

Medium for the night.

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William Packer finds urban America portrayed in mezzotint.



Of all the techniques of print-making, mezzotint is perhaps the least well-known. The term is familiar enough in the field of 18th-and 19th-century Old Master prints, but even so, it is rather as a medium of extensive reproduction, long since superseded, than as a creative medium in its own right.

It is certainly labour-intensive. The principle is to establish a surface to the plate that, when inked, will print as the deepest and most velvety of blacknesses. But whereas with aquatint a somewhat similar effect may be quickly achieved by biting with acid through a dust of resin, with mezzotint it is all done by hand, patiently working the "rocker", a tool that can have 100 teeth to the inch, across the surface, now this way, now that, until the entire plate has been treated. A large one will take months. And only then is the image imposed, by burnishing and scraping into that densely textured surface, working out from dark to light.

Craig McPherson is an American painter, now nearly 50, who first experimented with mezzotint some 20 years ago, variously exploiting the medium's dramatic and atmospheric extremes of tone - indeed, in a view of Tryon Park in Manhattan (1978), turning dusk into midday by wiping the plate rather more than less. By the early 1980s his prints had fallen in line with his essential subject as a painter, which is the high view across the city. With his "Yankee Stadium at Night" (1983), a version in print of a mural painting he had made for American Express, his name as a print-maker was made. It is a remarkable image, with its

vast black sky and flickering, shadowy city, and the dome of light above the stadium itself like a visitation from another planet.

Since then print and painting have gone hand in hand, with McPherson frequently working up his trial proofs with paint and pastel into a unique state. But where in the painting he seems to respond to the cold, bleak light of day and clearly loves the winter, in the print it is the moody obscurity of night that intrigues him - the dingy street, the parking lot, the pool of light above the cafe door. Mezzotint is, after and above all, a medium for the night. His antecedents are many, from Sickert and Grimshaw to Hopper and Marsh, an artist of the modern city in the great tradition of 20th-century American Realism. But he is his own man, quite distinct.

In this exhibition, the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge gives McPherson the painter his due, but the print-maker the emphasis. More to the point, in showing the prints through the several stages of their proofing, it celebrates the artist in his true creative engagement. And in putting him before an English audience for the first time, it does us all a service.

Darkness into Light - Mezzotints by **Craig McPherson**: The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, until March 15.

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