

# *The Washington Print Club*

QUARTERLY



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#### COVER ART:

Craig McPherson, *Edgar Thomson*, 1997, mezzotint, 17½ x 23½ inches, edition of 75.

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# About the Cover Artist: Craig McPherson

CRAIG McPherson is both a painter and mezzotint artist of note. Represented by New York's Forum Gallery, his work is housed in numerous public, as well as in many private, collections. The former range from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Whitney Museum of American Art, Washington D.C.'s National Gallery of Art, Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art, The Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, London's British Museum and Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum to Australia's Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney. His principal subjects are atmospheric yet detailed nighttime vistas of urban and industrial landscapes.

McPherson has been called a Realist, but that is an oversimplification. While his work is indeed firmly rooted in Realism, the ways in which he pares his subjects down to their very essence and manipulates his images through the application of paint or the modification of etching ink consistently transgress the rules of Realism. Thus it is not surprising that the nightscapes for which he is especially known have been described as "cinematic" and "film noir."

## The Artist and His Work

McPherson spent much of his life as an artist in New York City. Born in Wichita, Kansas, in 1948, he graduated with a BFA from the University of Kansas in 1970, and in 1975 moved to the Washington Heights area of New York, which at that time was a neighborhood burdened with the twin industries of thievery and drug deals, and their byproduct, frequent gunfire—with the added distinction of being included in a travel book entitled *The World's Most Dangerous Places*. McPherson's studio simultaneously had an intimate view of those activities and a panoramic view of New York City, including Yankee Stadium.

Trained as a painter, McPherson was introduced to mezzotint in 1978 by Sudanese-born New York printmaker

and master printer Mohammad Khalil, who printed for Romare Bearden, Jim Dine, and Louise Nevelson. He is, however, entirely self-taught in mezzotint. From 1975 to 1985, he devoted himself exclusively to drawings, paintings, and mezzotints. In 1979, he made his first schematic (a precise detailed architectural drawing) of the view from his studio looking out towards the Bronx and Manhattan skylines. He used that 18 x 72 inch schematic as the basis of his *Cityscape* series of mezzotints, each image based on a different or sometimes overlapping section of it. (McPherson's now iconic mezzotint, his 1983 *Yankee Stadium at Night*, was part of this *Cityscape* series, and was illustrated and briefly discussed in the *Quarterly* Summer 2012 issue.<sup>1</sup>) McPherson's schematics became fundamental to his art. Whether working on a panoramic or a more intimate scale, he would select a specific area of a specific schematic as his subject, and use it to produce, first, a more detailed drawing, then a painting, and finally a mezzotint. (For McPherson, "The print is the summation of the series.")

In 1985, McPherson's by then well-established pattern of moving from drawings and paintings to mezzotints ceased for seven years, when he was commissioned by American Express to create four mural paintings for the auditorium in its corporate headquarters at New York's World Financial Center. *Twilight: The Waterways and Bridges of Manhattan* (1985-1986), a 6 x 90 foot mural cycle, swiftly led to much larger American Express commission for murals in the main lobby of its corporate headquarters. This second, 11 x 318 foot mural cycle, *Harbors of the World*, comprises 10 murals depicting—in superb panoramas—the harbor areas of six cities: New York, Venice, Istanbul, Sydney, Rio de Janeiro, and Hong Kong. McPherson worked on this series of harbor scenes (which remains among the largest murals in New York), from 1987 to 1992. During that period, he spent the first 14 months on the road,

creating his schematics on site, followed by four years of studio work in New York.

In 1982, three years before McPherson's first mural project for American Express, he made the first of multiple visits to Pittsburgh, because it was the hometown of May Miculis, who would become his wife. He was immediately entranced by the once reviled vistas of this historic American industrial city and its often heavily industrialized environs, and, after he had completed his second American Express commission, that led him to take up a new subject. As he reported in an interview with Sarah Hall, the curator of the 2008 Frick exhibition of this new work, discussed below, "That first visit left a lasting impression. It was at night in the winter, and there were low-hanging clouds. As we came out of the Fort Pitt Tunnel and were crossing the bridge, the sky lit up orange from the mill up the river. Very odd colors, various grays, cool to warm, and a curry orange. Turner's *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament* had nothing on this. As we drove along the river, there was one great image after another."<sup>2</sup> Given his longtime aesthetic interest in night scenes, he was especially dazzled by the Pittsburgh area's nightly vistas of burning steel furnaces and smokestacks and they became a frequent subject of the series of Pittsburgh works he produced in 1992 and 1997. In 2006, they led The Frick Art Museum in Pittsburgh to commission him to create a body of work to commemorate the city's 250th anniversary. The resulting 2008 exhibition, "Steel: Pittsburgh Drawings by Craig McPherson," comprised the new body of graphite and pastel drawings and a selection of his earlier Pittsburgh paintings and mezzotints.

## The Artist's Mezzotints

In 2006, McPherson had retreated to northern rural Virginia to complete the Frick's commission, and that led him to decide to abandon New York, and he and his wife took up residence there in



2008. Now working exclusively in mezzotint, a print medium particularly suited to his longtime interest in nightscapes, because its practitioners work from a dark, not a white, ground, he continues to maintain complete control over every aspect of the arduous mezzotint process.

Ever since his initial work with Mohammad Khalil in 1978, McPherson has printed as well as produced all his plates (on his Charles Brand press), in the belief that there is as much creativity in the wiping of the plate as there is in creating it. In recent correspondence with this writer, he remarked "When you study the print work of Rembrandt, for example, I would argue that the best prints are from his hand alone—both in the etching or drypoint process and even more important, in the wiping of the plate. This is particularly true of those images where there's an extensive use of plate tone. For me, authorship is an issue. Something highly personal, almost mystical, is

involved in the creative process—the dialogue that occurs between an artist and the material he is manipulating. When you put yourself aside and give in to the medium it takes you places your will can't go. For me, this is the essence of art. A craftsman, even a master-craftsman or master printer, is working at the service of an artist not from inner necessity. Following on from this, there is a trajectory in the lives of the artists I most respect: from the acquisition of a set of skills as a craftsman, to the perfection of those skills as a master-craftsman, to becoming an artist with the discovery of a language or style that is yours alone."

McPherson's plates are large for mezzotints, often about 24 x 36 inches. He begins the process of making his prints by roughing the surface of the copper plates he uses with a curved, serrated tool called a rocker, for about three hours a day. And it can take him up to nine months to fully rock it; that is, to produce a plate with no discernible

grain and no glint of clear copper. Only a fully rocked surface can hold enough ink to print a rich and uniform black. He then works the image out of the black of the rocked plate and into the light required by the image. His preferred tool for doing this is a burnisher, which he can pass over the surface of the plate gently, in order to smooth the roughened metal gradually. The smoother he makes the surface area, the less ink the plate will hold, and so he uses the burnishing process work to tease out of the rocked plate all the tonalities of the final image, from inky black to luminous white, and any and all shades of gray in between. Only rarely does he use a scraper to polish its highlights. However, the indispensable roughness of the surface of a fully rocked copper plate, comprised as it is of series of burrs or spikes, makes it vulnerable to breaking down under the pressure of proofing and printing, especially in the black areas; therefore, after McPherson has completed the image,



Craig McPherson, *ET 2 (second state)*, mezzotint, work in progress, 23½ x 39¾ inches, edition of 50.





Craig McPherson, *Braddock*, 1997, mezzotint, 15 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 22 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches, edition of 75.

he steel faces his copper plates. This enables him to produce an edition of about 75, plus artist proofs.

McPherson likens the making of the image to sculpting, and the wiping of the plate (a process that also takes the image from dark to light) to painting. To quote from the artist's notes that he prepared for a 2012 Washington Print Club visit to his large and sunlight-filled studio: "The technique I use to wipe the plate is that of a painter and is derived from a study of Rembrandt's variant proofs that rely on plate tone (a thin film of ink which is used much like glazing in painting) for additional dramatic lighting effects and a heightened abstraction. Selective wiping of the plate tone plays a large role in the final image, as much as 20-30 percent. In a sense, each proof is a monotype,

though I work hard to make the prints consistent throughout the edition. The plate is like the score in music, wiping it is the performance. The hand, the interpretation, is everything—it can bring the latent image to life or kill it. For this reason I've revived the tradition of adding an "IMP" [impressit, i.e., he printed it] following my signature." In addition to selective wiping, McPherson experiments extensively with inks of different viscosity and always mixes his own inks in order to control their viscosity. A plate inked with stiff ink and well wiped will give a much harsher image than a more viscous, or looser, ink selectively wiped, and indeed an image may require both viscosities on the same plate. The paper used for printing is another critical element of the final work: while generally relying

upon BFK Rives white, McPherson also prints on cream, pale blue, ocher, or gray papers when he wants to alter the tonal balance or atmosphere of an image. And needless to say, much time and energy in McPherson's studio is also spent on proofing and printing.

The cover art for this issue is *Edgar Thomson*, one of the artist's 1997 Pittsburgh mezzotints included in both his 1998 retrospective exhibition, "Darkness into Light: Craig McPherson and the Art of Mezzotint," at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, England<sup>3</sup> and the 2008 Frick exhibition. The subject of this astonishingly beautiful industrial night scene of billowing white steam rising and drifting, slowly and sensually, around tall narrow poles festooned with wires and flanked by bulky black buildings, above which,



on the right, the even blacker silhouettes of the twin chimneys of its blast furnaces loom, is the historic yet still active almost 150-year-old Edgar Thomson steel mill.<sup>4</sup>

Located in the town of Braddock, about 10 miles from Pittsburgh on the banks of the Monongahela River (where, in 1755, the French and Indian forces from Fort Duquesne, which later became the city of Pittsburgh, famously mortally wounded and defeated the expedition of British General Edward Braddock), this quintessential Pittsburgh industrial plant was founded in 1872 by the fabled American industrialist, Andrew Carnegie (who grew up in Allegheny, across the river from Pittsburgh), to produce steel rails for the railroads. And surely not incidentally, he named his mill after the then-president of the Pennsylvania Railroad. In the early 1880s, Carnegie and the young Pittsburgh-area industrialist Henry Clay Frick, whose company turned coal into the coke that fueled the steel industry, joined forces. That partnership dominated the burgeoning Pittsburgh steel industry and paved the way<sup>5</sup> to J. Pierpont Morgan's and Elbert H. Gary's formation, in 1901, of the largest industrial enterprise in the world: U.S. Steel in Pittsburgh. Today, notwithstanding the notorious decline of the U.S. steel industry in the last quarter of the 20th century, U.S. Steel is still the largest integrated steel producer headquartered in the U.S.<sup>6</sup> And the two blast furnaces at its Edgar Thomson Steel Works still combine raw materials to produce liquid iron, which the plant still refines. But it now uses its refined steel to create steel slabs and ships them to one of its three nearby sister Mon Valley Works plants, where they are rolled into sheet products used by a wide range of industries, from appliances to automobiles.<sup>7</sup>

*ET 2 (2nd State)*, a work still in progress, is a wider and more panoramic view of the Edgar Thomson mill. Note that its focal point, the lower

left of the image, is our cover print. This mezzotint is a particularly fine example of how McPherson often uses his schematic drawings to "seed" his art, that is, to incorporate one image in another. Here, the artist portrays the steel mill and the twin chimneys of its blast furnaces on a more heroic scale; note, for example, in his drive to greater drama and abstraction, he has selectively deleted details that appear in the 1997 print. The mill is thus now seen as isolated in the blackness of its surroundings, and the now roiling smoke seems more a process of dystopian destruction than a mundane byproduct of contemporary American industry.

The subject of *Braddock*, a small 1997 Pittsburgh night scene mezzotint, is once again the town's Edgar Thomson plant. The viewpoint, unusually for a McPherson image, is at street level and is far more intimate in scale and classical in its use of perspective. Except for a few tiny lighted windows, the sole source of light in this print are three street lights that follow the course of the road meandering from the foreground to a small building in the background. It is they alone that illuminate the white smoky vapors and the large grid structures and tangle of hanging wires that hover over them, produce the erratic patterns of light on the road, and reveal the dilapidation and disarray of the structures in the left foreground. (Note also that while McPherson delineates the smoke and diffused street lights with his typical gentle use of a burnisher, his unusual use of a scraper can be seen in the glinting highlights on the street.) All else is the atmospheric inky blackness of his larger prints. *Braddock* is a fine image of a patch of industrial land in a state of dereliction and collapse, apparently abandoned by humanity.

In his introductory notes to WPC members for our visit to his studio, McPherson also summed up his thoughts about the appeal of this demanding print medium: "I saw mez-

zotint engraving...as an extension of my drawings—tonal drawings on copper—but soon came to appreciate the wider possibilities this medium offers....Mezzotint is drawing, sculpting, and painting combined. Through the proofing process there is a distillation of an image, which is much more than mere refinement. This involves scraping the image to the bone, eliminating the extraneous. The copper plate lives a life and has scars to show for it." McPherson says he is now committed to printmaking, and in a recent e-mail to this writer, he said, "There are about 15 large prints—10 year's work—that I would regret having left undone if the sand should run out."

JENNY FREESTONE

Quarterly Art Editor and WPC board member Jenny Freestone is a board member of Pyramid Atlantic and artist-member of Washington Printmakers Gallery.

1. Joan Pinkerton Filson, "Highlights of Reba and Dave Williams' Recent Gift of Some 5,000 American Prints to the NGA," *The Washington Print Club Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 2.
2. Sarah J. Hall and Craig McPherson, *Steel: Pittsburgh Drawings by Craig McPherson*, Pittsburgh: The Frick, 2008.
3. Craig Hartley, *Darkness into Light: Craig McPherson and the Art of the Mezzotint*, Cambridge, England: Fitzwilliam Museum, 1998.
4. In 1994, the Edgar Thomson Plant was designated a historic landmark by ASM International, a society that honors feats of structural engineering. Its awards in the U.S. range from the Statue of Liberty in New York and the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia to the USS *Monitor*, off the coast of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. For more information, see [www.asminternational.org](http://www.asminternational.org).
5. See [www.thefrickpittsburgh.org](http://www.thefrickpittsburgh.org).
6. See [www.ussteel.com/ussportal/home/aboutus](http://www.ussteel.com/ussportal/home/aboutus).
7. See [www.ussteel.com/ussportal/home/aboutus/facilities/company-facilities-edgarthomsonplant-braddockpa](http://www.ussteel.com/ussportal/home/aboutus/facilities/company-facilities-edgarthomsonplant-braddockpa).