in light of Dewey, Ingold and Sennet’s pragmatic writing.

**Future discourses**

Propositions for future research could include exploration and analysis of drawing methodologies for a wider range of printmaking practices such as lithography and screen printing. Tacit knowing has been identified here within a drawing and etching discourse and could be widened to inform other printmaking techniques such as relief processes. The tactility of surface layering is an equally fascinating aspect, especially when taken into consideration with questions surrounding how an intellectual and tactile engagement between materials and surface inform the creative impetus for the printmaker.
Drawing and Etching Place – Viva Exhibition

The Drawing and Etching Place viva exhibition was displayed at the F Block Gallery at UWE, City Campus, Bower Ashton in Bristol. The large and airy gallery space provided an elegant and spacious environment that allowed me to show a large number of works. My intention had been to provide a visual summary of the contribution from each case study artist that would illustrate key characteristics. The exhibition was wholeheartedly supported through the generosity of the case study artists, who provided me with excellent examples of their practice. I was able to maximise the benefit of showing their work and create a convincing, informative exhibition with genuine impact.

Ros Ford, working proof for Shelter, 2015, working drawing for Bagnoli I, 2016 and Bagnoli II, 2017, and Shelter, 2015, large scale etchings. Photograph by the author
Quotes from the artist’s interviews (see Appendix for edited transcripts) were displayed alongside the work to illuminate the processes behind the work. The benefit of displaying the quotes served to both satisfy and arouse curiosity. Visitors had questions answered but left with new questions to ask of their own practice and of the practices of other artists. The following quote, displayed beside Ackroyd’s work, serves as a good example and explains the presence of the photocopied sketchbooks in his display:

“You surround yourself with the drawing books... its good enough, to surround yourself here as soon as you come back with all the experience and it just brings it back... Each book contains half a dozen [drawings], a day’s work... it’s making the marks that matter. It’s the doing it. It’s a bit like you want to go somewhere, the journey is as important as getting there... when you come back you’ve no idea what you’ve got in the drawing books... and then you get a real surprise, sometimes you think ‘I would never have done that in the studio,’ and that is what you’re after.” Norman Ackroyd, 2018

The drawings, working proofs and etchings shown in the exhibition were all created during the time of the research, once again proving the benefit of longevity within case study practice-led research. This was particularly true of Jason Hicklin whose contribution to the exhibition illustrated four sets of work created over four years, and was an effective demonstration of developing practice and a curious practitioner. The exhibited work made the ineffable tangible.
“I think there’s something about the crucial marks I was making and the decisions I was making and I want that in the etchings. I want every decision to be a crucial decision and also a decision I have to earn. I have to really earn the right to make these marks at the moment... You don’t try and use all your tricks in every one. Your whole mark-making language can’t be in all of them, the language is about different marks at different places.” Jason Hicklin, 2017
“I’ve always been intrigued about how the etching process takes the image somewhere else. I was speeding up that process of materiality by using pen and ink. It didn’t give me a rigid form. It gave me a structure but there were small discrepancies and ambiguities which made it a process of visual problem solving. I had to go back in and adjust, alter it and that gave it a slightly different character... a fluidity.” Ian Chamberlain, 2018
My contribution to drawing and etching

I propose that this thesis contributes significantly to the understanding of British etched depictions of place providing unique and inspirational evidence of the twenty-first century position. I also propose that this research will provide significant signposting for etchers in
understanding and progressing with their practice. Arguments in support of both material and experiential reciprocity between drawing and etching, offer significant practical insights into the motivations, struggles and methods of those who dabble in its oily alchemy.
**Associated exhibitions/events organised as part of PhD investigation**

**Exhibitions curated as part of PhD study:**

*KLB Printfest*, prints by students aged 16-18, GPC Printmakers Gallery, Stroud, 4th - 24th July 2016

*Drawn to Print*, Impress Printmaking Festival, GPC Printmakers Gallery, Stroud, 28th Feb – 31st March 2016

**Residency undertaken as part of PhD study:**


**Conference Papers and Symposia presented in relation to PhD study:**

*The challenge of etching*, Impact 10, International Printmaking Conference, Santander, Spain, 1-9 September, 2018


*Introduction to Jason Hicklin*, Professional Practice Seminar, UWE 11th May 2017

**Exhibition essays reviews and other writing informed by PhD research:**


*Drawn to Print*, exhibition essay, Impress Printmaking Festival, GPC Printmakers Gallery, Stroud, 2016

*Finding New Lands*, Jason Hicklin feature article, Printmaking Today, Spring 2016, Vol 25, No.1

**Events, workshops and demonstrations related to PhD research:**

Woolwich Contemporary Print Fair, guest speaker, 22nd – 25th Nov 2018

*Jason Hicklin, Ocean Part 2: Pacific*, Collector’s evening guest speaker, Eames Fine Art, London, 14th March, 2018

*Drawing and Etching*, lecture and demonstration, Thornbury Art Club, 4th Oct 2017

*Introduction to etching for post 16 students*, organisation and delivery of workshop, Gloucestershire Print Co-operative, 17th Apr 2016

*Sugarlift Aquatint Masterclass*, technical assistant to Jason Hicklin, Gloucestershire Print Co-operative, 27th – 28th Feb 2016

**Membership of associations/groups that are beneficial to PhD study and further research**

Gloucestershire Printmaking Co-operative, full membership

MAMDP Alumni

INsight printmakers, founder member

RWA Artist’s Network

**Solo exhibitions exhibiting work made in relation to PhD study:**


Group exhibitions showing work made in relation to PhD study:

*Into the Light: INsight Artists take on artefacts from the museum stores.* Museum in the Park, Stroud, 29th Sept – 28th Oct 2018


*SITselect Open Studios*, Stroud, May 2018


*20:20 Print exchange*, Red Hot Press, Manchester, Oct 2017


*Diversity in Print*, Roses Theatre, Tewkesbury, 14th Nov – 4th Dec 2016


*RWA 164*, Autumn Open Exhibition, RWA, Bristol, 9 Oct – 27 Nov 2016


*INsight Printmakers*, Wotton Gallery, 1st - 22nd Mar 2016

*Drawn to Print*, GPC Printmakers Gallery, 27th Feb – 31st Mar 2016

*RWA 163*, Autumn Open Exhibition, RWA, Bristol, 4th Oct – 29th Nov 2015

*Alchemy*, GPC, Museum in the Park, Stroud, 10th Mar – 26th Apr 2015

*Second Impressions*, INsight Printmakers, New Brewery Arts, Cirencester, 18th Jan – 8th Mar 2014

*RWA 161*, Autumn Open Exhibition, RWA, Bristol, 24th Nov – 26th Jan 2013

*INCprint*, Impress Conference, Gloucestershire Printmaking Co-operative, Stroud College 1st - 31st Mar 2013
Glossary

RA
Royal Academician, the highest status achievable by an artist in Britain, elected by a panel of peers.

RE, ARE
Member of The Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers, Associate member, elected by a panel of peers.

RWA
Royal West of England Academician, elected by a panel of peers.

Technical terms

Aquatint
A technique that can replicate the effect of watercolour washes. The etching plate is exposed to a fine resin dust that is then fused to the plate using heat. Once bonded the resin sits on the plate as very small raised dots. The mordant bites the exposed metal plate around the dots creating a pitted surface that holds a little ink. The longer the metal is exposed to the acid the deeper the bite a greater quantity of ink is held, creating a darker tone.

Bite
This describes the action of the mordant as it etches grooves or marks into the metal; a plate is left in the mordant to bite. A shallow mark is achieved by submerging the plate for a short amount of time, as little as 5 minutes. A very deep mark is achieved by leaving the plate in the mordant for an extended period of time. Biting times can be as long as 2 to 3 hours.

Bite, open bite
An area of the plate can be left open - unprotected by resistant substances allowing the mordant to bite away a larger part of the plate. A shallow pool is left by this action. Interesting organic, marks similar to erosion can be achieved in this way. Hicklin uses this method to bite away areas that he wishes to change, taking the plate back to a flat surface.

Bite, foul bite
Often textural, but accidental marks which come about through processing a plate. Marks are caused by plates being poorly degreased or grounds being inexpertly rolled, therefore allowing the mordant to get in through or under the ground. Foul bite can also be caused by careless or clumsy handling of a plate by a novice etcher. Hicklin purposefully rolls grounds thinly to achieve desirable effects and Sleigh purposefully allows her tools to mark the surface of the ground creating textural interest.
**Bite, spit bite**  
This is commonly used in combination with *aquatint*. Once a plate has been prepared with *aquatint* a corrosive mordant is applied directly to controlled areas of the surface with a brush and washed away with water. Successive applications of acid will create darker tones. Using a water suspension for the mordant allows for softer tonal effects. The term *spit bite* originates from the practice of spitting into the acid to reduce surface tension and control the flow over the plate. Ackroyd achieves many of his subtle tones in this manner.

**Drypoint**  
A mark is scratched directly into the surface of a plate, the pressure exerted through the needle by the etcher creates the mark. The plate is not exposed to a mordant. Etchers in this thesis only use *drypoint* occasionally to reinforce, or darken, a mark previously made by etching the plate in a mordant.

**Hard ground**  
The metal plate is heated and covered with a resistant layer of wax using a roller. When the plate is cooled the wax *ground* becomes *hard* and can be drawn through with an etching needle. Other implements may be used to draw *through the ground* to reveal the plate surface. Chamberlain and Ford are inventive in their use of dynamic drawing tools.

**Mordant**  
A corrosive liquid or *acid* that eats – etches - the surface of the plate. *Ferric Chloride* and *Nitric Acid* are used by the artists in this thesis.

**Proof**  
A print which is taken after a new process has been enacted on a plate is called a *proof*. The role of the *proof* is to visually assess the effect of each process, also known as a state proof. A working proof can describe a print that has been over drawn or annotated.

**Soft ground**  
This is a wax *ground* which remains soft when cool, allowing for textures to be imprinted into the *ground* or for drawing to be transferred to the plate. When a thin sheet of paper is laid over a *soft ground* an etcher may draw over the paper; the pressure of the pencil picks up the wax leaving the plate exposed. When the plate is bitten the drawn marks are etched into the metal. Chamberlain makes use of *soft ground* textures and Hicklin uses the wax as a stubby crayon to draw directly onto a heated plate.
Sugar lift

A saturated solution of sugar is painted onto a plate with a brush, creating painterly marks. Once dry a ground is rolled over the marks and then the plate is submerged in warm water. The sugar solution dilutes in the water and lifts away from the surface of the plate. An aquatint may be applied at this stage so that tonal effects are achieved within the painterly marks. Chamberlain adds interest to his plates with this process and Hicklin explores the technique experimentally.
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British Museum, London, Print and Drawings study room, 3rd Sep 2014
British Museum, London, Print and Drawings study room, 27th Sep 2017
Tate Britain, London, Print study room, 18th July 2016
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Norman Ackroyd, Here and there, Eames Fine Art, 22nd Sep 2017
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Richard Diebenkorn, Royal Academy of Arts, 4th June 2015
Discovering Samuel Palmer, Eames Fine Art, 19th Jan 2017
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APPENDIX

DRAWING AND ETCHING PLACE:
WHAT ARE THE EXPERIENTIAL AND MATERIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF BRITISH CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE AND HOW DO THEY EVIDENCE RECIPROCITY BETWEEN DRAWING AND ETCHING?

WENDY RHODES PICKEN

Appendix to the thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of The University of the West of England, Bristol for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Arts, Creative Industries and Education, University of the West of England, Bristol

June 2019
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<td>An idea</td>
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<td>Searching</td>
<td>A design</td>
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<td>Whimsical</td>
<td>A concept</td>
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<td>Observational</td>
<td>A way of accessing inner thoughts</td>
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<td>Transformative</td>
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<td>Temporal</td>
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<td>Experimental</td>
<td>Evidence of many glances</td>
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<td>Open ended</td>
<td>A heroic act</td>
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<td>Improvisatory</td>
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Drawing word selection by Ros Ford

Drawing word selection by Bronwen Sleigh

Drawing word selection by Ian Chamberlain

Drawing word selection by Jason Hicklin

Photographs of artist drawing sheets, each sheet demonstrating autographic characteristics photographs by the author.
### Table: Creativity – Mapping qualities and components across theories

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<td>Laying a path through the world</td>
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<td>Fully alive, purposeful, spontaneity, emotional</td>
<td>Being alive</td>
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<td>Transference of values from one field to another</td>
<td>Drawn thread hinging the optical and the haptic Correspondence (2015)</td>
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Case Study interviews

The case study interviews, carried out over a period of 3 years became very lengthy documents. In the interests of expediency, I have included excerpts of the transcripts that will contextualise the evidence in the thesis chapters. In presenting the words of the artist, I hope to provide an opportunity for the reader to meet them, albeit at a remove.

Interviewing the artists was a rich and rewarding aspect of the research. I was honoured to have been welcomed into their studios and to have been trusted with their candid thoughts and feelings. They have been most generous in sharing their practice, allowing me to photograph their work or in providing images and I have felt the weight of responsibility in presenting their practice honestly yet respectfully. I have always found it most inspiring to read another artist’s words and I hope the reader will find the following pages to be informative and inspirational; providing companionship and direction - as required.

Interview excerpts with Jason Hicklin are presented in a lengthy format with few edits. This has meant that the appendix has become a large document. I felt that given the richness of his testimony combined with the scope of the various series of work explored, that it was worth sharing the bulk of his interviews. Hicklin’s practice provides a full account of the experiential and material characteristics evidenced in drawing and etching place.

Excerpts from Interview with Vincent Eames, Amy-Jane Blackhall and Meryl Ainslie

I have included a few pages of interviews that were conducted in order to clarify the contemporary position of drawing and etching in the wider commercial print world, and to provide cultural background and validity to the thesis. The respondents proved to be every bit as warm and passionate about drawing and etching as the artists and therefore provide a valuable contribution to the experiential context of the thesis.
Norman Ackroyd: Why etching? It’s very, very simple!
I made my first etching in Leeds Art school, a long time ago and there was a very good tutor there. I didn’t know what etching was when I first went to art school and when I did my first etchings and I found I just loved the stuff. It was a completely emotional thing, it wasn’t intellectual. I loved this way of working and it was a very free art school at that time; we had certain disciplines that we had to do, but the rest of the time you could concentrate on anything that you liked. I took to it right from the start and the etching tutor took to me and made everything available. I would work until 8, 10 o’clock at night in the etching room, 2 or 3 nights a week and I was in there whenever I felt like it. I made lots of etchings right from the start. I just loved the stuff and the more I did it the more I loved the possibilities.
Then, of course, I started to think who has made etchings? In the library you’d see these giants of the past – Rembrandt, Goya. And Picasso made fabulous etchings. Then, of course, you naturally wonder how they did that? The enquiry into possibilities was therefore perfectly natural. I always painted and drew a lot and I always loved watercolour and so I carried on. The people at the Royal College and especially my tutor Julian Trevelyan were very supportive.
You never stop learning about it and you never stop seeing things that people have done and now of course I know exactly how certain people did things and you take the basic grammar. My teacher (Norman Webster) in Leeds was a traditional. He could put the perfect ground on, take a perfect print - technically he could do all
the basic things so that gave you the tools so that you can learn the rules, and then you can break the rules. I was very lucky to have such a classical teacher, he didn’t try any tricks.

There was a wonderful thing that happened after I’d been etching for about a year. I’d taken out my first big plate, it was a steel plate, and done a drawing on it en plein air, (I was doing plein air etchings right from the beginning). It was quite a big plate and I remember I brought it back to the etching studio at Leeds College of Art and I was cleaning off the ground before I printed it which was proving a bit difficult, so I left it soaking with paraffin on it while I went for a cup of coffee. When I came back I couldn’t find it! I’d walked past a print taped up on the board to dry flat and I’d walked past 3 or 4 times before I stopped and looked at it. It was my plate and it had been printed absolutely beautiful! While I’d been out my tutor had rescued the plate. He must have had a beautiful piece of Whatman paper and he’d printed it, taped it up and said nothing. Now that was a lesson about how to teach! You can teach without opening your mouth in an etching studio, just doing things and letting people see. I thought to myself, ‘I’ve got to learn how to print like that’. So I said to him ‘I want to be able to print like that’. And so he said he would show me – how to mix the ink, how to dampen the paper how to set the press, which meant that you were doing something you knew you could get a good result from the plate.

WR: How nice to show you using your plate rather than using a demonstration plate.
NA: That was an inspirational piece of teaching.

I took the print down and framed it up.

WR: What was the image?
NA: It was down in Surrey of all places. My elder brother was studying in London and he was living in Surrey with his wife and child and I’d gone to stay with him. I’d taken the plate and there was this little Norman church near where he lived. I’d seen some of Picasso’s sugar lifts that he’d done just after the war and I wanted to use sugar lift really freely, just with a brush. I brought back the drawn sugar left and processed it back in the college. I didn’t bother reversing it but that’s what you do when you’re a student.

We used to have an exhibition in the north of England called the Yorkshire artists exhibition to which you submitted just like the Royal Academy. I put it [the print] in
there and Leeds City Council bought it for their collection, it was the first print I ever sold. So the actual proof that my tutor printed still exists in Leeds City Art gallery – the story should be taped on the back of it. The beautiful richness of the blacks and the Whatman paper was a lovely colour, (it wasn’t like a cheap proofing paper with an awful whiteness) and the ink was like butter and the thing hit you right from across the room. But the thing is that in my own archive I don’t have a print of it. I don’t have the plate either. When I have had an exhibition I have borrowed it back.

“It was all the stuff! I started getting interested in really beautiful papers and I started getting into making beautiful inks, but in a way it’s a bit like chef who would really like to work with top class ingredients.” I didn’t take much teaching you know, I was very keen to learn. I just loved the medium.

I still do a lot of watercolour. The freedom that I got into etching in terms of drawing, especially using a mixture of line and sugarlift I brought into the drawing from life and so it overlapped, working on paper with watercolour with different brushes. I do a lot more watercolour than I do etching. I do like working en plein air with those materials. You’ll see the facsimiles that we’ve been doing with the Royal Academy of my drawing books... The whole thing overlaps, but it’s all about drawing. You can draw with a brush as much as you can with a pencil or a pen, and the combination of those is wonderful I find. And draw in colour; it’s a nice idea to draw in colour.

---

WR: What were your earliest memories of etching, was it the atmosphere of the place?
NA: I started in Leeds College – an old warehouse annexed by the college, first floor light and airy. I remember there was a long line of aprons leading down to Norman Webster’s office; there was a big star wheel press and a small press.
I probably love etching as much now as I ever have done, and it’s one of those mediums that opens up the possibilities, but within the ethic of the medium. – I’m not trying to push the medium anywhere it doesn’t want to go because it’s so happy within its scale of black and white. It’s the ultimate of black and white mediums. It’s a bit like when you talk about music, it’s wonderful to have quartets, full orchestras or duets, but it’s wonderful to have music made by a solo voice without any accompaniment. It’s a thing that can exist on its own - and it’s a little bit like that is etching.

You’re working with the black and white and you’ve got the eight octaves. You can get high and low and you can get all of the colour in between. Its limitations are its strengths. Isn’t it beautiful to hear that solo voice and you feel you don’t want to hear anything else - and I think etching is like that.

Etching is a single voice, but what a voice, it’s a limitless voice. The human voice is limitless in what you can put over - for example plain chant, or a short poem rather than a novel - you can’t waffle. There’s a clarity and an elegance of thinking which comes into etching which if you try and embellish it will go flat.

That’s what I’m about, I’m trying to tell a single clear story, like a glance and I keep trying to do it and it’s when I’m very relaxed that the clarity comes.

NA: I love the stuff of etching. I love the blankets, the way the pressed print comes off on the paper – I find an amazing sensuality just in the stuff. When you take a new piece of copper and peel off the protective coating - it’s a perfect mirror; flawless.

WR: You talk about drawing existing throughout the whole process of creating a print; that the drawing never stops?

NA: No, the drawing never stops. It’s a lovely idea that you can think about drawing the bones of something onto the plate but not drawing the whole picture... sometimes you can do that directly on the plate, in situ, en plein air.

NA directs me to photograph some of the etchings of the island of Mingulay in the various proof states and shows me the sketchbook page
NA then shows me through some fascinating sketchbooks, which images he would like to develop and how many tones of black he could use. He points out the Mingulay drawing (below).

WR: Do you make the sketchbooks yourself?
NA: Yes because I like to have different papers. Usually I have 2 or 3 on the go at the same time; some drying on the boat while I’m working on others. You see it’s a little bit dull drawing on the same paper all the time – it’s quite nice drawing on different papers, not just for the colour but for the different surfaces - you can mix the whole thing up, you know.

WR: Do different papers suggest different ways of approaching the etching?
NA: The different papers are mostly for the watercolours. Most papers, if dampened correctly will accept the ink successfully. It’s really the colour of the paper that’s
important. Beautiful papers naturally mellow there wasn’t such things as the bleached white papers - everything was handmade.

Norman pauses to open a plan chest drawer in front of where we are sitting and begins to sift through a treasure trove of beautiful old papers. His lovingly collected paper put down for a special print. Paper is taken out piece by piece, held... felt... rubbed between his fingers, tapped to hear the snap and held up to the light to inspect the intricate and beautiful watermarks. Papers are compared, one against the other, so that we can appreciate the variety of different whites and creams. The tactility of materials and, in his own words, ‘the love of the stuff’ is amply demonstrated in his pleasure in this paper collection; his ‘goldmine’.

WR: Have you got any tools from well-known etchers of the past?

NA: Oh, god yes! One or two presses that have come my way have come with the studio collection – hot plates and such. Which a lot of them I’ve recycled to young etchers, given them away, I think there’s 3 hot plates at the Royal academy schools which are on permanent loan. I’ve got everything I need downstairs [in the etching studio]

WR: Old tools, tools that have been used before, must have a different feel to them

NA: Well you use the ones that work naturally; you like the ones that work best – I do have some wonderful old French roulette wheels.

WR: Which marks do you love making the most in an etching?

NA: When it suddenly works well! – I worked out that you could put a really fine hard ground over sugarlift, then lift it and then put on a good fine aquatint. Now I mix it in a different way, I don’t use the gum gamboge. My first tutor who used sugar lift had pure gamboge pith which he ground up and mixed up with sugar and water and I did my first sugarlifts in the same way as Picasso and I was taught by Norman Webster to do it that way. Now I use black gouache in everything and it works perfectly.

WR: The love of the stuff isn’t restricted to the drawing (sugarlift) and inking processes?

NA: Winding the big press is a beautiful thing; I love oiling the press; it’s got fantastic oiling points which are beautifully machined.
NA: When I finished at the Royal College and started teaching at the Central I was told that I was teaching a class with Merlyn Evans and I became very friendly with him, we would go for a drink. When I went to his studio I saw this big press in a converted church hall, which was his studio. He had another smaller press the same size as mine next to it. Then he died suddenly in 1973 without a will; his executors decided to give me first refusal of the big press because I knew Merlyn and they thought I would use it best, so I’ve had it since 1975. I know its complete history. It’s a privilege to have a machine like that; it’s probably the best etching press in Europe. I’ve seen a lot and it’s better looked after than most of the others! I actually enjoy oiling it.

I’m terribly old fashioned really, I just love the stuff.
This is the second interview with Norman Ackroyd. I was keen on this occasion to talk about how he draws when he is travelling and how his drawing reflects the nature of the place he is in. Before we began the conversation Ackroyd made me a cup of coffee and talked about some of the work he had recently been making. He showed me a small etching made for this year’s RA Summer Show which was, unusually, of a wine glass inspired by a small etching which was pinned up on a pillar in the drawing studio. This little etching was by Whistler, made on one of the small plates which he habitually carried around with him. Ackroyd told me that he sometimes takes a plate with him and that this wine glass was drawn on a visit to friends who own a gallery in Yorkshire. This anecdote beautifully sums up his life and practice. Longstanding friendships, a little bonhomie, and he is always working.

Wendy Rhodes Picken: Could we talk about how you approach drawing when you’re away on a trip, and the nature of that drawing? What is the significance of the place which is drawn?

Norman Ackroyd: When I go on a trip I’ve already identified somewhere I want to go for all sorts of reasons and I know that it’s visually exciting. The knowledge of a place that you’ve read about it, you’ve maybe visited it before and you want to revisit and you know quite a lot of its history is in the background. You’re not just looking at it, there’s an undertow of humanity in these places. At times they
weren’t that remote. When I charter a boat for a week I know there are certain places in say, the Barra Isles like Mingulay and Barra Head. I study the maps and then I find things on the maps that, you know, that look interesting and I head there but actually, once I know I’m heading there I just relax and blot it up. I’ve had long conversations with other artists... with David Hockney when he was doing water colour about how you just let your hand [go] and we talked about this and I have always done it... you stop [thinking too much], you don’t have any intellectual input then because it’s all in there and it’s working. Working, just responding. So almost like a pianist, you get your scales and you get your hands working and so as soon as you leave the harbour, whatever’s there is, is worth drawing. Because it’s all about light - and you just start drawing.

WR: You don’t wait until you’ve arrived somewhere?
NA: You don’t wait until you’ve got something, you just get the whole machinery going. I usually have an assistant and usually I’m working with three drawing books. Sometimes I’m working and if it is raining quite heavily you need somebody with a big umbrella to hold it over you; you know otherwise it would be chaotic! You just get going and you can start the same image three times. You just make marks and let the eye, hand and heart take over from the intellect. I don’t want to be thinking ‘oh, this will make a nice [image]’, I just make the marks.

WR: A direct response to everything coming towards you?
NA: Yes. You might leave at 5o’clock in the morning as the sun’s rising because you get a lovely angle of light and you might not get back until late afternoon. Then when you come back you’ve no idea what you’ve got in the drawing books.

WR: No, because you’ve been working so quickly.
NA: Yes, you’ve got no idea and then you get a real surprise, sometimes you think ‘I would never have done that in the studio,’ and that is what you’re after.

WR: All about the weather, the movement of the boat?
NA: It’s all that. You know, we’re sitting here in a nice warm room but [out on the boat] it can be cold and rainy and you can be down-wind of a gannery where it stinks to high heaven and its foul... and the row when you get up too close! I mean the noise and the smell of the birds! And also the cold and maybe the fact that it’s raining, all these kind of things which you don’t get in the studio. They do come through the whole thing.
WR: When you’re out on the boat do you draw with a different quality of line, or do you choose different colours to work with?

NA: I do have a thing that I can lay out on the boat which holds a lot of colours and there’s a heck of a lot of greys and blacks but there’s colours as well. And [I’m] working with water colour pencils so I can draw lines and then soften the lines with water. You’re working a lot with your fingers as well as with brushes and almost playing it like a piano. Moving it around... and then you get something that’s really ethereal, something really strange has happened and you take that [drawing] in and dry it off, in the cabin. You work with drawing books and you can sometimes see, ‘god what’s happening here?’ It’s incredibly exhausting!

Each book contains half a dozen [drawings], a day’s work. A lot of them are pointless you know, but it’s making the marks that matter. It’s the doing it. It’s a bit like you want to go somewhere, the journey is as important as getting there but I don’t throw any of them away.

WR: So the memory of the experience is much stronger for doing that constant drawing is it? Particularly if you’re on a boat, you move around so quickly you might not always get exactly that edge again?

NA: Well that’s one of the challenges especially if the boat’s rocking. One of the problems with turning off the engine; it’s not a good idea because then the sea throws the boat around and everybody gets thrown. So when I get to somewhere usually I try to get out in the middle of my area so I can walk round the work table and you get the boat to circle. When there’s something [interesting], you really want to stay and have a go at in greater depth, but generally you are just working with the speed of the boat. You schedule that you might be doing 50/60 miles on the boat that day and you do have to stay roughly with it but you usually give plenty of time. So I am used to it now and how to manipulate a day and I always make sure I get a good night’s sleep and a good breakfast.

It’s incredibly tiring in a wonderful way, and you get onto a high you know, you get into a wonderful state of mind - which I also do when I get back here and I’m working. I like to work at two or three places at a time but then just focus on one and have things around that are half-finished.
When you’re out on the boat do you sometimes see something and think that’s an etching I want to make - do you start the drawing thinking about the end result, about the etching?

I find that water colour is a drawing medium - it’s not a painting medium and I find that I’m almost thinking in an etching way, you know, my hands are thinking in an etching way. The distillation that comes from the aquatint, you know, [this drawing] could be done with etching, you actually think in the two or three stages that you will do. So what would be the first stage, what would be the second stage and... it helps the water colour that I think in an etching way.

So do you put the water colour down almost in layers like you might do in an etching?

Sometimes, I will see a subject and I think I’ve got to hold this down, I’ve got to have this reasonably dry before I go home, so you do it again and so you’ve got three going of the same subject. If you look up on the wall there is Barra Head, there are three water colours of Barra Head that are all done from the boat. The top right and then the two side ones underneath.

And the boat’s going round Barra Head so they’re from slightly different angles but you go one way and then you turn round and come back and you pick up the one again and you can go backwards and forwards as you go round. Barra Head is just a fantastic image.

But you’ll see that and you’ll think as you’re working through, either this would need a second layer of aqua tint or...?
NA: Yes and then I don’t even make notes because you come back and say yes I remember thinking about that how it would be three different aqua tints, the first state, the second state, the third state and - then you’re tight rope walking here you know! We take all the water colours up to a shop in the High Street and ask them to photocopy all these for me. Then you can stick them on boards and move them around.

So you take that book and say to them just turn all the pages and just photocopy the whole lot you know and then you, and you can bring them back here.

You surround yourself with the drawing books… it’s good enough, to surround yourself here as soon as you come back with all the experience and it just brings it all back. There’s hundreds of these boards all over the building.

WR: Because of course for me looking at those I can’t hear what you were hearing, I can’t feel the temperature but you’ve all that haven’t you?

NA: It’s that drawing book you know, just that.

Then I might make a series of it, which I did from this. I did a series of etchings called Beyond Cape Wrath from all the drawings. So you’re getting the idea of the way I’m working?

WR: Absolutely, a lovely insight. Do you sometimes get back and think I’d wish I’d done some more drawings of a particular view?

NA: Well you just have to accept what you’ve got, you know, life is all about limitations, because you’re working within the philosophy. When I’m doing a water colour I’m thinking about the subtle values because etching is all about drawings with subtle
values and etching is probably one of the most beautiful of all drawing mediums. It is drawing you know, it is drawing.

WR: Do you have some places that you go back to quite regularly?

NA: There are certain images like St Kilda and various places that I really do return to because they’re different every time. It’s all about the light that never shines on the landscape exactly the same every day, in this country, it’s different every time you go. Everything I do is about light. And light is different all the time. You just need something to hang light on and if it’s a very familiar image you know, that’s splendid.

I am extremely grateful to Norman for his generosity of time, for the insights into his practice and for sharing such wonderful anecdotes of his etching life.
**Interviews with Ros Ford RE - excerpts**

Ros Ford RWA, RE at BV Studios, Bristol

Interview 1 – 24th September 2015, b

*This is the 1st recorded interview with Ros Ford. This interview marks the beginning of a truly productive dialogue. The focus is drawing and where it sits in relation to etching within Ros’s practice, with particular reference to her large scale etching ‘Shelter – Sparke Evans Park’. We also discuss the emotional attachment to place.*

![Studio photograph by kind permission of the artist](image)

Wendy Rhodes: Last time we spoke we talked about drawing and the position of drawing in your practice. Could you show me through some work that might develop that idea?

Ros Ford: This is the new one (above) I’ve done this summer and this example will also touch on some questions about my sources. This one came about because I saw the pavilion structure. It’s in a sort of unrecognised part of Bristol – it’s Sparke Evans Park in St Philips. The history of the place intrigues me and I’m interested because it’s local and I’m building on the history of the area. I like to choose things that are close to me. What happens is usually over a year I go out and I do drawings and photographs and just get the structure into my head. This shelter one is an old pavilion and what I liked about it was these pillars. Then I realised it was falling down, and then the next time I visited they had had to put safety fencing round it.
It's the proportion of the thing. It's lovely. Each work I do is a new challenge and on this one I departed from my aerial perspective into a looking up perspective, a worm's eye view, but still retaining those big abstract shapes that I've enjoyed recently.

I keep revisiting this area, I actually know it quite well - in my bones. It does sometimes feel random, my subject [matter], but it's not. It's not at all.

WR: You really are getting a feel for the place, aren't you?

RF: Yes, just sitting there and doing a few drawings. (I didn't actually do many drawings.) Usually when I decide what's okay I start working on a larger drawing. I don't do a fully formed drawing on site. At the moment I knew I wanted to do a large etching and at the moment I'm working on this same scale. I want them as quite a big series, so it's a mini-series within a big series. What I do then is draw the size and then I start working out in the studio how I want it to be; distorting the perspectives and so forth. Again, it's not necessarily fully formed. I'm drawing the structure.

WR: Is this informed by photographs or just by sketches?

RF: By sketches and by photographs. I haven't got that many of them this time, but usually I've got quite a lot. I do lots of little things. Once something's in my head I do lots of tiny Post-It size and bite-size little drawings.

WR: Working drawings really?

RF: Yes, playing around with the elements of what I want. That helps me to discover what it is about the subject that is drawing me to it, overriding the many other subjects that also interest me and making the choice to commit to a couple of months – well, sometimes even longer than a couple of months.

WR: Are you looking for the unique identity for this structure and how to bring that out?

RF: Yes. I knew this park; the ironwork was drawing me, but also the fact that it was a shelter that wasn’t a shelter. The layers start to reveal themselves. Once I start drawing the layers reveal themselves and things like songs; like ‘Shelter from the Storm.’ Shelter is at the moment a huge political and human rights issue.

WR: The underlying layer of meaning, even though it might not be completely apparent to everybody that sees your work in the future, that’s still important to you in the making of it?
RF: Yes. I think there has to be another reason for me to make work. It’s not just the location of the structure or the geographical thing or the abstract qualities of it. There has to be another reason why I would want to commit this to a piece of metal, so while I’m drawing, other ideas are coming in and also the drawing is helping me to discover what I want to extract from the subject.

WR: Actually to get to know the subject as well? Hoping to get inside it?

RF: Yes. Basically at this stage with the drawing, I like to keep it like a skeleton; the skeleton of the drawing itself and I don’t know at this point how I’m going to approach it, so I do very old-fashioned things. I’m going to trace the skeleton. The drawing of the tracing allows me to alter and add and change, so I’m actually drawing on the original.

WR: It’s not a direct tracing, but a development of the drawing?

RF: No, it’s not direct. All the time I’m working with the drawing, because I’ve got the etching in my head and I know I’m going to etch, I’m thinking about how I want to approach the etching.

WR: You start thinking about which process is first and which areas need to be treated by different etching processes?

RF: Yes.

WR: So do you always start by drawing through the hard ground?

RF: Up till now, yes. Up till now because it’s a structure. The structure is the important thing. I’m actually doing a little bit more drawing on this initial hard ground because that’s the best hard ground, the best dark. It’s smoked.

Studio photograph by the author
This (above) is the first hard ground, I think. Stage one. Again, there’s more
drawing so I’m actually drawing directly on a plate.

RF: And I will go back to the location if there’s something I want to check. I went back
to the location for the ground and I went back to the location for various other bits
and pieces, so I’m revisiting the location.
I think a part of it really is having a reference of a real place. I also scan my
drawings in so they’re on the iPad and reverse them round as well. I use the iPad as
a reference tool. Then I’ll start drawing on proofs. I’ll start thinking about where I
want the image to go and I begin to see it. I think the thing about print is the
surprise element. I like to take the surprise as a good thing and work from that, not
try to have too many preconceived ideas, let the image dictate. I’m drawing on the
drawing.

WR: At what point does the print move away from being a drawing of the initial
drawing? At what point does it really take on a life of its own? Does it ever take on
a life of its own or is it always just an extension of the drawing? I think that
probably varies for different pieces of work.
RF: No, it’s always after the first, immediately I start drawing on the copper.
WR: Yes, it immediately moves away?
RF: Yes, Yes. For me it just takes on its own momentum.
RF: I’m going to call this another drawing where I’m making decisions... I’m going to call this a drawing. I’m trying to remember what areas go where because this is a watercoloured-in proof.

It’s feeling my way through. I might have to do a lot of proofs. It can change very radically. The colour can change it very radically and I might abandon the colour in the end. Of course I call this drawing, when I’m burnishing – I’m drawing... So from this I’ve burnished and that is all part of the drawing process, I suppose. Also, I suppose, the drawing is when I’m inking up. I’m really drawing each plate and revealing areas of the drawing that I want to come through and suppressing other areas through under wiping. This is to help me to memorise where I need to over wipe.

WR: It’s really interesting to see all your notes. There’s something very involved and very professional about the way that you do everything.

RF: They’re quite important.

WR: It’s really interesting to see really that your whole thinking process is on the overdrawn proof. You’re not leaving anything to chance in terms of thinking it through. You’re trying to cover all the bases?

RF: Yes. Once I’ve discovered something I don’t want to forget it because you can reinvent a plate in the inking up of it. You can completely change the whole thing
and once I’ve got it and I’ve decided I’m sticking with that, then I want to be able to replicate it.

WR: I’d like to discuss the notion of the drawing being an elaboration of what you’ve seen. A drawing is never specifically the subject that you’re looking at; it takes the concept of the image a lot further. Was the word ‘elaborating’ an appropriate word for you?

RF: No. I think elaborate means, well, for me, it would mean almost adding extra information. Whereas I think what I’m trying to do is to get the essence of something and what I hope my drawing does is to build on the essence of what I want to do.

WR: Do you think there’s a breaking down of initial information? Do you have to focus on something?

RF: Yes, although I think focus is a good word. Certain areas I focus on and sometimes it does get more, what’s the right word? Elaborate, in a way, does fit some of the detail but then the detail, I hope, is adding to the whole. I would love to strip stuff away, but there’s something in me that at the moment doesn’t let that happen. This is what I’m working on and most of the artists I admire strip right away. I went to see an Agnes Martin exhibition and it was absolutely lovely and the work was just white stripes and grids and lovely things! I would love to strip all that detail but I can’t. For instance Ben Nicholson’s work, I love that. That is stripped away to the bone and the drawings... But, I have to be true to myself and follow my own direction. I don’t think elaborate is the right word, I do want to get to the bones of something.

WR: So the structure’s starting to be hidden by it? But you prefer the time of year when you can really see what’s going on?

RF: Yes. Generally speaking I go out drawing in February because it makes me speedy. When it’s cold I can’t draw for too long so it does get to the bones of what is there. I can go back and elaborate but I actually find that doing drawings really quickly helps in the process of decision making about what I’m going to do.

WR: Do quick drawings allow you to go back and draw again?
RF: I go back to the location for details, to draw something that I need to know to put into my work.

WR: Which brings us to the questions of how you feel about a local place, local knowledge, nostalgia, fondness, familiarity, or trespass.

RF: I think it’s not nostalgia. That doesn’t come into it. It’s not nostalgia.

WR: No, because you’re showing what it is and the symbolism within what it’s become.

RF: There’s an admiration because with the bridge - there’s an admiration for the structure and the craftsmanship of this. Maybe the drawing for that is to learn about how that structure works. I’m learning about it and I’m quite amazed about it. I like the hidden locations. Not hidden, I like finding places and making it my own and I get quite upset if somebody comes along. Even if it’s a big structure, I get possessive.

WR: Even if it’s a massive building?

RF: It is about finding it and thinking that I’ve seen something that nobody else has discovered. I keep it a secret until it’s finished! I disappear. For the time I’m doing the work, I don’t tell people about it; I just don’t.

WR: So you’re very protective of the place as well in that time?

RF: Yes, in that working time.

Yes. It’s almost as if I develop this emotional attachment and then I discard it. I move on, thinking about the ‘Parcelforce’ print, which I did a while ago, I no longer have the same attachment; I do have feelings for it but not as intensely as when I’m doing the piece of work about it.
Ros Ford RWA, RE at BV Studios, Bristol

Interview 2 – 23rd February 2017

This interview was conducted as Ford was preparing for an important exhibition which she was co-curating at the Bankside Gallery, London. We discussed her experiential response to Pembrokeshire and Bagnoli in Italy. Ford had originally gone to Italy after having won a travel bursary from the RWA, deciding to take a trip following in Turner’s footsteps - visiting places where he had drawn and painted.

Wendy Rhodes: What can you tell me about how the Pembrokeshire etchings evolved, and what you discovered in making those?

Ros Ford: They were different in the sense that they weren’t local. And also the subject matter’s slightly different, they’re landscapes by the sea, but they still had the remnants of industrial buildings. The prints have been developed over a year; I made three visits – the first one not specifically for that landscape; and then I made two visits just drawing. I was drawing directly onto copper plates. So these ones on the wall [are] studies drawn directly onto the copper outdoors. They’re still studies, but I’m getting quite interested in my work getting smaller and quicker.

WR: Have you done a lot more on site with this place than with the local places?
RF: Yes, directly onto the plates. It was just that’s what I decided I wanted to do, to try and be a bit more spontaneous; it’s got quite a lot... [pause] bolder. Not necessarily by design, but just how it has evolved. I see my work going in a slightly different direction; and I’ll just see what happens.
WR: The fact that Pembrokeshire was a non-local place is one of the things I wanted to try and unpick a little bit further. Last time we spoke, everything was very local, you knew the places intimately, and also you were talking about the idea that the place had to feel as though it was your own personal find.

RF: Yes.

WR: Now you’ve gone out to places, to Pembrokeshire and Italy: do you still have the feeling that these places are yours, and that they’re personal finds, and that you have created an intimate relationship with them? Or do you feel like you’re borrowing them?

RF: I wouldn’t say ‘borrowing’. It is a slightly different relationship, and I suppose it’s enabled me to focus rather than respond to my emotional feelings about them, I’ve responded to the visual impact of the place. Whereas locally, I’m looking around now and I’ve realised there’s things going on about the local concept again; and of course that’s often places which I see day to day, or I revisit them. I revisited St Phillips recently, and it’s changed, and it’s not necessarily emotional, you don’t have to make choices about a composition and everything that you want straightaway when it’s a local place. Whereas when a place isn’t local, and you’re not going to visit it again, you have to make decisions on the spot.

RF: [In pembroke] I thought everyone else is a tourist, and I was the one who was local. [laughs]! I started to belong.

WR: Do you think it was important in being able to then make work from that place?

RF: Yes, for me, because you sort of feel inside it. I was scrabbling around on rocks, and, usually as a day tripper, you wouldn’t. You normally get an instant view, and walk around a bit and then come home, whereas I was investigating the different viewpoints; climbing up and down and seeing the tide, which was really important. It all changed radically with the tides. And the rain didn’t stop me.

WR: So you were getting quite physically involved with these places as well, scrabbling around on rocks?

RF: Oh, yes.

WR: The small ones definitely portray a feeling of being right there in amongst all the rocks and having that very close physical connection to the rock.

RF: Yes. It was quite liberating. They were so quick! All of those were on a prepared hard ground.
Ros then referred to the pre-interview question sheet. The phrase that had caught her attention was: ‘located or dislocated from place’.

WR: It sounds as though, in Pembrokeshire, you became located in that place. There’s no sense of dislocation from it, in making the work?

RF: Oh no, I was there! [Laughs].

WR: You’re there, but it’s interesting to ask, “why this particular place?” What was it that caught your attention - the Pembrokeshire Coast path is beautiful all the way along?

RF: I wanted the industrial elements of it, because for some reason, that inspires me; the sense of the history, and the living, human intervention with the landscape. But why? There are plenty of harbours in the world, but it was the particular form of this one; the form and the structure that instantly grabbed me. And then exploring that through the drawing, deciding to make the effort to go and stay there for a week; that was quite a big thing.

WR: That put you very much into the landscape, rather than just observing it? It was no longer a fleeting visit.

RF: I walk a lot, I would spend half an hour each day walking. It’s the discovery, knowing this channel well. The initial impact of the lagoon. When I first saw it and I didn’t know anything about it, that was a very powerful impact, it was “Wow”!

WR: Was that just a visual impact, or did you feel it emotionally?

RF: For me they’re the same. It was enough to say I’m coming back here. I had seen the place years before and it was a strong enough visual impact to remember over a number of years; it was quite powerful for both of the sites. When I walked I saw the lagoon first, and then from the lagoon you come across brickworks, so the landscape is getting more and more industrial; and then you can’t see the harbour until you’re on top of it. You can’t see it, and then suddenly you’ve got this harbour with all the structure! I’ve got more drawings than I’ve developed.

WR: It’s interesting to discuss the walking angle again. Clearly actually moving around a place, feeling it underfoot, having that very in-depth understanding of how a place works physically is also part of the whole process. And like you say, walking also allows a sudden discovery; you’re opening up a new vista.

RF: That came through, and was very strong for these ones in Italy.
This is Bagnoli steel works; they were decommissioned in 1996. There I was in Naples, [with] the freedom to select a subject, and I had given myself the permission just to draw: I drew every day. It was quite a journey [to Bagnoli] in many ways. And so I walked, I walked along a pier, and walked back, and did a little bit of exploring, and I walked the perimeter of this enormous site. This is right on the outskirts and it’s quite an edgy place! And it was extraordinary. Again, it was the initial response, “Okay, I’ve found my subject!” That was brilliant, that was fourth day in. I had a programme of places that I had committed myself to visiting – and I wanted to do that, of course, but I’d left a week at the end, in case I found somewhere that I wanted to return to and then I went back to Bagnoli. On the third day I wanted another viewpoint of Bagnoli, because I had always seen it from the town. I was relating my work to where Turner had been and there was a hill where Turner had sat to draw Naples which overlooked Bagnoli. It was really difficult, as a tourist, to get to. It was very upper class, and it involved quite a lot of negotiating forms of transport to get there. I used the Metro, the bus, a taxi, and I walked. I was determined to get to this place. Going back to the idea of walking - the walking was a walk around the perimeter; there were high walls - you can’t get into it, so the perimeter became quite important in the etching.

WR: Could you see through the perimeter fence sometimes, or were you always trying to get over...?

RF: Yes I could see through. I’ve got sort of photographs of where there were gaps in the fencing. In Bagnoli I wasn’t in the landscape, I couldn’t walk in it, but I could walk around it, and get a really good vantage point. I took lots of photographs from the Metro as well, because you got glimpses of it; those tremendous structures.
WR: I’d like to discuss the experience of being in a place, how it felt on a particular day – are the memories still very strong?

RF: These little etchings these are the more direct ones, you know, they’re like I was there, whereas the large ones are more removed. I wonder if we talk about this one [from Pembrokeshire], the pointed rock, which is virtually an island. I think the whole thing about this is the sharpness of the rock: it’s very sharp, and it’s very dark. I wouldn’t have been too far away from it - I was sitting down by the bridge and quite close because I wanted the detail. Although it was a tiny bit in a big etching, I didn’t know the form the big etching was going to be, so this was about the extraordinary shape of this point. And it was about the darkness of the rocks, and the quality, and the movement of the rocks against the softer waves of the sea. And this tiny bit of grass which - somehow it survived - was growing there. Yes, I was identifying and looking at the exact form of these rocks; the structure and the direction of them. I was identifying the angles, and what was man-made, because this was partially man-made, part of it was hewn by man. That flatter side of the rock would have been hewn away for some reason. So within the whole landscape there were the bits that were hewn away and built into the landscape, and then there was more of a natural landscape. In the whole landscape I was looking at the contrast of what was man-made and what was the natural erosion. These were drawn extremely quickly at this stage. I could have done them afterwards, but it was this form (RF mimed the hacking action of someone chipping
away at a rock face) ...the extraordinary quality... the darkness of these rocks. They were black by nature, they’re really, really dark.

WR: Yes, almost to the point where you can hardly see the detail.

RF: Yes. This is what the drawing was about, and it was cold enough that I didn’t want to linger. I quite like the difference between what I’m doing in the landscape and what I’m doing in the studio.

WR: So is coldness what you were drawing, and drawing on a cold etching plate?

RF: Yes, definitely. The qualities of the rock suited the copper, the hard ground on the copper. That angular mark, and these textures drawn with a roulette, actually there, so I was really trying to explore it. At the same time, I knew that this was going to go into the acid, and therefore I could do open bites to reflect the texture.

WR: Yes. So you’ve got the hardness of the rock and the sharpness of the rock with the hardness of the plate and the sharpness of the tools.

RF: Yes, each of these studies has a specific purpose such as the qualities of the rock...

WR: I’ve been considering the focus of the research being ‘landscape’ or ‘place’ – I settled ‘place’ and then I saw a definition of place in the Oxford English Dictionary: ‘I can’t be in two places at once’. I wondered, for an artist whether that was actually quite misleading. When you’re making the work in the studio, can you also feel that you are back in that place in Pembrokeshire or in St Phillips, or in Italy?

RF: Oh, I’m completely there. (This remark was expressed with quite some feeling, revealing one of the strongest driving forces of Ros Ford’s creativity – the experiential made tangible.)

WR: You’re completely in the other place? You’re not so much in the etching studio?

RF: I was thinking about that the other day – when I’m drawing or working on the inside of that building, I’m right inside of that building, visually I’m inside it. And that’s an important part. I’m in there, and I’m not looking at it as a viewer from the outside. I’m inside it, because I’m thinking “I have to go in, in here”. In these Bagnoli ones it was the qualities of the dark that I was playing with: it’s inside the structures, and that’s one place I go to. You know, it’s very strong that idea which you touched on, it’s...being there. And which part of it do I want to be in? Although it’s a strange thing, because I’m creating a birds’ eye view - which implies I am in
another place looking, overlooking something, or looking at something - but at the same time I’m there; I’m inside.

WR: So your bird’s eye view is a vehicle to allow you to go in?
RF: Yes, or a worm’s eye view. It’s a way to get inside it, yes.

WR: And with the small ones where you’d drawn the initial drawing actually in the place (small Pembrokeshire ones) did that equally put you right back there?
RF: Yes!

WR: Did it add to it the fact that you’d done the initial drawing there?
RF: Yes, because I’m always working from drawing. You know, I rely on my drawings more than my photographs, although I do both, but the photographs are more of a security blanket. Once I’m past the initial drawing stage there, I very rarely refer to the photographs, because as I said, I’m inside it. I was thinking about this the other day - this loops round to this idea of the local, and a place that I’ve visited over a shorter period of time. In a way, with the place where I’ve visited over a shorter period of time I can invent what is happening inside. I’m freer to invent.

WR: Yes. You don’t feel quite so much responsibility to it?
RF: I don’t feel someone’s going to say, ‘that’s not right!’ It doesn’t matter to me that it’s not like that, but I suppose I’m less bound by the structure of the place. I’ll make sure of my initial skeleton structure. But I was felt, looking at the Bagnoli ones, that I was freer to invent, and as I worked on them I was actually inventing more, rather than referring to my drawings, or photographs. I felt freer.
I wanted the structures to work as structures, on the paper, it didn’t matter if they had actually gone quite far away from the reality. On one I’ve actually moved things – you can see where I’ve cut them out? *Ros showed how she has cut the chimney sections from the original drawings and re-positioned them.* I’ve physically moved them for my own end, for my view of the structure. So this is quite liberating for me, for where I am.

The place is really important to how I see the structure within that whole place, and, this is quite interesting, which is where the walking comes in. Because it’s not about one view of a thing, it’s about a number of views.

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**RF:** If I go to a place and it strikes some sort of chord, that’s one thing. But then there’s another level where I feel I can be somewhere inside and I want to explore this further. I do a sketch or two, but what is it about this place which makes me want to spend a few months, or longer with it? (I mean sometimes you could spend years!) There has to be something else to relate to... there must be something underlying to relate to as to what this place is to me. It’s hard to explain it, but if you can talk about the experience well enough to externalise what it is, I don’t think you’d make the work.

**WR:** No. So the ineffable is important to maintain?

**RF:** Yes. Yes, it’s unexplainable. It’s obviously a relationship with what you’re doing, it’s so important that you need to do it.
Ros Ford RWA, RE at BV Studios, Bristol
Interview 3 – 22nd June 2017

This last interview was conducted after the ‘Trace’ group exhibition at Bankside gallery. Ford had hoped that time spent invigilating the exhibition would allow her to reflect on her practice to date, and give her some insight about where her practice might develop.

Ros Ford: It was quite interesting, just talking about my own work; it felt like the end of a series but it also felt like the beginning of something. The wall that I felt was the beginning of something was the more industrial wall, rather than the more watery, landscape wall.

RF: One of the things the exhibition has brought to the forefront of my mind, at the moment, is being literal to the landscape. The ‘Bagnoli’ etching was removed from
my personal and local landscape and the chopping up of the drawings liberates me from the literalness of the landscape. I’m playing around with variable editions (but not yet succeeding) to liberate myself from editions.

RF: I went to see the ‘American dream’ exhibition at the British Museum quite recently. It was about all the big American artists; the one who I came away with was Julie Mehretu. Her work was like a big etching, and full of marks!
I’m also looking at how much I’m enjoying my mark making and how I want to push that further.
What I really loved was the feeling of the freedom of the mark making, as well as the content and her use of colour. The abstract quality of the mark making, but also interestingly the content of the work about the urban landscape.
I’m seeing this time as a bit of research time as well; research not only on my technique, but also questioning what I’m doing. What’s nice about Mehretu’s work is that her image references include ancient historic buildings. I collect postcards like mad. She also talks about Cairo, where I once lived.
In other words, she’s referencing the urban landscape and the ancient landscape.

WR: It’s a very personal response to landscape. Is it not also a personal response to what’s going on in that landscape? The social structures? Layers of meaning?
RF: Yes, definitely. So, liberating myself from the literalness of the landscape
I think many people, who see my work, see it as a documentation of a period of time, which it is, so I think playing around with it and maybe going a bit more abstract, will bring more of the emotional aspect
This is a book about Julie Mehretu the White Cube catalogue from 2013, with an introduction by Tacita Dean - it talks about how she began a new body of work:
‘The increase in activity in her drawings and paintings has come from her ‘Mind, Breath and Beat’ series.’ She began these one summer in Berlin at her dining room table around the time Cy Twombly dies. ‘As every artist knows, some of the best things are done when you have half a mind on something else.’ That’s good, isn’t it?
RF: There was another one, another exhibition of George Shaw, who is another artist I love. George Shaw interests me greatly, partly because of the urban thing, but also that he’s relocated. He’s relocated himself near Ilfracombe, but his issues are still about the urban landscape. His particular urban landscapes though. It’s making me think about the particularity of a landscape or a place and how strong that is - how powerful that is, your childhood, or the places which have an impact on you. I regret not having a deep affinity with the place that I was brought up in. I was brought up near Reading and I don’t have any affinity with it. That’s quite interesting as well. I don’t have a deep affinity to this area either.

WR: Even though you’ve produced all of these wonderful prints?

RF: No, it’s just because it’s where I am. When I was in Egypt, I was making work about Egypt. When I was in Greece, it was Greece. I was thinking, if I move to the countryside, my work would be related to the countryside, so it’s where I am.

RF: My places don’t mean a lot to me! If I’m truthful about it, I can abandon them once I’ve done them. All I can say is I would approach it in a different way, was I to do it again. Each place resolves something within me that I don’t know about. Each one is a challenge. I don’t do it unless it is a challenge. That’s a challenge that I’ve looked at and once I’ve resolved it in my own head, I can move on and I needn’t return to that place.

WR: But while you’re working on an etching of a specific place, you care very much about how that’s represented in your etching. Is that right?

RF: Yes, I’m totally involved in it, because that involvement is within the mark making. I think the place a vehicle for the mark making. Once the place is selected and the composition is selected, then the mark making is the focus. Then the print takes over, it dictates where it’s going to go itself.

RF: I’m not bound so much by the literal. I’ve got my plan and then the mark making can take over and make of that diagram or plan what it wants to. Usually I’ll start with just lines. At the moment it’s on hard ground. I’ll use roulettes and various things but it’s basically linear on a hard ground. I’m doing more cross-hatching for the tone, whereas an older plate would have taken maybe three hard grounds to get the linear quality - I think on this newer one I only did one hard ground.
You’re getting it more in one take. Some of the roulette work was on that first hard ground as well, was it?

Yes. I’m using virtually everything and I’m also open biting for some areas - like the trees. In other words, once I’ve got the diagram down, the mark making takes over and I’m sitting there doing it for as long as I can resist not putting it into the acid. When I’ve reached a point where I’ve got to put this in the ferric, I’ll put it in, but then I’ll work on it again. I’m building up the drawing in steps.

Still with the same hard ground?

Still with the same hard ground. It depends on my tolerance, because I know now, the more I can get in on this first bite, the better. I’m adding all the time, so I’m doing step biting for 20 minutes, and then up to a couple of hours I’m step biting and stopping out, because I like a lot of variant within the line. It might not immediately appear so, but you can tell. I’m stopping out all the time and drawing and redrawing. With the cross-hatching, I’m getting different levels because it makes a richer black, so I’m just adding and adding.

You put some cross-hatching in, bite that for a little while, add some more in and then bite for longer.

Yes, and then build it up - I’ve got a routine for that, it’s to do with my tolerance. Also, I can push the biting, if it starts to bite through the hard ground or there’s something I don’t like happening, I just stop it out. I think I’m going up to about
two hours now of stepped biting on the most recent plate - seven steps, from 10 to 90 minutes. I usually do a proof but I don’t think I even did that with this one... and then I get the hard ground off. Some areas of texture are made by abrading the plate and using litho crayon. At this point, I’ve got the solid structure and the linear quality and now I want to mess it up a little bit - brave for me! Also, to get some movement and some unpredictability. That is that before the aquatint goes on. That’s quite random mark making. That’s very short times - one minute, two minutes just to take the bright white off of certain areas and so it’s easy to scrape back as well. If it goes over, then that’s scraped back into. Unless there’s a big mistake I don’t scrape back into the hard ground. Then I put aquatint on.

WR: Which adds richness as well as tone?

RF: It’s got a regularity to it, so as well as the more random marks, I’m adding something more defined and building on the cross-hatching, because I’ll know what tone is happening and I can build on that. I use litho crayon on quite a lot of the aquatint stage and stopping out, so that’s staged as well. I usually do a test strip for the aquatint, before I bite the plate. I’ll often do a sugar lift and often I’ll do two aquatints. One stage leads to the next stage and so forth.

RF: I’ve got my box of things which I just have by me. Too many tools!

We rummage through Ros’s tool box, and find some new tools which she had just bought, and some very interesting re-purposed tools including a device from an oven cleaning kit.
RF: I got the brush holder from Italy. Some of the tools I bought when I was a student must be 40 years old. Some have a really nice weight to them. They’re my specialist tools – and then there’s my box of tricks. I use all these things and I use my Dremmel. I love the Dremmel. We both know that we have to be restrained, because once you get going, it is very exciting. There is the other box which has my Dremmel heads. What I quite like about using it is they’re very controllable and uncontrollable at the same time. It’s the controllability and the uncontrolled aspect of the Dremmel I quite like. I’ve got this little Dremmel, but I’ve also got a big Dremmel. It’s quite heavyweight, which I’m hoping to use as part of my experimentation.

RF: I’ve got a rake, which is an etching tool. You can get different sizes. It’s good for parallel lines once you get going. I can use it and this for a bit of tone - it depends how precise and how random.

WR: A lovely box of tricks.

RF: That’s how I keep myself entertained! When I’m talking about the mark making, it is about that.

WR: Very experimental as well. Or is it intuitive?

RF: It’s more intuitive. These are dental tools. They’re great. I asked my dental hygienist and they just throw them out half the time but they’re not heavy enough really. I’ve done some marks with them, but they don’t quite go through the ground unless you exert quite a lot of pressure.

It’s about getting into the feeling of it, because it is also about the feeling. The feeling of the places dictates the tool.

My sincere thanks to Ros ford for sharing her practice in such an honest and open way, my visits to her studio, fuelled by her delicious coffee were always fascinating.
Interviews with Bronwen Sleigh - excerpts

Interview 1 - 16th February 2017, at her Glasgow studio

All studio photographs by the author

The first interview with Sleigh was initiated by looking at the list of ‘Drawing is.../drawing can be.....’ words and phrases. Sleigh took some time choosing and then reflected that she had adapted her choice from some notes she had made about the list some days earlier. Sleigh highlighted her chosen words with a bold underlining:

- Open ended
- Research
- Intuitive
- Investigative
- Transformative
- Something unfolding over time
- Evidence of many glances

Bronwen Sleigh: I haven’t underlined abstract, because I don’t think that is what the drawing is about for me. I just start drawing. I like transformative. That’s very true to me because the work will sort of just unfold. I like the word unfold. I’ve got open ended, which is also very true to me. A drawing can be transformative.

Investigative is probably the truest to me. I see it as a way of investigating, finding out, learning more about what I’m looking at, what I’ve seen. I’ll take loads and loads of photographs of the same thing from many angles, but then I use drawing to put it back together and find out more about it.

I investigate three dimensions through drawing, as well, and I love the fact that you can make illusions of the two dimensional. One of the reasons I struggle so much
when I’m working in three dimensions is because it’s real, isn’t it, in front of me? There’s no illusion at all. There’s no question of size or space.

Early prints (2005) incorporating collage, studio photograph by the author

WR: Could you tell me a little about how your practice of exploring 2 dimensional ideas through 3 dimensional models began?

BS: The way my practice developed when I was at the Royal College was that I started making models and that was the first time I started working in 3-D. I used to work from collage as a way to make. I used my bits of paper, nice textures that I like from my prints... and then I’d begin drawing. Collage gives me the ability to move things around and that helped me with the form of the print and then I would make a new print based on the collaged outcome. My hope at the time was that my practice would develop into 3-D and I would exhibit those things, but what actually happened is I started drawing from them. I would abstract the place through making these 3-D models and then I would draw the place again and that’s really how I’ve started, how abstraction first came to my work. I’d be slowly abstracting the work through the process of making it three dimensional and then drawing. Going backwards and forwards between two and three dimensions - which I still do but in a different way.

WR: It’s a nice way of being able to see a transformative process - to see an idea becoming reality and then being able to take it apart again.

BS: Yes. Most of my prints for a while were drawn from models I built, which is one of the reasons I was interested in Utopia because I was looking at a place that didn’t really exist or I’d made a non-existent place that I was responding to. Having gone through that process I learned so much about 3-dimensionality.
So now because of having gone through that extended period of making models, abstracting things and drawing from that, I now look at a structure in a different way and I’m able to draw it in a way that I wouldn’t have been able to if I hadn’t gone through those several years of making models and learning about three dimensions in that way.

Sleigh’s copy of Carey’s book, studio photograph by the author

WR: So were the models based on real places?
BS: Yes. That’s one thing that’s always stayed, remained.

BS: What I tend to do now is to work from a photo, a low resolution print-out. I’ll take loads of photographs in a place and then draw from several of them [in the studio]. I put it back together in a way that it doesn’t exist; it’s still abstract and it varies. Sometimes you can see what I’m drawing and sometimes you can’t and I quite like that; it still happens and it doesn’t necessarily happen consciously.
Quite often when I start, I don’t know what my plan is. I’m just going to start working out/trying to understand the shape. Quite often it’s about me trying to point out just some accidental spaces and shapes that I find really beautiful.

WR: Are we still talking about investigative processes?
BS: I think investigative is such an important word for the way I work. I don’t think there’s much I could say about the way I work that doesn’t come under that, to be honest.
BS: These are photographs taken in Kampala and some drawings I’ve been working on recently. I went on a photo spree of all of the buildings. I liked the centre of Kampala, it was surprisingly built up in a different way and there’s quite a lot of architecture that I found interesting. But the setting was so different, really different from any place I’ve ever looked at and I’m not quite sure how it’s going to change the work. The drawings that I’ve just done show that the colours reflect the building. With colour I never try too hard to think “I’m going to do it like this.” But that’s quite literal actually, which is unusual for me.

BS: So this is something I’ve been doing for – I don’t know, maybe a bit over a year, which I’m loving – I start off with a lithographically printed background which doesn’t necessarily have to be from the same place. There’s some examples of what I would start with, you can see in the light there’s a green but also a white.

*Sleigh pulls out lithographic prints (above) which have been printed in a green ink overlaid with a subtle white. The white is only visible when angled in the light from the window.
Looking again at the Kampala drawing...which I’ve brightened here to draw attention to the yellow/orange under-printing.*

BS: The reason I love this [method] is because I’m using pen and paint and pencil. The litho ink is invisible under pencil because pencil just sits on top of everything... The appearance of pencil doesn’t change over the top of the ink, with the ink of the pen you can draw over it and the fact that the oil based ink sits on top of the paper
means that these patterns and [shapes] come through. So again, it’s accidental. I haven’t got complete control and it’s working with layers. I’m drawing, but there’s an important print making element in there as well.

![Studio photographs of proofs, by the author](image)

WR: Does it matter what the starting points for the lithographs are?
BS: Not really no. There’s a part of me that thinks I should start off thinking “This is part of the drawing,” but then I like the fact that it’s not completely controlled and when I get to this point I’ve got something that’s random that I’ve got to work with. I quite like the fact that, at the moment, I’m fighting against something. On this Kampala example the yellow shape underneath was quite strong. The image would look totally different if that wasn’t there, but it was important to make the image on top stronger.

When something goes wrong in an etching, I like it - I need and thrive on it – I like struggling with and against my processes. Sometimes pushing harder and working harder than I’d like to! On this one I struggled quite a lot to get this to do something that I wanted it to do. I didn’t have a plan of what I wanted it to do but it had to become something. The litho ink is invisible under pencil because pencil just sits on top of everything...

WR: Always investigative. Will these drawings become etchings?
BS: No. I never ever plan for an etching. I just start drawing on the plate, just the same as I would on a piece of paper. It could only become an etching if I decided to reinvestigate one of the structures but then I would do a different drawing of it from the photographs and it would become very different.
WR: Could tell me about your mark-making?

BS: The lines are all drawn with a set of technical drawing tools and flexible curves. I’m using the design tools that the [architectural] designers would have used. One thing that I enjoy about what I’m doing is that I have no training in technical drawing - I’ve got a rough idea how to do perspective properly but I purposefully don’t just use my eye and respond using those [technical] tools. I’ve got a freedom in that, which I really enjoy. I love the way that lithographic ink sits on the paper and again I think I like the fact that it makes me use something different. Again, I have to really struggle with it because I don’t think it’s natural for me to work this way, but I think I always learn an awful lot.

WR: How intentional is what you’re making at the beginning of the process? I’m quite interested in the artist’s original intention because etching provides lots of opportunities and the acid opens up even more potential for development and ‘accident’.

BS: Actually I try my hardest to muck up the [etching] plate a bit. I haven’t managed to get all those accidental marks into [plate] lithography. Maybe that’s a bit of a problem with lithography for me. It’s got a cleanliness that doesn’t really work that well with me.

BS: It’s interesting, I guess, that I’ve chosen this way to draw where I’m fighting against something. And I think probably one of the reasons I’ve done that is because I’m most comfortable working in etching where there’s all those processes, all those things that can go wrong. I’m looking for something to fight with a bit and I think I’ve enjoyed finding a way to bring that into drawing.

Sleigh has made work inspired by visits to some quite remote places such as Iceland and Newfoundland. We began to discuss the remoteness of place, and whether inaccessibility make remote places more attractive to visit; whether the remoteness enables the artist to establish a vicarious sense of belonging to a place.
BS: Strangely enough, that doesn’t ring true with me at all actually. I like to see the strangeness of the world that we’ve created around us - so one of the reasons I need to travel is because what is around me is familiar. Therefore, there’s less of an urgency to investigate it, study it and work it out. That’s not to say it doesn’t happen - I do sometimes make work based on Glasgow, but I think being struck by unusual places that seem foreign to me is important. So, for example, the first time I went to Cromarty Firth and saw all the oil rigs. I’d never seen anything like it and it was very interesting because it’s a glimpse into the industrial world that keeps our world functioning - but we don’t usually see it.

I think travelling is relevant because when you’re in a foreign country there’s slight differences, like the road signs and bollards being different and I quite like that because I’m looking at it as a foreigner; looking at our world through the eyes of a stranger. I guess this is what I’m trying to do with my work - I’m trying to think about the world we’ve made. But another thing I find strange is that you can have man-made structure in a remote place.

WR: Is there a fascination with how it’s got there in the first place or about the juxtaposition of it, where it is?

BS: When I was in Iceland I quite liked the idea of trying to live somewhere so remote. We’re trying to control quite difficult places like Iceland where there’s land that’s still forming underneath you. So I’m interested in something to do with that. It’s about us, humans, inhabiting places that maybe aren’t natural to inhabit. That’s what interesting.

WR: When you’re in a remote place are you immersed in your landscape or are you there as a tourist?

BS: I would say both actually. I think that as part of being in a place I want to immerse myself in it in some way. If possible I like to walk around the place; I like to be in it, immerse myself in it. But the whole point is I’m immersing myself in a place that’s unfamiliar to me and that’s what’s interesting or fascinating – and that’s what comes out in the work, hopefully.

WR: I’ve heard you say before that when you go somewhere you just walk and walk and walk - because you really want to know it.

BS: That’s me - that’s how I like to experience a place.
WR: So is that a physical contact with the place? Do you feel more physically attached to a place because you’ve walked around it or do you just feel that you’ve been able to observe better?

BS: I think that’s an interesting question. Strangely enough when you ask me these questions, it takes me back to where I grew up and it makes me think about my attachment to the land where I grew up. My valley [in Wales] where there’s nothing apart from sheep, trees and grass, but when I’m walking in the land I’ve got a physical connection to that place. Walking over and through it, that gives me a feeling of connection. It’s the same experience with other places that I’m going to draw. With the built environment I find it fascinating and not so pleasant, but I want to investigate it and I want to find out more about it.

I don’t feel comfortable in the city, I don’t really like it. I never have, but there’s so much to the city that I just deal with it. When I’m out of the city I just feel so at home, so comfortable, and I find cities confining.

WR: Is the discomfort of city life feeding into what you do?

BS: I think it probably is. My work evolves rather than changes and work started when I moved to Glasgow. The seeds of what I do now started then. When I first saw those oil rigs, I started to want to respond to my environment. And it did change when I went to London as well because then it was about industrial structures within natural landscape and now the natural landscape has disappeared and I think that’s because I’ve been living in inner cities. At the moment I’ll go to places where there’s an enormous landscape and a little structure and for some reason I seem to be focused in on the structures even if they are in a place that’s actually quite spacious.

WR: To give an insight to the internal struggles of the practical process, I’m exploring the notion of tension and conflict in etcher’s practice and that both elements need to be present for true creativity to exist. Richard Sennett (2009) claims there must be a ‘willed surrender of control and challenge overcoming anxiety’ for creativity to flourish.

BS: I think the way I tend to work, whatever I’m doing, whether it’s drawing, etching, lithography, making silly things out of glass, making things out of steel, there’s always a challenge. If there’s not a challenge, then it’s not good. That is just
massively important to how I work. I need to be trying to solve something or struggling against something.

And that’s in every aspect.

I suppose sometimes the places may be a challenge to get to, sometimes not, but it’s not as important or relevant to me, I don’t think.

I’ve stopped sketching when I’m in a place, and the reason is because my challenge then is to just get as much [visual] information as I can. So I just [get busy] with my camera and try and get the same thing from as many different angles as I can; collecting information. It’s me translating various different angles and structures, ‘the evidence of many glances’ [from the ‘Drawing is.’ sheet] is quite a literal way of describing the process of taking all those photographs and then putting them back together in my own way.

And then the challenge comes more when I try to decide what to do with it. I just start and see what happens, because I think it’s a more of an intuitive response, with all the challenges in the way, of whatever medium I’m using.

And I guess it’s not just a response to the place - it’s a response to the formal areas of the structure as well. It’s not just about this place. It’s about my starting point - this is where I’m taking this structure from that I want to explore. This is what I want to find out about.

WR: So it’s exploring the structure that you’ve found in the place, but the fact that it’s in a place you’ve travelled to, is that important to the work?

BS: The place is important. It is important because I think there’s something about the journey and exploring that is important and I have to get excited about it.

I’m somebody that likes a challenge with my travel. I think that finding something that I find extraordinary in some way or unusual or weird that I want to investigate further is important. I need to get uncomfortable about the place, which is why going to a new place, seeing something that I’ve never quite seen before is exciting.

BS: I sometimes do notice things around me here in Glasgow. There’s a building I’ve been cycling past a lot recently and I keep thinking “I think I’d like to do something with this building.” But that’s a funny one because I’ve cycled past it for years and it’s only slowly dawned on me.
And there’s something I did some work on recently. There’s a famous building called the Hydro; a big venue. I loved it while it was being built. So I took loads of photographs of it and I actually drew it in different stages of being built. It’s a building that’s shaped like a jelly fish and this was when the roof was half on, so they had this structure that they were building but as they finished the building I was not as interested at all. That was exciting because that was something new and fresh that was forming in front of me; already half the work is done for me. The abstract selection of patterns and structures was already there for me. Often I have to try a bit harder to find that.

I’m very aware of the challenge of making it work and it’s a challenge that I need, definitely.

Normally what happens is I’ll start a drawing - I’ll just start. If it’s on a litho stone, on an etching plate or if it’s just on a drawing on a piece of paper, I start drawing and something will happen. It might be something that starts going well, or it might be something that doesn’t go well, and at that point it doesn’t matter. Then it’s just a matter of trying to make it do something that I want it to do, so whatever I’m using to draw that then becomes the challenge to find a way to solve it; to make this investigation into this particular thing that I’m looking at, work. I think it becomes quite a formal process.

Often I’ll be working on something and I really will be struggling with it, I don’t like it and then suddenly I will just find a way that it works. So it might be that with an etching I decided to put on an aquatint or I’ll hand colour one or I’ll put a second plate on. It might be a case of disguising the first or second plate, or making a new second plate. With a drawing it might be just carrying on until it’s done.

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WR: So that creates tension in the actual piece of work.
BS: In the actual piece of work, which is suppose reflects some of the tension that I consider when thinking about the space. So yes, I would never do preparatory drawing for that reason.

WR: That’s interesting. I’m sure people looking at your work would assume that there are reams of planning drawings before you start a final piece, but the working out is all on the plate?
BS: Yes, when you look at one of my prints they look like they’re quite well planned, but they’ve got a freshness to them that I know they wouldn’t have if the energy
had gone into the planning. I would be bored if I had to do it a second time. I’m excited by drawing because I want to try and understand. I’m using the drawing to try and understand the structure and to work it out, I’d be looking at all these different photographs and thinking “Okay, that goes there and that goes there. So that must be like that.” I’m drawing that and then it’s through drawing that I discover more and then realise that actually I’m doing it a bit ‘wrong’ and maybe I should have the lines here or there. And all of that is fun and exciting. It’s there in the drawing. If I then tried to do it again I would be bored, therefore the picture would be boring, I think.

I don’t think I feel a need to distinguish between the drawings and the prints. I mean, I’m drawing, it doesn’t matter what I’m drawing on. With print certain things that you touch (with your hand), such as the plate, get discarded at some point. The plate becomes an intermediate part of the whole process. Because I find drawing quite hard, it’s always funny when I’m looking at them because they look so finished and I just think “Oh, yes, I did that,” but I’ll spend a lot of time on it. You know, when you’re procrastinating - I suddenly find myself just getting up and going to buy some biscuits, or deciding I need to put the kettle on again - so they take a lot of time. I always come backwards and forwards to them. I would normally do a drawing over the space of a week or more. Once I’ve made a decision, I’ll sit down and do a lot - the decision’s been made and then I just have to work it out. It’s the decision making that I find is the important part. And sometimes it’s monotonous; sometimes I’ll do lots and lots of lines. If I’m going to show a particular section with lines and then it’s just a matter of sitting down, making sure there’s a good radio programme on and then it becomes a process. Once I’ve made the decision, then it just becomes a task like inking up a plate. But then again I quite like that. That was part of the drawing process - that bit of time where your brain can just relax with the image.

And actually that’s a very important thing that I love about print making, is spending so much time with your images in different forms and at different levels of engagement. And sometimes learning something from it; you’re seeing it in a certain light. I love having that time to reflect. I’m not very good at sitting down and thinking intentionally; I’m good at letting things slowly work through the subconscious, which is one of the reasons I like to
have quite a lot of backwards and forwards - do the work, go away, come back and often I’ve made decisions without realising it by the next day.

Quite often I’ll be working on quite a few things. At the moment, for example, I’ve just finished some drawings, I’m just starting on this 3-D stuff and my plan for next week is to start working on some etchings as well. I’ll probably try and timetable myself a bit; I’ll say “Tuesday and Wednesday I’m working on etchings,” but I like to be able to go backwards and forwards and I think it’s partly because I need thinking time. I just need a break.

WR: The notion of time is interesting for an artist, because drawing is quite a demanding process. You’re so closely involved with the mark that you’re making and once you start working on a plate the time consuming processes, such as waiting for it sitting in the acid do give you time breaks. I wondered if time might be an important factor in why drawers feel comfortable with etching because it gives you the breathing space?

BS: That’s definitely true for me.

This part of the interview took a much broader approach towards all the factors that may impact on Bronwen’s etching and drawing practice.

WR: Could you tell me about your influences?

BS: I’ve looked at the work of the Russian constructivists; I did my dissertation on Utopia which in my thinking is a place which doesn’t exist. The reason I started thinking about it in relation to my work is because I was making non-existent maquettes of places, I was making a place which didn’t exist. I had thought about whether Utopia as a word was relevant in contemporary art. It was interesting to look at other people’s art who were looking at the environment around them, thinking about does this place exist and comparing that to Russian constructivists who were working on Utopian themes and they were genuinely trying to design places that never did actually exist, but they were designing for a utopian dream and I found that fascinating. In more realistic terms of my work – I often look at the built world and I wonder if what is currently in our world is imaginable to the people who designed it. I like the thought of a city being just a collection of different people’s ideas of the future and they’ve all come together in a jumbled un-planned way. I like what I’m drawing and what’s around me. Some of it is
modern looking, but old and crumbling and I like thinking about when it was being planned and what it was supposed to be. Thinking about what it is like now, the building now is not what it was, it's not always a wonderful thing anymore. I like using the word utopia as a non-place, it could be good, it could be perfect and it could be awful.

The etchings are not exactly an interpretation but they’re my exploration of that place and I’m using my own hand and my own drawing to explore it and then it becomes whatever I happen to draw.

WR: Emma Stibbon has talked about her work as being about dislocation; does that have any resonance for you?

BS: I like that word, I’ll think about it. Frailty and obsolete are words that I also like. I have my own set of concerns that I think about but these words are not things that I disagree with about my work, they’re just words that wouldn’t normally come to my mind. I choose drawing, not words, to describe things, so new words that I haven’t thought of to describe my work are perfectly acceptable to me.

WR: Drawing appears to be a constant for you, how does the 3-D work fit into your practice?

BS: 3-D stuff is a much newer part of my practice; I’ve been experimenting with it for 5 or 6 years now, but I found it incredibly difficult to make things in 3-D. Everything in the studio is the result of a real struggle.

Studio photographs of 3-d explorations
Then I found I could get steel rod and things began to make sense. The problem is that you can’t be as intuitive with the wood, you have to know what you want to make, what angle you need to cut, how many pieces you need – it’s just not how I like to work. I hadn’t worked with metal before but actually it’s much easier to manipulate so I started making pieces that were the same shape and then seeing what they could become – it was exciting. I then combined the rods with a wooden frame, which I could make myself, then I could use the metal shapes and the thread to string them all together and then I could manipulate them. Things just started to happen and that felt the most successful as a way of applying drawing in 3-D, also being able to be more intuitive and also learning and struggling. There were days when I would tie some things up in a certain way, meticulously tying here and here and here and then thinking “right that was crap! Start again.” But when things came together and I could get a series of shapes to just change in front of me by pulling on a thread here or there. Suddenly I had found a way to bring these objects to life and get them to draw for me and things like tension and gravity came into play in what I was making. There’s something happening in the sculptures that happens in my drawings and I like the fact that I’ve been able to achieve these things in two different ways. I like the way metal sections relate to each other and the abstraction of a the place.

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fact that I’ve been able to achieve these things in two different ways. I like the way metal sections relate to each other and the abstraction of a the place. The shadows were good too and that is something I want to spend more time with – what shadows can do. For those reasons I don’t want to leave them behind; it was such a nice way to create.

_Solar Drive_, detail, plywood, steel, thread, photograph by kind permission of the artist

BS: Everything I make, because of the way I think, leads into something else. One thing isn’t made as inspiration for another but through them I will make more work.

WR: Most of your prints appear to explore the notions of gravity and tension in some way; some are quite gravity defying?

BS: Yes. I’m interested in tension. I really enjoy drawing the buildings were you can see all the tension in the structures, but I learnt more about it by physically playing with it. It wasn’t intentional but I realised I was dealing with the same things in a different way. I don’t consciously take gravity away from the idea but with 2-dimensions you have got so much control over what you make in that little space you can defy gravity you can make things so abstract that you don’t know what the
scale is – if they’re tiny or huge or what the depth is. All of those things I have control over and I don’t do it consciously but it happens.

Drawing is such an enjoyable thing for me to do, I’m very happy on a day when I can just come in to the studio and just draw. But on days when I choose to do something 3-dimensional I’m not happy. I like what happens with 3-D I like the results and I like what I learn but I don’t enjoy the processes as much. I do like the sculpture workshop when I find shapes in the metal pieces – there are definitely moments but it’s more to do with line. That moment where it’s suddenly starting to work is great but all the moments in between when everything can just fall apart – that I do not enjoy. I enjoyed the fact that I have a line that moves in 3-dimensions
This is the 2nd conversation with Bronwen Sleigh. The focus of our discussion on this occasion was the progress made since our previous conversation, following 2 residencies and a major exhibition. Bronwen spent a month at the Banff Centre, Alberta, Canada and 2 weeks at Cove Park, Argyll and Bute, to the west of Glasgow. She prepared and exhibited a body of work for an exhibition, ‘A Fine Line’ at the City Art Centre, Edinburgh, the exhibition will then tour to Inverness and Dumfries through 2018. Key areas of development have been a focus on subject matter in finding that the Kampala imagery continues to provide significantly rich drawing inspiration and the exploration of drawing lines into 3 –dimensions using wire and casting techniques.

We discussed whether Sleigh has rules that she adheres to within her practice. This focused our attention on a large print on the wall and the 4 drawings Sleigh is working on at the moment.

BS: This is one that I’ve printed [and] actually it was an accident, but I liked some of the things that happened, so I printed the second plate upside down on the first one. It was when I was editioning it. Now I’ve cut it into four and I’ve decided to make four drawings on it.
It’s a discovery isn’t it? I do love the sections that you’re getting from cropping that down.

Yes, that’s something that I enjoy as well...there’ll be always accidental prints and I often keep the nice ones and enjoy cropping them down. I often learn a lot from it and I often think that sometimes there’s a simplicity in a smaller section of a print that I should learn from. There’s been lots of times that I’ve thought I’ve made a mistake and I can’t use it, but this time I thought that it was... [a discovery] and I’ll use it. I get to a point with my drawings where I can put them up on the wall and look at them and then change my mind and carry on working on them. I enjoy cropping things down – sometimes there’s a simplicity in a smaller section of a print that I can learn a lot from that.

Do you get tempted to make a larger plate and then cut that down to the section that works best?

I could do that... I always tear down inside the plate edge so I crop within the paper, not the plate. If I was doing an etching I would still keep most of the image, but with the drawing I seem to have a lot more freedom, because they’re one-offs. It’s one of the rules, one of the things I do - it’s an etching so I have to start with a certain size, but I give myself freedom later on. When I work on a smaller scale I’m
more confident about how I place the image, with larger pieces the composition is more spread.

WR: What are the rules that you set yourself? Or we could refer to ‘terms of engagement’, things that you set yourself to do?

BS: I’ve developed ways to abstract the work and that’s the way I work - I could also look at them as rules and looking back at the way I’ve done things that is slowly changing. It’s changing at the moment, but I have some eccentric rules like the one we’ve just discussed. I have to set myself some boundaries otherwise the possibilities are endless. I like being decisive about size and that doesn’t limit me because once I’ve made that decision then I can do the work. The rules that I felt I was fighting against were some of the things that I’ve now gone back to doing. So for example if I’m going to make an etching I’ll think it has to be square but in Canada I printed plates which were cut into shapes to make a sculpture.
Rules mean that I need to allow myself the freedom to do something different, not thinking that a rule is necessarily a bad thing. But at the same time not sticking to something just because it’s what I’m used to doing. I don’t want to make a decision just because it’s a different way of working or because of a perception of what I think I should be doing. The reason for making a decision should be about what I’m working on. With my 3-D work I’m venturing into unknown territory and it’s easier to break rules, because I’ve made fewer of them. It’s interesting to think about what I have done differently during the time in Canada. I’m not someone who makes big changes; I let my work evolve. I might have a big idea that I’m not going to follow my rules anymore but then a small development happens, which for me is quite big. It’s been about being free to experiment and it’s good now to look back at those pieces and to know that it was exciting and that there’s no reason why I shouldn’t be thinking about the little pushes into new directions. With any residency there are some things which have remained and some which I’ve not touched on again, but I will go back to some of them.

WR: Do your rules/terms of engagement impact on your creative process?

BS: I always use a ruler and my drawing materials are pretty standard. The one thing I know which is a real strength for me is the ability to make a fine line and if I want it to be straight then I use a ruler, and with an etching plate that is how I do it. These are basic methods that I found a long time ago that work really well for me and I’ll always come back to that.

There’s a freedom at both ends of the spectrum. At one end – making the sculptures – I’m still learning so there’s a freedom in that something unusual might happen. At the other end – working on an etching plate – I understand very well what I’m doing and I’m capable of making something happen that I want to happen. When I’m using things that are most familiar to me I’ve got more skill and drawing language at my fingertips and that gives me a freedom as well.

For me, it’s very important to have both. If I stick with etching all the time I think it would get dry. It’s the experimental 3-dimensional work that keeps things fresh and I’m really happy that I can make that other work and it will influence the work that I’m most familiar with. It gives me a new way of addressing the same question - all the processes that take me away from the drawing allow me to come back to that work in a slightly different way.
WR: Can you tell me about what you’ve been doing over the last year and the work you’ve been making?

BS: We spoke in February, last year - I was working towards a show of drawings when I saw you, some drawings based on Kampala which continued all year. In April I went to Canada on a residency for a month and my aim was to learn about casting because it’s something I hadn’t done.

BS: It was an intense time of experimenting every day - I was busy running between different workshops - it was great that they were in the same building – and I got a lot done. The intensity of being in a place and having a task and not having anything else to worry about. We didn’t even have to cook and all I had to do was make work so that was very good! We had to do an open studios at the end of the residency which was probably one of the best things because it forced me to the next stage that I hadn’t considered... how would these things that I’ve made be shown? How do they relate to each other? I realised that that was actually a very useful learning exercise for me.

And then you have the greatest thing of all - those other artists who are willing to put their tuppence worth in. We ended up doing a little ‘crit’ session one day; we all went round to each other’s studios, which was amazing, because that was something I don’t get any more.  

Sleigh reflects on The Fine Line touring exhibition and the Cove park residency...

WR: Your process is always about experimenting and investigating isn’t it so the work might still be progressing rather than being completely resolved?

BS: Yes, and also throughout this whole experience, making all of this 3D work has dramatically influenced the 2D work as well. One thing that I was happy with The Fine Line show is that I managed to have 2D work and 3D work that related to each
other. They were completely inter-twined, neither could exist without the other. That’s something that I feel within all of this that I’ve been doing; I feel that there’s some different ways of working that have come out of it which maybe, to you, won’t seem that big but to me they feel relatively big.

WR: You haven’t been back to Kampala?
BS: No, I haven’t been back. I don’t think I will go back, which is a shame, because I think I would benefit from going back but it’s so far away I can’t possibly do that, and I’ve got lots of photographs. There are two reasons I want to continue working on it. One is because I’m very interested in the way that the city has developed to western cities. Some of the architecture is in a really different style which is interesting – there are practical things such as all these interesting shaped windows with shades to protect them from the sun.

And the other reason is because I’m enjoying the flow between 2D and 3D and there’s some buildings which I’m still working on, that I am interested in and I don’t really want to end that. I want those buildings to continue, to carry on, linked to this show.

Those are the two reasons I’ve decided to stick with Kampala. In fact, when I was on my residency I changed my mind. I thought right I’ll stop that and I started thinking about making work from something else and then I think I got back to my studio I realised ‘no, I’m not finished with this yet’.

WR: Good to still have all that potential to explore.
BS: Yes, and maybe things have changed slightly in that often I think I’m going to do an image of this and then I’ll move on to something else. But with the backwards and forwards process, I realised that I’ve been happier sticking with one building and continuing to push that one particular form that I’ve found interesting. That’s something that is a bit different at the moment which is one of the reasons I don’t want to stop.

WR: Can we talk some more about the significance of the place? The last time we met we discussed the unfamiliar, the non-place, the utopian idea. Is that still a relevant idea?
BS: When I talked about that last time, it was a way that I’ve contextualised my work. I think the things I think about more are ideas about the planning. Whether the city has worked out as planned. I’m interested in the thought of a city space being a mixture of lots of different plans and ideas at different points in time, so the fact that I make a non-existent place that I’m working from is in there, it’s true, but I would say it’s not something that’s at the forefront of my mind in the way that some of those other things are.

But these other things are. I do think about planning; how we live in space, how it looks now, how it was supposed to look. That’s all definitely in my head when I’m looking at place. When I’m looking at somewhere, for example the Banff centre [in Canada], I did think the word utopia came up in my head when I was there because it was an artist utopia. It started out with artists coming together and being creative and it’s grown into a huge centre with amazing buildings in the middle of the mountains.

How it’s come about, how it was made and how it was planned is definitely a big part of what I’m thinking about when I’m there. Then you’ve got the opposite of that which is looking at a place like Kampala which is so different. I’d like to understand more about how a city like that comes about. So, you could tell it’s very haphazard but I think that is relevant.

Another example would be looking at a dam where it’s all about humans harnessing natural energy, controlling and using it for our own development and advantage. So every structure I look at I’m quite excited by humans activities and how we make this thing, how we’re piloting something or building something or planning.

WR: And before you’d described the notion of humans inhabiting somewhere that’s really difficult and asking why have we tried to settle in such places?

BS: Yes, I think that was Iceland? I quite like that. I also liked a mountain called Sulphur Mountain that was close to the Banff centre. You could get a chairlift up to the top or you could walk, and they’d built this enormous complex on the top of this mountain. I thought that was just fascinating. It was three storeys, there’s a Starbucks! I quite like that human endeavour that we’ve decided to do that.

The decision making of human beings is maybe the underlying question I have in all of my work because I’m looking at spaces that people have decided to make and build and I think some of them are incredible; credible, incredible and bizarre at
the same time. Personally I wonder why they have built an ugly structure on top of
a mountain but then at the same time there are all those people who would never
experience the top of that mountain if it wasn’t for that complex with Starbucks in
it.

WR: You’ve talked a lot about rules that you’ve set yourself and that you’ve tried to
break away from. Do you think you could describe the general rules that you work
within for your drawing?

BS: I have to set myself some boundaries otherwise the possibilities are endless. I quite
like something like making a decision about size, which doesn’t seem to limit me
too much because it’s a decision that needs to be made and then once I’ve made
that decision, then I can make the work. It’s more been allowing myself the
freedom to do something different if I feel like it - a rule isn’t necessarily a bad
thing. I think it’s that perception of what I think I should be doing that shouldn’t be
the reason. The reason I should be working is because I’m working, of course
there’s going to be this big set of rules that surround that, or ‘terms of
engagement’ is a much better phrase, but I think that I’ve fallen into the trap of
thinking, ‘I don’t do that. That’s not me’. And I think particularly with the 3D stuff,
I’m venturing out into a bit of an unknown territory so it’s easier to break rules
because I’ve made less of them.

I think I let my work evolve, being free to experiment and yes, I think it’s been good
for me today to look at some of those things and think well yes, that was exciting -
these things that were little pushes in a different direction and like any residency,
some things have remained and other things I’ve not touched on again and I think I
will.

You pointed out the fact that I always use a ruler and you know what my drawing
materials are and that’s pretty much standard.

WR: How do your terms of engagement or your rules impact on your creative thinking?
Does that give you limitations or does it give you freedoms? And so, what you’re
starting to say there is that actually sometimes it works very well for you, the rule
and the straight line and the edge actually gives you freedom.

BS: Yes because I think there’s freedom in both ends. There’s the one end of the
spectrum which is making the sculptures and I’ve got a freedom in that something
unusual might happen. Then there’s the other end where I’m working on etching
plate where I understand very well what I’m doing so I’m more capable of making something that I actually want to happen, happen. I think I’ve talked a lot about process and the fact that print means that that’s never fully possible and I think the creative process of drawing itself, - well, I’m never completely in control of what’s happening but I think yes when I’m using the things that are most familiar to me I’ve got more skill and language, visual language at my fingertips so I’ve got more freedom as well.

WR: A broader vocabulary if you talk about the language of the making?
BS: Yes. For me it’s very important to have both. I think if I stuck with etching all the time I think it would get dry quite quickly because it’s the other end that keeps things fresh. I’m happy that I make this [3-D] work and that influences the part that I’m more familiar with.

WR: Yes, so it brings something new to it? It opens your eyes to what you’re doing?
BS: I suppose it gives me a new way of…a new way of addressing the same question where with the same method but because of all the different processes and thoughts I’ve been through away from the drawing, I’ve come back to it in a slightly different way. I don’t know if that’s a good way of describing it but yes.

WR: Does your drawing respond to your tools or do your tools lead your drawing?
BS: Let’s think what tools. There’s the ruler and the etching point… the work has to respond to it in that it wouldn’t be what it is without those things, but the tool part of etching, which I suppose my main thing, is so second nature now. There’s the ruler, the plate but it’s a bit like a pencil and a paper. There’s other parts of print making that I think are much more relevant like the fact that [etching] reverses your drawing on a plate. You can’t fully see what you’re drawing so the fact that when it’s gone through that process it’s been etched and then you print it, then you see so there’s much bigger parts of the process than the tools for me I think that are integral to the way I work.

So, for this drawing, for example, I’m drawing on top of an etching and there’s different decision-making points. It’s a long process of building something up but it’s still [pause], it’s a different experience than an etching, because of those points of having to make decisions, and then the same with sculpture. A whole different ball game again.
WR: So, all those different decision points help to move the drawing along at whatever point it’s at?

BS: I guess depending on the process I’m using, the decisions have to be made at different points and the decisions will be different because I will achieve different things at different points. Like it could be that I do the first plate of an etching and it’s not what I wanted or what I thought it was going to be so then I have to continue... change things a bit... I have to be responding to what I already have and how to resolve that.

WR: So, each different method you use, each different material you explore allows you to develop the drawing or the image, responding to it at a different point?

BS: Yes, and in a way drawing, drawing like I am now it’s more intense because you can’t have the breaks to the timing [that are in] print making.

BS: One of the nice things about etching is that you can print all sorts of different versions of it and take notes and you can always go back but with drawing you can’t and lithography you can’t either. Etching’s quite unique I think for print making.

WR: Is it relevant to say that you embark on a piece without the precise idea of the outcome?

BS: Very relevant for me, yes.

WR: Does the finishing point creep up on you or take you by surprise and what do you take into account when deciding a piece of works finished?

BS: I think...I think it can do both. It can creep up on me and almost creep up on me!

WR: What do you take into account when deciding a works finished?

BS: [pause] I’m not sure what it is. Let’s think about it... well this is what I was doing the other day actually. So, this is for the show and I think it often does take me by surprise actually because [pause]...often I don’t quite know where it’s going and then sometimes it gets to a point where I feel that it’s starting to make sense - I’m trying to pull out what I want. I don’t know what it is that I want to be important in a drawing... but there’ll be a point where I’m going to start to try to make it happen.
Sleigh mulls over the processes needed to finish the Nile Avenue drawing

BS: I think I’m going to add something to the white bit. I think it’s maybe too flat at the moment, but I think that crept up on me. I put it up on the wall, and I suddenly realised what to do. I think I’d probably do a tiny bit more to it... I’m thinking about doing something on this plane here maybe a light grey to give it something. Yes it does quite often creep up - suddenly I do something and I think okay that’s it. I always think, okay that’s as far as I can take it.

WR: That’s an interesting aspect of your practice that very open-end approach to it. Like you say you’re constantly evolving.

BS: Well I quite like the freedom to let go of something as well.

WR: Your drawings tend to develop quite often without a lot of pre-planning. Does the drawing make itself or are you still drawing it?

BS: Both. I can’t say it makes itself because I am drawing it, but the decisions that I make come from what I’ve done already; what’s already there influences what comes next.

WR: Yes. So, the drawing starts to suggest its next move? And then sometimes you take back over again?
BS: Yes. The biggest factor in the decision-making process is what is already on a piece of paper. But that’s partly because I’m drawing over a very heavily etched piece of paper and sometimes it’s not the case. At some point it’s very much to do with me and whatever I’m working from. Now what is on the piece of paper is what I’m working from.

WR: So, it’s not the original photograph of the Kampala flats anymore, it’s now what’s on the paper and the image.

BS: Yes, well that’s another decision that I’m thinking about with this. You know I could continue this as a study of, and continuation of, this form which I’ve been looking at repeatedly. Or, I have been thinking I could introduce something else and this could be a background. Yes I guess, I take over so I’ve got a choice about how I want to proceed with it. But again, that choice will probably be influenced by what’s happening. If there’s something exciting happening...
 Bronwen Sleigh at her Glasgow studio  
Interview 3 – 16th Feb 2018

Following the first interview in 2017 Sleigh expressed the value in having time to reflect on what we had talked about. On my visit to her in 2018 we decided to split our time into two interviews on consecutive days to allow for some overnight reflection. This is, therefore, the third interview with Bronwen Sleigh.

BS: There’s two...for me there’s two main points of drawing. One is where I’m trying to work out what I want to do which is the difficult part. For that part I maybe get a little bit lost in it - I couldn’t have the radio on or any music, I need to be very focussed. But then the repetitive part, the part where I’m drawing, the decision-making part, that’s the bit I find hard. Once I’ve made a decision, for example to repeat all those lines, then I guess it could be meditative because I don’t have to think that hard, because the decision making’s done for the time being.

WR: There are some other aspects of making the work which are more methodical?

BS: Yes, I make a decision and then there’s you know maybe an hour or two’s worth of doing the same thing. It’s the time I have to listen to radio and it’s part of my life and routine actually that’s important because it is when I catch up on the news and that’s important in its own way. I enjoy that time for that reason that I’ve got that time to let my brain think about other things too.

WR: So, I wonder if when you’re making those marks and those lines which you’re saying is quite a methodical thing to do, does it allows room for you to start to see other possibilities for the drawing.

BS: I think yes, I make a decision and then I do something quite methodical, and every now and then within that I’ll take a step back and have a look at what’s happening. There’s my plan of what I think I want to do and there’s the reality of what it looks like and they’re normally two different things so as I’m doing that I’ll...I’ll look back. It might be that half way through I change my mind. I might think actually no I’m going to stop... what’s happening there with that edge is interesting and I hadn’t seen it before but I’m just going to change my plan and do that or it might not happen.

WR: So you start working on it again and see where that takes you.
BS: I notice that when I was reading through the notes last time that I used the word sub-conscious quite a lot but what I mean is, I am thinking about it, but not consciously. I’m not thinking that line and that line are interesting, there’s something that happens that’s more intuitive, so I’m not fully aware of the decision making but its still decision making.

WR: There’s a lot written about what actually is going on in the creative process when artists are making but it is very difficult to pin down isn’t it?

BS: Yes. But I think definitely the two different...the two happen. Sometimes I’m more conscious about how I want to try and resolve something and sometimes less so. What I would say from what we talked about yesterday, as the image gets closer to being finished I think I’m more able to make some conscious decisions about how I might work. It depends [on the image]. Like we said yesterday sometimes they take me by surprise, sometimes I’m busy doing something and I realise actually I don’t think there’s much else that I need to do so. I enjoy that process.

Yes. I do know from experience that some of the pieces of work that I’ve struggled with most have become the most successful. Where I’ve been forced to push past something that’s really problematic I’ve had to push past my normal way of working there’s still that set of rules or that language that I’m familiar with that I’m using so I suppose it’s only when something doesn’t go quite right and I have to keep going further in a direction that I’m not so sure about that something different might happen which is perhaps why my...the work evolves the way it does rather than being something that is you know, I don’t have an idea that’s really different and then go out to achieve that. I let it and that method of working take the work forward.

WR: Yes. It’s a really interesting process. Your process is really quite different to most of the people I’m talking to because you’re not aiming for something which is a recognisable interpretation of a place in terms of the tradition of landscape, a drawing, or an etching. Because you’re interpreting it a little bit further and that’s not to say that anybody else is actually doing a literal interpretation. Quite often they’re not. It’s their distillation of remembering of an experience, but I think you do take yours further away from that literal representation of topographical or factual accuracy. I think you’re probably all making work according to your own experience of place.

BS: Yes, I would say that’s true of me.
WR: But those interpretations are very varied which is what’s so interesting.

BS: Often I don’t know what the buildings are though which is another interesting discussion I had with somebody the other day. My work is about the building, and it’s about the space that the buildings create, that I’m in. So, I think it’s about the city space as a whole rather than about one particular structure even if it’s just one building that I’m focussing on. It’s about my experience of built space.

I think about the collection of architect’s intentions rather than one in particular and how cities have grown to be a mish-mash of falling down, old buildings that were probably initially intended to be something quite different. Glasgow’s a typical example of all the 60s developments which have since been knocked down, but initially they were utopian in their thinking; trying to imagine this clean perfect way of living. It didn’t work at all and there’s a strange collection of Victorian building and random 60s buildings. Maybe the 60s building of that era is more interesting for me because that thinking of planning, changing, coming up with a new vision of how people were supposed to live and it not necessarily fitting in. It’s planned for totally practical reasons, but it still makes the world that we live in, it’s still part of the world that we now see as normal... we’re living in this world and it’s about what we’ve currently got as a result of all these ideas.

WR: So, one of the last things that I was going to put to you was the idea of being a problem finder rather than a problem solver. The idea is that if you’re just solving problems, you’re reacting to problems that already exist. If you’re a problem finder, you’re looking to create a problem that you then have to solve; you’re looking for the challenge in the problem all the time. It seems to me that your three-dimensional work in particular, you’re doing that. Or you find a problem with the etching or the drawing and then you explore that in a different medium again, so you find another problem.

BS: I think that seems to be fair. I was just thinking about how I create anything, even my drawing. I don’t come up with a plan, it’s just an integral part of how I create. I just start and therefore because it’s not planned out, almost instantly there’s going to be problems with what I’m doing, but I enter into that process fully aware of the fact that that’s how it’s going to go. I enter into that and it makes me feel quite free because whatever I’ll just work with it... it makes perfect sense to me that I’m
a problem finder and trying to solve those problems that I’ve made is my way of creating.

My sincere thanks to Bronwen Sleigh for her hospitality, peppermint tea, but most of all for the thought that was put into all her responses, revealing an intellectually enquiring mind, and a truly creative problem finder.
Interviews with Ian Chamberlain ARE - excerpts

Interview 1 – 14th July, 2016, in the Print Studio, Bower Ashton, UWE

Ian Chamberlain references redundant technologies in his work such as Cold War listening stations and coastal defence structures, celebrating what man can achieve and presenting these iconic objects as totemic monuments. Ian travels to these places, records what he finds and works on sketches in the studio. Then, using research time combined with his own time Ian translates the sketches into highly worked, intricate portraits of the monuments using a wide variety of etching techniques. He embraces the traditional; aquatint, drypoint and hard grounds and combines these with more experimental techniques such as the use of Dremmel tools. Ian kindly prepared a number of etchings and state proofs for the interview; these were laid out on the tables and included the small ‘Dome’ series (below), the ‘Mirror’ triptych of etchings and the new ‘Goonhilly’ pair of etchings. Prior to the interview I had given Ian a list of words entitled ‘Drawing is..., drawing can be...’ from which he had selected a number of words and this was our starting point for this conversation.

Wendy Rhodes: What is drawing for you?
Ian Chamberlain: I’m looking at the ‘Drawing is...’ list here and the ones that jump out for me and relate to me closely are the idea of ‘searching’ and ‘investigative’. But the one that, if I could put it in bold type, would be ‘physical’. For me drawing and using the plate provides that physicality, that energy - battle, wrestle; backwards and forwards; to-ing and fro-ing. That also relates to one of the quotes on the ‘Drawing can be...’ list which is ‘something unfolding’, for me it’s something evolving over time. The transformative journey which is probably shown in some of the state proofs which I’ve laid out which is how images change over time.

Proof states, a small selection. Photograph by the author
WR: You’ve got a lot of proofs laid out?
IC: I just brought a few in; I thought they would be useful. Drawing is also ‘investigative’. For the sake of the recorded evidence I also put ‘observational’, but something I’m fighting and wrestling with myself at the moment is trying to make the work less figurative/observational and I want to push the work so that it becomes a bit more abstract again. That’s how I started and the work’s become more figurative and observational and I want it to go back out again now because I feel like I’ve done with this (gesturing at the ‘Mirror’ series on the table)

WR: Your work has a photorealistic quality to it hasn’t it?
IC: It’s gone that way – I like it and I’m happy with it. The next step for me to evolve is to use some of those realistic qualities; surface qualities but to use that within a more abstracted form

WR: Are you going to look for abstraction in the initial drawing or are you going to allow it to come through the actual process [of etching]?
IC: It needs to come with the drawing now.

WR: Can I ask you about the subject matter of these etchings and the physical nature of drawing these objects?
IC: The subject matter definitely links to this word of physicality of that surface quality - how I retain that, explain it or display that surface and describe it. The two acoustic sound mirror pieces that I have here show that the actual surface of that object has gone through wear and tear by the elements and I almost feel as though I’m doing the same thing again on the plate to achieve that.

Photographs of sound mirror proofs by the author
WR: Are there any other words from the ‘Drawing is…’ list which you identify with?
IC: Obsessive is important (laughs). Definitely important. It’s that layering of image. It’s also my competitive nature as well... It’s incredibly self-indulgent as well! As with most people in the creative arts; it’s our world. It is methodical as well, but it’s also cathartic for me.

WR: Are we talking now about what etching is to you rather than what drawing is?
IC: Etching is more important to me. I thought at one point I enjoyed the drawing more than the etching but I don’t. The thing is now the drawing has got a bigger role to play than it had in the past.

WR: That’s interesting now that you’ve got to this point, would you say that you are now producing etchings as well as you can for this type of image?
IC: For me technically, and for what the process can do, my present work is technically the best I’ve done so the only way I think that I could take them further is through the initial drawings that I did.

WR: If you push the initial drawing further do you expect that to throw up a new set of technical issues?
IC: I want the new drawings to include the dynamic, that’s what I want them to be. I think these existing prints are strong and dynamic and graphic, but when I initially started doing these I used a lot of negative space within the objects, the ‘Transmission’ series used a lot of negative space but then the subject matter dictated that it wasn’t relevant to do that. There is no negative space in these mirror and dome forms; they’re solid. The thing is now I’m coming back out of that because I’ve been doing these for two years and I want some more linear aspects or a combination of linear and tonal. Which is why I want to make some of these things up, but that’s the hard bit, making it up.

WR: It will be about bringing in the imaginative or the intuitive and trusting that rather than being literal.
IC: And that’s where I hope the drawing will come in because I will be able to be more intuitive with the initial drawings and for that they have to be quicker.

WR: Your burnisher is going to become part of the physicality actually on the surface of the plate?
IC: That’s the thing I use a burnisher as much as I do a scribe. It’s something unfolding, it’s one step forward two steps back, and it’s continually a process of layering.
WR: Do you see yourself as drawing more on the plate than in the preparatory work? Where do you place your drawing now?

IC: Most of the drawing happens on the plate at the moment because of time, and because I can get a bit too analytical over some things. If I can invest a bit more time with the prep drawings at the beginning I think I’ll end up with a looser image – that’s the plan. And hopefully that will speed things up. Although process wise these ones have actually been quite quick for me! Usually it takes two months per plate but I’ve managed to do these in just over two months so that is a lot quicker and it’s just from having learnt the process. I expect that the skills that I’ve learned will be vital later on; I don’t want to throw everything out, but I want to get looseness back again.

IC: The subject matter will always be there; technology, defunct forms, ‘man-made’ objects touching upon brutalism, social architecture and the military, because it’s what I love and what I’m interested in. Some of the imagery has been superseded and defunct so it’s a historical document, as it were. The other thing is a celebration of these objects and forms, the love of the Goonhilly telescope. It’s me looking at it in a pseudo romanticist way – these are amazing things, look at what people can do. I try to describe these as monuments which is why they’re isolated.
The background of the subject matter won’t change, but I think the way I look at it will differ.

Goonhilly telescope proofs. Photograph by the author

WR: There’s a very strong sense of place in all of your work, they’re of a very specific place?

IC: Yes, and I want to do them justice. It’s a responsibility, especially with a subject matter that is so well photographed. What can you do with etching that photography can’t do? And for me that’s surface quality. It’s why it’s integral that they are printed and that they are made with this process of etching.

WR: You have spoken before about sound and the atmosphere of the place where you do your initial documentation. Is that something you will bring in to the imaginative aspect of the drawings? Could it bring in an evocative aspect?

IC: Yes, yes...It would be nice to use that, how - I don’t know yet. It was really important with the Maunsell Seafort work because of where it was. And to a certain extent these mirrors because they were so isolated and cut off. The sense of place was less important with the Goonhilly ones – you get a sense of place because of the object but it’s isolated again, on a headland. All of my places tend to be quite out of the way which is what I enjoy.

WR: They’re cut off from the landscape in many respects by being on a headland?

IC: Yes headlands, swamplands out in the ocean. The only one of these which is which is in the middle of the countryside is the Lovell telescope, but all the others are pretty cut off. I like the idea of frontiers and out-posts, another idea on the back burner but these ideas overlap. The photographer Donovan Wylie is a strong influence. He did a beautiful book on outposts; an early warning system in Canada, the army observation towers in Northern Ireland in the troubles and the temporary
structures built as out-posts in the Kandahar region of Afghanistan. They’re beautiful and it got me thinking about what was visible and what was hidden. I need the drawing to help me investigate the idea because if it’s not put down in drawing it won’t get done.

WR: Drawing as ‘searching’? It sounds to me as though your drawing is not just about searching for accuracy of representation when you’re in a place, but will now be about searching for something new?

IC: And searching for new ways of recording or showing. There’s always something different; an angle or a plane or a tone that I can expand on. That’s always there ticking away - the looking for something else.

WR: Is drawing a way of accessing your inner thoughts, an inner world?

IC: That will probably be never relevant in anything I do visually because I work in a cathartic way; I work through my own thoughts – sometimes personal. It’s probably where the obsessiveness comes from as well. At certain stages, not all the stages, but at certain stages you can be there for several hours [etching] and you do tune out – or tune in! I like that as a way of thinking about other things and that’s probably why I’m able to spend the time on it because I get something out of it not just another artwork. I wind down and take stock.

WR: On a meditative level?

IC: Yes, and I get that from this (indicating the etchings), not the drawing which I find incredibly stressful, incredibly stressful. Not the etchings - because once I’ve got the form I know the stages that I have to go through and things come up in between, but with drawing the process is more vulnerable.

WR: Does the stressful process detract from the final product?

IC: When I saw the Babel print; the final product it was worth it... Funnily enough the drawing was on really cheap paper but I prefer drawing on that because the graphite could skid and slide. That whole process shows how vulnerable drawing is. I always find drawing stressful, wherever I am – I just don’t like it.

WR: But you still draw?

IC: Yes!

WR: So etching is cathartic and more relaxing?

IC: Yes, and your studio environment will help that – just changing my working environment at home which I’ve done quite recently has made things so much
easier I’ve got my own little space and it means I can leave things out; I can have 2 or 3 things on the go and I’m creating double the amount of work that I was before.

Ian will first print a whole edition of a plate in its first finished state, and then he will re-work a plate and offer a new edition in a second state. This is an intriguing idea which allows the artist to reassess an image and offer an alternative understanding of an image without the need to start all over again.

Small section of one of the Goonhilly proofs, photograph by the author

*We look at one of the Goonhilly prints (left) at a section on the concrete base which IC feels needs more work.*

WR: The use of the spit bite on these etchings is interesting; you’re drawing with the acid?

IC: Yes drawing and it is chance because with the ferric it’s so much harder to tell how far the bite has taken, so you close your eyes to a certain extent – it would be easier with nitric, but through experience I know to a certain extent what will work. But I don’t want to overdo it.

WR: You don’t want to have to burnish those areas?

IC: No I want a water stain effect but the good thing is that if it goes wrong – 5 minutes with the brasso will sort it out, but I’m hoping it does its thing! I’m looking forward to that.
WR: Does the amount of time between one process and the next create a rhythm which starts to develop? Does the necessary time out from the etching studio between processes allow etching to be a more relaxing process?

IC: No, because I want to get it done. I’m probably impatient. Recently I’ve had 3 weeks of working in the print room, working pretty much every day continually and because I work on 2 or 3 plates at a time there’s always something else I can be doing. While ones drying another one is in the acid. That’s how I like it and that’s where the physicality comes in. With the big plates its hard work, you know about it when you’ve done a day

I like it however if I’ve put a ground on and there’s a weekend and I can’t get back in the print room for 2 days. I can slow down. It’s quite ironic, given the images I make, but I’m quite impatient by nature.

WR: You wouldn’t think so to look at your prints. I don’t see an impatient person...

IC: No, but I keep thinking of the word ‘speed’, but I don’t think I mean speed; I want to realise things quickly to get on to the next bit but I don’t really want things to be done fast!

WR: I’m interested in how you use drawing in your proof stages, some of which are covered in multicolour codes, lines and notation

Ian moves back to the table where a sequence of larger ‘Mirror’ etchings are laid out.

Photographs of annotated proofs by the author
IC: These have my little coding system. So B for areas to burnish or knock back, ‘D’ for detail meaning I have to put another ground on to reinforce it and ‘A’ is for the aquatint. I started doing it to speed things up, adding little notes for what the etchings might need and then it helped to start making decisions.

WR: Is there a particular set of etching techniques that you use, what is usually your starting point?

IC: Its often aquatint but it all depends on the subject. The smaller ‘Transmission’ ones all started with line but the aquatint starting point all comes from the small charcoal studies that I made. There’s no linear element in those, the subject matter does dictate how it started and what is relevant. The tone gives the form and I used line to bring in surface quality; showing the layers that get built up over time. The thing is loads of people don’t know what’s going on in the etchings; there’s a lot more in them than people realise. Sometimes I can spend two or three hours doing the drawing and then I bite it and it’s not all that noticeable, but by using a bit of brasso I can knock a section back and that line comes through again. It’s a battle, a wrestle.
This is the 2nd interview with Ian Chamberlain. The focus of our discussion on this occasion was the development of the Atlantic Wall project following a research visit with Darren Nisbett in November 2017, the position of drawing and material involvement.

Wendy Rhodes: I’d like to begin with a chat about your new Atlantic wall work...
Ian Chamberlain: It’s in it’s infancy, I’ve had one trip to France so far which was a real eye opener in many different ways and the big difference for me was in questioning what my role was... what am I going to do with these structure because they were amazing, I found more inspiration than I anticipated, which I also found daunting when I got back and looked at the footage and began to think “How do I do justice to these forms?” The thing which was slightly annoying was that there was so much graffiti on them, but in a weird way me cleaning them up is a part of the work. But actually just experiencing the wind and the rain – it was brutal it was 60 mph winds and the camcorder footage I took really captures that and increasingly sound plays a part. The fact that when I’m working in the studio I’ll put the sound on just to hear the wind again. If I went back I’m thinking about how I could really emphasise the sound. I think it goes hand in hand with some of the music I listen to, soundscape, minimalist composers, little things which all contribute to the story.

The rubbings were also far more effective than I thought they would be because I’ve always been a little bit cynical of that as a process but actually as I was doing them I really enjoyed it and when I go to Denmark in a month’s time I’m going to take a bigger roll [of paper] and try and wrap one up! I like the idea of just trying and already that has had an impact. I’m doing a couple of etchings at the moment and I’ve been pushing wood into the soft ground in reaction to the rubbings. I started doing some drawings, but I got bored of the drawing and I need to go into etching to bounce the dialogue between the two, but now I’m very aware that I need to do some more drawing! ...Sometimes drawing was hard, I did do some drawing but they were pretty (IC takes a moment to find the right word) crude and I think I need to liberate myself a bit more.
WR: So by saying the drawing was crude what do you mean by that? Did you not get enough information from them?

IC: They were simple, simple. Some of them I’ve worked on back in the studio and I quite liked that... But it was, yes, it was hard. I physically couldn’t do it because of the wind and I forgot bulldog clips to keep my book open. I didn’t have anything to keep the sketchbook open so everything was all over the place, and I couldn’t believe that I’d come all that way and the only thing that I’d forgotten was a bulldog clip. I couldn’t put a weight on it because the wind would blow it off.

IC: Dunkirk was quite amazing, because it put me back there with the kind of [pause] the expanse of that beach, and then you can’t help but think of the troops on that beach and how vulnerable they really were, and now it’s a tourist place. It’s quite exposed. They had nowhere, nowhere to go. And all right, the bunkers were built after that, but I was looking up at the sky and there would have been planes flying above there looked at the horizon, you’d have seen ships, you know, quite eerie, actually... I’m not celebrating political ideals; if anything I’m highlighted the failure of an ideology through an architectural form.

WR: They don’t have the intricacy of what you representing before? [the transmission series]

IC: No, they’re actually, in that respect, quite dull. But also there’s some that are broken and collapsed on themselves, and you can see where the French have tried to demolish them and left it halfway through, and...

WR: And this is the story that you’re talking about, that you’re telling?

IC: Yes, I’m saying something --, raising a flag, I suppose there is a very loose narrative, but it’s more the idea of blockades, symbols of a past, ‘we will move through this’, and it also links with my other interest of my work, which is about communication.

WR: Can we just go back a little bit to the sound and the video footage that you were taking? So what were the sounds that you were experiencing?
IC: Wind, sea and sand. In my face! [laughs]. Making my face sore and I’m not joking, I had a really sore face, it was horrible. What I found really interesting was the shapes the sand was making around the dunes as the wind pushed them around. [The wind] whistled through them. Some of them acted as tunnels, there’s some footage of me walking through one and coming out the other side. They are about the monolithic, the monument. So the good thing about the trip was that reaffirmed that. What I liked about the sound and the wind was the realisation that that is non-stop, it is continually battering and weathering and ageing those structures. And I think this constant erosion is inevitable. Atom by atom, molecule by molecule, they are being degraded – which was one thing. But then you’re there looking at them and you’re feeling them and touching them, and they’re so well made, but they are going. And then, it was really nice seeing bits of metal, the way the reinforced concrete was coming through; rusting. But it was more seeing the internal structure of it, which in turn then got me interested in how they were made, the forming, the sounds of the sand hitting things. The wind, the whistle. The one thing that I still remember is the flapping of my hood - constantly in my ear – ch, ch, ch, ch... And luckily I had this woollen hat with a peak, and I’m so glad there was a peak, because if there wasn’t the sand would have hurt even more. So it was an experience.

WR: So are you starting to draw new parallels between the erosion on the plate and the erosion on the monument?

IC: Totally. I think the parallels were there; it just became more concise in my head. It almost seemed too easy, because etching is basically erosion, and I thought, ‘let’s have some of that!’ But actually, that’s what I’m thinking, it works... it’s a good process, it’s the ideal process. For me there is no process I could do this with that is as well suited. In litho I can’t get into that surface, that violence. I think that’s one thing I am going to have to do and be a little less tentative about.

WR: We’ve talked through the process, the research, getting to the location, making the drawings. Would you want to be more selective next time?
IC: Yeah. And I think it was the energy when I was there was, because of the weather, it was so powerful and I’ve tried to do that back in the studio, just bring some of that energy back into the work, which could manifest itself in either being braver, or looser marks, or embracing the accident. So I’m trying to use that experience as a way of becoming braver.

WR: So it’s the power of the weather really that stuck with you?

IC: Yeah. And I wasn’t expecting it. I mean, I knew it was going to be windy, but it was quite overwhelming.

WR: And that coupled with the expanse of the place. So was it the scale of everything really in the end?

IC: Yeah. Because... it wasn’t necessarily the scale of the bunkers that impressed me; it was more isolated, on the edge of something, vulnerability, really, which has been heightened by the fact that they’re sinking... or tilting, because they have no foundations.

WR: I see, built on sand, with no foundations? They weren’t expected to last, presumably, at the time.

IC: And the irony is, for me, that they’re an ideal metaphor for failed ideology, because they weren’t built on a solid foundation, and neither was that ideology, because it shifted and changed according to the whim of an individual. And also I think that link is beautiful, and I’ve thought about it, I’ve linked it to the point where it almost sounds too good! But actually, it’s true. It’s just irony. I think that synthesis, it reinforced the synthesis between the concept and the process: that’s probably what the trip for me did.

WR: You say you want more risks, do you mean trying to draw quickly, trying to draw in different materials?

IC: I think risks, but abstracting a bit more. I think I need to embrace abstraction. I’m still based in the figurative object, and there will be figurative elements to anchor that. But I think [pause] have some fun with it, really, just kind of bring more of my feelings, emotions into it. I don’t want it to be just recording. It is a historical document, a visual document... The soft ground has been a nice addition, actually, something that wasn’t initially planned, but its gained prominence the more I do it. But I think I could play about a bit more, and not be so fussy about the drawings,
accept that they don’t have to be a thing in their own right, they’re just a part of the body of work.

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IC: I don’t really work in a sketchbook, I can’t, and it’s not really relevant when I’m in the studio.

WR: A sketchbook is only a useful form for some people, isn’t it?

IC: No, and it doesn’t work for everything, does it? For some a sketchbook is vital – brilliant. Like Dave Sully... I just need a pile of paper, and get it up on the wall, and... pull it off, walk on it for a few days... spit on it – I’ve done that a lot actually, because it just gives an erratic mark. Spitting sounds disgusting. Or I’ll have a coffee before and I’ll flick it at it.

WR: Something to work against?

IC: Yeah, very much. I’m not going to do that all the time. But I suppose that’s what I was trying to do with the soft ground I just thought okay, give me something to butt up against, or fight. Like we said before about etching, I find it a wrestle, and it’s a toing and froing, editing, attrition. I think I erase as much as I put down. That’s becoming more relevant, which I quite like.

WR: You can build up the surface then.

IC: Yes, the history. And that evolution for me, is more apparent.

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WR: To quote yourself, is this still true... ‘The print making process takes the image far beyond what I can achieve with drawing’.

IC: Yeah, intensity, graphic intensity, depth. I don’t think drawing can compete with that – well, not the way I draw. When you get that ink loaded on, there’s no
graphite, charcoal, I don’t care what it is, nothing can compete with that. I love the line coming through the aquatint, it’s something I realise I do a lot… I use a line within the aquatint as another mesh to make it even denser. It’s that graphic intensity… And the surface quality.

WR: Yes. Does it also give you that opportunity to let rip which you don’t find in drawing?

IC: I probably let rip in an etching more than I do in a drawing, which is probably what I need to stop, I need to change that.

WR: You need to do it in the drawing?

IC: As well. As I’ve said, I find drawing incredibly stressful, and I still do. I need to find a way, and that’s what I’ve been trying to do with these new drawings, it is altering the way I draw, knowing that it’s going to go direct into the etching process… But the looseness of the etching needs to come into the drawing, yes, it just makes sense now. I think it’s because I spend more time with the etching than I do with a pen.

WR: In etching you proof a plate, you go and do small work on it, and you see the change in the proof stages. Enjoying it’s really hard to actually see that, because it happens so gradually. So does the gradual unfolding of a drawing blind you to some of the state changes that are physically captured through proofing?

IC: That’s probably a fair point. Because you’ll take the proof.

WR: Is that one of the problems of drawing?

IC: Yeah, where you’re suddenly hit with a new chapter almost, so I’m glad, that’s a new part of a story, yeah, with a drawing it’s a slower, gradual… Maybe that’s the problem: it’s too slow, and I need to speed things up.

WR: And you’re the only person who really likes that clean edge as well, aren’t you?

IC: Yeah, I see no excuse for a scruffy edge. You are right. Even on the looser ones I still have to have clean edge.
So what material processes do you enjoy the most, the most important to you? Using a particular type of paper, or a particular type of pencil in drawing, or a tool in etching?

If anything I love my ball burnisher! [Laughs]. And the scraper. Because I think there is, especially with this subject matter, the scraping back and the erasing is as vital as the marking, and they go hand in hand, to the point where the scraping becomes the mark making. I love the aquatint, burnishing aquatint, I do enjoy that. I imagine the [early] stage I’m at with the etching now is actually the bit that I don’t like, I find it quite depressing, because I feel like I’m just getting started. But usually, it may be the next stage or the stage after, is when I feel I’m in it, right, I’m in it now, this is all me now, I’m doing this.

So what have you got on the plate at the moment, what processes?

Burnishing, soft ground, aquatint, hard ground. So I’ve gone through four layers, probably.

But it’s only establishing the basic forms, is it?

Yeah, basically... then something will happen, Okay, that’s better than I thought. And that can suddenly happen within one or two stages.

And that can be tone, can’t it? Light/dark balance.

Yeah, it could be. Generally it’s from the addition of a hard ground or a spit bite. Because usually the burnishing can loosen it again to then go to the next stage which will then tie it. I love my diamond tip, it’s great. That’s the other. My scribe, drawing scribe. You can put up beautiful feathery little lines with it. The dremel still plays a part, less than it used to if I’m honest, it used to loosen, it’s not as much, but it’s still there as a --, usually when I want to give it a bit of welly, so you get the dremel, and then that will lead up to a six-hour, eight-hour bite.

Is there something in the way that the tools feel in your hands, how they balance, or is it what they do to the plates?

It’s what they do to the plate. I’ve got this one scribe that I use, it’s a long, thin one, and it fits very nicely between these two fingers, and I hold two of the flat planes, and I like that because it all locks. I like that because you can get harder marks with it, but then again your elbow will ache, but... [there’s] one wispy little one I’ve got which is quite nice, it’s really light, you don’t even know you’re touching it, that
you’re holding it, it’s really light. But generally, thinking about it, the scraping’s becoming more and more evident.

WR: So that’s the actual favourite one?

IC: I think so, yeah. I like the rest, but it’s the scraper, whenever I’ve looked at a piece of work that I’ve liked, it’s the scraping into the positive marks that lifts it, because a lot of us can just put down positive marks, but the thing is that understanding of them taking bits away which I think is... braver, actually. It’s more unknown.

WR: So that’s what etching gives you rather than drawing? That bravery as well when you’re taking away.

IC: Yeah, and I think because I know what I’m doing in etching... but when I started the drawings I realised I missed thinking here [in the etching room].

WR: You’ve referred to your process of observation as bearing witness, can you expand on that?

IC: Yeah. It is observing, but for some reason it fits better with witnessing. Because I don’t know, is observing...? Witness almost sounds more of a personal connection. Because I’m observing the bunkers: if I’m a witness, I’m down there on my belly in front of them, I’m touching them, I think there’s more contact, more personal.

IC: It’s much more revealing --, Yeah, it does, it means more.

WR: I wondered if it was referring more to witnessing for future generations, a historical recording.

IC: Yeah. That’s an element of why I’m doing it as well, as part of that document. And I suppose witness as well, it seems more of a deeper [connection] than an academic one, a deeper understanding. I was in it, I touched it, I rubbed my hands on it, I wasn’t just observing it, I suppose that’s how I’d... slowed things down, which again is what the processes are.
Ian Chamberlain in the Print Studio, Bower Ashton, UWE
Interview 3 - 28th June 2018

My last interview with Ian Chamberlain took place after he had made some significant progress on his new Atlantic Wall series featuring bunkers from the French and Danish coasts. We discussed the looseness that he was beginning to get into his work. His recent drawings had provided a looser base to build from.

WR: Could tell me about what you have been setting out to achieve with this new set of work?

IC: I’ve been trying to embrace the abstract through the alchemy of process, including drawing with pen and ink and the painterly results that gave me. The pen and ink meant that I could only control so much what I’ve always been intrigued about with the etching process is how the process takes the image somewhere else I think I achieved, to a certain level was speeding up that process of materiality by using pen and ink, it didn’t give me a rigid form. It gave me a structure but there were small discrepancies and ambiguities which made it visual problem solving I had to go back in and adjust, alter it and that gave it a slightly different character – it’s clearly still my work, but there’s a difference, a fluidity. I want more negative space breaking into the shapes. I’m finishing things off, by visually joining elements. I’d looked back at some older work and I think they were more interesting because of that [broken edge]. These are such solid brutal forms,
it was a way of me retaining some element of originality. This element on the right hand side I’m enjoying - It’s breaking up, edited, I want more of that. The broken edges are me emphasising the breaking something down. They have more interest visually, it gives ways in, it gives the eye a place to rest. If all the textures were at a very intense level, especially if they’re cropped tightly, I think it could look quite repetitive and that’s always worried me.

IC: The bunkers themselves were different shapes and different forms depending on the materials they had, some built by the German forces under forced labour conditions. Images celebrate an irony, built on floating rafts without foundations, so contextually there’s a link; like fascism which shifted and changed without foundation, like these bunker objects which slip and deform.

WR: Have you used the negative space intentionally to suggest the lack of a firm foundation?
IC: Yes, the white space hints at the possibility that the forms might sink. The three dimensionality is very interesting different.

On the subject of drawing in place – the camcorder had more influence in recording place. This thing of analogue technologies combining with new technologies – a project which I’ll get going along-side this is drawing in virtual reality, sculpting through a 3-d printer, then rendering it with textures collected over the last 10 years.

WR: Another way of interpreting the subject

IC: Yes, and each time something happens, doesn’t it. The process is always playing a part. This is going back to the wrestle and the fight and about me taking ownership of it.

I want more of the abstract in the work but there has to be realistic hooks to anchor it, whether that be graffiti, a doorway, shadows - to show form

WR: These abstract shapes, are they giving you more opportunity to interpret?

IC: Yes, they do. The forms are abstracted, not abstract, but representational of place and history of the object.

IC: The surface quality is something I can manipulate. I’ve tweaked all the viewpoints to exaggerate the forms that I’m attracted to. I’m still wrestling with it! I’m still playing with how much space I leave around them, nibbling the plates away.

WR: Is that to create perspective and distance?
IC: It’s to do with the viewer looking, a sense of depths, playing with thirds. Drypoint used a bit more, and there are more errors, nicks and dints, allowed a bit of foul bite. I’ve tried to go along with them. It has more of the weathering.

WR: Can I bring you back to pen and ink and the textures you’ve achieved in new etchings?

IC: Yes, and something else which has loosened it all up – succeeded - and failed in some! Is pushing wooden textures into a soft ground. If I was bolder I would start the image off with similar shapes, if I cut the wood to triangular shapes, just roughly because the splintered edge is what prints the best.

Wooden textures impressed into soft ground, combined with open bite ‘erosion’. Photograph by the author

IC: The results are quite subtle, which is fine. It’s trying something new, not to overdo it, it sometimes foul bite. Issues where the bite got into areas where it shouldn’t, where I thought the ground was strong enough to hold up. The wood wasn’t pushed in deeply enough, so by leaving it longer in the acid and therefore it compromised other areas. It foul bit quite badly in areas – It was a long time burnishing to get rid of clumsy areas.
WR: Have you used anything else that’s new to you?
IC: I’ve started open biting. Sugar lift and open biting now introduced and actually it’s a pretty close representation of concrete erosion. That worked quite well. It also made sense for me to be a bit more adventurous with the spit bite, like the painterly marks of the ink.

WR: These new techniques have given you a point of difference for this new work?
IC: To some extent, it’s been encouraged by the looseness of the pen and ink. What was really effective was the use of masking fluid, drawing with masking fluid emphasised the graffiti text; the look of the graffitied mark, but it wasn’t so controllable. I would do a less contrived representation of the mark. I tried to simplify the pen and ink, because then things would get more complicated when I got to the etching process, (which relates back to the simplified charcoal studies.) The pen and ink has been more of a turning point than the soft ground actually, it has speeded things up. Got my eye in quicker.

WR: You would have also drawn with the brush?
IC: Yeah, it gave me confidence in drawing with a brush and particularly with spit bite, which as you know is so much in the lap of the gods...
WR: ...and experience.
IC: There are times when it works, but then you can’t see pieces where I’ve burnished it back. It all plays a role.

WR: To what extent have you been immersed in these two locations?

IC: Initially it was a big wow factor I was dazzled. Some of the locations, especially in France we weren’t there that long and we had an agenda, an hour here, an hour there, which wasn’t ideal.

I adjusted in Denmark, I got more time in every location. I got more of a sense of place – the weather conditions changed the way I operated, I was able to sit and listen and I got more emotionally involved. It made harder to know how to approach it, to justify it and clarifying how I do it. The sound puts me back there atmospherically more than watching videos back, like the sea forts with the bell. A physical connection, whatever it is, is the thing that stays with you.

*Many thanks to Ian for sharing his thoughts on all the tricky aspects of his practice. I would also like to thank Ian for lending me work during the course of the research.*
The Jason Hicklin RE Interviews

Interview 1 - 17th September 2015, at his Ellesmere studios

This first interview began the case study research and was useful as preparation for writing a feature article for Printmaking Today - Finding New Lands

Summary of Jason Hicklin’s background: Hicklin found his passion for etching when he was sent from St Martins, where he was doing his degree to the Central School of Art to make use of their 5th floor printmaking studios which were the best in the country at that time. From the first day he fell for etching, which he describes as a magical process a process which he felt was something which made complete sense to him, and made the print studios his home. He describes etching as a process which he had somehow forgotten how to do, it always made complete sense to him. Hicklin was fortunate indeed to find that his tutor was Norman Ackroyd RA, following the degree Hicklin worked for Ackroyd as a studio assistant, honing his craft editioning prints with Royal Academicians and to this day Ackroyd has remained a very important figure in his life. Ackroyd showed Hicklin that it was possible to make a living from etching. Hicklin was elected a member of the Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers in 1993 and has worked as Head of Print at the City of Guilds College since …. Whilst his teaching keeps him in touch with his galleries Hicklin’s studios are set in deepest Shropshire where he can absorb himself in his work.

Jason Hicklin in his studio, photograph by the author
WR: You’re a very experienced etcher now, are your experimental days behind you, do you know the processes inside out?

JH: No! Every project is about a particular landscape but it’s also about etching, about how far I can take etching and how far I can get under its skin. For instance at the moment I’m etching plates the deepest I’ve ever etched and so physically the plates are very different to what they were 3 or 4 years ago. The surface is very different and I’m very interested in how far I can push that.

The beauty of etching is its simplicity, it’s all about resisting acid and corroding part of the plate, and then it’s about getting an accurate print off a very corroded surface.

I’m absolutely fascinated about how I can break the surface of a plate. I’m using a process called open biting and biting for quite a long time so the metal is really getting quite thin. The plate has to be right you can’t fudge it if I was to give a plate to another reasonably competent printer then they would be able to print it accurately. It’s got to be in the metal; you can’t fudge and hide things.

If I’m ever struggling with images I try to remind myself that all this is about is metal resisting acid and then I’ve just got to sort that out. It’s as easy as that! (laughs) And then I clean the studio, clean the plate, change the acid, clean the hotplate and go right back to the basics, getting it right at the beginning, because if it’s not right at the beginning you’re going to have problems later on.

Your eye gets keyed into a plate and begin to know what you’re looking for. It’s all about learning how to see the plate. The most helpful advice I ever had was to look at a plate through a magnifying glass. When you look through a magnifying glass it’s a revelation, the whole plate opens up to you and you really understand what you’re looking at. I always travel with a small glass, I don’t think you can teach without one. If you’re trying to teach aquatint you’re guessing if you can’t see the surface.

WR: How important is drawing within your practice and within the whole process of etching? How do you get to the point of starting to make etching?

JH: Drawing is fundamental. Every etching I make derives from the sketchbook. Sketchbooks are absolutely crucial to what to my work, just as etching is crucial, so
are the sketchbooks. Every project, the most recent one to the Outer Hebrides was
typical, I use 10 sketchbooks. I work every day, I have no other recording device, no
camera, it’s about looking at this landscape and the only way to get the time
looking is to record it with the sketchbooks.

I travel very simply. I have a stick of graphite, or an aquarelle pencil, rain, seawater,
puddle or rock pool. I draw just with that, nothing else. If it’s raining it’s not the
end of world, my sketchbooks are tough enough to get themselves back into shape
once they dry out, even if they get dropped in the sea. The etchings just wouldn’t
happen without the sketchbooks, I can’t just work from memory. Memory kicks in
but I have to refer to the sketchbooks.

Every page in the sketchbook is photocopied, I can pin them up all around the wall,
turn a mirror around to them and start drawing on the plate as a mirror image.
Whistler’s old trick of a mirror on a stick.

Drawing runs right through the etching, if you can’t draw etching will find you out.

WR: You’ve touched on the question behind my research, why do people assume that if
you can draw you’ll be able to etch?

JH: Etching is thought to be unforgiving to some degree. It is and it isn’t. A mark is
made on metal and it’s etched in and there for everyone to see. But an
experienced etcher knows that things can be taken away. The scale of etching is
important, a really large etching allows things to disappear, but a small etching
everything is noticed. Samuel Palmer are master pieces because nothing is there
that shouldn’t be there, they are completely true, everything he wanted is there,
and they work like a short story works. A great short story is where every word
works, not one word too much and not one word too little. It’s the same with a
Palmer etching, every mark is right. The scale of etching means that your drawing
has got to be right

Even when I go up to the big drawings that I make, which can be up to 1.5 by 2
metres I scale up from the sketchbooks, it’s just drawing and drawing again.

The sketchbooks and photocopies of those sketches are always around in the
etching studio...
It’s a two way thing, I bring the etchings back up to the drawing studio I have the drawings around all the time. I’ve never seen the difference in the processes, whether you’re drawing or etching, he’s just making a mark whether on paper or metal, it’s the same stuff “I’ve never struggled with that”

With etching I’m trying all the time to get close to the excitement I had when I made the initial sketch if the etchings start to lack that they fail, they go dead, they can be scrapped and I’ll starts again. The etchings will go ‘still’. The metal will go flat, it just dies on you.

A plate can be overworked, and go flat, just as a piece of paper can give up through the pressure of constant erasing.

WR: Can you tell me about your drawing on the island, the Outer Hebrides or the Orkneys. Your drawing appear to be made quickly?

JH: They are made quickly, often because the weather’s so bad! I’m also drawing on the boats and ferries, so there’s the speed of the landscape changing as you move along. I walk a lot

It’s a battle with the weather, sometimes you’re so wet and so cold. That’s another reason for not using a camera. The camera would be so much easier but I would lose the looking

WR: Even a 20 second sketch involves more looking than you might do if you were taking a photo? Do you think the weather influences the way that you draw, does your drawing improve if you’re being lashed with wind and rain?
JH: Absolutely. The better drawings are when the conditions are against you, when you’re having to say to the landscape ‘You’re not going to beat me, I will draw you, I will get the drawing I want.’ The deadest drawings I have made have been when the weather’s beautiful. The drawings get slack and they don’t have the tension. When the rain is lashing the boat it speeds your decisions and it’s really exciting. And that’s something I want to bring into the etching studio all the time, get back to that feeling, don’t get complacent or comfortable, keep it edgy. Sometimes you just have to close your eyes and drag yourself back to that moment of the movement the rain, how cold you were and how excited you were, that’s why I drew this, that’s why I did this trip and I want that in the studio.

WR: Do you go back to the same view if you’re on an island for 2 weeks?

JH: I’m always moving around. I don’t often go back, when I’m in a particular landscape I exhaust it. I draw and draw, every viewpoint I can. I can easily fill a sketchbook in one day, exhausting the view know it fixing it I’m curious, see what is over the next hill the time I’m in a particular landscape I will draw and draw until I know it, until it’s in my head. I’ll draw from lots of different angles near to the feature, far away, down a hill to draw from underneath - so walking is a part of the process. All the sketches together make a 3-D map of the hill or island, it’s about making sense of a landscape. If you haven’t walked you can’t understand how its shaped or formed. Walking allows you to feel where the wind and rain comes from, You realise that thousands of years of this weather has made this rock, this shape, the coastlines been made and you’ve felt it. If you don’t feel it you don’t understand it.

WR: I’m beginning to wonder if there is a very strong connection between walking and people who make landscape etching. Etching is such a tactile, physical process, is there a connection there?

JH: The rhythm of walking is important too, it almost matches the etching process, when you edition there’s a rhythm to editioning. And that is in the walking as well. I like pacing things out and if I’ve got a problem of any sort – I will often go for a walk, if I need to make a decision I’ll go for a walk and somehow it answers it, and it’s the same with the work. The decisions I need to make in the work and the problem solving begins on the initial walk – when I’m making sense of the land, the form and the appearance. The best way to get around, for me, is on foot. If you use
a car you can whizz around the island, but then you begin to be limited by the car because you can’t park it where you want to. So I’ll park the car for the day then set off, walk as far as I can and circle back around.

Walking is really crucial. Walking can give you time off from drawing. Your mind is free, foot down, rain on your back. Looking back I sometimes feel that the walk meant a lot, I can really understand that landscape now. I can see how vicious it is. The last trip I did was really tough and it really felt as if it doesn’t want you to be there. Sometimes feels like the land is rejecting you, pushing you out, I feel as though it’s really against me.

I’m not far away from the landscape I was working with last time so it fits in nicely, there’s a nice pattern developing. There’s similar shapes, the Outer Hebrides and the Orkneys are not far from each other, the feeling of the sea dominating them and the links between the two islands are there, because off the history of the two sets of islands. The more I go to these islands the more I’m beginning to understand these relationships which is what I always wanted to do to understand how all these islands fitted together - how and why? Its old rock, the oldest rock in Britain.

Going out to St Kilda [the islands] you realise what a bloody amazing place the Atlantic is, its shapes and it dominates. It’s a really frightening landscape, its humbling, I’m humbled by it. When you’re on a boat you realise there’s not much keeping you out of it [the sea]. I was thinking on this last trip about the rhythm of ocean and the boats are important because you feel the rhythm of the sea, there is a pattern to this the pattern of tides, it was rougher than coming in and you realise you’re against the current. I wasn’t brought up by the sea, so to me it’s still an exotic, strange place. By drawing it you get that connection, you’re trying to keep something steady and you really understand how much the ocean moves. If you work with a camera you don’t feel the rhythm as much as when you’re drawing. When drawing you’re trying to keep the horizon and keep the island in view.

WR: Do you draw as you’re walking or do stop and draw?

JH: I usually stop to draw. I’ll lean against something or get a bit of shelter, crouch to get some stability looking. Have a look, remind myself that I am looking. Sometimes don’t look at the book, just looking up. I’ve often got the sketchbooks in plastic
bags so the rain isn’t completely obliterating the drawing. My hands are inside a clear plastic bag so they drawing is dry, to some degree! Occasionally you can find a shelter like a disused cottage or hut, and on Orkney there are a lot of WWII gun emplacements. Sometimes it’s good just to get out of the rain, but honestly some of the best lunches are a thermos and a sandwich, breather from the weather. The best taste ever, Oat cake, coffee, in a sheep hole full of sheep dung! The best café in the world when you’re propped on a rock overlooking the Atlantic, what could be better than this!

Glorious weather can be a disappointment. It can flatten everything and it can be difficult to work with. Bad weather follows me!

I want to be able to react to an atmosphere, I purposefully travel in the winter. I also like working with a limited amount of light. I like getting up the dark, having 5 or 6 hours and then dark again. It feels like an adventure and when its dark you know you’ve done all you can do in that day, you’re tired, wet and cold – it’s been a good day’s work. When I get back to the cottage, which I sometimes use in the winter, I’ll get out the damp sketchbooks to dry, prop them up, look at them. To prop your sketchbook up and have a whisky is such a good feeling, I can hear the rain on the window and think ‘oh, what a great day that was’.

It’s all about challenge, being in it - in those elements. My best drawings come from a challenge and the best etchings come after a challenge, I bring all the memories experiences back into the etching studio, to re-engage with the experience. The more extreme it was - then I remember everything - how cold you were, the leak in the tent. When I think back it’s often to moments when I’ve been huddling down behind a wall when there’s snow falling, falling over in the mud, or having to lie down so you don’t get blown off a cliff to draw - that’s a fantastic memory and the best drawings happen in those moments.
WR: How do you start a new set of work, what’s the first thing you do?

JH: It always starts with a new journey, a journey away from the studio. It’s the best way for me to distance myself from the last project, I can clear the studio down and get away. I choose the place. There is a rough plan to my choices, I link by going to a place that I could see, more or less from the trip that I did two years previously as a way of re-engaging with a place.

WR: How well do you know a place?

JH: Well, you do get immersed in it and the immersion is a nice feeling, it’s good to feel that I know where I am. At the same time the excitement of arriving somewhere is good too. The most difficult part of a project is when I’m out on the land on the first couple of days, panic, how am I going to get this done? I have to slow down and work methodically east to west, building this land, exploring it logically. The horrible feeling of looking at the sketchbook on the first day and thinking is that all I’ve done, I’ve got a show coming up, how the hell is this going to work... After 3 or 4 days you start relaxing, it all gets a bit more familiar and you do think - I do know this now.
I’ll see something and think I know this shape, I’ve drawn this from the North and it starts to add up and to link. An island is like an etching, it’s like reversing it, around the other side it’s like the mirror image. That’s when I truly feel I’m familiar with the place.

I can feel with a project that I’ve been immersed in it, and then a year later when I’m working on something else I’ve forgotten it all. I haven’t but the new project is in your head. I try and immerse myself in that one project and not get involved in anything else at that time, to do it justice.

WR: Could explain your process from drawing to print?

JH: On the island I’ve got a sketchbook, pencil and some water that’s all.

I make a number of drawings, than back in the studio I’ll make photocopies, of the sketchbook. It heightens the contrast, makes the image twice removed, as it were, as though I haven’t done it. It makes it clearer, removes the texture of the paper, clearer to work from. It’s easier to see, easier to engage with because I can pin them up – I don’t need to flick through the sketchbook. I can focus on one sketch with all the others laid out.

Once the plate is started – proof one I’ve water-coloured into it to work something out. It was a light minimal start. It was an aquatint all over the plate, drawing out the headland to get it in. Then drawing on with a sponge or rag with soft ground to stop out then one etch of 4 or 5 mins, then it’s proofed to see if there’s something I can work with.

Once I’ve got the initial shapes into the plate it’s then a matter of etching in the next bit of land. I know it will be quite crude and I like to give myself a number of problems to work with.

If too much has gone in and it’s too overpowering I will open bite some of the detail away, by open biting some of the detail away a deadness was coming back to the plate. So I put more back in, then lived with it for a few days. A plate can just not do it for me. Then I go back into battle more darkness back into the water knowing I would have to reintroduce more light eventually. A fourth aquatint will counteract an area which is overpowering the image. Stop out varnish is generally
sponged in, or brushed on in later stages, but in combination with soft ground drawing.

I want some fragility, I like it when I feel I’m almost back the drawings. The proofs will get pinned up and I’ll live with them for a few days. After I’ve got 4 or 5 plates finished I’ll re-think the image and decide whether it’s good enough to make the final 20.

Plates are very deeply bitten. Zinc gives deep gritty open bites. I’m quite impatient and I can get these deep bites in half hour in fresh acid 12:1.

WR: Does the series need to work together as a whole?

JH: The series has to link, the technique is the common thread within each series.

Marks crop up in the structure of the metal, I’m not too precious, and it’s all part of the making. I leave bits of wax on... I love the unexpected marks that years ago used to bug me, now I’m really intrigued by them – they remind people that they’re etchings.
Stages of a print which shows views from the Sound of Rodel, towards Rhenish Point, Harris
Jason Hicklin RE at Eames Gallery Studio, Bermondsey, London.

Eames gallery - 4th November 2015, b

This transcript was from a recording made at an Eames Gallery Studio event celebrating Hicklin’s Orkney Box set launch. The interview was conducted by gallerist Vincent Eames and a section is reproduced here with his very kind permission.

Vincent Eames: Tonight is the launch of a brand new box set – The Orkney Box Set – subtitled ‘Gods of the Earth, Gods of the Sea’; the culmination of this body of work. So we’re celebrating tonight.
VE: Jason maybe we should have a recap and talk about the Orkney trip and the work that came about out of it. So it was December last year that made the trip...

Jason Hicklin: It was December last year. Every body of work starts off with a particular island in mind. I’ve always wanted to go to Orkney, so I set off; it took twelve hours of driving to get to the port. When I get across to Orkney I start breaking up the island. It’s always a mystery when you get there, what the hell you’re going to do. You look on the map and you think “Orkney looks a dodggle. A couple of days walking I’ll have that done.” You get there and you think “Oh, this is bigger than I thought.” So you start walking on day one and think “I’ve only done about two miles of this coastline.” So you then break it down into however much time you’ve got there. Break it down into periods of days of walking and then work in sketch books, every day.

I don’t use a camera. I’m not very good with stuff like that. So everything’s in a sketch book, dawn with a stick of graphite, which is a thick pencil. Just walking and drawing every day. No matter the weather; no matter how I feel I just get out there.

After about a week of walking you start to realise that you do know what’s in the west coast, you know what’s north, you know what’s east and west. It starts to come together and at that point you start thinking “Right, I can see the viewpoints that I need to take back to bring this island alive for people who haven’t been”, so it’s my interpretation of the trip, for people who haven’t been. I’m a kind of an explorer, with my set of books. It’s not a photographic representation. It’s my interpretation. But it is important that I walk it and record truthfully to myself. The images come from any inaccuracies. Anything that’s not right is not right because I didn’t get it right the first time from the sketch books, so any inaccuracies are carried on into the etching.

VE: You’re not trying to get a typographically accurate representation?

JH: No. Everyone knows you can just go on Google Orkney and see what Orkney looks like really, so I hope you’re looking at just my interpretation, my inaccuracies, my gaps of memories, and things I didn’t get to see because it was too far to walk that day.
VE: It’s a very personal reaction to the landscape.

JH: Very personal. I used to go off with this idea; I’ve got to get it right. I’ve got to come back because there’s going to be someone... in the words of Morrissey – someone ‘with a big nose who knows.’ I always thought “I’ve got to get this right because someone is going to say, “It’s not like that.” But the longer I’m doing this business, it’s my interpretation. It’s up to me what I record. It’s up to me what I do, and hopefully you guys come along and just say “Yeah, it reminds me a bit of Orkney.” That’s good enough.

This (holding up a sketchbook) is the only thing that was made in Orkney, the sketchbooks. I make on average, ten to twelve sketchbook in a ten day visit. A sketchbook a day - roughly.

VE: And you draw dawn till dusk, is that right?

JH: Yes. I do like to get up early. You get there in the dark and there’s something about it all being revealed. All of a sudden the light comes up...

I remember the first time I went to the Isle of Skye for instance. I went with a group of climbers and I said, “I’m not climbing, I’ll walk to the Cuillins.” They told me where they were but I couldn’t see a bloody thing. It was misty and I said, “Well, they should be here.” And then the mist lifted - everyone knows the Cuillins in Skye - they sort of push up out of the water - and they were just revealed in front of us. It was as if that unveiling is something I’ve always thought of and it’s the same when the light of the sun rises. It’s there for you and you’re ready to go and you’ve got to hit it hard. I also really like the glow, at the end of the day, when the sun’s gone and you’ve got to get it drawn. And all of a sudden the light goes and there’s
that finality. It’s finished and you’ve got to stop because the light goes. It’s not that it’s dark. You still can see something but it’s just gone. It’s flat. All the forms are flattened out. They’ve disappeared. I do like the end of the day.

VE: You can see that in the light in the work - the shapes, the silhouettes. Tell us a bit about where in this process the box set comes. You told us before that you start off with smaller pieces like this. You create a sort of architecture of the whole thing.

JH: All the sketchbooks are photocopied. I go to the local photocopier. They love me in the photocopiers!... I can see them think, “Oh, Christ. Not him again!” I have to get all the settings right and then I do all the sketchbooks. I’ll photocopy the lot, everything. Get them back to the studio and then just plaster the place with them. They’re everywhere. And then I start thinking “That I like. That will do.” You eliminate some pages and you’re left with the bones. You know that this is going to be the structure that you’re going to work from to build this set.

And then as I said earlier you’ve got the north, south, east, and west. You know what the key image is. Like in Orkney, the first thing you see when you get on the ferry is the Old Man of Hoy. And that’s it. That’s the beginning and the end, because that will be the first thing I see and that will be the last thing I see. And believe me, the best view you get of it is on the ferry. You book your ferry each time you go across and there it is. It’s as good as it gets.

And I wasn’t quite prepared for it! I was drinking coffee on the ferry. I suddenly saw it ... and then, bloody hell it’s gone! But coming back I’d be approaching it from the other side, so I was ready.
To start the series I build the small etchings, making the structure of the whole journey. Every series of etchings isn’t just about the place. I confess now. It’s also about me, it’s me exploring etching. It’s a really very personal thing, what I can make etching do. The new work I’m making from the last trip would not work, and I realised I was applying the approach I’d learned from Orkney to the new landscape and it wouldn’t work. So I realised that each set is a reinvention of what I know about etching. I’m making it do things and it becomes personal to the place but each process in the etching is about the place as well. So really they’re books. The last thing I do is monotypes or paintings, and then I aim to finish each project with a box set. So tonight is the end of the Orkney project because the box set is done. I will not be doing more Orkney for a while. I aim to bring it all together back to the small etchings, to really look at the small etchings that I’ve done first of all...A 20 etching set.

VE: It’s quite important to say that it’s not just an exploration of Orkney. It’s an exploration of etching from a technical point of view. You can’t really understand Jason’s work if you don’t appreciate that it’s the stuff of etching and that is absolutely vital.

JH: Crucial. It does. Before I go on the trip I order sketchbooks and they all arrive and I’ve got all the sketchbooks piled up and I just look at them and think “I haven’t done this trip yet, but those sketchbooks, they’re waiting.” And you keep looking at them and you look at them. They’re all pristine and then all of a sudden you unleash yourself in that landscape. The sketchbooks, they’re the thing. So they’re virgin sketchbooks and then you get into them. Then I come back and then pull it all together into this new box which I collected a couple of nights ago. Then I put it back into a box. I’ve been there, put the landscape into the sketchbooks and then I put all this back into this little box.

VE: But it’s important to say this isn’t just fancy packaging for some lovely etchings. There’s a strong heritage to this, isn’t there? And this is also a format that you’ve returned to again and again and we’re very lucky to have a number of Jason’s box sets from earlier trips dotted around the studio. This is obviously a format that really appeals to you. Tell us a bit about why that is?
JH: It goes right back. You know the term ‘come up and see my etchings.’ Never works! Come and see my box set!

It comes from the fact that before glass existed, if you went along to a Durer studio and thought “Oh, Mr Durer can I have your etchings?” We’re talking a 1500 set of Durers. You’ve got nowhere to put them. There’s no glass good enough to frame them. You need to contain them so you contain them in a portfolio or a box. That was the best place to put them because it’s flat and long.

So this goes right back to how etchings were preserved and it’s this idea of then it becomes really private. So anyone then can walk away with this box, go and sit in their room on their own and they’re in the journey I’ve made. They’re not standing in a gallery with other people looking over their shoulders, all the rest of the family are all looking over this picture on the wall. They can go away and they’ve got this journey.

VE: And also inevitably a gallery show is edited highlights in summary. You’re not getting a full body of work, the heart and depth, which you do with the box set.

JH: It’s something that you can put away on a shelf and forget about it and think “God, I’ve got that nice set.” You open it up and you’ve got the whole set. One of the ideas is that many people used to come to the studio and say “Do you sell the sketchbooks?” But I never break a sketchbook, never sell a sketchbook. They’re things that are very close to me. So I wanted a way and a format of passing a box, a sketchbook, onto someone else. And it’s a hands-on experience. When you hopefully open the box, I don’t know, I get it anyway, there’s that sort of treasure idea. You open it up and you can touch it unlike most things in galleries.

VE: It’s a very direct experience.

JH: I love the smell of ink. It still has that papery, inky smell and some people pick prints up and think “The ink’s going to come off on my fingers.” It won’t, by the way. It’s oil based ink - you get that smell of oil, the smell of ink, the smell of paper in a box set and it’s that hands-on experience.

VE: Yes, you can revel in the actual stuff of it, can’t you?

JH: You can mess around with them and just enjoy them.
I’ll come back to that idea of bringing this landscape into a box form. It’s finished now. This landscape’s finished and the next one can sort of come from this. Because I’ve also, going back, I’ve learnt a lot about etching. This Orkney series was a real turning point because I did a lot of things in these etchings that were different, that was a challenge. They went up and down all the time. It was a big struggle. You can learn etching. You’re good at something, whatever you’re good at, and you can sail through and think “I’m the bee’s knees.” Then all of a sudden you think “I’m repeating myself. I’ve got to stop repeating myself.” These landscapes deserve a reinterpretation. They need their own identity and that is simply going back to a different way of etching for me in these series that gives these landscapes their identity.

So I worked in an ink which is called graphite ink, which is the same ink I printed the monotypes in. Graphite ink is made from graphite powder. It sparkles in the light and it smells different. Again, I love the smell. It smells metally. It smells industrial.
So I changed the ink. What I also wanted to do was really focus on the plate itself. So I print them without a border and print within the plate. So it really is about that intensity of what I wanted to see.

VE: We have unframed examples so you see there’s no margin or border...

JH: It’s that bleed, and again it becomes like the sketchbook page. You’ve gone right to the edge it feels as if the paper almost disappears. These are all printed on white paper, so the back of it is also etched. It’s all about printing with etching - it’s that metallic ink. You can feel the graphite ink. So you cannot own an image of this in graphite if you don’t have the box set.

It’s a great link back to the monotypes. They have their own identity.

VE: You’ve edited them again, haven’t you? You’ve gone in and cropped them to intensify the view

JH: I like the idea of the paper disappearing. It gets so encrusted with ink its right in there. Do you know, people have said, “What colour paper is it?” Again, it’s almost disappearing, the paper. It’s all that ink. The paper’s just a support for this inkiness.

But the crucial thing is in the etching, the metal, the acid, the ink and the paper become very important as well.

VE: Pressure’s a good thing!

JH: So you’ve got that, “I’ve got to get this done,” You do that first drawing and you reckon “This ain’t going well but I’ve got to finish it,” so that’s the toughest. By day two the sketchbook’s getting a bit dirty, you’re all in, you’re wet, you’re dirty. The novelty’s wearing off. You’re starting to get into it. Yeah, it starts to get dirty pretty quickly with me.

It’s the same on the first day in the studio. The first day you start the new series is the worst. It’s horrible. You etch the first plate and you think ‘Oh no!’ You pull out a piece of paper and ‘Oh Christ!’ I don’t let many people see the work going on in the studio at the preparation stage but occasionally you’ll get someone come in. You can see them looking at it and they’re thinking ‘This guy’s lost it!’ You know when people don’t say anything... you know!
So yeah, that first day in the studio is horrific for me. At the moment it’s tough. The work I’m working on [St Kilda series] is really tough, but I’m sort of getting into the swing of it. It’s coming and I’m enjoying that and I think back... Now I think back to the Orkney series I sort of miss those late nights and the struggles that I was having because it’s done and so you start to miss that [process] of what was going on.

VE: There are very few artists, who are so in tune, and what they do is so integral to who they are, and Jason really does embody etching for me. The result is beautiful and authentic and there’s an integrity to it which I’m not alone in noticing, and enjoying, about his work.
This is the 2nd interview with Jason Hicklin. The focus is drawing and where the artist feels that drawing sits within his own practice. We will also discuss the recent work made about the island of St Kilda which will be shown as a solo show at Eames Fine Art, Bermondsey, London. A list of ‘drawing’ words were supplied prior to the interview as conversation starters and as a way of pinning down language, pinpointing what drawing means to the artist.

Jason Hicklin: Good words (Jason circles and adds annotation marks to the list)

The first word I’ve circled is ‘Observational’. I think that word and the idea of drawing goes right back to when I was at school; I had a very good Art teacher who always talked about how important it was to look at things and drawing and the business of art was always about looking and if you didn’t look the fundamentals weren’t there. That’s always stuck in my head it’s always just about looking. And what drawing does is it slows you down it ties you down to a particular object, a particular place, a particular moment in time where you’re still and you are looking. So the word ‘observational’ could be ‘looking’ really, you’re observing. That is why I don’t use any photographic recording devices because you don’t look. I feel the device is doing the looking for you. But drawing slows you down, makes you sit makes you think makes you consider. In the time that you’re there it makes you think not just about the marks on the paper but thinking what’s going to come from these marks on the paper. You’re also thinking why have I stopped here? Often it’s not just because it’s a good place to sit, it’s not that its dry, it’s not that its warm, it’s just that it’s a particular view, a particular moment. It just feels right. It’s an instinctive place to stop. So the sketchbook slows me down, makes me stop, and that’s often why I work alone when I’m walking because if you’re walking with someone else you can sense they need to move on. The importance of being on my own is that it’s not interrupted and I can take as long as I want.

When I’m working on the boat and the boat is moving it can be a 10 second drawing, but that is as important as a 5 minute drawing (or a 20 minute drawing).
When I refer back to those (quick) drawings every mark in there tells me something. There’s 3 marks but I remember everything – the particular shape, the horizon, just that moment is captured by those 3 quick marks.

WR: If you’ve got less time those marks can much more concentrated ....

JH: You have to make decisions, you can’t start making marks and wonder if that’s right or if this is right, you haven’t got time, you don’t even look at the drawing. You flip the page, you draw then you flip the page and we’ll see in one of the sketchbooks from St Kilda that a lot of the work done around the Stacs were done off the boat and that’s the only way to see them so it had to be done quickly. I think that has then influenced the way the etchings have been made because the etchings might not be the most accurate of etchings in the sense that they’re not a photographic record of where I’ve been but they are definitely etchings built and made from that crucial bit of information that I had in the sketchbooks. There’s no back up, as it were, that’s all I work from.... And I think it adds a vitality to the etchings because I think the initial marks had to be made so quickly that it has influenced the etchings.

WR: so they’re more evocative than geographically accurate?

JH: I’d like to think there’s an element of geographical accuracy, but definitely more evocative because it’s a strange series of shapes. It’s a very strange environment, St Kilda, and that influences the work a helluva lot. They were the most difficult set of etchings I’ve ever made because I couldn’t rely on some of the other ways of making etchings I’ve had in the past. There were no sweeping views to these islands; the perspective was very different. This land just bursts out of the water. There’s no lead in to it, there’s water then that’s it, there it is. It was really difficult. I started out trying to make them in the same way that I made the Orkney etchings but they were completely wrong. They were dull, there was a sort of formula that I was working with which wasn’t fitting this landscape. I had to re-think the whole way I etch from scratch. Scrap all that; re-start, re-think. And that’s been good for me.

WR: Scary at the start?

JH: I started them in September (2015), at Christmas I was almost willing to jack the project in. Thinking I’ve got to work from somewhere else, this just isn’t working.
And all the time I’ve got this deadline, the date of the show (at Eames Fine Art, June 2016) was already in, it’s coming up and I haven’t got time to mess this one up. I’ve got to get it done. Luckily after Christmas I started to make a series of monotypes which were again based on the same sketches, from the same sketchbooks.

I had to find another way of making monotypes because again the old way wouldn’t work. It’s always good to look back on a body of work and think why I am not completely satisfied with the last series. You never are. You always see what’s wrong. Looking back the Orkney etchings were great, I thought they were great. The Orkney monotypes - I really enjoyed making them and people responded to them but I looked at them and thought “What’s wrong with them?” And why are some of the same ways of working not working on the St Kilda ones? It was to do with things like light, it was to do with shapes, and it was to do with perspective. Those were the things that I really had to really re-think, particularly light. The Orkney light was very different to the St Kilda light and that was because I was there at a different time of year. I can’t get to St Kilda in the winter; the boats stop going after September.

WR:  Usually you like going in the winter.

JH:  I love going in November, December. But this time I couldn’t, it forced my hand, I had to go. I went at the end of August to get back at the end of September to start the work. The light was completely different. I just couldn’t make up the fact that this was a big, stormy, brooding place. Which it was, at night – it was, but arriving it was just sparkling and the light was just bursting onto everything and the colours were different; the shapes and the way they reacted to light was completely different. And the ocean was different! It wasn’t boiling and bubbling away, it was quite still, and the light was sparkling on it. It wasn’t moving the same way that it does in the winter. On the boat trip out to St Kilda some of the people on that would’ve said that it was a rough sea but it was a different roughness to the ones I’ve been used to. You’re a long way out in the Atlantic and things are different. It’s a really different place so there were a lot of things going on the whole challenge of it was very different. It wasn’t until after December/January (2016) that the etchings started to fall into place and I started to realise how it was going to work. But it was right up until nearly the end of the small set of etchings I’ve made that it
really started to fall into place. And then I started the bigger etchings and then I really felt that I’ve got a handle on it. But every day I was worried that this could go wrong at any time. It felt quite edgy.

WR: Was it a relief to finish them then?

JH: It was. It’s always sad to finish a project because I miss them now. It is a relief though, it’s a relief the show’s come together because there was lot riding on this show and I wanted it to be right and I think it could be one of the best shows because my comfort zones were completely changed. I want this to be a good show and the challenges were more than I imagined they would be. I was quite cocky going out there, I thought I could do it all in the usual ways but it was a very different landscape and it didn’t give an inch.

Jason discusses the good response from Eames gallery, and his nervousness over the differences between this show and the last.

JH: So going back to the word Observation - I think the whole notion of what I do this set of work, and all the work, is about taking the time to observe. And that’s what I do, bringing back the notes of what I’ve observed.

JH: The other word I noticed [on the ‘Drawing is...’ list] is ‘physical’ The physical act if drawing is really important, observation is all about your eyes and the physical nature of looking and your eyes are working. And then something kicks in where your hand responds as well and there’s a physical relationship between your eye and your hand. And you do feel propelled to note things down. Again that physicality of drawing, it feels right to be moving your hand and your arm in that way. Often my drawing is relatively physical; I don’t make myself too comfortable, I draw quickly so I don’t have to. Sometimes I’m kneeling down in mud, sometimes I’m sitting down in wet grass and sometimes I’m lying down. Especially on St Kilda where the cliffs are so steep, they are some of tallest cliffs in Britain and so to get to the edge of some of them I had to lie down and put my head over – it’s not a place where there are safety rails, there’s no signs ‘watch out for the edge!’ it’s a sheer drop and it’s so exciting to crawl and lean over. As you lean over the gulls and the skuas are all looking back at you. As you’re walking the great skuas are swooping down to protect their nests. Sometimes you are physical you’re lying down. Kneeling, crawling, just to get the right view and to be safe so that you’re
not going to blow off the edge. On the boats it’s physical drawing as well, the boats move so you have to balance yourself; you’re not comfortable. And then between each drawing is the walking.

The physical act of walking. You’re on your own and that’s important, from one site to the next site you’re thinking about what you’ve observed and what is coming next, and what you’re going to do with these drawings. In the drawings there’s physical evidence too – bits of sand, dead flies, mud, the rain as its hit on the page – all those things when you open the book they’re the memory for me. The books themselves get battered and muddy, they’re important because they bring memories back, but they’re not precious museum pieces, they’re working books. I like the look of them on the shelf – they’ve been out there.

WR: Does the mark making change with your physical situation?

JH: Absolutely. When you’ve got more time you sit a bit more comfortably, you take longer with the drawing. When it’s a complicated view you’re looking at and you want to get the perspective right, and the land mass right – the way you sit and draw then is different to when you’re kneeling down on a boat and the spray’s coming over you and the rain is on your back. It’s much quicker when you’re uncomfortable, cold and wet and you just want to get out of there. Then there’s a definite difference in the marks.

WR: Do you think you can translate those differences in the etchings?

JH: Yeah, yes. You can see that sometimes if an etching is missing something it will be that physicality; it lacks the life that the drawing had. That’s why it’s important to have all the photocopies, of the sketchbooks. All those marks are evident and when I’m working on a series they are pinned up all the time and I’m looking and looking. It’s important that some of those marks are fed into the etchings because they are the lifeblood of what keeps those etchings fresh.

JH: Another word from this list is ‘Preparatory’. The drawings in the sketchbooks are preparatory for work; they are the bedrock for what’s going to come. Without the sketchbooks there is no work; without the trip that I make there’s no work. So it is preparation and all the time I’m away I know that the work isn’t done, I’m just collecting information for the real work. I am starting to prepare physically and
mentally, my head space is getting ready for what’s coming. Because I know the real work is coming and God knows what that’s going to bring!

The research is the drawing, the travelling and the walking. The reading I do about the place is also important for background information. The types of rocks I’m walking on and the history of the people who have been there before me, why people were there or why they’re not there. When I’m back and not actually in the studio I’m reading books or articles on these particular places so I’m living it it’s in my head all the time. Those bits of information, the name of the hill or the name of the bay – when I look at a drawing now I know the name of the hill and I know where it fits in comparison to the next one and of course all that comes from the research because there’s no label on the island. The experience of the people who have made the journey before often relates to your own experience of making the journey too. It’s such a small place, St Kilda, that even the experience of getting off the boat is the same, the jetty hasn’t changed in the last 100 years – everybody has that same experience. If you look at old photos of the jetty you can see the same steps and the people are standing in the same place that I’ve stood in. I love looking at the maps (on the wall is pinned a map of St Kilda) It reminds me all the time of the shape of the walk; there’s a fair amount of research that goes on. It doesn’t get in the way of the work though; I don’t get too bogged down in the research. It’s there but the etching is the priority. I like to keep it bubbling away.

I was going to stay for 4-5 days on the island, but the crossing was so rough that when I got there the guy said I’m going to have to come back tomorrow because if I don’t it could be 2 weeks. I only had food for 5 days so I took the decision to come back. The MoD are there but not for visitors they don’t like being interrupted. There are 6 volunteers doing bird counts and they have their own work and supplies. In 2 days I worked all the hours I could and I’d walked the entire island twice, clockwise, anticlockwise through the middle and the ins and outs. I’d already done some work on Harris and Lewis and so I’ve got another 10 sketchbooks which haven’t been touched, but I’m going back out there. They are slightly muddled, but the reason for going out to the Hebrides was to go to St Kilda and it wasn’t easy getting there. I had to ring the boatman every morning and every evening. The first three calls he said, ‘No way!’ Then at about half past seven one evening he said ‘be at the port at 7 the next morning’ so I had to camp near the port and be up, packed
and ready to go. It was the right thing to do because so many people have tried and haven’t got out there so it was the right thing to do.

I did get there, I did stay on the island and it wasn’t easy. It was a really rough night, the wind... it rained, my tent leaked for the first time ever, it was horrible - absolutely horrible; it was like being on a big old ship out in the middle of the Atlantic; way out there. It’s an unforgiving place.

It’s 40 miles out from Harris; a 3 hour crossing but it’s worth it. It’s staggering, absolutely staggering.

All the words on the ‘Drawing is..’ list have meaning but they are the ones that really jump out.

WR: Are there any words from the ‘Drawing can be..’ list?

JH: ‘Material experimentation’ is something that drawing can be but at the moment with my drawing I’ve honed it down to the very basic materials that I need to draw, so that I don’t get waylaid in experimenting because if it doesn’t work the drawing doesn’t work and the materials that I work with at the moment get me to where I want to be. It gives me a consistency so I’m not being dragged away to work things out. So it can be material experimentation, but over the years I feel I’ve done that and I’ve got it to the point where I really only draw with what I draw. So the drawing is with the graphite and rubbers and they’re the same as I use with my sketchbooks, there are two different sets but they’re what I stick with, they’re consistent.

WR: So your work is more about a sense of reliability, so that your drawing is something you can rely on?

JH: Yes, I’m reliant on the materials. The materials give me a constant. Drawing is as tough as the etchings. The drawings I make in the studio are big drawings approximately a metre and a half by a metre. They’re big drawings, they’re physical things again, and they really are hard work. They need a freshness to them; they can’t be overworked so I’ll work on them for 2, 3 or 4 days. I work a lot more on drawings than I’ve ever worked before because I want them to be quite thoughtful. I want each drawing to be right for me. I don’t want there to be marks there that aren’t needed; I want every mark to have a point, to be considered. Obviously that
means that some marks get put down and taken away, re-done, re-taken away and with the graphite I’m drawing with its tough to get the mark off the page; the erasing is as physical as the drawing. The erasing, the negative is almost as important as the drawing.

And... ‘elaborate finished work’... again the big drawings are, I don’t know if they’re elaborate, but they are elaborate in the sense of what has gone into making them. The drawings are an elaboration of the sketchbook - the scale has changed, the very act of having longer to be with the drawing, you know, I’m there all day and that’s very different to the way I’ve drawn in the sketchbooks which can be a 30 second drawing.

And... ‘transformative’... they pieces are transformations from the idea, from the landscape to the sketchbook, to the finished drawing on the big page. There’s a few points of removal away from that original idea.

And... ‘evidence of many glances’... I think they are an amalgamation of a lot of looking, there’s a lot of looking goes on. There’s the physical act of making the drawing but there’s also a lot of time sitting on the old sofa up there in the drawing studio staring at them and thinking ‘why isn’t it right?’ and yet someone else can walk in the studio and say ‘that’s great isn’t it, it must be finished’ and I look at it and think ‘no, no it’s not’. What can they see that I can’t. Personally I know, because I was in that landscape, what’s wrong with it and I know what it’s not giving me.

And... ‘a way of accessing inner thoughts’... because you do think a lot when you’re there on your own drawing. You do think about the work you’re making but you also start thinking about the whole range of work you’ve been making over the years, why you’re drawing this particular drawing? Where is it going to go? The etchings you’ve made and the mono-prints that are going to come. It makes you think a lot, about all sorts of things being on your own drawing. It’s solitary.

And ... ‘Immanence, something remaining within, pointing to something else’... every drawing is just a stepping stone to the next drawing, it doesn’t sum up the whole idea of what I’m about but it’s on the step to the next drawing, I’m already thinking about the next drawing the next body of work is already bubbling away inside of me waiting to start. It’s important to have the previous drawing out,
because there’ll be something, a mark or a particular atmosphere that you want to take into the next drawing. I etch in a similar way, as I develop a series I keep them all on the wall because there’s a sense about them; an atmosphere about them that continues through the series. You want to keep that going all the time. The drawings do work in a series as well, a smaller series. For this show there are 3 big drawings but I’ll probably only show 2 of those but the 3 drawings are a triptych.

And I like the idea of the ‘heroic act’... I only wish I could say it was!

You don’t relax, I still need to make sure the details are correct, next series - not started yet, I’ve got ideas in my head, give time for the last set to get out of my head, I have clues that makes it a bit clearer. I’m missing that confrontation of the studio time but I can’t stop, because I get out of practise! As much as I moan and struggle I do enjoy it and look forward to each piece.

WR: Capturing the sublime, is that part of your thinking at all?

JH: It isn’t part of the thinking work when I’m doing it but when I look at the work and think of the word sublime it probably is an element of what I do, I don’t think it’s fundamental but I think looking at the work now and looking back at it now it is a word I could attach to the work. I think Sublime is a word that could be attached to this series (St. Kilda) perhaps. St Kilda has this particular shape as monuments in the landscape they have got more of a sublime nature to them, they have got more of a monumental feel to them because there are only so many shapes there and it’s a small landscape compared to some of the other landscapes I’ve dealt with. Monumental would be a good word to attach to them – I hope so anyway.

WR: Bound up with this element of the sublime is the solitary nature of the experience; the artist Frances Walker describes it as a ‘Naebody-aboot feel to it’

JH: That’s a good phrase, really important. I agree with that, I like working on my own and spending time on my own. I look at landscapes and cut things out, on St Kilda the MoD listening posts are on all the major hills; I didn’t want to put that in; I wanted to see this land as it was before the listening posts were there. When the listening posts are gone this land still stands in the history of that land -the posts are nothing. I think that’s where we are, we’re just passing through, and we’re nothing. This land doesn’t care about us.
WR: That wasn’t to do with idealising the land? Just looking at the bare bones of it?

JH: Yes, looking at the bones of it. You often think of people standing there 500 years previously and they were looking at the same shapes that I’m looking at. Not a lot has changed perhaps. Obviously the coastline has changed but predominantly the shapes of the hills and the land hasn’t changed much. You can imagine 500 years ago the same bay would be there. So [I hope I’m] getting the monumental feel of that land that just sits there, and it doesn’t matter about us.

WR: Is that something you feel quite strongly, that when you’re there, that the land doesn’t care about you?

JH: Absolutely. On this trip, and not only on this trip, you do get that feeling. And I’ll think ‘damn you I will do it, no matter what you throw at me I’m going to stick this out and I’m going to get what I want’. I don’t feel the land is a friend. I have mixed feelings when I read how people have written about landscape, as though it’s a friendly place or a welcoming place. I don’t see it like that at all. Sometimes you’re not meant to be there and it knows it and we know it and deep down we know it and fear it. I think the ocean scares us. It scares me. The ocean is a frightening place. In some landscapes when you’re on your own you can scare yourself, what happens if this boat doesn’t turn up, what happens and what would’ve happened? On this island I wanted to be there in isolation but you can’t be. The MoD presence is there, but if all that stopped the island would still be there, sitting there in that ocean.

JH: Reading about when it was evacuated in 1930 I was struck strongly by the night people were evacuated – it was probably the first time for 2000 years when no one was on the island. That night there must have been an incredible sense of the land breathing a sigh of relief. The island just carries on as it has before and as it has done since. But for that night there must have been an incredible sense on that island. I would have given anything to have been on that island that night. The village is still there, the 10 or so houses are still there. Obviously they’re falling down, there are no roofs but the Manse house, the church and the keepers cottages are still there now and lived in and the MoD have their buildings there. In the original village there’s a number painted on a stone in each house with the name of the family who left.
Recently, during the year in which I made the work, the last St.Kildan died, in her 90’s, 8 years old when she was evacuated. That struck a chord, a coincidence.

There are things you notice things tie together and make you think this show is meant to be.

WR: Making a nice circle?

JH: For me it does, yes. One of the stories on the island is of the keeper who wanted to improve the lives of the inhabitants. To do this he imported zinc to improve the roofs of the cottages to make them waterproof, which it did, but it also created condensation so the cottages became worse, with all this water, than they were before. So they ripped off all the zinc. All the etchings I’ve made of St. Kilda have been on zinc. There was a nice feeling of the imported zinc which didn’t work, and then I’ve dragged images into zinc making it work for me. When I was reading up on the island the word ‘Zinc’ zinged out at me it was odd and it felt right to be doing this series in zinc because the zinc is doing what I want it to do. It was an odd feeling to be using this material that was completely bloody useless on the island.

WR: Now it’s found some use

JH: *Laughs* - If the islanders were still there they’d still be saying that zinc’s bloody useless, that is! Probably the best thing you can do with it is dump it in acid!

Things like that are important.

WR: I assume those things enrich the experience for you, and then enrich the work afterwards?

JH: It forms a narrative to the trip, it makes it become less random; these things add up and makes me feel there was a point to me going. There was a point to the metal I was using. It was a tough trip and I do feel that these landscapes don’t want you there a lot of time and particularly on this one. The whole of the trip on the Outer Hebrides the weather was dreadful – midges! It was an idyllic landscape; it was August but I had to sit in my tent wrapped in mozzy nets - drawing somewhere windy to get away from them. You get midge madness, can’t think of anything but them. I had to wear a midge suit. It was horrible.
We move to looking at the St Kilda Etchings. JH gets out the new St Kilda etchings to look at. We start with the smaller prints, elongated landscape format. Jason begins to explain the struggle that he had in initially getting the St Kilda series off the ground.

WR: My first impression of the new work is that the black is more dominant than before.

JH: Jason gets out an Orkney print to compare to the new St Kilda prints. This sort of format from the Orkney prints was not going to work (for St Kilda).

WR: My memory of the Orkney etchings was that there were more tonal qualities throughout the plates but now (looking at an example from the Orkney series) I can see that they were quite black as well.

JH: Even this way of etching the water wasn’t working quite right (indicating a passage of open water from an Orkney plate). This way of etching the water was a much deeper etch. It was a case of getting to the point, not saying too much, did I need to give you all of this water, or do I need to give you just this much. To explain where this land sits - I’m quite interested in just giving you just a tiny bit.

WR: You used a very low horizon line?

JH: When you’re on the boat sitting right next to it that’s how it is.

The way I’ve made the plates has been very different; I was struggling so much, the zinc. When I first started work on the plates I made quite random marks – etched the plates quite deeply (if you’d printed them it would have been quite a mess) then open-bit, re-etched and imposed the landscape on to these distressed plates. Some of the marks are incidental marks from previous etchings which have got nothing to do with this landscape. It’s a way of breaking the surface and I was.
thinking about those St. Kildan roofs, that useless zinc, how to impose shapes onto this ‘useless’ metal.

WR: Are you making the zinc useless

JH: I’m making useless marks. Making marks I’m never going to show, I didn’t even proof them, just etched them, put wax on, dragged things across and etched them and I could tell they were a mess, but then I started putting these landscapes in, taking the useless marks out, so you end up with marks that are instances. It’s just what’s left in the plate, I had no idea what it as going to be but it makes sense of that but it wasn’t really my intended mark. There’s a trace of things.

WR: Was there an intention of getting the weather on to the plates?

JH: The weather wasn’t so important, the weather was there but this series was driven by the shapes. The instances happened incidentally. I had to ask myself why I was so excited about being there at St Kilda and it wasn’t the weather. The sea was important, and being on the sea was part of it, but it was these strange shapes. As a series I think it is the first one that is about shape.

JH: No they’re not but the shapes you’re confronted with are. They’re odd, strange (much emphasis) shapes. And I wanted something of the isolation in them

WR: The landscape is quite terrifying in some of these prints. (I particularly noticed the prints where the island dominates much of the composition)
JH: It’s an imposing island that one (Jason tells the story of the men sailing across to gather the birds eggs for several nights, staying a month once when the sea was rough. He indicates all this on a large scale ordnance survey map of the St Kilda group of islands which is pinned up on his wall)

Neolithic sea farers found the island, to us its isolation but them it was the ideal island; it was the safest place to be.

*Jason gets out the bigger diptychs for us to study*

![Diptych proof, photograph by the author](image)

JH: This is further away on the boat trip now. The diptychs are always in my head and I wanted them to be different, you can’t just scale things up, so I wanted to treat the ocean differently, making it more about the ocean.

*3 large diptychs are spread out*

JH: These are based on the drawings from the boat and what I wanted to do was a portrait of each land mass. There are four major land masses the main island Hirta, the Stacs - Stac an Armin, Stac Lee then Boreray and Soay. The horizons are all in the same place so they’re a series.

WR: You get a feeling, looking at the prints that you’re on boat travelling around and seeing the islands from different angles
JH: That’s good I like that, it’s exactly how I wanted it to be, you can look around the whole series of islands and see everything. These large prints were the last ones I made...

WR: They’re very striking. You got to know the islands through the small plates first?

JH: Yes, I was quite confident by the time I got to these; I wanted the ocean to be completely different to the small ones, to be more about the ocean. I wanted more of a physical nature, and again the word abstract. We all know this isn’t the ocean (indicating the etching textures in the sea) so I wanted to give you a sense of how light is falling. This trip was also about the light being different as well. So I wanted that sparkling light in these.

WR: The bigger ones have got more light, in contrast to the smaller ones which don’t always have that light? There’s also so much sky in the larger prints...

JH: It’s the scale, I wanted to this scale to frame things so that they feel imposing and in these I wanted to put in the vastness of the ocean too.

That’s roughly the same view. The nature of the view changes when it changes scale.

WR: There’s a completely different feel (between the two prints) But they’re still quite imposing, a ‘don’t come near us’

JH: They’re just such odd shapes; they’re the tallest sea Stacs in Britain.

WR: They are tall, how far away would you have been when you saw that view? Can you see St. Kilda from Harris?

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Comparison between a large and small print of the same view. Photograph by the author
JH: No, no. On a really clear day you can see St Kilda from Harris if it’s sunny as a distant shape on the horizon. This was less than half a mile away from it. This is on the boat on the way in. On the way in you go straight into the harbour and you get a little dinghy to go onto the island, on the way back he takes you off and on a trip all the way around pass each Stac. At one point you look up and there it is and at another point on the way back - you get a completely different view of them. That was really exciting actually going around the Stacs, I really enjoyed it.

WR: The Orkney etchings were more about showing enclosed sea areas weren’t they?

JH: Yeah, the bays

WR: Layers of landscape as well?

JH: And looking across landscape but you couldn’t so much on this one [St Kilda trip], you just couldn’t. And it’s a relatively small landscape compared to Orkney. This was just one island. I’d done a similar sort of project on Tory Island, off Donegal. That was a similar challenge to this one – it’s a small place and it’s got to be a sort of portrait of this island I’ve got to spend more time with this one island and hence this idea of looking back at it.

WR: More time once you came home rather than more time while you were there?

JH: Yes.

*Looking at all the smaller prints laid out*
WR: What’s interesting about that is how people look at your work and what they’re seeing in it?

JH: I really don’t know how people will respond to them I really don’t (betraying a slight nervousness about this new set) some people might find them too odd, too dark, too this, too that, but they have to be what they were going to be.

WR: Did you ‘destroy’ the zinc with these big ones as well?

JH: I didn’t actually. By this time I knew where I was going. This foreground of the sea is made without any aquatint. That’s the difference in these plates. By working on these I discovered a way of not using aquatint in the sea. The only aquatint is in the land and that was a completely different way of working for me.

WR: ...and the sky?

JH: The sky? When I waxed up the sky I just didn’t do it very well! – Deliberately! I knew the acid would get through. It’s quite exciting what has happened there, the light on the sea, the dark on the horizon, the light just getting through. I really do quite like that passage of etching – but it’s almost accidental; and it occurs again there (pointing to another part of the plate) - I really love things like that.

JH: The final two images are printed with chine-collé onto Japanese paper. I wanted these images to be quieter.

I did a talk about Goya at Eames [Gallery] and I was getting quite interested in it, there’s one plate which is almost completely black apart from a line and some steps and I was thinking ‘How brave’ that was and that gave me the compositional
idea. A quiet period and then some activity but leaving the plate almost black. I’d like to come back to that in the next set.

WR: The prints on the wall, (below), are far more familiar as your style, more like the Orkney prints.

Studio photograph by the author

JH: They’re far more gentle. They’re quite late in the series, a summing up. It’s a completely different place and hopefully I’ve got the sense of that difference.

*We look begin looking at the sketchbooks while we move on with our conversation*

JH: That sketchbook is mostly off the boat. That’s just arriving at the island, really quick, working with the spray.

WR: Have you compared these back to any photographic reference for geographical accuracy?

JH: No I don’t want to do that I deliberately wanted to rely on the drawings. When you’re on the boat you’ve got to get to the point, and again that’s why I don’t use a camera because when you’re there you think ‘I’ve got to get it’. You do see people messing about with a camera and not looking, there’s usually 15 people or so on the boat and they’re fiddling about with cameras half of them aren’t even looking or they’re looking through their phone or camera. You see I think your memory can be disturbed with a camera. I did a trip recently to Montenegro, nothing to do with work, and I did a tour around the mosques. And it was beautiful, and then the guide took me through some back streets to another mosque and he said ‘you’re not taking any photos’ and I said I’m enjoying the walk and I’m looking, and honestly I don’t need to [take photos], I just want the memory. Later I thought
about what he’d said ‘you’re not taking any photos’ and he was so used to everybody taking loads of photos that he almost thought there was something wrong with me, that I wasn’t interested somehow, but I was really enjoying the walk. Then I thought what would I do with those images? Because I’m not going to make any work from them and why would I show them to anyone else – it would be an odd thing to do. Now I can look back on that walk and enjoy thinking about it; it makes me wonder if people don’t rely on their memories any more or don’t trust their memory.

WR: I wonder if the younger generation who have such a different relationship with their phones and taking photos will find that there is an impact on the way they work.

JH: I’ve found that particularly when I’m teaching foundation students, and many degree students, that they pull out their phone to find something to draw, they don’t go to the library, they don’t look out of the window and they draw from a 2 dimensional image that they have recorded or that they’ve taken off the internet. a) They haven’t experienced it perhaps and b) They don’t have the scale of it and its 2 dimensional. It’s a very odd way of seeing the world and it goes back to the start of our conversation about observation - seeing and looking, they think they’re looking but they’re not. So I don’t rely on a camera at all.

Sketchbooks showing the journey around St Kilda. Studio photograph by the author

We continue looking through the sketchbooks while we’re talking.

JH: The sketchbooks are for me, they’re mine. I understand them and it’s not a photographic record, the point is that I remember it.

WR: There’s always something more in a sketch than a photograph can get.

JH: If I had taken my camera on the trip and just gave you that set of photos to look through I bet you wouldn’t have spent as long as you spent looking through the
sketchbooks and I’d like to think that the way you’re looking at the books is close to the memory of what I had. You’re engaging with it, it’s tangible

WR: I’m beginning to wonder why is that line moving in that direction and why is the shading here. You’ve drawn it, it’s fixed, it’s always there, the weather, the feeling, sounds and smells ...

JH: Absolutely, they’re working books, they remind me of everything.

WR: I can see some of the sea marks in the drawings that have come through in these etchings.

JH: That’s true. The ocean was relatively still on this trip and I wanted something else from the ocean rather than that brooding quality. I wanted that sparkle of light and a bit of stillness in it. Especially in the diptychs I wanted the sparkle; the stillness; the islands sitting in the ocean, isolation.

WR: The drawings have more light and shade on the island masses than in the etchings, is that change part of the wrestle to understand how to show these islands?

JH: Yes, also partly about how I’ve etched the plates. I wanted to make them more imposing, big masses, big lumps of rock. Some etchings have a little sparkle of light on them but in others I wanted a real heaviness; quite a chilling sort of landscape.

JH: I won’t show the sketchbooks in the Gallery but I’ll do a studio talk and I’ll take them along then. The gallery is a commercial space so they don’t often like things that aren’t for sale. I also want to hold back on things like the sketchbooks so the mystery is still there. The sketchbooks are quite personal, but it’s nice to take them to a talk because you can explain them and they help put the work in context.
I open another sketchbook, above.

WR: This book is quite different

JH: This is walking on the island. They’re slow drawings, not much slower, but come from walking on land. They’re circular; clockwise and anti-clockwise walks, just 2 days.

WR: It’s interesting that you weren’t able to spend much time on the island and then the resulting etchings are mostly about the journey to the island?

JH: It was mostly about the excitement of arriving and then leaving. I wanted to think ‘why is this show different?’ and it’s different because I’m focusing on a very small set of islands. My time there was brief and it was what I was really excited about, going to St Kilda to see these great masses of land. And of course printing Norman’s etchings for years I felt as if I knew them. But then I had to make them mine. It was exciting and a challenge to make them mine. It’s like sitting where Tuner sat— you can’t make a Turner— but you can draw from where he drew from.

It was an exhausting trip. 2 weeks; a long drive to the Hebrides; the midges, the weather - the camping was tough – and then to pack up to go even further out to
St Kilda – it was exhausting. I was knackered, covered in midge bites; everything was wet; soaked through.

WR: The sketchbooks give a sense of that physicality, the speed of drawing; that sustained effort to produce 4 full sketchbooks over 2 days...

JH: There’s something to be said for having a time period you can’t dilly dally; you can’t sit and muse too much; you’ve just got to get on; you’ve got to record the information. It’s gathering the information because I know I can’t nip back and get more.

WR: So every single process is drawing?

JH: Yes – the new mono-prints I’ve done I’ve been working with silver and graphite ink but I’m still drawing with the ink. I draw with the ink on the glass, lay the paper down take a print, to me that counts as a drawing. Drawing underpins everything for me.

WR: Is the drawing enough in itself?

JH: The big drawings stand independently they’re on their own somehow. They’re on a different scale, the marks are different but they’re from the same concerns, the same images and the same sketchbooks. They’re linked right through. I don’t think my etchings are better or my drawings are better; they are all part of the same thing.

WR: That sets you apart somewhat; many people believe that etching gives substance to their drawing.

JH: This [St Kilda] show is a bit of a departure because Eames now has the rights to show the big drawings and it will make it more of a complete show because all the elements will be there. Principally I am an etcher, but I do draw too. I love etching - it’s deeply part of what I do, but without drawing there would be no etching.

WR: Without the etching would you still draw?
JH: Yeah, if I haven’t got an etching studio I draw in sketchbooks or I’m in the studio drawing. The two are so linked, enmeshed together; I couldn’t imagine not having one part of it.

WR: You print all your own plates don’t you?

JH: I like to own it all – printing my own plates reminds me of the time when I was an editioner and I haven’t yet met anyone who I trust enough that they will get what I get from the plates, it’s my problem. They’re not difficult plates to print but I’m fussy; I know what I want. Someone else printing a plate will always bring out something different. Sometimes when I’m printing for Norman (Ackroyd) I’ll use a slightly different ink to what he would have used and we’ll sometimes agree that we like it and it’s a bit of a chance that we got to that colour of ink, but he goes with it. It can be a very interesting relationship working with a printer, but I do like having that solitary time.

But - I enjoy editioning, I have edition days. Etching and printing are different things. When I’m etching the studio is just set up for proofing, when I’m editioning it’s set up very differently and there is a different atmosphere then. When you’re seriously editioning your rhythm is so important. It even comes down to how many steps you take, you need to make sure everything’s close – and the luxury of having that all to myself - I can’t tell you! Every night when I finish I know the next morning everything is ready to go, there’s no interruption. I do like being on my own in the etching studio, I must admit.

WR: Thank you Jason once again for your generosity of information and time, it is always a great pleasure to talk with you in such depth, about your work.
This is the 3rd interview with Jason Hicklin. The focus of our discussion on this occasion was the struggle of creating a new set of work which grapples with issues of tension and challenge and with the boundaries of materiality. Hicklin is focusing this series of etchings on a trip to Lewis which will be shown as a solo show at Eames Fine Art, Bermondsey, London in the early summer of 2017.

WR: I’d like to begin our conversation, today, by discussing the notion that creativity requires elements of tension and challenge (Dewey 2005, Csikszentmihalyi 1990, Pope 2008) in order to flourish.

JH: Tension, I think is a good word in the sense that I think it’s important for what I do to have some tension and some challenge. I think every series I’m making at the moment is more challenging because I make it more challenging.

WR: Are you looking for the place to be more challenging?

JH: Yes. The place is important still, but of more importance are the results and not just the finished articles but the process to get to the finished article is becoming much more difficult but logically it shouldn’t be. I know what I’m doing now, but that doesn’t seem to satisfy me. I don’t want to make a comfortable etching. I get them to a point where they could be finished and then I go away, make some notes about why I’m not happy, come back in the studio and really re-engage with them. For example one that I’m working on now, which probably some people would say its fine, but on Monday it’s going to be completely obliterated.

Because this is how the etchings are being built now. The ease of looking at them isn’t important to me. I’m not concerned that people find them difficult or wonder where they’re supposed to be going with them or how look at them. That’s not really my concern now. My concern is the conflict and that tension in the studio.
It’s becoming much more important. The big turning point for me after the St Kilda work was the Mersey work. They really became a link from what wasn’t quite sitting right with St Kilda. I started the Mersey work. It was going okay but my feeling was that’s all it was. It was just going okay. There was nothing really kicking off that was really making me excited until I started obliterating them. I did something I’ve never done before - I exhibited them in a small show up in Runcorn. It was just a small show, not really a selling show, and at the end of it I was glad it wasn’t a selling show because when I went up to see it, I thought “What a mistake you’ve made here. They’re not the full ticket, these.” And I couldn’t wait for that show to end so I could get them back to the studio.

I didn’t want to interrupt the plates until they were off the wall, and once they were off the wall I then thought “Right, rethink them.” And it’s as if I’d taken them so far but not far enough. Instead of going the full hundred miles, I’d got to about seventy five miles with them and I just needed to push them through something. I’m glad I did because that Mersey work became a real turning point for this set of Lewis work now. But no one can tell you that it’s not working - you’ve got to find it yourself.

WR: But it was actually seeing them all on the wall?

JH: I just knew they weren’t right. That was such a good thing to do, to really re-etch them, rethink them and that definitely has led into the way of working for this series. I’ve made some of the plates quite quickly in a way, but I just wanted to map them out. Just wanted to get some information on the plate knowing that whatever happened they weren’t going to stay like that. They were going to be ripped apart.
WR: They do sit together really well as a set.

JH: I think they do. I don’t think they go together easily. Again, that’s part of it. There’s more perspective in these and more distance. And that’s dictated partly by the landscape; this is the Isle of Lewis. It’s a big island, Lewis. There are big distances involved. The island’s got many elements to it; the north - the Butt of Lewis, is quite different to the Berneray Peninsula [on Nourth Uist, seen from Lewis] where you get these different things happening. It’s just a very different landscape. It’s got many elements to it so I was able to spread my thought process with that - different ways of making marks and responding to different elements in the island.

WR: Last time we spoke you seemed to be at a point of being very content with what you’d achieved with the St Kilda series?

JH: At the moment I’m in a different head space. I’m quite agitated. That’s good. I like to be agitated and I like to be not happy! These small ones are finished but now for the big prints. I’m starting the big ones now.

I still am agitated about the small ones but in a good way. I keep looking at them thinking “No, no,” but I don’t want to tidy them up.
WR: Do you get to a point when they’re all on the wall like this and then you pick one plate out and have another little tweak?

JH: I did do that. There was a couple I did that to.

WR: Which one?

JH: I re-altered that one (Butt of Lewis). That one I thought was going to be finished first. It became quite tricky. That was the trickiest one out of all of them, I find. Oh, that one. I thought I had that sussed and I had it up on the wall thinking “It’s done. It’s done.” Then I went away, came back and thought “No, it’s not done at all.” It’s simple things. It can be light, too dark and too heavy or they’re not heavy enough. Mainly at the moment I think they were too dark and I wanted to put more light into them.

WR: One of the phrases I picked up on your last interview was your thoughts after doing the talk about Goya; about wanting to have much more dark in your work, but with some interruptions of light. But you have actually lightened these a little bit.

JH: I think the light is absolutely crucial to etchings, absolutely crucial, and sometimes you can get carried away by just making things blacker and darker. The way I’m etching at the moment, using open bite technique, it’s a way of putting light back in.

That’s what the problem with Mersey work was all about. What they lacked was the open biting. With open biting it goes in the acid a long time and if you don’t
protect everything else you’re going to lose everything. The light in these has all been achieved by open biting - it reintroduces light. It’s like a big eraser, and I think that it’s really important, for me, to remember that all the time. And of course the light only works when you put dark against it. So it’s balanced.

WR: How long would you open bite the plates for?

JH: Some of them are in the acid for about two hours. That’s nitric acid that’s been used before so it’s quietened down a bit - it starts to wear itself out, but you have to keep your eye on it because once the acid finds a way in, it starts to undercut. And so what you think you’ve protected goes - which can sometimes be a good thing! Sometimes you think “Oh, God, I’ve lost something. The one thing this etching had, I’ve lost it.” So it’s about protection. It’s not two hours where you can go away. You’ve got to keep on it, every ten minutes or so I have to move the acid around. I’ll have something else I’m working on but I’m constantly aware. So it’s not like you’re neglectful. You’re still aware of the hours and just keeping your eye on it.

WR: A very purposeful erasing process?

JH: Yes. Oh yeah. It’s not a negative. It’s like using an eraser when I draw. It’s very much like drawing in that sense. Open bite is like a big eraser, just like when you’re drawing you’re erasing. It feels like a positive way to put the light back in.

WR: And similar to an eraser then, these areas here where you’ve got just a trace of...

JH: …what was there before. You make a decision not to take it all the way back - it’s a suggestion of what’s there. You can’t forget “I’m thinking about water”. I’m thinking about the difference in land and water.

If it went back to pure white it would make it too flat. That time in the acid, I’m dragging my fingernail in it thinking, “How much ink is that going to hold?” You think “Take it out,” because if you go back to white you’ll think “Shit, I just wanted some tone in there,” you’ve then got to re-etch it again. That can be a tricky thing just putting the tiniest line in. It can make it so obvious that you’ve put it back in. So you lose all of that serendipity.

WR: So there’s a lot of conflict in this series?
JH: The whole lot has conflict in them, which is, as I said, intentional. I really want to be involved with them. I want them to be as challenging as perhaps the landscape is. I was there in September, so some days were good, some days were bad when the rain came in. I think the best drawings I did were on the land. I went out and huddled behind a rock, wrapped in my waterproofs, really struggling to see thing. I think there’s something there about the crucial marks I was making and the decisions I was making and I want that in the etchings. I want every decision to be a crucial decision and also a decision I have to earn. I have to really earn the right to make these marks at the moment.

WR: So how do you go about generating a situation in the etching where you’re creating conflict for yourself?

JH: I start etching all 14 plates. I put down what would be the idea of the sea. I etch. I put a layer of varnish/wax, across the plate, leave some areas covered; some uncovered, and etch them all. So at one stage I had 14 prints just of marks which look like water.

WR: Your horizon line is quite similar?

JH: Again, a clear decision. Moving on from St Kilda where the horizon line was almost as low as it could be. With these I wanted to bring it up and then on occasion just drop it down a bit or drop it right down in there. I think it’s always good to have a joker in the pack sometimes. I think that’s the joker in the pack, (below) because the horizon has obviously dropped down and the sky’s treated differently.

Hicklin’s ‘joker in the pack’. Studio photograph by the author
And so once I’ve got the sea, I then etch the land-form masses in and at that point I began to think things were going Ok with some of them...

But then you just unleash the open biting! You unleash more aquatinting into them! Then I proof them and then I get problems. When things aren’t resolved that’s when you then start the conflict.

WR: Is the aquatint ‘unleashed’ in a planned way? When you put the aquatints on, are you stopping out purposefully?

JH: Once I’ve got the land in, I open bite. I then protect some areas, sort of half intentionally. Then I put them back in the acid for an hour or two and see what happens. When I proof them I can see what I have to do to resolve the image, and then it’s quite tricky - and that’s when usually I go back to aquatinting and redrawing.

It’s very purposeful. I’m always thinking about the land and where I am. I’ve still got my sketchbooks out, all propped up in the mirror, so I’m still looking, making sure compositionally they’re working, the shapes are right for this land and there’s always that element of why I stopped there originally to draw. Why there? The reference back to the drawing book is really important. As it is right through the process. Even when I’m making that initial rough etching of the sea, I still have the sketchbooks open just to get that feel of the perspective the sea is giving me. So it’s intentional to that degree.

But I’m still looking for the acid to do something that I wouldn’t have done, for something to happen that I’m just not expecting. The etchings don’t work for me until I lift them up and something’s happened I didn’t expect to happen. All I’ve done is influence it. I’ve pushed it, hoping it would happen but I’ve no idea if it will or what will.

WR: To a point?

JH: To a point, but with etching it’s so... Things happen. It does surprise you. Sometimes the acid’s stronger than you think, weaker than you think. There’s got to be a bit of surprise when I lift that paper up though. If there isn’t, it’s still not working. You know you’ve got something.
WR: So when you say ‘lift up,’ is that the point you lift the paper up off the copper plate?

JH: Yeah, when it’s been printed and you just lift it up for that proof and you hope it’s the one.

For the first five or six proofs, I know it’s not going to be right. So when I lift the paper up, I quickly look at it, but I know it’s got work to do. But when you get to the stage where you’re hoping some things are resolved, that’s when you start lifting it and hoping.

WR: The more you look at this series, you more you start to see. There’s an initial impression that they give, which is clearly quite a difficult landscape but then the more you look at them, the more intricacies you see.

JH: That’s good. I want the viewer to be drawn into them because I think as an etcher, when I look at them I’m excited by the marks that are there. I know people who don’t etch probably won’t feel the same excitement, but maybe they’ll find that mark which will mean to something to them even if they don’t understand the mark or how it’s been made. I’m hoping it gives them a bit of a buzz, a bit of curiosity I suppose.

WR: There will be a lot of etchers who won’t have a clue how the mark’s been made and that will be fascinating for them.

JH: That’s an interesting point. I do like that idea because there’s no real mystery to the mark making. There’s no secret. I am hoping even people who etch will wonder “How the hell did he do that?” And perhaps it would be easy for me to explain it, not that I want to.

But sometimes I’ve got something and I look and think “How did that happen? Was that the open bite? Was that the aquatint here?”

Then when you get to the point where you’ve nearly got it, you really start thinking about the order that you did things and what dried wrong and whatever. You just know you want this darker and that lighter, and you can get lost in it for a few minutes or a few hours. You just start thinking. The process just takes over completely. You’re completely in it. Absolutely lost in it. And that’s exciting. That’s really, really exciting!
At the time it’s not always easy. You go back to good company in those days but it’s so exciting when you’re actually in it. But it’s always easier to say that when you actually get a result. Until you’ve got the result, it’s a nightmare!

We move around the studio to look at the difference between the Lewis etchings and the Mersey series

JH: It’s a different type of water, obviously it’s a river. It’s a tidal river so the levels change all the time. This is the one (below) that there was most conversation about [at the preview evening] and it was the toughest one to make.

Estuary, proof Studio photograph by the author

JH: This is made from three pieces of metal. And these were the ones that came back to the studios, these smaller ones that really worked. And that was the starting point for the big ones, 2 plate and 3 plate. These are actually based on some marsh land next to the Mersey. So it’s not actually the Mersey River, it’s just something I really liked
Smaller Mersey plates, left, which were the inspiration for the larger 2 plate etching, *Meadow II*, right. Studio photographs by the author

JH: I started to open bite and they started to come alive and then I knew I could make the big ones in that way. I got the light back into it. I’d proofed it at one point and it was just so dark so then I just ripped the centre out. I didn’t have a feeling of water and light and air. I just open bit the whole centre of it and left traces which look almost accidental. There’s something about this [2 plate] etching I really love. I remember proofing it one evening and thinking “I’ve just got to get this resolved.” I went to bed, thinking “I’ll work on it tomorrow.” But when I got up and I looked at the proof … do you know, I think it had worked and it was done.

But it was a hard fight to get there.

WR: Can I see a nice reference back to some of the monoprint marks from the St Kilda series?

JH: Yes, the marks here.

People will take longer to respond to these, I know that, but that doesn’t matter. Because once you work in this way, you can’t turn it off.
WR: You’ve talked about portraying the three different elements of the earth, water and the land; they’ve got to be treated differently.

JH: Yes, that’s true. When you’re etching you are aware of what you’re etching. The ones that don’t work, the sea can feel just like land. And you have to remember that all the water is a big mirror for the sky. That relationship between the two is really important and that, relates them, links them.

WR: Obviously it’s been interesting having two quite different landscapes as well to deal with and you’ve worked on the two series quite quickly, one after the other. Am I right that you didn’t have long to do these?

JH: 15 etchings in one month - Yeah, a good month, Five weeks.

WR: A very intense period of working?

JH: It is, but you have to have that intensity. That’s what I was saying about the big ones. Once you start on them, you’ve got to have time to be on them.

WR: I’m sure that’s what gives you such coherence - working quickly and staying focused.

JH: Maybe. I’ve been away this week and one of the things I went to see was [Picasso’s] the Vollard suite. Seven years he worked on those and they still hold together brilliantly. One of the reasons I went to see those was to remind me how to handle a series and that I’ve got a lot to learn.

The pure business side of it is a series has to be finished by a certain time and because of the way I work I can’t always rely on myself that it’s all going to work. I’m hoping it’s all going to work. So I just have to give myself enough time in case they don’t. I’m feeling under a lot of pressure to get the whole Lewis show done, but at the same time that pressure’s good. It makes me do it and makes me make decisions. It makes for really intense working periods and I really need that on these.

WR: Does the deadline provide another aspect of conflict, or tension?


WR: And so you give yourself very tight deadlines to increase the pressure?
JH: It’s a discussion with the gallery. These will be shown in June, but when you work backwards that means they’ve got to be catalogued, they’ve got to be framed. They’ve got to have them at least a month before. So mid-May is my sort of deadline on these.

WR: You’ve got loads of time then!

JH: No! You start working out how many days you’ve actually got completely on the job in the studio. I think I’ve only got 20 completely uninterrupted days before the end of March. That conflict of time can be a good thing as well because when I’m working I have about half an hour for lunch. Apart from that the whole day is on them - you’re on them all the time. And that’s what I need, that’s what I think I need now. (And in a way, even if I have two years to do them, I probably wouldn’t start making them until six months before. You just don’t do it.) Sometimes you do have to make yourself make decisions.

WR: So you’re forcing a decision?

JH: I want them resolved and I have to get into a place close to resolving at some point. So I don’t want to force it, because you can’t force it, because you know they’re not done. You can’t kid yourself. You know when they’re done or not, and if they’re not finished by the time the show comes up, they don’t go in the show. That’s the way it will be. For the show, I’m envisaging these will be in it. Maybe three or four bigger etchings, that’s all. And maybe one or two monotypes...

WR: It sounds almost like this Lewis show is starting to become a bit more about process than place.

JH: I think that’s absolutely fair. What I’m thinking about in this show is that I want it to be about etching. Of course, Lewis is important to me because it’s where I was walking when I was thinking about the show. But to do something really about etching - that will be the next step and then to keep exploring this process as far as I can.

WR: Showing much more about what the metal can do; what the ink can do?

JH: Yes, and what the acid can do. Not hiding marks, not disguising marks that crop up. Previously when I have had marks like this I would have found it difficult to live with them. I’d have got rid of them. I suppose it’s just embracing the mark,
embracing what’s happened and living with that. Living with that great mark. I’m really enjoying it. It was partly accidental; it partly happened through open biting, and previously I may have hid things like that. I think these prints are more open and yet the most secret and there’s a mystery to them in that sense. They are completely open about what they’re about and less tricksy I think. I’m more open to the process itself in these. I’ve let the process just come in and take over and with the Mersey stuff I think I invited the process in and let it take its course, let it pull me around a bit. So yeah, the show will be about this etching business.

WR: The St Kilda series became very much a struggle because it was such a strange place and you couldn’t invite the etching in in the same way because you had to suss out the shape of the place.

JH: There just wasn’t enough room in the plate to let the process in to complete it. I think it partly was creeping in; there are elements of St Kilda in these. I knew almost the quality I wanted, but I wanted also to harp back to St Kilda a little bit to remind people of where I’ve been before.

JH: So again I’m using the [St Kilda] series in a different way. It becomes a link back to something. It also harks back to Orkney and I think it goes right back to some etching I made in County Mayo in 1996.

The ‘joker’ in the Lewis series compared with a 1996 County Mayo print. Studio photograph by the author

WR: To me your work is immediately recognisable, but it’s interesting to look back at an old series and see how different it was.
JH: I did think of that etching when was making that sky in particular. You also start to see how much further you can go with it in this business. You can see how, what I was learning then about the process.

It’s building up the nerve to take them as far as you can. You look back and see what made them sell really well. There’s a sort of accessibility to these that people can understand and live with. This new series will be more difficult for people to live with on their walls.

I think there was more romance in the way I was using the acid. They’re gentler and they’re softer. Which is fine, but it doesn’t suit me now. I can’t think like that now. I just want a snapshot of that top place. I’d like to go back there and re-etch Achill Head like this because this, now, excites me more in the way they’re made, the physicality of the etchings themselves, close to the physicality of the landscape. But again, the landscape is just a starting point for the way I’m thinking about etching.

WR: You don’t sound as if you’re as much in touch with Lewis. Did the landscape touch you emotionally in the same way?

JH: I think it did, you know. It’s about the fourth time I’ve been to Lewis. I think at the moment my head is so full of etching, I can’t think about the place almost. But I had some great experiences on this trip. There’s so many great memories of the island.

The reason I went back to this island was that when I got back from St Kilda, it had been so exhausting, and then I lost my wallet and it really upset my head space. When I was last on Lewis the weather was bad, my tent was ripped and I couldn’t quite settle. I went back to Lewis on this trip determined I would be completely calm in the sense that everything would be in order. I could just think about drawing. And I did. I had a really great week or ten days on Lewis and really, really loved every day I was there. But coming back I knew etching would take over. I knew this was about the etching rather than Lewis. But without Lewis I wouldn’t have the chance to do the etching.

WR: No, but maybe because you were more comfortable because you knew the place? You weren’t having to work out the place for the first time in your mind.
JH: That’s right. I knew about the ten to fifteen key sites I wanted to go to, which would form the island and that allowed other things to creep in – it allowed the etching in. At the same time I’ve been wanting to do a show about etching for a while. It’s been building and building, I think. I suppose I’ve been holding it back a bit, but now I think with the support of the gallery - they hope it’s going to be okay. They’ve got an idea of what’s coming but they won’t really know until they come and see it.

Next year’s show is going to be even earlier and I’m going to be making work from Australia. Which will be interesting. I think because it won’t be a landscape I can easily dip back into, I think then it really will be about etching completely. See how far I can take it.

During 2016 Jason took part in a collaborative residency project visually and experientially exploring the Mersey River in England and the Hudson River in Australia.

WR: How was Australia?

JH: It was great, I loved it. Absolutely loved it! The town I was resident in was in Newcastle, about two hours north of Sydney. So I spent some time in Sydney, mainly in Newcastle, and doing a series of talks and a couple of workshops, two exhibitions and then walks with the rangers in the wetland areas along the Hunter estuary. We were looking at the similarity between the Hunter estuary and the Mersey in the sense that they’re both major shipping lanes, both huge rivers, both tidal with industry in some areas. In other areas there was some reclaimed land and in other areas land that hasn’t really been bothered by that. So it was quite a similar place in a way but a bit warmer. It was extraordinary!

I worked in the same way when I was there. We had a guy that used to take us to the walks and I made sketches in my sketchbooks just in the same way as I worked on the islands. The difference of course is it’s the Pacific Ocean rather than the Atlantic, which of course is really quite different. But the sketchbooks, they look like they could be in Scotland.

It’s interesting how much of me is in this, but I didn’t want to rock up with my watercolours and completely change everything because it just isn’t me.
This (above) is an area very similar to the water meadows, Ash Island, reclaimed. I think it was colonised, all the trees were felled, they completely ripped apart the landscape, but now it’s been reclaimed and salt marsh has been re-introduced with mangroves. So it’s interesting how much of that happened to the Mersey as well, you see.

WR: And you did this sketchbook when? The Australia trip was after the Mersey?

JH: Yes, I’d finished the Mersey and that was the idea of the residency because I did it with two other artists that made work on the Mersey and then we all went off to Australia to work, to do the residency there on the Hunter.

So there were lots of challenges for me, to walk with someone else because there were conversations. I didn’t know my way around, so to have a ranger was necessary. All the shapes were different, the light, the Pacific was different, the smell was different. Even though the sketchbook may look similar, in my head there are elements I really want to extend with the etching into the new work.

WR: So if you were to choose a page to sum up that difference or the similarity that you wanted to take through?

JH: I think it’s going to have to be, I think, this nob of land, it is called ‘Nobby’s Point.’
This land, this is Nobby’s Point, was twice the height before it was colonised and the convicts were made to take all of that top off, build the lighthouse and use this land there. They took off the top to build this causeway. I’m going to do something about that because it’s actually a manufactured landscape but it also links an island to the land and it also was made by convicts. So things like that I got quite interested in. And the colour, in my head I can see the colour of the Pacific and that’s something I’ll pick up on in the etching next year.

WR: Not by introducing colour?!

JH: No, again, light. It’s reminded me about light all the time. And the scale, I think I will make more, larger, etchings for the Australian show because it just felt bigger. There were bigger vistas. I think it would just be a good opportunity to really chance my arm and stretch my arms a bit with the images. It was a really interesting trip because it did make me consider a lot about what I do, why I do it and when I do it. Talking to people who weren’t completely familiar with Scotland was quite interesting because they’re surrounded by such a different landscape.

So my wild rugged Scotland was like a drop in the ocean to Australians. It’s going to be a challenge that I’m all-embracing. looking forward to the Australian stuff. I’ve never made a work about another country before.

I’m going to start the work as soon as this show is up because we’re going to show it in March next year. It’s going to be a very different, everything is going to be slightly different - the time I’m making the work, the way I make it, the scale, everything. I’m envisaging it being a completely different experience. Yeah, I want
to go much bigger. Again, I think something about etching is the scale. You don’t see a lot of big etchings. And I really like making them. I think there’s the challenge of making them. There’s the challenge of looking at them and that’s something I want to go further with. So Australia will really give me that excuse to sort of really expand them out and the monotypes as well. I think there’s a series of monotypes I’d like to make, but really quite large. Obviously it’s got to be pieced together with paper but there’s limitations with the presses. I am excited about the challenges ahead for sure.

The trip, it was worth doing, I enjoyed it and I think it will be productive and I think I’ll be going back at some point. I’m more curious than I thought I would be. I didn’t think I’d get it, but if I’d have gone there when was about 20 I think I’d have stayed there. Honestly. But culturally it’s different too. There is a reason to be here. Australia went on and on. But that’s why I had to concentrate on a very small area, the Hunter estuary. It’s too big. It’s a lifetime’s work to do the rest, take on too much.

WR: It’s a lifetime’s work to do Scottish islands.

JH: I know. Concentrating on that Hunter estuary is what I’m going to do. They’ll probably be similar in some senses to the Mersey series. I’ll concentrate on certain areas, the really key areas, making responses to those. Let’s see what happens. I’ll keep it open.

You take something from each series, it leads into the next. We’ve just looked at a print from 1996 and there’s a thread right through, I think. And I think that has to always be there. I don’t see how you can avoid it really.

WR: But you don’t want the work to be ruled by that common thread?

JH: No. I want people to be surprised every time they see a series. I don’t want to think, “Oh, another Jason Hicklin show.” I want them to be surprised, just for a split second. I know it doesn’t last for long. I do know most people spend about ten seconds, thirty seconds in front of a piece if you’re lucky, but you just want that initial “Ooh, I didn’t expect that.” That would make me very happy if I just get that bit.
You sometimes envy print makers. You see work that they’ve made over the years. They’re really happy doing it and they’re very good at doing it. From their work I often sense they’re at peace with themselves, they’ve found their process.

You see people’s work and you know their work. They’re so good at it and so comfortable. But for me, again, I go back to the conflict and tension. I realise this only exists because of that conflict and tension. I can’t just repeat myself.

Technically there’s many people making prints and making them really well. But I think for me it’s got to go further than that. I almost don’t really want to be satisfied. I don’t think I am really a print maker - I’m an etcher. For me, because the process does take over in the way that it forms images, I’m an etcher - I’m not confident with being called a print maker.

WR: Are you a fine artist who uses etching as your medium?

JH: Yes, and I think going back to the drawing. The drawing is never far away. It’s a way of drawing and it’s a way of interpreting my drawings, but it’s also a way of drawing on plates and I’ll never forget that. That’s why I use the sketchbooks and I don’t use any other recording device when I’m outside. It’s just because that is the link with the drawing.

WR: And as it becomes more about the process of etching, will it become more about the process of drawing on the plate?

JH: Absolutely, it’s the way of drawing on the plate that becomes different as well. That’s why some of these marks are different. They’ve been informed by the way I’m drawing. And so the way of drawing has become a process as well. There’s a process to the drawing.

WR: At any point you’re not relying on a very habitual way of drawing. You’re always looking for a few way of laying something down, of getting that mark?

JH: Yes, and that then relates to that landscape as well because you’re trying to re-interpret that landscape in its own way, and so you’re looking for a body of work to have its own body of marks, a language. So I suppose you’re just adding to your vocabulary.

WR: A different visual language for each one, a different dialect?
JH: Dialect’s a good word. I think that’s a really good word for it.

The more I do as well, the more I keep referring back. Thinking about that Vollard Suite again I really spent time looking at them, really looking at them. The Vollard Suite was a seven year batch of work and there’s some good etching in there.

I also saw, when I was away, the complete set of Der Krieg by Otto Dix, the war etchings and they are just unbelievable. He’s one of my very favourite etchers and to see those and realise the language in the marks he was employing, I learnt so much from those.

Just think how he made them and when he made them and then I look at the luxury I have. I mean, I’m creating this conflict in myself in the work. He’d lived through that. It’s horrific conflict and it’s almost his responsibility. What have I got to bloody moan about?

Seeing the whole series - you can see everything like the ink on the edge of the paper where he’s over inked them, and they’ve scrubbed out the ink. Things like that. They’re so human. They could be made yesterday.

There’s a great catalogue for the Dix show where they’ve devoted each page to the etching, which is great. So to see those, to spend a couple of days looking at those, was just so informative.

I’d gone away thinking “I’m going to go and see these things and somehow for my stuff has got to stand up a little bit to these guys.” I was dreading walking back in here, so I crept in and sort of thought “No, they’re okay. As a series they’re okay.”

WR: It doesn’t matter whether you’re actually going to etch in a similar way or not, you are still being inspired by another artist?

JH: Absolutely. You see how they’ve worked. Working on a series, that’s it. You see a whole series of thought process and you realise what they’ve gone through to get that. And it reminds you that they’re human too. They have all those struggles, all those conflicts, all those problems that I’m getting.

This year started off with me just being immersed in it. I also went and did a trip to Spain because Picasso’s been in my head a lot with the etching. I went to Malaga where he was born and they’ve got the etching press there that the
Crommelynck’s printed with. It is in a museum now, it’s a bit sad it’s not being used. It’s just itching to be used! I touched base with where he came from, I walked around there, the bull ring’s still there and mountains, I don’t know why it was important but I thought it would be.

They’re intimidating characters, the great etchers. Just seeing that etching press. I took some photos of it. It was really something to see - the handle, it’s covered in ink. You get such a buzz looking at that.

I suppose it’s just putting yourself in context, where people have been before you. You just realise what a geek you are sometimes. “Oh, look at that. The ink on the handle of that! Imagine that!” Things like that have been important this year.

WR: But that brings you back to the actual process, it’s about the etching, isn’t it? It’s about what you do?

JH: Yes. The whole idea of an exhibition is an interesting thing. I was thinking about that yesterday. You see the finished things on the wall and it’s as if the etching room is like this little engine that chugs away and things are happening. And by the time they’ve reached the gallery wall, they really are resolved. It’s what people don’t see, that also really interests me. Going back to the word ‘conflict’, that complete immersion, conflict and mess that goes in to make the image that just ends up sitting on a wall. But the way you get there, that difference is such a dichotomy.

WR: When people know about etching though and they know about the process as well, they do become even more interested, don’t they?

JH: Yes, I think that’s true. People really want to understand. There’s no photographic reproduction in these at all. It’s all a conflict between acid, metal, wax, varnish. That’s all going on and conflict within yourself too.

You see those little photos of Picasso, looking at proofs. You can see it in his eyes. He’s not happy. There’s got to be something else to it. It’s good to remind yourself, I think.

WR: He re-worked plates to a large degree, didn’t he?
JH: Yeah, absolutely. That’s really important to put across, Rembrandt as well, the way he worked back into plates - really physical things. It’s really important to remind yourself that they did all that. Got their hands into it and they were very hands on.

In the second part of this interview we talked more about Jason, the person, and how much of himself he puts into the work.

WR: Did Lewis show you compassion, give you some good days? When you talked about St Kilda you said “It hated me. It didn’t want me to be there.”

JH: Yeah, you’re right. Lewis this time was a bit more biddable. I went so determined I was going to get the work I needed because I had such a bad experience last time on Lewis. Everything was just wrong that time.

I had some really good experiences actually. I felt more in control of the whole expedition; I knew where I was going. As I said, I’d been before. I knew there were images I wanted. I knew the points on the island. It’s why I’ve got the map up there; it just keeps me thinking about the shape of the island and where I was. So I felt much more calm, in that sense. I wasn’t camping; I stayed in a camping pod which is like a wooden shed type thing, so I was actually dry at night and that meant I could think straight. I could read, look at the maps, look at the books. So that felt better.

I was pretty absorbed in the island, to be honest with you. I really was. There were lots of memorable things - I got up in the middle of the night one night and it was a full moon. I was staying just underneath the Callanish stone circles. I got up in the middle of the night and went up to the stone circles and just watched the full moon sit above the stones. That was unbelievable. I did some drawing by moonlight; I did a few sketches here and there, but I bought into them the feeling of light again. It was light on the water, moonlight on the water.

Another good thing was that I had slightly more daylight than I usually get, which I think I might do something about. The midges weren’t too bad either. A few, the headlands were bad, but on the whole they weren’t as bad as they had been in the summer when I went to St Kilda.
It was a great trip and I really enjoyed it. I suppose I came back feeling more assured about the images I’d collected; a good book of images. And I got to grips with it; I felt more at peace with that island. I felt surer about it all.

WR: How many sketchbooks did you do?

JH: I think it was five or six. There was another one, I think. I think six, so that’s about one a day. That’s my usual, about one a day. And then there’s the previous books on Lewis as well, so it was interesting to put them together. Some of the spots were exactly the same spots I’d sat in and that wasn’t intentional. There were obvious things that you’re just drawn to. I was more sure about where I wanted to be. I think I did a better set of drawings by going back; they’re more informed. I knew the spots I wanted to etch, so I was quite calculated about the information I took back. This etching up here...

Loch Roag from Berneva, proof. Studio photograph by the author
...which is going to be the same subject matter as the big etching downstairs. I knew, I’d spend a lot of time there, almost a whole day just drawing that bay and just really getting the shapes into my head, what it was about it and just looking at it, just watching it; just watching the water.

I did quite a lot of walking at the different points I’d decided on. I almost circumnavigated the whole island with the car as well. It’s a big island so I’d drive, park the car and then do as much walking as I could before dark instead of having to move back to the car.

This trip was just about being more assured about where I wanted to work from, but I wasn’t particularly comfortable. I was more comfortable at night because I was dry and I could look at things and think about the next day without having to spend a lot of time just drying stuff or repairing things. I felt better for that and slept better.

And that’s something I want to consider for future trips, whether camping is the best way because camping is time hungry. You spend a lot of time moving the tent, putting it up, taking it down.

WR: Obviously it’s a bit cheaper but if that’s not giving you the information?

JH: Yes, so you’ve got to weigh it up. The camp is really a bargain for what it is; it’s just brilliant, having things like a shower just felt better the next morning. I could leave sketchbooks out and the maps. I could really think and make notes about what I’d
done. In that sense, I was more prepared for the next day than I have been sometimes.

WR: Then you need more conflict back in the studio?

JH: Yeah. Yeah, definitely more conflict in the studio, but I come back to the studio knowing that I want that. I know it’s going to be a conflict time and that’s okay. It’s not as if it surprises me. It’s not as if I want it, as I said earlier - It’s necessary for these. And necessary for me, I’ve realised. I think I do need it to make the work. I don’t want to say too much about it in the sense that I might be wrong, but I think some of these are more about me than previous etchings. I think some of the larger ones are more about me. I think because of the conflict, because of the tension. Someone talked to me about yoga the other day but I don’t want to be that relaxed. I don’t want to be chilled!

WR: You want to be a bit on edge?

JH: Yes, to make these you do have to be. I think you’ve got to be and I think that’s why they’re about me in a way. There’s a lot in them that I’m enjoying at the moment. I think there’s a lot about etching, and they do remind me of myself, but I think it’s only because people say things about you and you think “I hadn’t thought that about myself before.” “I didn’t realise I was always on edge.”

WR: There’s a lot of light in them as well.

JH: Yeah. I don’t think I’m particularly moody or dark in my personality at all. I don’t think they’re about that. These are more exacting. These take a lot more out of me; I feel more tired after these than I have done the previous ones.

I think the decisions become exhausting, as you can see from the series of proofs, and so that can just become a physically tiring part of it. And you have to work relatively fast to do these, so a day’s a long day and it’s a physical thing. You’re just doing them, proofing, wiping the plates, on your feet all day with them really.

WR: You’re quite determined and driven then? Ambitious? Or just driven?

JH: Ambition? The more people that see them, the better. I like that idea. I like the idea as well of more conversation - perhaps about etching. The night we opened the Mersey work I noticed that the conversation about that big one was more than
there had been about other etchings previously. It was how it was made, the
marks, and I think it was people weren’t that comfortable with it. They weren’t just
going “Oh, I love that.” It wasn’t like that. It was more like “Ooh, that’s interesting. I
like that bit and this is different and that’s…” And even the gallery said the
conversation that created was greater than a lot of other people’s.

We agreed that that’s not a bad thing because if you want to move the images up
to being something else rather than just pictures of landscape, I think there comes
a point when that change has to be made. You have to start making that step up
with them and that will create hopefully conversations about them. It was just that
people were talking about it more and I suppose if I can get them onto that level
where people want to talk about them more that’s good. They’re more exacting
for me to make, but I want them to be more exacting for the viewer too, to tax
them a bit more. So the viewer has to work a bit harder to put them together.

But not everyone will want to do that. I think it goes back to what we talked about
earlier where it was all about what other people make and other people want.
They’re very different things. Some people want things they’re really comfortable
with on their wall and it just makes them feel okay. People who buy the work?
Maybe they just want something to cheer them up, I don’t know. That idea of why
people have things on walls fascinates me.

WR: And that varies very much as to whether you are coming at it from a
knowledgeable position about the technique or whether you’re coming at it just
from a point of view of home decorations.

JH: This is why most people have things on their wall. You’ve got to think, do I want to
be that type of artist? Does that matter? I don’t think it can at the moment
because I don’t think I can hinder these with that sort of thought.

WR: They’re more likely to touch people on an emotional level, a gut response to them,
do you think?

JH: I think I’ll be happy with that. If there’s anything I want, an ambition, it’s to pull at
people’s emotions, to make them think “What is it about this? And what is it about
these marks?” They’re marks that intrigue you perhaps, and you just have to try
and figure it out yourself. That’s why some of them are more abstract in their
composition - I’d like you to be able to put it together a bit; fill in the spaces more.
WR: The marks you’re creating are quite elemental. They could be found on a bit of worn rock or a patch of sand...

JH: That’s quite nice, I think. Yeah, I like that. I think that’s interesting. I think there’s more texture to these. And I think all those things that come into your head when you’re walking along are there. You see the texture from a stone in the sand; it does register in your head. It has to. I used to talk about the weather more than I ever do now. I don’t think it’s that important to it at all. The weather has obviously had an influence but it can be a bit too obvious, that link. I can’t say that these depict the weather. They probably depict time and erosion and the effects of, or the aftermath of, weather perhaps. The sky is important to them compositionally, but I’m quite happy for the sky to sort of find itself sometimes in some of them. But in saying that, I really like the sky in that up there! There’s something in that makes me... It’s almost an abstractive mark, the sky. It’s almost too heavy. But again in a series I think it’s important to drop things in like that. I think that sky is unique in the series. And when I first proofed it, I thought “I’ve got to sort that sky out.” You pick it up and you think “Actually, why? It’s doing its job.”

WR: A better balance to the textures and the rest of the image.

JH: Yeah and I love the foreground in that one too. There’s nice quality in that. I’m glad it’s not as dark as the land. I want them to have different tonal values but it’s sort of accidental that they do.

WR: But the land’s still gone backwards on that, hasn’t it? It’s got that perspective.

JH: In a way it wants to jut forward to the dark bit but it somehow doesn’t. It’s obviously there. The weather exists and I’m in it all the time but it’s not really the first point of interest.

WR: Was this trip more mentally exhausting than physically?

JH: I wouldn’t say mental exhaustion but it’s more taxing at the moment. But that’s just a period I’m in. I’m making work - the more I do, the more I’m learning to enjoy this taxing period. When it’s over you can look back and think “I really liked that.” You sometimes get that with a show - it hits you when you put all the works up and you’re there and it’s like saying goodbye to a project. It’s all done now. All that pile there of proofs there and all that stuff downstairs in the studio, it’s all
gone and the next ones coming. Then you get worried then about the next one and you think “Oh God, what if I can’t do the next one?” So you do start to miss it. You do start to miss this period. I’m trying to make the most of it. I’m trying to enjoy this as much as I can, as taxing as it is.

WR: I did wonder if I might find you biting your nails.

JH: There is a bit of that but I’m just hoping everything works out Monday and Tuesday on that big one! I’m not going to destroy something just for the sake of it. So it’s just making sure I make those right decisions and keep what I want. I’m sort of itching to get on with those. I’m looking forward to that. WR: You’ve talked a lot about actually the experience of making. Your studio is in the basement of this house... could you describe a good day in the studio?

JH: A good day?

Well, I go down to the studio before anything else. I get up; I go down put the hot plates on, then come up and have breakfast. During the first part of the morning, I’ve noticed, I don’t really resolve anything. The morning is etching, open biting; it’s doing all the usual stuff I do. I find after lunch, I have about 15 minutes, half an hour lunch; I really start to try and make decisions. Try and tighten things up; try and resolve them.

So by the time I’m proofing, at around five, six in the evening, I’m sort of okay with them. A good day in the studio is when I’ve resolved one or two plates; I’m actually proofing at that time of the day and those are the best days. The rest of the time it’s just etching and open biting until I’m nearing what I want. Until they’re starting to resolve or become resolved. If you’ve been with them all day, by the end of the day you start to see what you need to do to make them work. There will be marked changes, really are obviously changes that go on. But it depends, when you’re quite close to them, you’re hoping you’re not doing anything too drastic. It’s just tightening up here and there perhaps. Sometimes though, it might need something drastic.

WR: If you’re having a very intense day in the studio, you don’t take yourself away for thinking time; you become totally absorbed in it?
JH: Just absorbed in it. I find it’s better for me. Occasionally there are periods when I have a cup of tea and I pin up a proof and just look and think, but I tend not to come out of the etching studio to do that. It’s all in the etching studio because sometimes you come out and you can be distracted really easily and lose your train of thought. Sometimes you have to be careful you don’t get distracted into something entirely different.

If I’m working in the etching studio, I’ll stay in there as long as I can. By the end of the day you come to the point where you’re just knackered and you’re not thinking straight. You become too tired and you know that the decisions you’re making then aren’t the best decisions to make. So it’s that afternoon bit, that is the important bit for me and it’s when things start to happen. I’m not very good first thing in the morning.

WR: And you don’t pull all-nighters?

JH: I do occasionally if I really, really need to do it. Again, I find my decisions can get blurred if I get too tired or overtired. Its gets a bit panicky. I like the tension; I like the chaos but I don’t want it to be a panic. I like to have some control over that conflict and that tension. I don’t like panic at all, and that’s why I think I try and give myself enough time. I know they’re tight deadlines, but I don’t want to be panicked by the deadline. I don’t want to be rushing at the end because I don’t think I make the right decisions for the work. So I’m giving myself enough time all the time.

I do like doing an all-nighter, but it’s only if I can really concentrate and I’m being productive. If you’re just doing it and messing things up, then you’d be better to go to bed and start again really.

WR: On the flip-side, what’s a really bad day?

JH: A really bad day is when you’ve got so many other things to do, you can’t concentrate. You’ve been pulled out the studio all the time. Or saying to yourself that you’re hoping to etch and proof it but then it isn’t as dark as you wanted it. That can really bug you and then you’ve got to strip everything off, react to the plate. Those sorts of days can drive you bonkers really, when you just can’t, completely, settle into it.
And going back to panic. If I’m starting to rush things, you can feel yourself not being comfortable with it at all. And again, you’ve got to be comfortable with that conflict. You’ve got to be enjoying it and being in it. If you’re starting just to be completely upset by it, then I don’t think that’s good either. And I don’t know where that line falls. Sometimes I can completely live with it; other days I’m completely overwhelmed by it. So a bad day is being completely overwhelmed and everything you’re proofing isn’t working. A good day is just when you get one or two where you think “I’ve got something there,” and you can finish the day by feeling so much more better with yourself than those days where you’re completely at odds with yourself and it’s just not happening. You begin to feel “I can’t do it anymore.”

WR: You’ve said, a good day you just have one or two resolved etchings. You’re not looking to do too much

JH: No. God, no, especially when you work on a series, it’s step by step. It’s just getting one to work in a day or two maybe would be a really good.

WR: And that sometimes would just be a passage within one plate that you get to work?

JH: Yeah, and then you think “Tomorrow I can resolve this.” Or just in that day you resolve one of them and you think “God, that’s great,” that’s enough. Sometimes it’s a really good feeling if you can resolve one and then all the others can be all over the place, but at least you’ve got a foothold in the series. It reassures yourself you can still do it. You can’t take it for granted that you can do it. Some let you down; bad days are really bad.

WR: Do you finish early then or do you just try and work through?

JH: No, I always work right through. I remember David Smith, he said “There’s no excuse for moods or you don’t feel like it.” It’s not good enough; you just carry on - there’s always stuff to do so you just carry on. No, I tend to stick through to the bitter end really, to get something at the end of it all.

WR: I’m just starting to jot down a few key words to describe your imagery. How do you feel about ‘the land endures’?

JH: ‘The land endures,’ I like that. It’s a nice title. Yes, I think that’s true. That’s a good question about this land. I think in a sense I’m just recording this at this moment
and the older you get, you realise that when you’re gone that land will still be there. It’s one of those things you don’t want to think about too much. I suppose when I’m there, I do think about it more. It is sort of a little dalliance with mortality. You’re just a dot, a nothing, to this. It doesn’t know of me, does it? When I’m gone this land will start to change as well of course. In a thousand years it won’t be like this and it wasn’t a thousand years ago. So it’s just like being on two spirometers in a way. I’m on mine and this land on its.

We talked about that Australian thing where that land I’m drawing wasn’t man made. These things will collapse and the island will go - it’s all that transience I suppose. That’s what it’s about with me, I suppose. The idea of the land going on does make you feel weird. The younger you are you just feel like you’ll always be there, but you won’t. That’s odd sometimes. Really nice, those words.
Jason Hicklin RE at his Ellesmere studios

Interview 4 - 19th Jan 2018

This is the 4th interview with Jason Hicklin. The focus of our discussion on this occasion was the comparison of drawing and working from studies made in the warm yet alien surroundings of the Hudson River estuary in New South Wales, Australia. We also focused on what catches Hicklin’s eye in a given drawing and why that becomes translated into etching. This series of etchings will be shown as a solo show at Eames Fine Art, Bermondsey, London in February 2018.

Wendy Rhodes: I’d like to begin our conversation, today, by hearing about your trip to Australia and how you have found working on a series of etchings about a place which is so different to your usual habitat of the Scottish islands.

Jason Hicklin: These etchings are all based on the walks I made in New South Wales and...yes, its been a really tough one to pull together. Really tough, I spent the first 3 months making plates and they have all been destroyed. Everything was wrong - they didn’t have the right atmosphere; they didn’t have the light, they didn’t have the right shape to them. It took me three or four months to work out what was wrong about them and to try and figure a way into the project. I realised that I was making etching with Scotland still in my head and they didn’t look anything like Australia felt to me. They didn’t have the right feeling of light or the alien nature that Australia had. The movement in the ocean was different, it was the Pacific, not the Atlantic, and so I wanted to reassess how to interpret the drawings I’d made in Australia and to give them that quality of light and quality of air. And the way I felt about Australia and when I put these next to the Scottish work, there is a difference. I wrote down a series of words such as:

- Alien
- Bleached
- Hot
- Arid

The sort of words you’d expect and they definitely helped me focus on what was important.
JH: Not being able to go back was also important, even with Scotland it’s possible to go back, I can take a weekend and go up for a walk. But with Australia I’ve been totally reliant on the sketches I made and the memories I had. It’s made me be quite thorough in investigating the drawings I had. I’ve really had to analyse what I’ve got. I’m only just feeling its coming together.

WR: Was the change of location a bigger transition than you expected?

JH: A really big transition – but then again, it’s made me not take it for granted that I can just turn up anywhere and respond to the landscape. It’s been better for that investigation; it’s been a real struggle but it’s been a good use of time, it’s not been wasted time, I think I’ve learned a lot from this one.

I started making the work in August and it only really started falling into place in October/November. I worked on the set of small etchings first of all and I’ve used a different colour ink. It’s the Charbonnel ink with about 25% silver. I’m thinking about a different sort of light, a crispness and therefore to make a difference from the Atlantic etchings. The colour is quite different when you put them next to each other.

I tried printing the plates with a lot more silver but you lose definition, they become almost too opaque without the black. There’s a shimmer because the silver I’m using is a metallic silver - it catches the light in a different way.
WR: The prints have a very different atmosphere.

JH: There is a different quality of light. Ink is a tool to do that. They’re also less cluttered too, less active. In comparison to the Atlantic where there’s more activity. It was a different ocean, it’s calmer. The word Pacific comes from ‘pacify’, it was a good to word to think about too.

WR: There’s less activity in the skies too?

JH: When I was there the skies were clear, very few clouds, so I didn’t want to pop in a cloud as a compositional effect or as a comfort blanket. I wanted to merge the sky and the ocean.

WR: Have you had to exercise more restraint?

JH: A lot more restraint. Less open biting (there is some, but less) more thought before I started the initial drawing so I would have less open biting to do. There was so much in the Atlantic series so a way of describing the difference was to have less open biting.

WR: The prints aren’t tentative though...

JH: Good, they’ve been thought out, a lot of thinking, a lot of scrap metal on this series.

This Stockton Bridge etching was one of the most difficult; there was a lot of open biting. This was one of the earlier ones in the series.

WR: There’s almost nothing there, but the there is so much...

[Image: Stockton Bridge, proof. Studio photograph by the author]
JH: Yes, it was very last minute, I remember etching in some of the darks and I pulled it up and I thought ‘God, that’s got it’ it gave a border to this light, it was all it needed. It was a much more gentle river, there was a lot more light.

I felt like I was working with the landscape. There were a number of stages to each plate, but there have been more plates rejected. I had to make them more open, there had to be a difference. I couldn’t repeat the Atlantic approach; I had to put a different way. Not knowing the land as well as the Scottish land meant that I was making it... not abstract, but less explored. With the Scottish landscape I understand the contours more, I’ve walked it more - here it was about getting the essential shapes; an indication of what’s there.

There was much more memory involved because I couldn’t go back to re-walk it, but the experience was very important; it was a different sort of experience and it took me a long time to understand it. It was so different. There were familiarities, bays, headlands... but the shapes were different.

*Jason gets 6 prints out from a drawer in the studios, which make up two triptychs.*

JH: These were based on two different beaches that I walked on extensively, along and then out to the sea. If I got to know any bit of land, this was it; Newcastle Beach.

JH: These are areas where I swam; I did a lot of swimming in Australia. I do swim in Scotland, but not as much! [laughs] I swam both in the ocean and in a man-made ocean pool which overlooked this beach. It was one of the ways I started thinking about it differently – the amount of time I spent in the sea; its warmer but you have to be careful not to go too far out. When I was drawing some of these I was often standing in the water; light was reflecting and the water was splashing. I could stand in the water there because my feet weren’t turning blue!
JH: When I was first making them I had intended to butt them all up next to each other, but they stand individually. It’s nice not to have the link up in the paper. There are links but there was a freedom in making these because they will be framed separately, they don’t have to link up exactly.

I’ve moved things around because I wanted that freedom in the work and I was working from memory; it’s not the exact view but I wanted an amalgam of that beach. I’m not standing on the same place on the beach to see that view. You’d have to walk from one end of the beach to the other and crane your neck to get this view. It’s a different project, this one; it can work in a different way. It’s about the quality and essence of the beach; the light and the movement of the ocean and different light on the ocean.

WR: Were you more relaxed when you were in Australia?

JH: In a funny sort of way, yes. The first few days I didn’t know how the hell I was going to get into this landscape. I thought ‘You’re just a visitor’, but getting into the water
and swimming, sitting looking at the sea, having those nice long days helped. I was getting up at 5am and as I was swimming, the sun was rising and I could sit on the beach at the end of the day with a beer – they were nice long days; full days.

I thought a lot about the connection to the beach because most of Australia lives on the edge. I didn’t really go inland the furthest away from the beach I got was walking along the river, into the wetland areas, to Ash Island. It’s land that was reclaimed from an industrial past when the British first landed. It was one of the first areas they deforested, decimated in a way. Now wildlife conservation is a big deal there and the wildlife is coming back.

You think about everything, but it was a nice feeling, that alien quality - just dropped in, never knowing a full part of this land. Everything is strange. In Scotland you get more familiar the more you visit. But this is so big; I don’t know how you ever get that familiar with it. Everything is strange, the bugs, the leaves, noises – everything is so different.

It did me good; stepping back from Scotland, it enthused me.

*We looked at the large 5 plate etching Hicklin had pinned to the studio wall, Hicklin is very enthusiastic about this large print:*

**JH:** Some of the marks are still the same as the initial proof, some it hasn’t been touched. There something I really quite liked... the freshness, not manipulated too much, all I was really doing was pushing the background back. There are marks I really like, I like that recession. Sometimes when you’re proofing you get marks that you really like, so why get rid of them just because you think you should? Let those marks exist. This is one of the biggest ones I’ve done. I don’t want this one to be behind glass, I want to encourage people to get right in.

**WR:** It’s interesting that you’ve brought light into the foreground shapes.

**JH:** I’m wanting to break into the solid areas, I want some of the solidity but I don’t want to keep repeating it as a device. I’m working on one at the moment where I’m really trying to break up the foreground rhythm, break the darks by putting light back into it. They’re quite defined shapes.
Hicklin has another large four plate print clipped to a board on a different wall:

JH: There is a difference in the two big prints. On this four plate print I wanted the ocean and the sky to merge; so that there’s almost no marks in the water. Not wanting to treat the ocean in the same way every time. The way the light was falling on it and where I was standing sometimes it would become just a mirror, other times it would swell and go dark. So this is working towards a show which is about the ocean but about the land too, just as the Atlantic one was. We were there for about a month, not many changes in the weather conditions, there was one thunderstorm, a couple of cloudy days, but not really that cloudy to be honest... it was fantastic!

This whole show is another etching show, the first one that will be purely on paper. Each plate is really thought through; each plate is doing a job.
WR: Was this a more contemplative, rather than physical, engagement with the land?

JH: It was a physical engagement, but a different physical engagement. I was really influenced by the environment and the atmosphere I was in. Being in that different atmosphere made me think differently. I didn’t feel that the landscape was so against me. But – you’ve got to be careful. Sitting on the beach could be very nice and comfortable so I was constantly looking for ways of not being so comfortable; standing in the water, swimming, getting back to land and drawing what I was thinking about. Still looking at it, but having water on my mind all the time. I took my walking boots with me so I went on long walks on quite warm days; I walked on the hills and headlands and along the estuary just as I normally would. It was physical, but there was contemplation too. The physical engagement is just as important, but different.

WR: The etchings don’t seem as agitated as the Atlantic etchings?

JH: The agitation came from the struggle to make them, I’ve been more agitated in myself – I don’t know if that’s been expressed in the etchings. I have been quite worried, I didn’t know if it was going to work. It wasn’t until November that it started falling into place. The Lewis etchings look more physical, and they were more physically made. There was more physicality going on – there was more aggression in the sense that the acid was more aggressive. The acid has worked hard on some of these, but because I had to slow down and think about what I was going to do, I had to be quite clear about the thinking. I think there is more clarity in these new ones. But I think I’m always agitated when I’m working, I’m never that relaxed. I need something to work against. It was quite similar to process with the St Kilda etchings. With the next landscape I need a challenge but something a bit more familiar, but something that brings everything together. I’d like to combine a physicality, a different light, a flatness, somewhere slightly alien but not too alien. I’m thinking about Shetland at the moment.

*We began this section of the interview by looking through the proofs from all the rejected plates. The style is very different much bolder land masses and very bold marks in the sea indicative of the rise and swell of water. Hicklin discussed his disappointment with these early proofs and how much his lack of progress worried him...*
JH: I wanted to make the metal do what I wanted it to do. I etched this, and it went on for days. I really liked that mark there and I was trying to make everything work because of that mark, and at the end of the day... Why?

Well, you know, a few days of that and you think, ‘God, I don’t know what I’m doing here, I really don’t know’. And you wait for something to happen to give you a way in, and I think that etching there: there’s something about this one – this is one of the ones that that started to work – and there’s a delicacy to this, and a quietness about the ocean. Now all of a sudden I realised I really started to enjoy the negative spaces – breaking it up, but not too obviously.

WR: No, it just creates a delicacy or a bit more light, doesn’t it?

JH: And that was Glen Rock Beach: so that was the drawing for it.

JH: You know, that I really like that shape there. I just like those shapes, the smoothness of that. And then I remember this day: it was like the ocean was sort of bubbling a little bit, but there was a whiteness to it, it wasn’t raging ocean, it was just that it was gently moving, and I wanted that sort of quietness against that nice shape, I just like that shape, and that little interruption.

WR: Is that what you saw in the sketch when you were going through your sketchbooks?

JH: Yes. I liked these two shapes, yes. And I liked the fact that the ocean was quiet. It leaves a blank canvas there for me to do what I want. I know I wanted that quality of light and whiteness in the ocean. But it gave me that freedom with whatever I could get in the etching; I wasn’t a slave to this drawing in that sense.
WR: So the drawing gives you room to make an etching, and space to develop it.

JH: Yes, it was one of the first walks I did with the aboriginal chap, so he was able to talk about what he used to do when he was a little boy when he was there. So you realise that this landscape that to me is completely not mine was his, those little insights... and it was just a nice, expansive walk. We started a big long walk along this beach, then cut up through the hills, then came back across this hill, then back down the other side, all on these track ways that he knew.

WR: You walked the distant features of this one?

JH: We walked on this one, and it helped in lots of these sketches. Lots of this book were done from walking on the hills as well as on the land.

WR: That’s quite a walk in the heat, isn’t it?

JH: It was, to be honest, too much. I couldn’t walk far.

WR: Can you pinpoint exactly what makes you choose a drawing to make into an etching?

JH: What they give you is information, there’s enough information, but there’s also enough openness to do what you want to do with it. Some of the first drawings I made were just drawings of the sea, really loose, looking at the water, standing in the water, then eventually I starting looking at the land, and once I got to walk it a bit, I started to feel I could draw it.

From Newcastle Beach, proof and sketchbook. Studio photograph by the author

I just like this shape here, just poking out. And there’s movement: the strata of the rock where it had slid downwards, that openness in the ocean, and perspective.
too: I quite liked the perspective in that sketch. In the etching I’m just trying to pick up on it, but not making it too obvious.

WR: So you’re not looking at an individual linear mark and thinking, ‘I like that, and I want to bring that through’?

JH: No, it’s definitely that sense of perspective, that sense of way in to that headland there and that relationship between those two things. So it really becomes about the way you get there [that distant point where the sea meets the sky].

It’s a beach, the tide comes in and goes out, when you walk along it it’s like watery sand, so this etching is about not being too obvious where the horizon is; or where the edge of the sea is, or where the tideline is.

WR: Now you’ve said, tide comes in and out, so it’s not ever really a fixed edge, is it?

JH: No. Occasionally it leaves traces of course. And these lines, you’ve got to be careful; some of these lines are just my way of saying there is perspective; it doesn’t mean it existed. Just as I used devices in the etchings, I’ve used devices in the drawing, to remind me of perspective.

WR: A visual shorthand for yourself?

JH: Yes. Again, you can see it coming through here. I’m not being a slave to the drawings, but just enabling myself to be open with the etchings, because the sketches are just information, just visual reminders.

WR: It’s still intriguing as to why, with a whole book full, that you choose to pick up on one rather than another.

JH: You do wonder yourself sometimes! It’s about the perspective. I think perspective’s really important in most of my work, and these sort of [tide and sea-current] movements.

*Hicklin puts the Ash Island etching out and turns a few pages in the sketchbook*
JH: That [perspective] is what I was thinking about, in that one there. Again, something in the foreground, just bits of land going away from you, but mostly it’s about the way you get there. That line there is something I used in the Stockton Bridge one; but I didn’t want to use it in this one, I wanted to make a more subtle way of getting there. I wanted you to find your way there rather than me putting a line in it - using that foreground, something else, to get you there; but the perspective is there, hopefully. It gives you steps to work through. There’s something about the agitation in this one as well, because when you’re there, it’s hot, there’s midges, there’s flies, and you’re covered in sun screen, insect block, so you’re not actually that relaxed – part of you is comfortable because it’s warm, but walking is uncomfortable, we’re inland here, it’s much warmer inland than at sea. So there’s that mizziness, that sort of busy-ness of sky and things around you.

JH: Those odd shapes that you don’t always get in Scotland or England, just formations - a lot of this land was mined for coal, when the British first arrived. When they first got there, there was coal sticking out of the beach, on the beach almost, and so they just could dig into it. They didn’t even have to dig in for it.

It was all across the beach, and you often come across bits of rusty machinery, old rail tracks and bits of wheels from old carriages that are dragging along. It was pretty vicious. It was there, they got off the boats and it was just there, they just got stuck into it. It was a land of abundance and it was there to be taken.

After a break we moved the interview on and interrogated some of the strands that I was developing in my thesis.

WR: I’ve been reading a bit more about drawing. I was reading from David Rosand - he’s talking about Rembrandt’s drawings. He described the experience of looking at
drawing; at the actual line, following the artist’s hand and then looking past the
drawing to the presumed site. He pointed out that if you’re always looking at a
landscape drawing to see the location, you might then be losing or missing out on
most of what the artist is trying to say? And in referring to the Rembrandt drawing
he tells us that it is as much a record of the artist as of the landscape.

JH: I think that’s a good point actually. What I was saying earlier about these triptychs
being like amalgams of a landscape, it’s not important to me really that they’re not
completely faithful to the place. It’s important that you know roughly where I am,
but if I’ve moved things or left things out, which we all – well, I – do, I’d rather that
people were engaged in the piece I’ve made rather than thinking, ‘Oh, it’s a picture
of somewhere I know’. I think it’s right; I think you can be distracted from looking
at the drawing or looking at the etching, by trying to put yourself where the artist
was sitting.

It can be a fun thing to do in a way – ‘Oh, I’m standing in the same place.’

WR: Following in Turner’s footsteps is something you hear regularly.

JH: Yes, I did that once without knowing it. I did a painting, a drawing of Harlech Castle,
and painted it. Then someone put together a list of artists who’ve worked in the
same place as other artists, and picked on my painting of Harlech Castle and one of
Turner’s, and apparently we were very close – but I wasn’t aware of it. Sometimes
you find yourself commonly doing that. The reason someone like Turner would
have sat there I think is because it was a bloody good view of the castle, and so
you’ve got to get the same.

WR: So ‘Is it a place or an ideal of place? Are you recording places, or is the creative
process moving towards something more internally driven?

JH: I think it’s definitely moving towards something more internally driven. They’re
harder to make, and I think there’s more of me in them than there has been
previously. And I think I’m looking for places that put me into a position where I
can get closer to the way I feel. In the idea of the extremes, and being on my own,
the experience not being always so easy, as I’ve said previously: I think that does come through in some of these.

WR: So are you quite isolated in these places as well?

JH: Well, yes, even on a popular beach. I mean on these beaches if you’re walking on a Sunday morning near the pools and near the town there are going to be people. Within a 10-minute walk you can’t see another soul. People just don’t venture away from where the ice creams are or where they can park their car. You know you see in Scotland, there are people picnicking in the car park? They’re the same in Australia! There are people near the ice cream stand where their kids are. So yes, you can get yourself quite isolated quite quickly.

WR: I did wonder, because you were beside a working river, whether there would be more evidence of human habitation in your work...?

JH: Not so much habitation along the river, but right at the end the ships are non-stop.

WR: But not in your prints.

JH: No. No. They’re just different concerns. The ships are just another world, and they’re just immense. And again, as in Scotland, you can omit some manmade items. But then again in some of these I’ve deliberately drawn them – Nobby’s Hill for one, that’s a manmade thing; also causeways; a lighthouse now and then crops up; the Stockton Bridge. They crop up, but I didn’t want to start drawing the rigging of the ships or the cranes that are everywhere.

WR: No. And where the manmade things appear, that image is not about the manmade, is it? It’s about the landscape that surrounds it.

JH: No. I got quite interested in Ash Island - the guide was talking to us about how it’s been reclaimed. I was starting to think about what it would have looked like before it was ripped apart many years ago and how terrible that was. And, now, in a way the quietness, the wildlife and the water has come back to the island. That’s where I’m looking for that timelessness: those cranes and all of that industry won’t always be there. So I was trying to avoid some of that brutality.
It’s all about taking away. I’m not interested in accurate recording in that sense, I’m not going to tell you there are shipping cranes there, or what shipping cranes look like; I feel nothing towards them.

You could also ask about the Aboriginal warden, why didn’t I draw him walking alongside me? I’m just not interested in drawing him.

WR: No. But you’ve drawn his land, and you’ve drawn his walk.

JH: Yes, absolutely. I think it was more sympathetic to be led by him and to look at things that he was talking about. Yeah, I think that was more sympathetic. How much what I was doing meant anything to him was interesting, because he was a painter as well, as they all are. He gave me a piece of his work when I left, which was a painted plate. It was the first time I’ve really understood how his perspective works, and how circles are important, and right angles aren’t. And that was really interesting too. It’s the first time I’ve really listened to someone talk about aboriginal art and painting, what it meant to him. That was interesting; a different sensibility - I can’t draw like he draws a place, and he doesn’t draw a plate like I would... So that was two interpretations of a landscape. His was much more internal: that’s what was so interesting, so interesting.

WR: I have some other points to put to you... We were talking about tension and the importance of tension in the last interview. I’ve read about unresolved tensions but I don’t know whether an unresolved tension is just a tension, because if you resolve it...

JH: Then it’s not a tension! Yes, that’s true.

I think restlessness is probably a better word sometimes than unresolved tension. You know when a piece isn’t finished for instance, when you feel restless about it: it digs away, and you want it to be finished, but it just isn’t, it’s nagging away; and that makes you feel restless, it makes me feel quite tense too, it makes me feel as if the job’s not done yet, and it needs addressing, and it doesn’t matter what anyone else says – ‘it’s fine, leave it, don’t touch it, it’s perfect’ – but you know it’s not, because it’s not answering something that is within you, it’s not resolved, it’s not
quiet. So yeah, I think that’s important, I don’t think it’s a bad thing to feel restless, because you’ve got to have some reason to resolve it, or else you would just be relaxed and think, ‘Oh, sod it, it’s fine, it’ll be fine’; but you know it can’t be. And if you try to get away with it you feel that someone will notice, someone will call you out on it. I think that’s probably a fear I have, someone saying, ‘It’s not resolved’, when it’s in a gallery. I just feel that would be quite a harsh thing to live with somehow. You can’t argue, if you know in your soul it’s not resolved, you then can’t argue it is resolved, you’ve got to really believe in the work to say it is actually resolved, and argue it to the full.

WR: Can a single piece be resolved, but not resolved in the whole continuity of the work.

JH: The whole continuity of the work is just the next step before the next batch of work. So this can never be concluded: it’s a pause before the next work. So again, I think it would be awful to feel like you do a show and you think, ‘That’s it, I’ve done it, that’s done’. I think you always need it to be unresolved. I think every show needs the feeling of questions that haven’t yet been fully answered. And I think you are the one, when you go into the show, you can see the questions, and not everyone else can see them at first – maybe they’ll get to them in the end, or they only get to see the questions when they see the next batch of work. But I think that would be the way I feel, that questions are always raised.

I mean, after the Atlantic show I thought, ‘God, I don’t know if I can do work any harder on this, I don’t know if I can’. But you start the next one, and you do, it is just as difficult, even more difficult maybe. And now I look back at the Atlantic ones, and they somehow felt much more straightforward than these ones. But they’re not, they weren’t, but you forget the turmoil in that last one, because you’re so engrossed in this one.

Everything, as I said, has got to be unresolved, yeah. I think there is a difference.

WR: Another interpretation of the moment of unresolved tension could be when something happens in the drawing, or in an etching, that you didn’t expect, that gives you a different direction to what you thought it was going to go.

JH: Yes, you wait for those moments, you really need that. You really need something, like an outside influence, you need something to happen, and you hang on it and
keep it. And sometimes it’s not the right thing to keep; sometimes you’re onto something and you’re thinking, ‘Keep it, keep it, keep it’, but, why? Why am I doing that? It’s leading you up the wrong path. And so the wrong direction can be as important as the right direction sometimes too. But then you make a mark and something just happens, you think that’s it, it’s got a sense, a quality that I really want.

WR: Like the first marks on that very large one in the foreground.

JH: Yeah, absolutely. And you just think ‘They’re done, they speak for themselves’, I don’t need to interrupt them anymore.

And then sometimes you just get the smallest interruption, (Hicklin indicates a small negative mark that breaks up the line of the distant horizon) that white going into that black, I really like that. I don’t know why that’s so satisfying sometimes, that little break in the black.

I think if that white line wasn’t interrupting that area it would be completely different, I wouldn’t be so happy with it. And yet it was sort of accidental. I think it somehow creates a space. That becomes one element forward of the other. Take it away and they’re just equidistant. You have a little gem like that; you think that’s it, ‘I’ll build the etching around that now’.

North Channel, Hunter River, by kind permission of Eames fine Art
The idea that erasing isn’t always a negative: it’s just as positive as a positive, a black mark or a white mark; I think they’re valuable tools. Because if you didn’t have it, I don’t know what you’d do! [Laughs]. I really don’t know. Especially me, the way I work, without that chance to go back, I wouldn’t be able to do it.

Rembrandt was a great example of someone who used to erase and take away, burnish and destroy. Sometimes there’s that quest for black: got to make it blacker, got to make it blacker. But instead, no, I’ve got to make it whiter. Yeah, and I think you’ve got to keep the plate, it keeps it open, that’s why I agree with that, it keeps everything open. You get those marks and think, ‘God, I didn’t expect it, but I need it’, and yeah, absolutely. And if you don’t get them, something – maybe sort of bouncing a ball against the wall, and it doesn’t bounce back... oh, shit! I can’t play that game anymore, you know. So yes, you do want something unexpected; you want something [pause] more.

WR: St Kilda: after that trip you said it didn’t want you and you had to fight against it; by returning to Lewis, you said you’d made your peace with it.

JH: Yes, the trip after St Kilda – It was Lewis after St Kilda, so I used it as a base, and had all sorts of things going along. So going back was definitely a way of being more in control, as much as I could be about what I wanted to do. And just feeling better when I left it, that I’d got all the information I wanted and had a plan of what to do with it. I didn’t feel at rest with it because as I said so many things went wrong, I needed to go back and not have bad blood with it, I wanted to have peace with it again. So yeah, I definitely feel that with Lewis now; I don’t feel the need to go back for a while to Lewis.

WR: So how would you describe your relationship with Australia?

JH: Phew! I truly felt like I was on some sort of alien landscape. I felt a long way from home but it didn’t actually bother me being that far away. And it’s a cliché but the stars were in the wrong place when you looked up; the ocean was just different, it sounded different, felt different, it looked different. When you’re in Scotland, you feel like a real dot in the landscape; in Australia I felt less than a dot. I felt as if I can only concentrate on this small section; this tiny, tiny bit of it, because it’s too vast, it’s just too much. And I think that’s why this show is about this tiny part of the
land. There’s no way, the way I feel at the moment, I could do a series of etching shows about Australia. It would need a lifetime.

And it probably is the same with Scotland, but at least you’d build up bodies of work eventually, perhaps put it together, but Australia, no, it’s too vast. So if I go back I’ll probably work on a nugget of the landscape, again a very small part of it. To do it any justice at all, to just try and understand it a tiny bit, that tiny bit is just the Hunter estuary, and the beaches at the mouth of the estuary, that’s all I could deal with.

WR: It’s hard to take in those distances as well, isn’t it, particularly when you’re used to Scottish islands?

JH: You could walk around an island in a day. There I can walk on a beach in a day! It’s just incredible.

WR: I’d like you to talk about how you approach sketching on location; do you think about the etchings that you may get from your sketchbook?

JH: I try not to think too much. When I’m out with the sketchbooks I try not to think too much about what I’m going to do in the studio, because there’s plenty of time for that when I get back to the studio. I really feel as if I’ve just got to gather as much information as I can. And sometimes you’re making a drawing knowing where you know you’re going to look back and think, ‘I was never going to make an etching of that, but I wanted to draw it, it was important to fill in’. So I definitely try not to think too much about the studio when I’m out in the landscape. It’s only when I come back that I really start to think about what will make an etching.

WR: That’s quite interesting. Again I would have thought that you would have stood in front of some places and thought, ‘This will make a brilliant etching, I’ve got to do as many drawings as I can here’.

JH: Occasionally... then again, sometimes I’ll draw just because it’s an amazing place, so I’ve got to try and get as much of the information as I can on paper. Maybe subconsciously I’m thinking there’ll be an etching in this; but sometimes there isn’t; sometimes the smallest drawing can give you an etching and you wouldn’t have thought it at the time – it’s when you get back and pin them up and say, ‘Actually
there’s something in that, and it reminds me of …’, and you pull an etching out of it.

WR: And so there’s not a point where you make a pencil mark on the page and you think, ‘That’s something I want to try and get in the etching process’?

JH: Sometimes yes, there are particular marks that you make, but not while you’re making the drawing; it’s when you look back at the drawings that you see them; but not when I’m consciously making a mark, no. No, I make the mark just in the drawings and they’re just marks in the drawing book; it’s afterwards I look and think, ‘How do I interpret that mark into etching?’, but not before, because you spend so much time in the studio it’s just great being out not doing that.

WR: When you’ve been out for the day and you’ve done some drawing, and then you’re reviewing the drawings, do you then sometimes think, ‘Oh, that might work…?’

JH: Yeah, sometimes you do, in that sense, once you’re looking back through you do think, ‘Oh, I need to make an etching about that’, or, ‘that’s a particularly good shape’, or, ‘There’s something in the relationship between that and that which I might be able to work with’. Yeah, you do start thinking...

WR: So you don’t need the distance of separation of place to studio to make those decisions?

JH: No, it can start to come quite clearly when you’re there; others don’t, but some of them do. Some of them you know when you get back and flick through the sketch book, you think, ‘I want to do something about that’. But not whilst I’m drawing. I was thinking about this last night. I think, for me, it’s about being involved with materials, with stuff that makes these etchings, it’s being involved with ink; it’s being involved with acid; it’s being involved with turps; you know...

WR: Involved with graphite and water?

JH: Yes it’s almost about paring down to as little as I need to make these images. And I think there is an involvement in the tactile qualities of them, the simplicity of them. And from all of these very basic materials I can make these etchings, I can make these drawings: that fascinates me; that from this ‘stuff’ I can make other ‘stuff’. And when I look back there’s a struggle. I do like being involved in it, I like standing in the middle of it all sometimes and thinking, ‘What am I going to do next?’ As
much as that’s a worry, sometimes you have to remind yourself this is what you do, and this is why you do it: it’s that excitement of being right in the middle of it all - one thing being on the hotplate, one thing in the acid; you’ve got concerns about this, concerns about that, but deep down it is just about putting varnish on, putting wax on, putting it into the acid. I wouldn’t want a short cut: if someone said that you can do all this without these materials, I wouldn’t do it. It’s about being in there. And I don’t even want to make lithographs about it, I don’t want to make woodcuts about it. It’s a different thing: it’s about this acid, it’s about the wax, and it’s the machinery that goes with it.

The tools of it all; the shape of the brush, just everything in being in that etching studio is what I want to be doing. And the materials are what make the studio: they’re things that hold it all together, and you’re in it. And coming to the end of a project can be a sad time too because as painful as it’s all been, you just think, ‘Oh, God, I’m saying goodbye to a series, and deep down I sort of did enjoy being in the muck of it all’. It is being involved with materials. And I think when you see other artists’ work you see if they’re making things out of clay, they’re making things out of stone. They’re in them. Like Giacometti, when he used to be seen in Paris covered in plaster of paris – his hair was full of it and his clothes were full of it: he’s in it, and I like that, that’s important, to be in it. I don’t want someone else to make it for me. Which as an etcher you could do: I could draw it and put that in the acid, and then someone else could put a coat of wax on it and do this and that. I’m not interested in someone else doing that, I don’t mind it, I want to do it, and it’s what I do. So yes, I think it is being involved with materials.

WR: You can see somebody like Richard Diebenkorn working with technicians – there some videos of his time at Crown Point Press – he’s still right over their shoulder, he’s so involved, he’s right in the way all the time; they might as well have given it to him to do!

JH: Yes, I think you’ve got to be in it. I think you can tell the difference, I might be wrong, but sometimes I think you can tell the difference where artists have made etchings and you think: they’ve signed them, but these are technical, technicians have worked on these. You can see they’re almost too neat. The element of chance somehow isn’t there. I mean when you look at Picasso’s Vollard Suite, the chances are there, the elements are there. I know he had technicians alongside, but his
hand is on that burnisher, his hand is on that needle, you can see it. And you see it because of his interventions.

Sometimes it would be lovely to have someone as a technician – But then again, I don’t know. I think it’s also about having time alone in the studio. I want to be on my own in there, I think I’d get very self-conscious if someone was there waiting for me to do the next stage, or to pass something on to me.

WR: If somebody else proofed it for you, you wouldn’t know what had happened in the metal, would you?

JH: No. I want to proof it. I want to be the first one to see it. It’s mine, I don’t want someone else. You can tell when someone thinks, ‘I’m not sure about that’. I don’t want someone else’s opinion. At that point it’s up to me. I want to be the one who’s saying it’s not right. Because also, the opposite is that someone says, ‘It’s brilliant, don’t touch it’. And then you think, ‘It’s not right’. But you’ve got someone else’s advice – you’re worried then: ‘Is it brilliant?’ If I make the decision I’ve made the decision, it’s no one else’s. I’ve got to take that risk. And sometimes you do make mistakes, you think, ‘I wish I hadn’t done that’. But you’ve done it and so you get on with it.

And even here, if anyone walks in the studio, until I ask, ‘What do you think?’ I don’t expect a comment, and I think people finally get to know that they don’t make a comment. I don’t need to let them in, I don’t want any comment. Or I’ll say, ‘I don’t want anyone to say anything, not a word!’ Definitely not, ‘Interesting…’ Interesting, what does that mean?

I don’t want any comment. I think that’s why personally I don’t want the gallery here until I’m really sure it’s done, because silence can say so much!

WR: People do need time to take them in...

JH: Yes, absolutely, they do need time. But you know the point when you feel confident about letting other people see it: you know it’s okay for them to have a look, because you’ve lived with it so long yourself. Honestly if there’s something deep down bugging me about an etching, I couldn’t let it go, I really couldn’t. Actually, no matter what anyone said, I still wouldn’t let something go, and after I’d have to resolve what it is that bugs me. It’s about being absolutely up to your
elbows in ink, wax, whatever is the important bit – I like all of that. The material itself is there to be manipulated and worked with; it’s involvement in materials. It’s manipulation, it’s being in it.

I struggle sometimes. I feel that what I do most of the time is etching, but it is drawing; it’s just drawing with wax and acid. The things I think about and the ways my hands move aren’t much different when I’m drawing as when I’m etching. I’ve really sometimes struggled with people talking about the difference. It is drawing as it is etching; it’s just the same; I can’t really see a difference sometimes.

WR: Drawing is sometimes classified as a preparatory stage, not seen to come through in the finished piece, which is, I think, contentious.

JH: Yes, yes. Some people make a preparatory drawing to make an etching, and then stick slavishly to that drawing. They’ve got to make the etching just like that drawing. I don’t do that at all, as we know. Drawing is just drawing on graphite and paper; this is just drawing with acid onto metal. I don’t think there’s much difference in the two. And what I’ve been trying to do is bring them together, bring that sense of drawing into these pieces – with the process of etching. I feel they’re merged. I couldn’t do one without the other. And I’ve heard the conversations, I’ve heard people say that etching’s not this, it’s not that. If they can’t see it, they can’t see it. There are certain people I know teach who don’t think etching is of value; they think it’s a poor relation to painting, as not even a relation to painting, something you do almost like an illustration perhaps.

WR: For all the differences in the case studies, the one thing that keeps coming through is that you are all ‘drawing’ on the plate. But I still wondered if some of you might consider drawing to be a separate process and whether somewhere along the line an artist would say, ‘No, because of all the different tools I’m using it is not drawing’. But interestingly, all of you have agreed that you are always drawing.

JH: I think it’s just putting metal where there’s paper. I just don’t see how your mind can shift that differently, or how your hand can move that differently, because it just doesn’t.

WR: Yes, if you made that difference you’d have to start in different conditions. Like you say, the gestural marks you’re making...
JH: ...they wouldn’t be your marks somehow. No, I think it’s just drawing. It’s just a response; it’s just an urge you have to make something, to make a response to what surrounds you somehow. And I think we all have it, but some people just have the ability to release it - it fulfils a need.

My sincere thanks to Jason Hicklin for another enlightening and honest review of practice; these conversations have provided a detailed contribution to our understanding of the experiential and material nature of an etching/drawing practice.
**Interviews with Vincent Eames - excerpts**

Eames Fine Art, Thursday 16th June 2016

Vincent Eames is the director and owner of Eames Fine Art, Bermondsey, London. Eames is a gallery which specialises in print and they represent Jason Hicklin and Norman Ackroyd. We talked about Jason Hicklin’s work as we sat in the gallery surrounded by the series of St Kilda etchings and monotypes.

Wendy Rhodes: Shall we just start by talking about Jason Hicklin’s work and in particular the difference between this show and the last show.

Vincent Eames: I think the key to Jason’s work is his journey to the location to work with his sketchbook; to walk around and really get under the skin of a place. What’s different about this show is his visit to the island was at a different time of year for him and that’s had a huge impact on how the work has emerged.

You can only visit St Kilda in the summer and so that’s what he did last year; he usually prefers to go later on in the year when it’s grim – proper ‘Hicklin’ weather. He clearly had to work with a different light condition and the reflected light from the sea. That would be a huge difference for him. The topography is inevitably different - so the whole trip really challenged him. He couldn’t get onto the land and all of these creative sketches are from boats, so the island confronted him, literally, in a different way. He had to capture the idea of the rocks looming up out of the sea. He has had to struggle with a different way of encapsulating everything and get it under control. It’s different to how he’s usually worked and I think that shows. He
couldn’t walk around – he was on a boat, you’re not getting up above the land in ways that he has been able to do in the past. He often goes to the high point so that he can look out across the landscape. He hasn’t been able to do that - he’s at the base of the landscape here all the time, on a boat at sea level. And the light gave him a different sort of challenge. That’s what he really did come away with (in his remark to me) he was just trying to capture the light as best as he can. So, in this exhibition, you get a huge contrast; a very, very stark contrast in the etchings which I think is particularly clear in the smaller pieces where you get an idea of silhouettes against the strong light.

VE: We’re happy to have a platform for him on an annual basis because it’s nice to be able to chart, in pretty short order, from one year to the next, how the work develops. And actually it’s quite striking, last year’s work was already a huge step forward from the year before which was the Hebrides, but if you compare the St Kilda series from the Hebrides series the difference is quite marked. The palette is extraordinary; the range of light from dark to light is much, much wider in this series now which is extraordinary.
WR: You get a full picture of the artist to see the drawings as well don’t you?
VE: I think so. Drawing, the way I always look upon it, is slightly different – it’s not a way of working, it is work – it’s what you do – it’s like you have to draw every day to keep fit like an athlete, as an artist, but there are some artists where drawing is more important and certainly Jason is one of those.

Etching rewards good draughtsman as well I think. It can show up bad draughtsmanship as well, it can be quite brutal really, certainly in terms of line. Jason’s work is more tonal compared to a lot of the etchers that we represent. You look at his sketch book drawings and what he does with just a lump of graphite and line is incredibly important. It’s that distilling of shape is what he’s doing but when he takes these back to the studio and creates drawings like that (indicating a large scale drawing on the back wall of the gallery) the huge large scale pieces that we’ve got in this show, they have immediacy. They look like they’ve been done in situ which is extraordinary really.

WR: They contain the whole feeling of the place don’t they?
VE: There’s that huge scope of them, breadth of them. He has taken that on board and has tried to put them into a more representational format - he’s certainly done that this time around I think. They are closer in feel, certainly from a representational point of view, to the etchings... I want him to really enjoy and push it and you know that he will and I’m excited to see what happens next time, to see where he takes it.
WR: What were your motivations in deciding to dedicate the gallery to print in the first place?

VE: My wife and I, we met at university. Rebecca was working for a print dealer while we were studying together - art history - so she had an opening/entree into that world while we were still studying. And the way that she got into it was by going to an art fair when it was her 21st birthday, or something like that, and she was given £150 as a gift to go to a gallery. She found she could buy a Matisse for £150 and she was just blown away by the possibility of having work that we had always loved, Matisse, Picasso etc. - just accessible if you are buying a print. It hadn't really occurred to me at that point before that, making a differentiation between print or any other kind of gallery as it were, but the key for us is you get into the whole idea of works by great artists being accessible to you and as soon as you open that door and you start understanding a bit about print making it's just so fascinating. The different potential of what you are able to do in print is just extraordinary. You understand the various different techniques; the different characters; how different artists have used them and then you just become addicted to the whole thing. That's the thing. We are a print gallery... I have profound respect for anybody who can wrestle something out of these infuriating techniques and the precision, the respect for process that you have to have. I think it’s a real testament to the creative imagination of a printmaker... I find fascinating about an artist who chooses to do work in print. Why they choose to do it and how they use the different methods to express the way they want to /what they want to do ...

WR: That gives a very nice angle to your whole decision - not just about the end product but about the way it’s been made as well...
VE: There are artist print makers who really take on the challenge. Jason again is one of these and I love the fact that he looks at a blank plate at the start of a journey and it’s an adventure - because you don’t know what’s going to happen necessarily. The whole idea of setting out to create an image, not knowing necessarily what it’s going to end up looking like, but you are able to adapt as you go - and I find that incredibly exciting. Artists that are adventurous like that - it’s a voyage of discovery in a way ...

VE: There is another side to this – I think it’s important to give print making a platform. It’s hard commercially. This isn’t me fishing for sympathy here, but print making traditionally in this country, as you know, is seen as the poor relation of the art market. There are reasons for that - some fair, some unfair; the general level of understanding about print is very poor, you get to a point where you have to get over the fact that people are always going to ask you what the original is worth when they are looking at an etching, an original print, and you will lose count in the first year of being a print dealer how many times you have to explain this is not the same as a reproductive print this is an original print.
There’s something - not evangelical that not the right word – but it is important to try and explain what a vital and vibrant and incredible art form it is and having a gallery that serves that purpose is important to do that.

WR: Did showing Norman Ackroyd’s board of drawings and maps for the ‘Skellig revisited’ show enhance the exhibition?

VE: I think so. It was a nice experiment to do and you could tell it was going to work. Norman is of such a reputation you’d kill to find out what his studio is like and his working processes and that was a real opportunity. He was very generous with it to reveal all of that. And it was just fascinating and you’re able to refer to it all the time when you’re talking about pieces within the exhibition. He was able to refer to it back when he did the collectors evening in the gallery here. He stood in front of the board, not the pictures, and just let the pictures speak for themselves. It made sense to do it that way, particularly with the type of work he does and, very similar to Jason, the preparation of a journey and a trip which is the back story to the work that emerges and that was wonderful.

WR: So you do feel that that’s enriching the gallery experience?
VE: Absolutely: It’s not for every artist… Norman was happy and keen to do it and he’s very proud of it and rightly so. It was a fascinating insight and it did bring everything together.

WR: To see the sketches and then the watercolours and then the prints as well - to make that full connection …

VE: For that show it was an anecdotal, almost off the cuff, remark he made that really brought things alive. It was this idea that he has a sketchbook that he does watercolours in on the boat or in situ. Most of our show was from a block of watercolour paper. He comes off the boat and he gives himself an hour and a half just to create one watercolour and to distil everything of the day before having a lovely supper, and that’s what we had. The majority of the pieces in the show were these one and a half hour moments in every day, the one image he wants to capture that day and I just love the idea of him just settling down in a moment of calm at his table, in his hotel room, before he goes off to supper. People love that idea. It was a very evocative way of understanding Norman’s working day and that moment of peace where everything just comes together.

Watercolours by Norman Ackroyd. Gallery photographs by the author

I would like to thank Vincent Eames for a fascinating and enlightening conversation. I would also like to thank him for sharing his gallery images of Hicklin’s work and for welcoming me into the gallery for collector’s evenings, it has been a pleasure to work with Eames Fine Art.
Interview with Amy-Jane Blackhall - excerpts

Interview at Ink on Paper Press, 9 June 2016

Amy-Jane Blackhall is Master printmaker and proprietor of Ink on Paper Press, a Fine Art print and editioning studio based in Wiltshire, UK, founded in August. Amy-Jane worked at 107 Workshop under Master Printer Jack Shirreff and editions for Emma Stibbon RA.

Wendy Rhodes: I would like to discuss the collaborative relationship to the artist. I particular how you and how the artist work together to preserve the autographic mark; the artist’s hand clearly in evidence in the final piece, whether that starts to become at a remove or whether you are always working very hard towards that.

Amy-Jane Blackhall: I think artists come to print studios, some as printmakers or with printmaking experience and some not. There are multiple reasons why they’ve come to work with a printmaker at a studio. When I worked at Jack Shirreff’s workshop, there were a lot of painters who came and they had a very painterly approach to print making so you work with the idea rather than let the process lead the idea. But there are certain processes that are more that suited to certain things so where people have a very strong drawing base to their practise or very strong linear line then something like etching would be recommended by the printer.

WR: If people have drawing as a starting point you would naturally recommend etching.

A-JB: I think the directness and how intimate etching is, the fact that you could use an etching needle, a drypoint needle as you would a pencil and when you’re doing things like just scratching through the ground its very fluid. With drypoint you’ve got more of the resistance of the material so I suppose in that way etching through a hard ground is an easier transition for an artist. It’s not as intimidating; you can see what you’re doing if you smoke a plate; you can see how you’re working… Its one process has a very distinct appearance; there’s meaty blacks and delicate fine lines.

A-JB: There’s a Walter Sickert quote… Walter Sickert told a story of an ambitious art student at a tea party in the late 1880s who lamented the fact that he could not draw. There was a pause in the conversation and then a young lady asked, ‘why don’t you etch?’ It’s a suggestion that artists have been taking up with great enthusiasm in the intervening century and a quarter. This stuck in my mind when I did my BA because there is also a misconception as to why people etch. Just the idea that, even if you say there’s no such thing as a good
drawing or a bad drawing, but then you could make it better by etching; or it would beef it up, soup it up. The lines would have a different quality

WR: It depends on the drawing, but certainly you can keep going back to the print, you can keep going back to the plate. For me that is one of the great joys of it - you see it in different stages.

A-JB: Also you can save it, almost like immortalising it at different stages. You’ve got something that was an initial sketch and you get to take a proof of it and then you work on it and that never really exists again although you see echoes in a drawing of what was if it was smudged and rubbed but you never have that one layer, that one moment in time back. People talk about photography as a moment in time and I’ve heard of drawing described as a period of time so I suppose an etching is also similar to being a period of time because you are working on various different stages over a period of time.

WR: Following on from what you’ve said about the ways in which an artist can translate their drawing... how do you continue to preserve their drawing mark? How do you preserve their drawing within the print?

A-JB: When I think about what it is to be a printer or someone who works with an artist to make their work, the main process is the etching side of it, whether that’s in litho or etching plates. There’s a huge responsibility at that point... An artist has done their drawing or their sugar lift, they then entrust you with their plate to etch it properly. To get the tones they want and then print it, then that is the responsibility of the artist.

The thing is it’s the Integrity of the mark and you’ve got to interpret the drawing. Even when I work with Emma [Stibbon] you can see a drawing but you have to really understand it. When I’m printing her work sometimes it’s just the nuances or something in the drawing she would say ‘that needs to be lighter or that needs to be darker or that’s the side of the mountain’ and sometimes it’s not for you wanting to do it but you’ve got to really understand the image in the same way as when you’re etching, you’ve got to really understand that’s where the light hits that part or they want to intensify that area so in that
way you are preserving their mark but you have to give it some gravitas. You’re putting meat to the bone, I guess. That is the most important, to keep the artist mark and their intentions. So I guess it just depends on their work but the ultimate thing is to keep their images as true as possible but then it will ultimately become something else along the journey but that’s what the artists like because you never take away that excitement of taking the paper off that moment of realisation of what’s been created.

WR: That’s a nice little point... how do you keep that autographic mark, how do you keep the integrity, but the whole point of making it into a print is that you do make it into something else.

A-JB: There’s a moment where the artist has to let go because it would inhibit the progression of the piece ultimately. If you wanted to do facsimile this day and age you could just do it digitally. These processes aren’t for that, there’s a reason why people do it - because of the different appearance and effect and feel that it has. There is that crucial moment when they have to work with what it is and then it becomes more of a dialogue and a response that they are actually seeing the proof, responding to it, making changes ... There is that awkward moment ....There is a moment when you almost have to break away from the original drawing because it’s becoming something else.

WR: People assume you think you are going to get to a point with it where you are going to predict pretty faithfully and it’s nice to hear that they are still looking for the alchemy in etching

A-JB: That’s what always drew me to it, that’s what I loved, that elemental thing. My final year at art school, I just loved it... I was just in love with the whole thing but it was that elemental part of it, this alchemist’s chemistry, engaging with the material, this chemical process in your mind like a biological thing that you’re assimilating ideas and in a similar way chemical process that you’re making image on plate. I like the duality in that idea, there’s something really primal about it. You’re working with big lumps of metal and acid... It’s just physically engaging with some surface, the materiality of it.

WR: And that brings us back to drawing as well. Drawing is very much an engagement. Drawers love paper, go around art shops just feeling paper to get the right feel and then the right weight of pencil in your hand - a very physical connection
WR: Interesting point that you want to make that artist’s work the best it can be...

A-JB: And also bring out the best in the artist

Artists are going to get safe in their own environment - they repeat patterns, they have formulas that they know will work, they sometimes don’t realise they have a prescribed way of working, whereas removing them out if that environment, out of that bubble it throws them out of their comfort zone and forces them to take decisions quite quickly and intuitively which can make them feel uneasy and working in a different environment with a different group of people often with a time limit and sometimes they are aware of financial cost as well so there is that pressure on decision making and they are forced them into areas they have never been before and that can be a good or bad things, some prints work some wouldn’t but equally they’ve made new ground and that comes back onto their practise.

Equally you learn from the artist they will do it in their own vernacular and in their own way without being told what to do, they’re responding intuitively to a medium, they do it in their own way and you learn through them. In that way it is reciprocal - you are always learning. Circumstances are always changing so you never stop learning.

A lot of printmaking is problem solving and handling and there is this exacting tedium in the editioning but that’s also the buzz for the printmaker - how things come out, and it surprises you with surprises.

Thank you, Amy-Jane, for your time and your very thoughtful contributions, it’s been a pleasure.
Interview with Meryl Ainslie - excerpts

Rabley Contemporary, 15th June 2017

Meryl Ainslie is the founder and Director of Rabley Contemporary and Rabley Drawing Centre, an internationally renowned gallery and centre for excellence in the Graphic Arts, based near Marlborough in Wiltshire. In approaching Ainslie my intention was to have a conversation which reflected the position of drawing in contemporary printmaking practice, the concerns of the artists that she works with and the audience with which she engages at the drawing school and in the gallery.

WR: What do you consider when you curate content and presentation in terms of audience? What is your aim for your audience experience? Is the notion of the work being made by hand understood by your audience? How much does this matter?

Ainslie explained that Rabley Drawing Centre and Rabley Contemporary have been founded to promote “print which comes from a drawing perspective. A lot of our work is about hand and mark”. Screenprinting and digital printing are not shown at the gallery unless they have come directly from a hand drawn image. Any work selected must represent the artist’s perspective, and must not be led by the process. She believes that printmakers can suffer from becoming obsessed by process and technique, whereas the viewer often doesn’t care or know about the technique. “In a gallery setting the viewer is left with the work and therefore it must be the artist’s intention which remains paramount.” Ainslie attributes the gallery’s success to “knowing and understanding the print process or the process which has underpinned the work” Rabley Contemporary benefits from having a sound understanding and working knowledge of the techniques employed by the artist printmakers. They engage with the audience on a different level, enabling the work and the underlying process to be explained; “education being a way in for people”. Ainslie refers to this as “…light touch education. Education, in one form or another is how we support the arts”

WR: I was intrigued about the decision process in choosing artists to show work or to fulfil residencies. I asked Ainslie what she was looking for?

Ainslie suggested that different things were looked for between the artist and their work. She has expectations of the artist and their professional presentation and then she has different expectations of what she would like to present in the gallery. Ainslie likes the artist to have “a research element and to have a thoroughly investigated body of work” the research can be practice based not necessarily academically based.

I was keen to focus on the importance and relevance of contemporary drawing and printmaking practice:
To put the question of relevance in a commercial sense into further context Ainslie tells me that Rabley Contemporary had recently been elected to the IFPDA (International Fine Print Dealers Association) – “things like these, markers of standards, can’t be ignored, because it gives people (collectors) confidence and puts bread on the table of the artists, a huge responsibility.” The Rabley Contemporary artists “have a sensibility which is about marks on a surface”. All these artists have an embedded drawing practice, sometimes exhibited as part of their work, sometimes ‘just there’ integral to the work. “There has to be an integrity to the work something which underpins the concept, there has to be an intellectual engagement with the practice” The word “drawing” has become a much broader term and I posed the notion that there has been some intellectual re-defining: Ainslie agreed, arguing that the re-definition comes from drawing “being recognised as a discipline in its own right”. In the Royal Academy the graphic arts has remained as a discrete subset of artists for 200 years. “We haven’t re-invented the wheel so much as re-furbished it, drawing has had a re-positioning”.

Having seen the passion which drives Meryl Ainslie I wondered about her own emotional response to the works she promotes and asked what stirred her emotions in a drawing? After a moments pause Ainslie was quite clear, “Honesty in a mark - always autographic and not reflective of another state. A drawing is only as good as its intention so if your intent is to appropriate and re-represent and in doing that to sublimate your autographic mark, that has a different value to a drawing that is about the notion of making an idea concrete. Those are different things. It has to be knowing, with a deal of honesty, and knowledge helps you, hopefully, to read that honesty.” She eloquently added that “A drawing is a period of time not a moment of time (a photo is a moment) therefore drawing is an experience, it’s very experiential; the period of time is revealed within the drawing, even in the erased marks” Ainslie’s relationship to the work she promotes and the artists she represents is truly heartfelt. In summary she says “There is something about the autographic nature of the drawn mark that is very beautiful and emotional, it reflects its wearer” Then very quietly and in a much more reflective tone she ends by affirming: “Drawing is very beautiful.”
I would like to thank Meryl Ainslie for her time and generosity in not only answering my questions insightfully and informatively but in giving of herself in warmly expressing the emotional aspect of the precarious business of making, promoting and selling art.