

RUTH KIRCHMEIER

By Hermine Hull

Ruth Kirchmeier is an artist – a painter, a draughtsman, a gardener – but it is as a printmaker that she is in her *métier*.

As an observer and friend of over twenty years, as her dealer for several of those years, I am struck by the “all of a piece” quality of Ruth’s life. Her woodcuts are her most recognized artistic achievement, justly so. They are complex and descriptive, the lines and marks, the overlays and underlays of colors. Her speech is as complex and beautifully descriptive as the patterns in her woodcuts; her garden and her home also are as artfully and richly designed.

But it is the woodcuts that are the subject of this piece. A retrospective exhibition of Ruth’s woodcuts, from her earliest art school prints made under the tutelage of Will Barnet and Karl Schrag at Cooper Union, to her latest woodcut, “Hellgate Gorge” completed in time for this show, will open at my gallery, Hermine Merel Smith Fine Art in West Tisbury, this Sunday, July 8. We have done this together to mark Ruth’s seventieth birthday and the fifty-year long development of her artistic career.

Ruth remembers being awestruck by the collection of artists and intellectuals gathered around the dinner table in her childhood home, German expatriates who fled the Nazis and were welcomed in rural New Jersey by her parents. Ruth said, “My father always had friends who were artists. I always wanted to be like them. They seemed Olympian to me.” When artist Joseph Scharl would “come to the country to visit, he would describe what he was working on in language so evocative I could see the yellow rays of sun.” She was later to feel “paralyzed by his advice to her: there is only one line – the right line.” Fortunately, an art school professor made his students stand at a distance from their easels and draw with a two-foot long stick, which “loosened me right up.”

There were years of early marriage and motherhood, traveling with her family, finally settling in Brooklyn, New York, where “a room of her own” and joining the Smith Street Etching Group, refocused Ruth on her work as an artist. “When I joined the etching group, I just flew and never stopped.” Woodcuts were portable, so could be done anywhere, and the smell and feel of carving wood “reminded me of my father, who was a cabinetmaker, the pungent smell of his workshop. My father inspired me.” She also realized that in making woodcuts she had found her medium. “I knew I could make this medium do what I wanted. I loved the German Expressionists – Nolde and Kirchner – and Japanese prints. I never imagined doing anything like Japanese prints, but realize now that I am.”

THE EARLY DAYS

For my second woodcut at Cooper Union I went to a near-by hardware store and bought a 4-foot length of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch pine which I had cut into equal lengths. My teacher, Will Barnet, had advised me to expand on a smaller woodcut, my first, that I had done of my younger brother Marc on Traverso's Pond. In rural New Jersey where we grew up, there was an Italian farmer among the small German immigrant population who had a pond where he watered his cows and where local children skated.

Barnet thought we, his students, lacked passion. He remembered when students would have fisticuffs over whether Cezanne or Matisse were the greater painter.

"Overlap and flatten the figures in space," he told me, and because I admired him, I tried to follow his suggestions.

In those days I used a carving knife and a chipping tool exclusively. I loved the smell of the pine as I worked on the woodcut. It reminded me of my cabinet-maker father's pungent workshop. I enjoyed carving that first simple woodcut and was pleased with how it came out.

While I am not always as pleased with later woodcut endeavors I have never lost my delight in carving.

I took a leave of absence after my second year at Cooper Union so that I could be with my husband, an architecture student, who was matriculating to Harvard University for his final year of study.

The woodcut "Morning" was made at our Central Square apartment in Cambridge and reminds me of ~~the~~^{my} sense of loss and alienation in an unfamiliar city removed from the involvements and pleasures of student life at my beloved art school.

THE WATER WOODCUTS

The Water Woodcuts series emerged from small pen and ink drawings I made while sitting in the bow of Nelson Bryant's canoe on the Rapid River in Maine.

My partner Nelson and I spend a lot of time in wild places where he fishes. Initially, when we were anchored I would draw the scenes beside the rivers and lakes. Soon I became obsessed with the form and movement of the water itself. Its fluid and endlessly changing geometry became the subject of drawings which I brought home and translated into the Water Series.

Our wilderness trips are also the source of the large landscape woodcuts. The Dead Diamond River runs through Dartmouth College's Second College Grant in northern New Hampshire where Nelson and I have spent many happy times. I climbed a boulder to make the sketch for "Bend in the River," while "Dead Diamond River" was drawn when I sat with my legs dangling over the edge of the suspension bridge that spanned its snaking course below me.

Similarly, "Hellgate Gorge," where the river squeezes with enormous force through narrow cliffs, was sketched from the high vantage point of our cabin porch directly above it.

For the "Lake Fishing" woodcut I was again atop a boulder while Nelson fished from a skiff that Allen Whiting had donated to the Bryant family camp on Salmon Stream Lake in Maine. Nelson's fishing efforts began in the afternoon and ended at evening. I tried to replicate the change of light in this series of woodcuts.

I am grateful to Nelson for having brought me to these places of "wilderness and wet," of solitude and healing, which have inspired me to make my art. It has been a privileged journey. Thank you, Nelson.

Plus, he makes my frames, a greater gift no man or woman could ask.

BROOKLYN

When I lived in Brooklyn I drew with my friend Alta Anne Morris once a week. On fine days we would draw at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden or the safer neighborhoods of Brooklyn. When weather grew cold we went to the Cloisters in Fort Tryon Park or simply met at our own places.

The woodcut "The Greek Rug" was made from a drawing I did of Alta Anne's living room and "The Old Conservatory" from a Botanic Garden sketch, "Eclectic Houses" from a drawing made while sitting on a folding stool on a sidewalk in Flatbush, Brooklyn.

I also met once a week with a group who drew from the model at Selina Trieff's studio in Manhattan.

From this a second group formed, March Avery, Sally Brody, Joan Miller, and Harriet Nash, who met on weekly evenings to draw each other. The woodcuts that bear their names were born in those sessions.

CHANGING COLORS

Marsha Wynsrig invited me to hike to the cliffs at Menemsha Hills Reservation one autumn to do some sketching and the woodcut which bears its name came from that two-day session. In winter I walked there again with my sister Susan and friends after a snowfall. When we reached the cliffs it occurred to me that I could –using the original blocks carved for the autumn version but with different color inks – print a snow scene. There followed “Menemsha Hills, Winter.”

“Dead Diamond River, Autumn and Spring,” as well as “Homestead Lilacs,” from a bouquet plucked from clumps beside an overgrown cellar-hole adjacent to a West Tisbury field, were subjects I then decided to similarly transform, one from autumn to spring and the latter from purple to white.

Wild Water Lilies

Nelson Bryant and I were paddling to his favorite fishing spot on Salmon Stream Lake in Maine when I saw, in the distance, a flotilla of golden-yellow globes on the water. We went over to investigate and found ourselves surrounded by wild water lilies. Wanting a bouquet for our camp table, I asked Nelson to hold the canoe in place and he waited patiently as I plunged my arm to the hilt in the dark water to pick the long-stemmed prizes. Later, watching them unfold to reveal their complex and fiercely beautiful interiors, I strove to depict their glory with lines and color on paper .

Kirchmeier

Ruth

-30-

Homestead Lilacs

I made a painting of lilacs I picked behind my sister's house in West Tisbury where they grew in rank abandon beside an old cellar hole. The painting hangs in her dining room and looking at it over the years I thought about how I might make a woodcut of it.

"Homestead Lilacs" is my first translation of a painting into a woodcut. I began with a depiction of the purple lilacs as closely representative of the painting as I could carve in wood. The technique I use, which involves myriad color overlays, made experimenting with those colors irresistible and after four purple versions I decided to make the lilacs white. There followed six months of creating - from the same image - lilacs of different colors in different light and with different backgrounds. The vase remained more or less constant as a kind of morning star to give me something familiar to go by.

I stopped after ten prints of what was to be a twenty-print edition had been completed. Maybe one day I will be moved to do the remaining ten.

Kirchmeier, August 2006

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-30-