

Bill: When I first met you at Middlebury at the beginning of your teaching career I recall the intensity of your focus on painting. You were not actively engaged in making prints but I know you had had some experience in printmaking at the undergraduate level at the Rhode Island School of Design

Bruce: Actually, that's true. I was just teaching painting at Middlebury and there was no opportunity to do prints there at the time. I had first taken printmaking at RISD taught by Herbert Fink, a very good artist and etcher. I was more experimental with drawing materials than with oils, and printmaking was a natural extension of drawing. There's just something about the incision and the line and its directness - I just enjoyed it. It was a beginning course and we only touched on the basics of etching, no aquatints or soft ground, just hard ground line etching. Herb liked my prints. He commented on my use of space in a couple of nice landscapes. Sorry to say I don't have those plates anymore. I don't even think I have copies of them. Even then ninety percent of my energy was devoted to painting.

Bill: What about your graduate work at Boston University?

Bruce: At Boston University I worked with Walter Murch. Again I was pouring myself into painting but the MFA curriculum required printmaking courses. I took etching with Karl Fortess who, I think, was mainly a lithographer. At least the only prints of his I've ever seen are lithographs. Because there wasn't a lithography press at BU we did only etching. My BU prints were crazy little abstract etchings. But again, it was the line and somehow the fascination of the scale and the cutting and the incising that absorbed me - all those sculptural techniques, and working on paper again.

Bill: Can you say more about your interest at the time in printmaking as an extension of drawing.

Bruce: Definitely. Printmaking challenged me to expand my vocabulary and work with new tools. As a draftsman I was working with charcoal and pencil all my life, as early as I can remember - charcoal, pencil, chalk - and erasing was a huge part of my background in drawing. Changing my mind is part of my aesthetic - jumping out of the paper, not exactly knowing where I'm going and then finding out. That approach is not necessarily compatible with printmaking in the traditional or classical sense. Most printmakers are more decisive and clear about how they want to do things...

Bill: At BU you were especially close to your advisor Walter Murch who also has a distinctive approach to drawing. Describe his influence on you.

Bruce: Well, he sure confirmed a lot of ideas. First of all I loved his notion of doing anything to begin the work of art. The classic example that he talked to me so many times about was putting paper on the floor and walking on it. He couldn't stand working on a blank piece of paper or a blank canvas. It had to have stuff on it - that density is in large part much of what his work is all about. He had to have something to start with, something that's accidental, to start seeing into the picture. He encouraged the notion of change that is so easy to talk about but so difficult to do. He was also tremendously interested in vision. He looked everywhere for things that supported his vision by going out into the streets of Boston to find bricks or look for architectural fragments in junkyards or on construction sites. He would bring back dead fish or old radios - all that kind of stuff.

Bill: What did he think about printmaking?

Bruce: Well, once he commented to me that he had never done a print. I think he was so into the immediacy of drawing. His working methods were very direct. He would paint on the floor, he would draw, he would redo. I just think he was thoroughly immersed in his own drawing techniques.

Bill: You have already said that when you began teaching at Middlebury College you had no opportunity to do prints.

Bruce: No, at that time there wasn't a press but I had come with my plates and my stuff from BU. Once my colleague, Bob Reiff, who had purchased a hand table press, asked me to do a demonstration. Well, it was just awful. Hand table presses have no pressure. It wasn't until some years later when David Bumbeck, a friend of mine from BU, was hired at Middlebury that I had a chance to start printing again. David as you know is a great printmaker with a national reputation. He had worked with Bob Marx and Don Cortesi at Syracuse University and his early work reflected their aesthetic.

Bill: You mean that Italianate quality

Bruce: Yes. I was really inspired. I knew I drew differently from David. I work much more with line and David works much more with volume and shading. I just lived in the printmaking studio and stole every bit of his technique. I was also interested in the idea that he changed his images. He scraped and burnished and left things behind. That connected with what I had learned from Murch and what I was trying to do in my own drawings.

Bill: So the earliest of your professional prints are from that period in Middlebury when you worked so closely with David.

Bruce: Yes, with David's help I developed my professional skills even down to presentation. When I came for my job interview at Kirkland College I had organized my portfolio just like David's with all the prints encased in envelopes. When the Department Chair saw my work he said "Hmm, maybe you can help teach in print-making." I said, "Sure can. I can do this." So I began teaching etching, sharing the studio with Jim McDermott, the sculpture professor, who was then teaching lithography. We had one room for both presses. It was a wonderful opportunity to grow and to start separating myself a little from David's influence. I was completely on my own and started to think about other ways of etching.

Bill: Thirty years later you are still teaching printmaking at Hamilton College. The majority of your retrospective collection at the Amity Art Foundation has been done during that time. How many prints are included?

Bruce: Well, we put together 109.

Bill: And these prints, all intaglios, represent your mature style. Can you speak as a self-designed painter/printmaker about the development of your technique and style since 1972 when you came to Kirkland.

Bruce: All right. It's easy to focus on the technical changes first. As I said, always from the beginning I was more comfortable with drawing and less comfortable working with paint. I found scraping and burnishing in printmaking to be the equivalent for erasing in drawing. It allowed me to experiment with and integrate all that stuff that Walter Murch did with drawing, using kneaded erasers and scumbling with big pieces of chalk then washing it away. I began to think that I could do this with painting too. In other words, I could remove paint and leave tracings of the old image behind.

Bill: Sort of developing an intentional pentimento

Bruce: Yes, of the action of painting. The thing I like most about drawing is the tracing of the thought process rather than the image - the way you see something over a period of time. Rembrandt did that in his prints. You can see where he takes out whole passages, like the one where Christ is brought before the moneychangers. He just wipes out a whole twenty people. I like the idea of leaving the thought process in the plate. It's like making a movie to me. I began to realize that I could also do the same thing with a painting. I can change a landscape all around. The effect is

even more noticeable with figures. I would use paint remover and steel wool for scrubbing things away, imitating on canvas the action of scraping and burnishing the plate.

Bill: So, just like scraping you'd erase on the canvas.

Bruce: Yes, part of my teaching philosophy is that you know something by comparing it to something else. I would make two things and compare, scrape it away then draw back into the part that's been scraped away and re-paint it building it up so that the two processes blended into one.

Bill: When you describe your process you refer to historical models such as Rembrandt but contemporary artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg also employed variations of that additive/subtractive method. Did you look at their work?

Bruce: Especially Jasper Johns. I love his flag pictures and his maps. Johns would leave little scars, indications that it's a plan, that it's in process - like a scaffolding. There was a big Jasper Johns show at Brandeis at the Rose Art Museum when I was a student at BU. It really impressed me, especially the gray flag paintings. With his flag paintings Johns used the idea of an image within an image. I was taken with that idea and began to think about incorporating it into my own work..

Bill: Can you talk more about your landscape theme of the frame within a frame.

Bruce: The frame functions as a window or view-finder. It's a way of dealing with peripheral vision and organizing space. I think all landscape has to do with environment. I'm not a traveler in that I never go very far. I am where I am. The urban/suburban landscape of New England around Boston, Providence and the South Shore where I was raised is a much more crowded landscape. It's more frontal like a garden landscape. My sense of space began to change after eight years in Vermont. I fell in love with the notion of distance. Here in the Mohawk Valley at times you feel that you can see forever. You also have spatial contrasts with things up close, things in isolation. I love the landscape here - the idea of horizons and hills and horizontal banding, something both close and far away - the sense of distance and time that the picture is all about.

Bill: Are there landscapes by printmakers that you admire?

Bruce: Whistler and his brother-in-law Seymour Haden's prints are just wonderful landscapes. The windows and facades in Whistler's Venetian prints are especially interesting to me.

Bill: You're describing Hayden and Whistler who were famous for working directly from nature, but your prints are all created in the studio. Is that correct?

Bruce: That's right.

Bill: Can you describe your working method then? How do you develop a print? What's your philosophy about making states and editions?

Bruce: I work from memory. I think you have to build up a vocabulary. My own work is my primary source. When I was young I drew outside or sitting at a window. I had a tough time painting a landscape except by going outside. I couldn't make up a landscape. I painted a couple of really successful ones. Once I painted a picture from my mother-in-law's upstairs window. At BU, I took that painting and did another one from it - a painting from a painting. Walter Murch saw it and thought it was a terrific painting. I must tell you I think it inspired him to do

what I believe to be his one and only landscape.

I had a wonderful studio at BU. It looked over railroad yards. On a March day the sun would go in and out. The whole Charles River would gray and then it would become green. The MIT dome would be gold and then it would be yellow ochre. The brick buildings in the Harvard Business School would be red and then brown. And it was windy and gusty. Painting out that window one day I had a realization. A picture is all about memory and change. It's all about putting things together, so what the hell, I'm just going to paint it the way I'm thinking about it. From then on I just had to look and then come in and start putting it together.

At Middlebury I just painted in the studio. And then, of course we took long rides everywhere. Several of the prints in the Amity Art Foundation group are done from rides we took in Upstate New York.. All the way down to Schoharie along the Mohawk I would look at things, and going out to the Montezuma Wetlands or south to Binghamton or Elmira, north to Camden and the Tug Hill Plateau - riding and taking photographs.

Bill: How do you use the photos?

Bruce: I don't really draw from them. A photograph is too myopic. It doesn't help with the space. I just use them occasionally for specific details. Many of my landscapes are about old factory buildings and farm houses, the architectural remnants of this area, a way of dealing with past and present.

Bill: The aspects of duality that interest you in the landscape are also present in your figurative work. The tension between vision and memory in the landscapes becomes a conflict in representation in the figures. You know – all those mirrors and double images. Is it overstating the case to suggest an existential reference and the influence of Giacometti?

Bruce: Certainly. The figures in both the etchings and paintings are more complicated to talk about. After all, dealing with the figure is like dealing with yourself. They are about existence and a reflection on that existence. I was always interested in the way Giacometti made his figures. The fact that he reworked them almost to the point where they disappeared – the idea of making a person, or people, come and go – an acknowledgment of the fragility of life interpreted in a world of space. I try to do the same thing with my figures. I don't think there was ever a painting or print that I didn't begin with two figures, one being a reflection or counterpoint of the other. This idea of the two figures was initially inspired by Rembrandt's painting "The Marriage of the Jewish Bride". I've been remaking that image for the past thirty-five years, using it as a point of departure. Sometimes the second figure disappears altogether, or takes on a new identity, an angel maybe. The idea of someone coming and going is like a search for identity. The individual portraits are probably based more on Italian painting – they seem more stable and more comforting. They change less – are less in conflict; however both the heads and full figures are about states of being and therefore by nature very personal. I see them as mirrors, of myself and of art as a mirror.

Bill: In terms of incorporating aspects of memory in your work I know that at times you have actually employed used plates as starting points.

Bruce: Well, yes. That's one of the problems with the record. There is a little plate that I did this year that's a circle plate that goes way back to Middlebury. I just picked it up last year and it's in the Amity group. I just started scraping and burnishing, and adding different things. My early Middlebury prints were mostly aquatints with burnishing. After looking at British printmakers over the years my work became more linear - especially artists like Muirhead Bone who concentrated on drypoints. As I get older I get less patient with all the paraphernalia. There's something wonderful about drypoint - not having to deal with the acid, or anything. It's terrific.

Bill: Well, it's the closest to direct drawing.

Bruce: It's the closest to direct drawing. So I took this print and I just started drypointing all over it. I don't feel anymore like putting aquatints in and all that kind of thing. I feel like being really direct. You can do wonderful things with dry point but you can't make as many impressions. It breaks down.

Bill: But now when you work with one plate like that for so many years do you have different states? Are you documenting the different states?

Bruce: Yes. There are three copies of that print with different editions and all documented at different states.

Bill: I see. And how many states do you think exist of a print like that?

Bruce: You can look at the record. Some prints have so many states I don't even want to think about it. Actually I took three old plates this summer and worked on them with drypoint. I do the same thing in painting. There's a painting in my studio that I'm still working on that began in the autumn of 1965.

Bill: Do you always edition your prints?

Bruce: That's one of my problems. I'm torn by the notion of impulse and creativity and being flexible. I make small editions - about ten each - and I figure that's enough for the record. That'll do.

Bill: Do you ever cancel a plate.

Bruce: No. I've never done that. All the plates are still in pretty good condition. They're all in play.

Bill: You mentioned that your recent prints employ more drypoint technique. How has your technical emphasis changed over the years?

Bruce: Well, with the early prints there was a period of confusion and awkwardness. My early prints are dark and somber and packed. I decided the idea was to feed myself so there's a density there that comes out of confusion. I begin editing as I became more confident about the additive things I wanted to put in. I know a little bit more now. There's no need to repeat some of the same mistakes. I take fewer state proofs now. I'm clear about how to get there. I also use more engraving tools such as the roulette wheel.

Bill: Have you always used only zinc plates?

Bruce: Yes, it's habitual. David Bumbeck worked with zinc. And I've been told - I have no reason to doubt it - from people like David, that zinc is better for scraping and burnishing. It's a softer metal and it holds aquatints better. Copper is wonderful for engraving and straight etching. I'm stuck in habits so I just decided I'm going to work with what I've known.

Bill: As long as we are talking about materials what about paper?

Bruce: I guess I'm torn between Archer's Cover and BFK Rive's. I think Archer's Cover is what David used all the time. When my prints really work I think they work best on it. Archer's Cover is mellower. And it also makes a better contrast. The Rive's seems to pick up the aquatints better but it's colder and it's whiter. Archer's Cover is a wonderful color. It really is.

Bill: Talk a little more about color.

Bruce: I've done some four-color prints a la poupee. They're attractive and people like to buy them but I stopped doing it in landscapes because it looked too silly. It only makes sense in a figure where you can isolate things. Now I use mostly certain pigments like sepias, browns, burnt siennas, and umbers to tone the ink.

Bill: Your mention of the commercial viability of color prints prompts me to ask about how you have managed as a painter to promote this other aspect of your production?

Bruce: I show prints all over. One nice thing about printmaking is that it's not too difficult to ship and set up.

Bill: So, it actually allows you to move all across the country.

Bruce: Yes. I've been able to show my work from San Diego to Boston . I'm a member of the Society of American Graphic Artists in New York City and show my work there. In Boston, I show my prints at the Copley Society of art, where I'm also a member. There's a huge amount of printmaking shows that go on in this country. Prints have always allowed artists to establish their reputation more broadly and build new collectors.

Bill: Before we stop today I would like to hear your thoughts on the current Emerson Gallery show of prints done by your students from the past 30 years. In terms of what we see there can you speak about balancing the roles of artist and teacher?

Bruce: I thoroughly enjoyed that show. I just loved seeing all the work and was overwhelmed by the variety. I always encourage my students to do something personal – that's the thing about the show that really caught my eye – all the images seemed unique. There were still life's, landscapes, portraits, abstractions, and narratives – just a huge range. I've never found teaching to be in conflict with my work as an artist. I love teaching and love talking about art. You ought only to take art courses if it gives you pleasure. I enjoy observing the absorption that students bring to the classroom – that they can lose themselves in their work. There is a give and take about teaching. Sometimes they take my suggestions but most of the time they don't. The idea is that they go about making a change. It's not important how they arrive at that change. Most of the time when I'm teaching them, I'm teaching myself too. I don't think you do art in isolation. Teaching is a way for me to collaborate with young artists – to make art together.

Bill: Has your work ever been influenced by students?

Bruce: Oh, definitely. No not really. I've envied them more. They're very talented. I'm always amazed at how much talent you see in this world.