

HOWARD HODGKIN PRINTS: A CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ

LIESBETH HEENK

Thames and Hudson 2003 £60.00 \$95.00

240 pp. 83 col/126 duotone illus

ISBN 0-500-09309-1

In recent years, a number of publishers have seized upon the catalogue raisonné as an opportunity to produce a

monograph of relatively broad appeal rather than the specialised and expensive scholarly instrument the form traditionally has taken. Recent catalogues raisonnés of the graphic work of such prolific printmakers as Robert Motherwell, Andy Warhol and Sean Scully, for example, are clearly intended for the general art book audience, in addition to those artists' dealers, collectors, and most ardent fans. *Howard Hodgkin Prints* continues in this vein, including as it does an introductory essay by the prolific and accessible Nan Rosenthal on Hodgkin's work in general, a central essay describing the trajectory of his printmaking activities, and an interview with the artist. Taken together with *Howard Hodgkin Paintings* (Thames and Hudson, and Abrams, 1995) – essential, both for its stunning plates and for 'an exchange' between the artist and John Elderfield – it provides for the curious reader a solid accounting for the high esteem in which Hodgkin is held in the estimation of his contemporaries and artistic descendants.

It is well known that Hodgkin's paintings are developed gradually, often over a number of years. They clearly are much indebted to the innovations of Abstract Expressionism insofar as the image is formed, found, through the act of painting. Such an approach is antithetical to the printmaking process, which rewards the efficient execution of a previously fully conceived image. (As a result, few Abstract Expressionists had much use for printmaking.) This particular conflict is very evident in Hodgkin's prints, and observing the artist's struggle with the inherent limitations of the medium is itself compelling.

It is typical of Liesbeth Heenk's sober, un-starstruck style that she frankly acknowledges that Hodgkin's prints lack the intensity of his paintings. ('Expansiveness' is offered as an alternative attribute.) In fairness it must be said that the paintings derive much of their considerable visceral power from the glow of light reflected through layered glazes of oil paint, an effect that is not at the disposal of the printmaker. More troublingly, Hodgkin's routine use of the interior frame or border, so masterfully integrated into many of his best paintings as a kind of emotion-intensifier (like John Marin, with the antic yodelling replaced by heavy breathing) can feel rote in the prints, stylistically preordained. Heenk traces

Hodgkin's use of this device not to the Indian miniatures he so enthusiastically collects but to an incident aboard a rail journey through that country, involving a stolen glimpse through a tiny window. The 'Indian Views' series resulted, and Hodgkin's work has ever since been characterised by a furtive quality, concerned with the pleasures of the bedroom, the table and the side street, or anyway the memory of those pleasures. The work retains its mysteriousness by refining away almost all recognisable narrative detail. In Heenk's words, 'disclosure of its subject is explicitly denied to the viewer'.

Hodgkin's development as a printmaker is marked by two technical breakthroughs, both of which he subsequently adopted as standard working methods and which continue to inform the work to the present. Both also allow for greater spontaneity in the formation of the image; the artist can better 'develop the image as it goes along'. In 1977 he began to use hand-colouring as an integral step in the lithographs he was then making, as a way of introducing a painterly immediacy and vividness to the surface of the print. This hand-colouring was performed by assistants responding to somewhat cryptic instructions from the artist. (Despite those assistants' considerable skill at reducing variation to a minimum, apparently a number of prints were discarded for want of being sufficiently identical.) Delegating this aspect of the work, which we are left to guess was considered unorthodox within the printmaking community, is conceptually consistent with Hodgkin's avowed desire, in his own painting, to construct images of marks that are anonymous – not 'autographic'. In any case, any procedure that contributes to a visual experience as rich, intimate and dazzling as the 'Venetian Views' (1995) requires no defence.

In 1986, Hodgkin was introduced to a then-new material called carborundum, which, like aquatint, provides a means to develop the image in a painterly manner, in terms of colour rather than line. Carborundum, a powdered abrasive, can be suspended in a binder and thereby made into a paste, applied to the printing plate and left to dry. The plate is inked, wiped, and run through the press, making it a cousin of intaglio processes. Impressions made from such a plate are characterised by the look of the tool used

to apply the material, in Hodgkin's case primarily the paintbrush. The process is at its most evident, and beautiful, in prints from the mid-1990s, such as *Window* and *In a Public Garden*. A considerable relief element is introduced by the concomitant embossing of the sheet, which posits an equivalent of the vigorously worked surfaces of his paintings.

The physicality of Hodgkin's painted surfaces is so much a part of their impact that, in its absence, affinities with the imagery of other artists begin to suggest themselves. *Bedroom* and especially *Girl on a Sofa* from the '5 Rooms' series cannot help but recall Bacon's dimly glimpsed grapplings; the telephone that is the subject of *Staying in Touch* could have slithered out of an Elizabeth Murray painting; *Seafood* coils upon itself, and leans toward autographic drawing, in a manner that is distinctly CoBrA. But these must be fancies, or coincidence, as the reader is told that Hodgkin looks at little but Indian painting. He says, 'I wish I felt close to the Nabi printmakers, but I don't'. In fact, Hodgkin sounds a little cranky in the interview. Unhelpfully, he asserts that he hates both painting and printmaking; it is unclear whether he is joking. He does discuss, albeit briefly, his views on the relationship of his prints to his paintings, and his practice of making both colour and black-and-white versions of some of the prints. He is funny recalling the early development of the hand-colouring technique, and makes a crucial observation on the present state of the curatorial enterprise:

Fashion rules in museums, particularly at the moment. Before I became a trustee of the Tate gallery in 1970, I vaguely realized that curators judged work on whether it is a part of history and whether it is any good. Nowadays curators only ask themselves whether the work is a part of history.

This gets to a hugely important topic, which unfortunately the interview as it is transcribed does not pursue.

The catalogue raisonné itself occupies the last third of the volume, and is all it should be. The reproductions, in crisp duotone, are not too small. Each is accompanied by the specifics of its production and publication, bibliographic information, and a note on the public collections in which it is held. The catalogue covers the period of 1953 to 2002, and includes the illustrations for the two books with which Hodgkin has been involved: *The Way We Live Now* by Susan Sontag (1990) and

Evermore by Julian Barnes (1997). A brief final section gives a career chronology, list of exhibitions, bibliography and index.

It is ironic that an artist so sceptical of printmaking's ability as a medium to carry serious emotional weight should help to revitalise it. He tells Heenk: 'Prints are less demanding than paintings, but they don't deliver quite so much'. In bending the medium to his will, or maybe figuring out a way around it, Hodgkin sets aside the niceties of craft and says what he has to say. That's what good artists do.

STEPHEN MAINE

Writer and artist, New York