



GRÁINNE CUFFE

‘Capturing a moment’: a brief essay on the artist and her work



June 2017

Gráinne Cuffe is an Irish printmaker who makes bold, large scale richly coloured etchings of flowers. Each piece has a powerful sense of dramatic tension, rooted in a pure and simple essence; the essence of the flower at a fragile moment in time, a moment of great beauty.

She is drawn time and again to the transience of that moment, when the colours, the structure, the lines and shapes of the flower merge, and a subtle drama unfolds. In that moment the essence of the form; it's shapes and lines, it's energy and tension, and the dramatic effect between the light and shade captures her attention. The moment is fleeting, but within that brief second the essence of the flower reveals itself and it is that very essence Cuffe strives to recreate in her work.

A key influence for her is the early 20th century Bauhaus School founded by the architect Walter Gropius. The work from this school is underpinned by a pared back approach to the arts with an emphasis on rational, simplified forms.

"My father studied under Gropius in Harvard in the late 1940s", Cuffe explains. "Bauhaus was very much ingrained in him and that was the basis he worked from. When I went to art college, aged 18 the conversations I had with my father were incredibly intense. One of my teachers, Trevor Scott, advocated Bauhausian theories, everything to do with line, flat shape and three dimensional within and without. So I was in a place where my father had been too and he was fascinated by my project, really supportive. It was all remarkably influential, ideas of getting to the essence, simplicity, and if you can do something with one line, it's better than six". With her work she sets about getting rid of all the peripheral information, honing it down so the message is visually crystal clear, believing that; "the clearer the message is, the clearer the punch is".

Her mother was also very supportive and influential. "My mum had a deep appreciation of the visual arts and we had on-going conversations, analysing the work of various artists. She was also a wonderful gardener who grew many beautiful flowers, which inevitably fostered my own interest in flowers", she says.

A sense of the epic in Cuffe's botanical prints began with a love of the wild landscapes of the Wicklow mountains. A couple of years after leaving art college she lived in the remote valley of Glencree, in County Wicklow. Each day she would head out from the cottage she was house sitting, ruck sack on her back, drawings in a plastic bag, a pocket full of pencils and spend hours trekking through the hills, drawing the landscapes. On those solitary walks she gradually developed an intimate connection with that landscape and all its natural drama.

In 1984 she won a Fulbright Scholarship to study lithography at the Tamarind Institute in New Mexico. A couple of years later, as her interest in etching was growing, she won a scholarship to study at Grafico Uno in Milan. Soon after her stint in Milan she moved to London. Daily journeys out of the city in search of the inspirational landscapes of the Wicklow mountains proved elusive. But one day she got off her bus a few stops early to buy some beautiful anemones in a flower shop, and she drew them. From that point on she began to focus her attention on the minutiae of flowers, while treating them as if they were in fact landscapes in their own right.

"There's a sort of logical progression", she says. "Having drawn landscape, then I was looking at a flower as if it's a landscape, and then scaling up to making large etchings of

flowers". The tension between the delicate and fragile beauty of a moment in time and the embodied drama of mountainous landscapes is a defining feature of her work to this day.

While in London she was asked to sell two editions of the work she had made in Milan. Looking for somewhere to print she came across the printmaking studio at St. Martin's College. Here she signed up for a post-graduate course in etching. Over the course of the next two years she worked with an inspirational teacher, Norman Ackroyd, to whom she believes she owes a huge debt. "He is a phenomenal character", she says, "he is a huge influence on me and my work, he really taught me a lot! He simply wouldn't let us use colour. Only black ink and white paper. His thing was, you can get all the colour you want with black ink and white paper – which is a great training.

"But in the studio where we worked, on a very high shelf, there were these tantalizing jars of pigment. He roared at me, 'you're not to go near those', and of course that was like a red rag to a bull. So I did sneak in kind of blues and green. In the end he showed me how to grind some pigment. He put up with me, giving out to me the whole time!"

Two pivotal points in her early career shaped her work profoundly. On her journey to the Tamarind Institute in New Mexico she stopped off in L.A. to see some cousins. She visited the print gallery, Gemini Editions, where she was mesmerized by a show of exceptionally large David Hockney etchings. The sheer scale of the etchings fascinated her. She subsequently visited the Boston Gallery of Fine Art where she saw James McNeil Whistler etchings. As part of the exhibition the state proofs of certain etchings was on display; "I was really intrigued by the process, looking at each stage from the initial line drawing on a plate to all tonal gradations, application of aqua tints, to final proof. The construction of an image and all its stages is still so interesting to me".

Other key artistic influences have been the Matisse jazz series of paper cut outs, and the stark prints of Richard Serra. The simplicity and understated strength of Serra's work was particularly influential. Georgia O'Keefe's botanical paintings also had an impact on her, and her work shares with O'Keefe a sense of femininity and a rich tactile quality akin to the sensuousness of silk velvet.

Following her post-graduate studies in London, she returned to Ireland and bought a cottage with her partner and future husband, the painter Brien Vahey, at Calary Bog in the heart of the Wicklow mountains. The couple still live there with their two grown up children.

She has been associated with the Graphic Studio since 1979. Located in a converted distillery in the heart of Dublin City, she is a board member and shows her work with the Graphic Studio Gallery in Temple Bar.

Her work sells both nationally and internationally, to private collectors and larger institutions. Notably, her work is found in spaces where people are often under duress. "Some of my work is in O'Hare airport in Chicago. In Ireland it is in places like the Family Law Courts and the oncology unit in the Mater Hospital. It is also in St Vincent's Hospital and St. James's. It seems to be quite effective in locations where people are stressed". The prints are grounded and grounding in lots of contexts, and they have a sense of joy.

In those locations where people find themselves in emotionally challenging circumstances, they have often commented to her on the calming effect of her work. "You wonder

sometimes about the role of the artist in society. And it is a remarkably isolated life, with a lot of unpredictability. But the good thing is when someone says that they saw my work somewhere, like the café in St Vincent's, or going through divorce proceedings at the Family Law Courts, and they tell me that as they sat there they noticed my work on the wall, and that it lifted their heart. Those lovely kind of remarks people make, that's worth it all".

Each piece can take up to six months to complete and as she works she focusses intensely on retaining that original moment she set out to capture, while ensuring it is still alive and has an energy. The process of making the work is almost meditative itself, she says. "The concentration has to be total. When you're making a plate, you just have to be totally there, with each tonal thing that goes on and each dip in the acid. You need to focus, to be utterly present as the process unfolds. Because in the end, after each step of the process from the initial drawing to the final print, I want each piece to be fresh, sparkling, sharp".

Ultimately, in an explosion of rich colours - magentas, scarlets, purples, ambers, earthy mustards and azure blues - each of her dynamic and vibrant prints captures a sense of wonder. "There is something particularly captivating about the aqua tint, the tones it gives and the vibrancy it gives the image", she says. "I often think about the connection between the structure of the surface of the petal and the aqua tint. The petal exists to attract insects to come to the flower and pollinate. It's got to trap light, to hold light within it. This is also what aqua tints do, so they are matched somehow in their function.

"There is a certain magic about etching, which is just unique to etching", she says. "Every medium has its own magic, but there is something very special to me about the mystery and magic of etching. My work doesn't address everyday concerns such as current affairs or politics. I am drawn by something more enduring, which is about being a person in this world, particularly a woman. There is a lot of colour, the pieces are sensual and they are a celebration of the continuum of life. It is about the joy and the wonder, about the endless potential for life to be good. Within that there is a resonance of calm, peacefulness, of being at ease with life. I hope that comes across in my work."