Bill Jensen, first etchings : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 16-March 4, 1986

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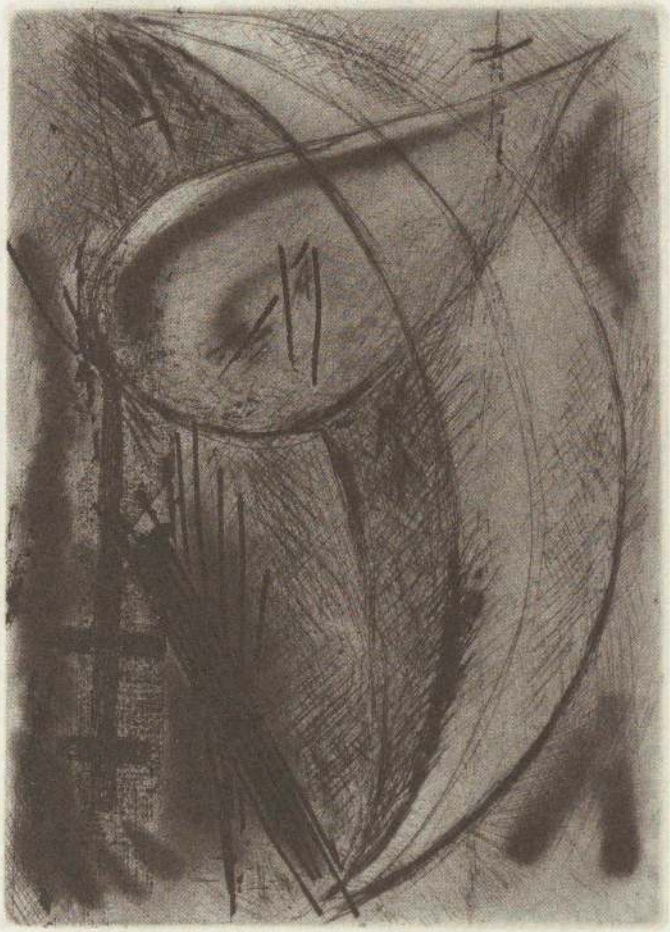
Bill Jensen

FIRST ETCHINGS



The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Etching is as malleable, organic, and integral as painting and drawing in the discoveries in my art. Etching is a severe way to draw.

Bill Jensen

Bill Jensen
FIRST ETCHINGS

Deborah Wye

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
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Cover: *Studio*

Design by Bill Jensen and Universal Limited Art Editions

BILL JENSEN / FIRST ETCHINGS

Endless, the recently completed portfolio of prints by Bill Jensen, provides a remarkable encounter with the range of the artist's poetic language and represents the fullest expression of his introduction to the techniques and potential of etching. The trial proofs and progressive states that lead to the final prints of the portfolio give a glimpse of Jensen's journey through this new medium. Examples of preliminary work are included in the exhibition because they hint at what the artist describes as the "emotional hazards" that exist in a process which allows multiple variations of a single evolving image. Seen together with his single prints, both black-and-white and color, this group evokes the complex and potent sphere that Jensen has made his own—abstraction which explores certain realms of the inner life. The territory that he covers includes spirituality, as manifested in an aura and intensity that is usually found only in devotional objects; sexuality, as suggested by the curvilinearity and sensuousness of his shapes; nature, through references to organic matter and primordial processes; the cosmos, through implications of outer space with its planets and galaxies; and magic, as evidenced by alchemical-like signs and mysterious symbols. This is an invented world which pulsates with feelings that relate to real life without depicting it.

Bill Jensen was born in 1945 in Minnesota. Having studied fine arts at the University of Minnesota in the late sixties, he came to New York in 1970. His mature work became known in the early eighties. At that time, his intense, intimately sized abstract paintings made a significant impact on a contemporary scene in which artistic activities in other forms had dominated for some years. Jensen's work brings what might nostalgically be thought of as a lost sanctuary, protected from the cacophony of everyday experience, to the forefront of our consciousness.

In 1982, Bill Jensen was invited by Universal Limited Art Editions, the renowned workshop in West Islip, Long Island, to make prints. It was fortuitous that Bill Goldston, the present director of U.L.A.E., and Jensen had known each other as graduate students. After being out of touch for several years, Goldston called upon Jensen with the idea of working together. Jensen heard the proposal with trepidation: It would mean exploring unknown regions of new mediums in the celebrated print shop founded by Tatyana Grosman, where artists of an earlier generation had made some of their most important prints.

After almost a year of postponements, Jensen went to West Islip in March 1983. Upon Goldston's suggestion, he started with etching, and met John Lund, the master printer with whom he would collaborate. An intensely private painter whose work is done in solitude, Jensen was fearful at the thought of others being present while he worked. He credits Lund's sensitivity to the collaborative process, as well as to the "energies" of the etching techniques, for easing his way into the medium. Lund's intuitive

sense of when to introduce technical possibilities has been fundamental to Jensen's making the process his own. In fact, when Lund initially described copper as a malleable material, with the possibility for erasures, Jensen immediately felt more comfortable. Knowing that repeated changes could be made, Jensen was able to transpose his painstaking method of overpainting to the new matrix of copperplate. Goldston encouraged him to take the time he needed to work in this personal manner. As Jensen has remarked, "Only at U.L.A.E. could I have worked for two years on a 5 × 7″ plate." The trial proofs and progressive states in this exhibition are a visual diary of his process, and provide for Jensen a "treacherous lineage" of the marks made.

Jensen's imagery is the result of what he refers to as "triggers"—responses to things seen or imagined. He sketches in small notebooks that he carries with him, jotting down visual ideas and working notes; he then mounts these in his studio, studying them as his paintings evolve. Jensen decided to bring a group of these notebook drawings to U.L.A.E. to serve as a basis for prints. He remembers wanting to bring his own world with him in order to have his "shields" nearby. All of his prints have stayed close to the size of those notebook pages.

Jensen's painting and printmaking are thoroughly integrated. Whereas his first plates derived from notebook drawings and painting ideas, as he became immersed in printmaking, paintings and drawings began to utilize elements from prints. Now, etching, drawing, and painting function organically in his studio in what he refers to as a "working oneness." This is a natural extension

of Jensen's original notion, that printmaking should not simply document painting. For him, etching would be "out on its own." He would learn to feel the unique energies of the techniques and to tap into them. He acquired as many intaglio processes as possible, including straight etching, open-bite, aquatint, sugar-lift, solvent-lift, drypoint, engraving, and roulette, as well as scraping and burnishing; and he invented others. All became elements in his language, ready to be "released by instinct." For Jensen, these are more than tools. He says, with a smile, "When the tornado hits, you need all your weapons."

Even Jensen's first plate eventually became a finished etching. He wanted no test plates with which to ease into the process. His was "straight-ahead" etching. In fact, the potential of plates to hold all the memories of past marks was of great importance to him; he has "never lost a plate." He continues to work, to scrape away, and to rework until he is satisfied, the accumulation of marks creating a powerful resonance.

After two visits to U.L.A.E., Jensen had started work on four plates, all of which would be painstakingly labored over for months and would eventually become part of the portfolio *Endless*. His having several plates going at once is similar to his having several paintings and drawings always evolving simultaneously. Since the journey from trial proof to final state often seemed endless, with Jensen continually adding "just one more line" or taking one away, he decided to title his portfolio accordingly. *Endless* is made up of eleven etchings printed in different inks on three tonalities of paper. The order of the prints in the portfolio is that in which they were completed. They demonstrate a growing sophistication in the use of techniques and record the course Jensen traveled.

As a special function of the serial format, the sequence of the prints creates a poetic rhythm that reflects Jensen's artistic concerns. Iconic presences begin the portfolio and appear again later. They are fundamental elements in his vocabulary and evoke the intensity and symbolism of religious objects, implying a separateness from secular and worldly concerns. The delicacy of *Angel* introduces the group with an ethereal essence that suggests the supernatural. Its riveting frontality demands fervent attention. At the same time, a central, slitlike shape gives the suggestion of sexuality.

Mute continues the gripping centrality but also introduces mysterious and magical qualities. The aura of mystery comes from a pervasive stillness of the forms, which results from their symmetrical arrangement and the illusion of solidity. The signs and symbols that have been given a physical presence look as if they could be an alchemical equation. This comparison with alchemy extends to the element of danger inherent in such transmutations, a sense Jensen's imagery often elicits.

The narrative of the portfolio returns again to these iconic presences after a span of six etchings that investigate other visual equivalences. In *Lust*, a velvety darkness intimates the vastness of the galaxy more than simply a nighttime sky. The starlike configuration suggests a visionary planet as well as a sensuous conch shell. This intermingling of the celestial and the terrestrial implies a common denominator in an involvement with primordial origins—of the world of nature and of the universe itself.

Within *Innocent*, a dramatic, flowerlike burst pushes its luxurious, tentacular petals up against the plate mark, which barely contains it. The erupting organism, like mythic flora, occupies a cosmic region reminiscent of that seen in *Lust*. Yet here, two double-tiered crosses rest on a planetary globe and add a religious dimension to the experience. Nature, religion, and the cosmos itself cohabit in an imaginary sphere.

Prints such as the iconic *Angel, Mute, Lust,* and *Innocent* present the hieroglyphs of Jensen's poetic language and define his reality. As elements occurring at certain intervals in the narrative of the portfolio, they serve as anchors of symbolic continuity.

After being introduced to the portfolio with *Angel* and *Mute*, the viewer is met with a progression of prints in which interaction, flux, and transmutation activate the stillness of these preceding works. In *Melville*, protozoan-like organisms are seen in an atmosphere of union and frenzy and imply very early stages of life. In *Mussels*, an orgasmic explosion fills the plate. With *Ribbons*, the central image becomes completely unraveled. Imaginary beings, like the mythical fairies of literary tradition, move freely across the plate in a graceful and elegant dance. It is as if we have come upon all the awakening activities of nature at the beginning of a new day.

Pilgrim slows down the pace of the portfolio's tale, with two distinct regions relating in an environmental field. The addition of blue heightens the discreteness of the forms and contributes to a quiet, gentle atmosphere. The configurations connote feminine and

masculine polarities, and their placement implies an attempt to relate to each other with what appears to be a tentative yet natural attraction. The shell-like form on the right has a freedom and grace which serves as a counterpoint to the rigid confinement and solidity of the mountains on the left.

Just past the midpoint of the portfolio, *Daniel* creates an abrupt pause and a discordant note, because it is the only horizontal composition in a series of vertical images. *Daniel* has monstrous overtones, but its main function seems to be one of almost comic relief within the unfolding drama. The viewer is taken back from a journey of the inner life, to be confronted with a physical aspect of humanity, by way of this almost cartoonlike image.

The narrative continues with an evocation of the complex processes of nature within the context of a landscape. The richly colored and tumultuous *Good Earth* suggests trees, rainbows, and waterfalls, tumbling together in a process of perpetual change. The spontaneity of such ongoing movement had been hinted at earlier in the graceful elegance of *Ribbons*, but here the addition of brown situates the scene in the natural environment rather than in an amorphous, abstracted space.

The portfolio ends in a cataclysmic whirl. The free use of intaglio techniques in *Fearless*, the final print, propels us into an open-ended void. The overriding effect of spiraling lines creates a sense of vertigo, made more acute by the fact that Jensen's usual palpable shapes are not present as guideposts. Therefore, the end of the series, as the title *Endless* implies, is not a traditional finish in the sense that there is no resolution or closing. Instead there is an opening-out into a vision of time and space as infinity.

Although the individual titles are chosen by Jensen only after the completion of the prints, their appropriateness is always carefully "felt out." Taken together, they clearly reflect the range of discourse described here. In his portfolio as well as his single prints, Jensen has intuitively developed a place in which interior life may be explored and also linked with a universal, collective sensibility. In so doing, he fosters a range of imaginative experience all too infrequent in our contemporary culture.

D. W.

ENDLESS

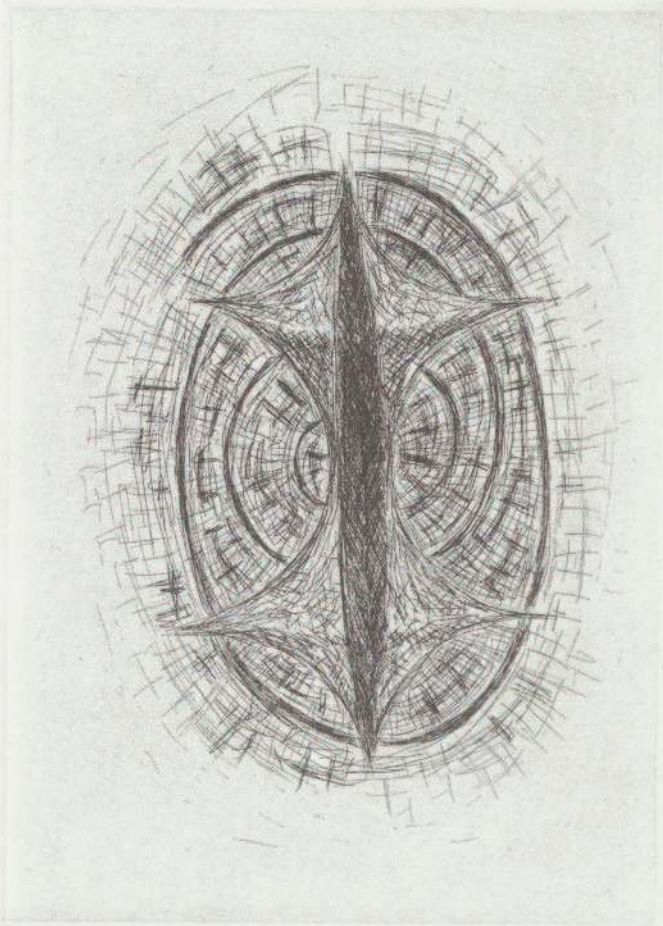
Bill Jensen

Introduction to the portfolio *Endless*
by Emily Sorkin

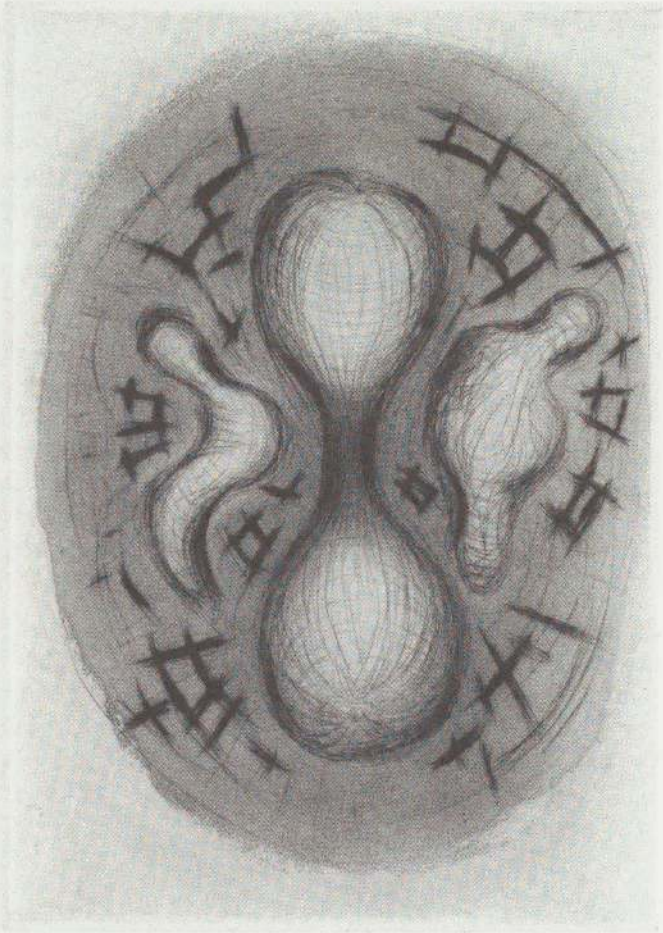
Entering the China Building, one is aware of the quiet, a soft musty smell of the past, and an unusual clear light. It is Bill Jensen's studio. Placed around the walls are eleven etchings. Immediately, even before knowing the images, one is struck by some element of perfection: the kind of perfection created by a demanding and unappeasable nature.

Introducing the etchings, Bill says, "These are the innocent ones": his first etchings. He is in front of *Angel. Angel* is almost hard to look at. There is a painful pure light – captivating, reaching out from the core of it, pulsing, fading. Look again, the light is there. We begin to recognize something in the curved lines, is it carnal female or the voluptuous spirit of the universe? This exquisite form defies us. It is strange, it is not from the natural world. Before us is a private mythology, and it leads us to the deepest most invisible parts of ourselves.

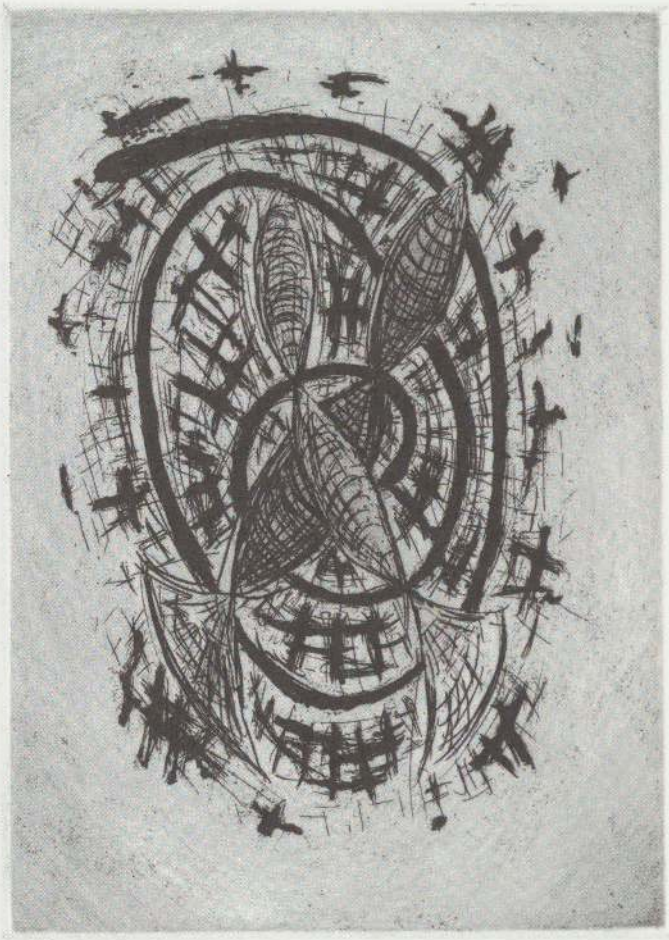
There was no plan to make a series of etchings, no set method used; just an act of searching. With an almost exhaustive thoroughness, innumerable subtle adjustments were made that kept everything – tools, printing, lines, tones – in a constant state of change, and through the joy and necessity of discovery, this portfolio evolved.



Angel

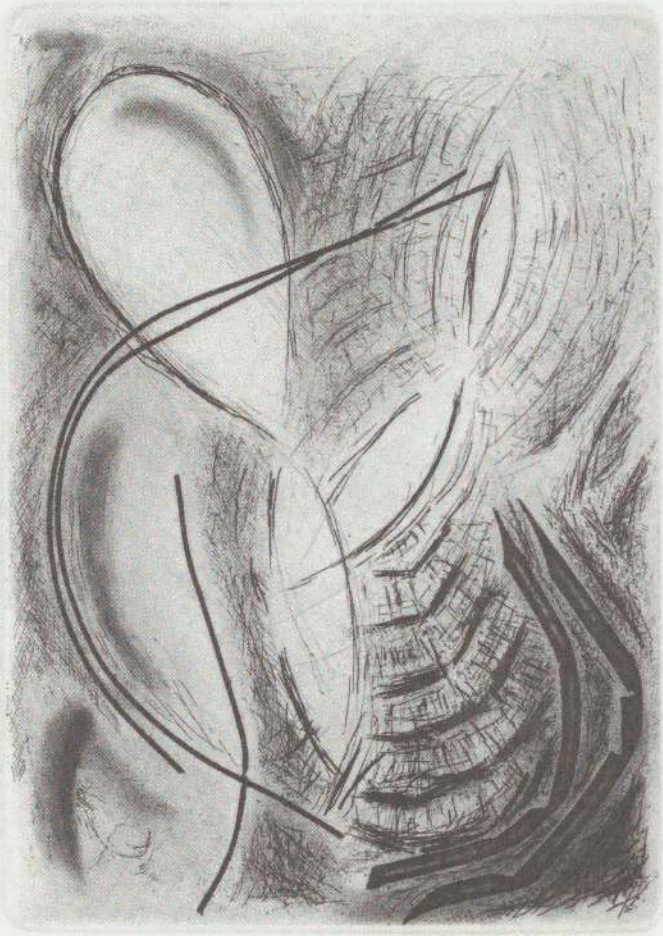


Mute

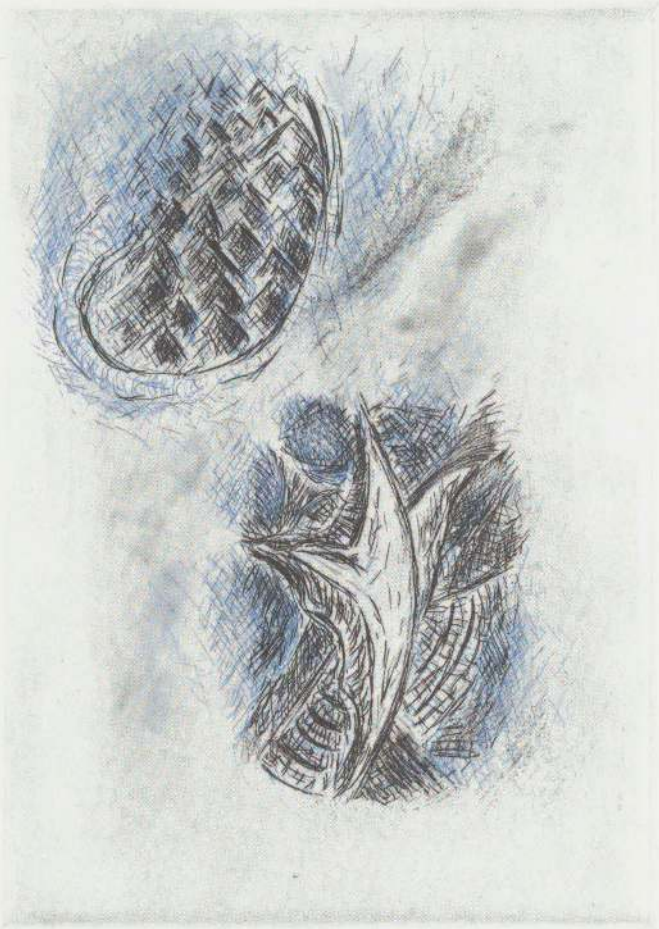


Melville

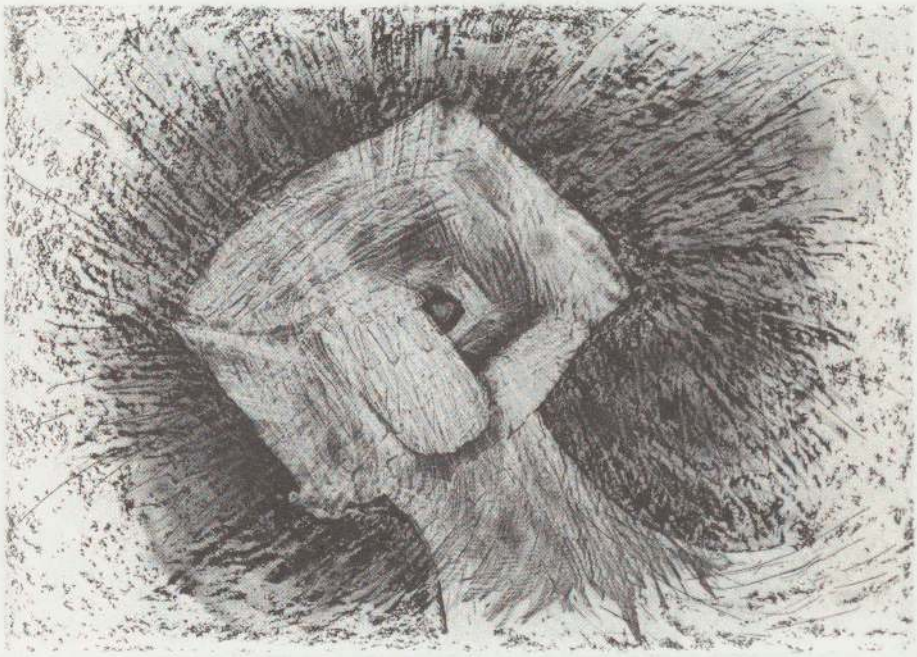
Mussels



Ribbons

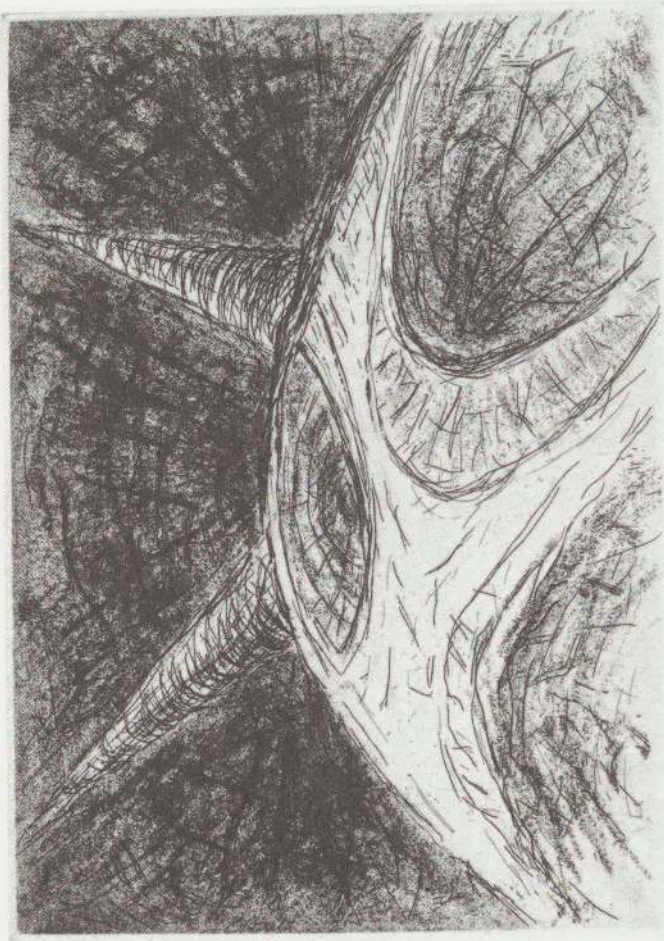


Pilgrim

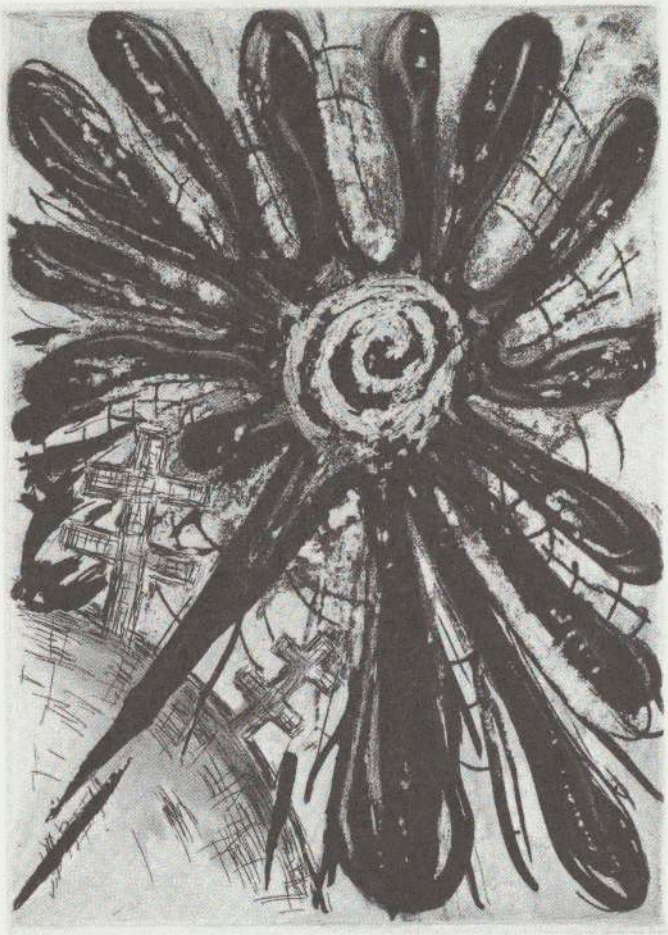


Daniel

Good Earth



Lust



Innocent

Fearless

CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

Mediums are listed according to degree of use in given print. Dimensions are given in inches and centimeters, height preceding width. Plate size is given for prints, unless hand additions occur outside the plate mark; in these cases sheet size is given. Sheet size is given for working drawings. Dates of execution are enclosed in parentheses and do not appear on the works; they are included only when different from dates of publication. All prints were executed at Universal Limited Art Editions (U.L.A.E.), West Islip, New York. Numbers 1 – 13 were published at U.L.A.E.; numbers 14 – 20 were unpublished as of January 1986. Proofs for the portfolio *Endless* and unpublished prints have been lent by U.L.A.E.

1. *Studio*. (1983 – 84.) Published 1984. Etching, aquatint, drypoint, and roulette, 7 × 5″ (17.8 × 12.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Emily Landau.

2 – 13. *Endless*. Published 1985. A portfolio of eleven etchings. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Emily Landau.

2. Title page. Etching, drypoint, and roulette, 7 × 5″ (17.8 × 12.7 cm).
3. *Angel*. (1983 – 85.) Etching and aquatint, 7 × 5″ (17.8 × 12.7 cm).
   a. State 1. Etching.
   b. State 2. Etching.
   c. State 3. Etching.
   d. State 4. Etching and aquatint.
   e. State 4. Etching and aquatint on chine collé.
4. *Mute*. (1983 – 85.) Drypoint and aquatint, 7 × 5″ (17.8 × 12.7 cm).
   a. State 1. Drypoint.
   b. State 3. Drypoint with selective plate-tone.
   c. State 4. Drypoint and aquatint.
   d. State 5. Drypoint and aquatint.
   e. State 6. Drypoint and aquatint.
5. *Melville*. (1983 – 85.) Etching and aquatint. 7 × 5″ (17.8 × 12.7 cm).
   a. State 1. Etching.
   b. State 1. Etching with pencil notes.
   c. State 4. Etching and aquatint, printed in color.

6. *Mussels*. (1983–85.) Solvent-lift, aquatint, etching, and drypoint, 7 × 5″ (17.8 × 12.7 cm).
    a. State 1. Solvent-lift, aquatint, and etching.
    b. State 2. Solvent-lift, aquatint, etching, and drypoint with ink-wash additions, 12-15/16 × 10″ (32.8 × 25.4 cm).
    c. State 3. Solvent-lift, aquatint, etching, and drypoint with gouache additions and ink notes, 14-9/16 × 11-5/16″ (36.9 × 28.7 cm).
    d. Spit-bite template. Pastel chalk and felt pen, 12-1/16 × 9-1/16″ (30.6 × 23.0 cm).
    e. State 5. Solvent-lift, aquatint, etching, and drypoint with pencil notes, 17-5/8 × 14-3/16″ (44.8 × 36.0 cm).
7. *Ribbons*. (1983–85.) Etching, open-bite, aquatint, drypoint, and roulette, 7 × 5″ (17.8 × 12.7 cm).
    a. State 1. Open-bite, drypoint, and engraving.
    b. State 1. Open-bite, drypoint, and engraving with ink wash and pen-and-ink.
    c. State 2. Open-bite, drypoint, and engraving.
    d. State 4. Open-bite, drypoint, and engraving.
    e. State 5. Open-bite, drypoint, and aquatint.
8. *Pilgrim*. (1983–85.) Etching and aquatint, printed in color, 7 × 5″ (17.8 × 12.7 cm).
    a. Plate 1, State 1. Etching.
    b. Plate 1, State 1 with Plate 2, State 2. Etching, printed in color.
    c. Plate 1, State 1. Etching with ink-wash additions, 12-7/8 × 9-15/16″ (32.6 × 25.7 cm).
    d. Plate 2, State 2. Etching and aquatint, printed in color.
9. *Daniel*. (1983–85.) Etching, aquatint, drypoint, scraping, and burnishing, 5 × 7″ (12.7 × 17.8 cm).
    a. State 1. Aquatint.
    b. State 3. Aquatint.
    c. State 6. Aquatint, scraping, and burnishing.
    d. State 8. Aquatint, drypoint, scraping, and burnishing.
    e. State 11. Aquatint, drypoint, scraping, and burnishing.
    f. State 6. Aquatint, scraping, and burnishing with pencil additions.
    g. State 13. Aquatint, drypoint, scraping, and burnishing with ink-wash and gouache additions, 10-1/2 × 15″ (26.8 × 38.1 cm).

10. *Good Earth*. (1984 – 85.) Sugar-lift, aquatint, drypoint, printed in color, 7 × 5″ (17.8 × 12.7 cm).
    a. Plate 1, State 1. Sugar-lift and aquatint.
    b. Plate 1, State 1. Sugar-lift and aquatint with pen-and-ink and wash additions.
    c. Plate 2, State 1. Sugar-lift, aquatint, and drypoint.
    d. Plate 1, State 2 with Plate 2, State 2. Sugar-lift, aquatint, and drypoint with etching-ink and ink-wash additions and notes in ink and pencil, 16-1/4 × 12-3/8″ (41.0 × 31.5 cm).
11. *Lust*. (1984 – 85.) Etching, 7 × 5″ (17.8 × 12.7 cm).
    a. Plate 1, State 1. Etching.
    b. Plate 1, State 1 with Plate 2, State 2. Etching, open-bite, aquatint, and sugar-lift with ink-wash additions.
    c. Plate 1, State 2. Etching, drypoint, and aquatint.
12. *Innocent*. (1984 – 85.) Aquatint, photogravure, and etching, 7 × 5″ (17.8 × 12.7 cm).
    a. Plate 2, State 2 from *Lust*. Sugar-lift, open-bite, and etching.
    b. Plate 2, State 2 from *Lust*. Sugar-lift, open-bite, and etching with ink-wash, charcoal, and gouache additions, 16-1/8 × 11-1/16″ (41.0 × 28.1 cm).
    c. Plate 1, State 1. Photogravure from b.
    d. Plate 1, State 2 with Plate 2, State 3. Photogravure, scraping, burnishing, sugar-lift, open-bite, etching, and soft-ground with ink and gouache additions, 15-5/8 × 11-1/2″ (39.6 × 29.3 cm).
    e. Plate 1, State 3. Photogravure, aquatint, etching, scraping, and burnishing with pen-and-ink and wash additions, 15-1/4 × 11-3/16″ (38.7 × 28.4 cm).
13. *Fearless*. (1984 – 85.) Drypoint, scraping, burnishing, solvent-lift, aquatint, and etching, 7 × 5″ (17.8 × 12.7 cm).
    a. State 1 (Plate 2, State 4 from *Innocent*). Scraping and burnishing with ink-wash and felt-pen additions, 15 × 11″ (38.1 × 27.9 cm).
    b. State 2. Scraping, burnishing, and aquatint with ink-wash additions and notes in pencil and pen, 15-5/16 × 11-1/8″ (38.9 × 28.2 cm).

c. State 9. Scraping, burnishing, aquatint, and etching with pencil notes, 20 × 15-1/16″ (50.8 × 38.3 cm).
d. State 10. Scraping, burnishing, aquatint, and etching with ink and pastel chalk additions and pencil, felt-pen, and ballpoint additions, 20-5/16 × 15-7/16″ (51.6 × 39.2 cm).

14. *Isle Le Block*. (1984 – 85.) Etching, engraving, and drypoint, 5-1/4 × 8-1/8″ (13.3 × 20.6 cm).
15. *Kepler*. (1984 – 85.) Etching, engraving, and aquatint, 5-3/8 × 8-11/16″ (13.7 × 22.0 cm).
16. *Lyons*. (1984 – 85.) Engraving, roulette, and drypoint. 4-5/8 × 7-7/8″ (11.6 × 20.1 cm).
17. *Ancestors*. (1984 – 85.) Etching, open-bite, aquatint, drypoint, roulette, scraping, and burnishing, printed in color, 9-3/4 × 6-13/16″ (24.7 × 17.2 cm).
18. *Babylon*. (1984 – 85.) Etching, engraving, drypoint, aquatint, and roulette, printed in color, 10-13/16 × 7-11/16″ (27.5 × 19.5 cm).
19. *Exit*. (1984 – 85.) Etching, engraving, drypoint, aquatint, and roulette, printed in color, 5-1/16 × 9-1/16″ (12.9 × 23.0 cm).
20. *Plight*. (1984 – 85.) Etching, aquatint, drypoint, roulette, scraping, and burnishing, printed in color, 10-7/8 × 9″ (27.6 × 22.9 cm).

BIOGRAPHY

Born Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 26, 1945

Education University of Minnesota, BFA, 1968; MFA, 1970

Awards Creative Artists Public Service Program (CAPS), 1979
National Endowment for the Arts, Artist's Fellowship, 1985–86

Individual Exhibitions
Fischbach Gallery, New York, 1973, 1975
Washburn Gallery, New York, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1986

Selected Group Exhibitions
Rooms, P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York, 1976
Critic's Choice: John Perreault, 55 Mercer, New York, 1977
The 1970s: New American Painting, for circulation in Eastern Europe, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1979
American Painting: The Eighties, Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York, 1979 (with catalogue)
Appearances: Show Number One, Fashion Moda, Bronx, New York, 1979
Seven Americans, Neuberger Museum, State University of New York, Purchase, 1981 (with catalogue)
1981 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1981 (with catalogue)
Painting from the Mind's Eye, Hillwood Art Gallery, C. W. Post Center, Greenvale, New York, 1983 (with catalogue)
Tendencias en Nueva York, Palacio de Velázquez, Madrid, Spain, 1983 (with catalogue)
Affinities, Hayden Gallery, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1983 (with catalogue)

Five Painters in New York: Brad Davis, Bill Jensen, Elizabeth Murray, Gary Stephan, John Torreano, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1984 (with catalogue)

An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984 (with catalogue)

The Meditative Surface, Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, 1984 (with catalogue)

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