VISUAL ART

Norman Ackroyd: I studied for free — now I want to help young artists

At the Royal College of Art in the Sixties he learnt his craft alongside David Hockney. Now the master etcher is creating a legacy for a new generation, he tells Laura Freeman

Norman Ackroyd at his warehouse studio in southeast London

MICHAEL LECKIE FOR THE TIMES

Laura Freeman

Wednesday March 20 2024, 5.10pm, The Times

‘I’m not about travelling around the country making pictures,” says Norman Ackroyd, smoking the first of several cigarettes at a desk in his studio in southeast London. Ackroyd, a master of the art of etching, is seeking something more elusive. He’s after mist and mizzle and haze and smirr and first light on unstill seas. Shorelines that sink below the horizon and spray that obscures the sky. He is happiest out on the water in a boat chartered for a week or more. Up at half past five, striking off from some tiny place such as Inishbofin — “the most beautiful little island” — off the coast of Connemara, the engine stilled, time to draw. “It’s my idea of bliss. And the boatman’s got a little gimbaled stove, you know? And he catches some fresh mackerel and he’s got some buns and a bit of garlic and butter and he makes a big pot of coffee …” He grins. “You can keep Torremolinos.” Then, in the evenings, “lobster, chips, pints of Guinness”.

The sea air, the mackerel and the Guinness have done him proud. Ackroyd is a wiry, energetic 85. A friend recently remarked how lucky he had been to be an “adolescent” until the

age of 84. Nothing to complain about, fantastic constitution, still playing sports, still working 15-hour days. Only lately has he been under the weather and that has led him to thinking about his legacy, although he doesn't call it anything as grand as that.

I am talking to Ackroyd on the eve of the London Original Print Fair, where he is exhibiting etchings from across his career and launching the Norman Ackroyd Foundation. He passes me a hand-printed pamphlet. On the cover is a medieval compass; inside, a mission statement.

"In 1956 I won a scholarship to Leeds College of Art, where I studied for five years before attending the Royal College of Art from 1961 to 1964. For eight years as a student, I had no tuition fees to pay and in fact received a small maintenance grant throughout my student years. I supplemented this with various vacation jobs and finished my education debt-free." At the Royal College he overlapped with David Hockney, a fellow smoker, who had been at Bradford School of Art when Ackroyd was at Leeds. "We brought our Yorkshire accents and our work ethic with us," he told The Yorkshire Post in 2018. "We were always first in at 8am. That was largely unheard of before we arrived."

Ackroyd with David Hockney in 2015

PHIL SAYER

Times, he observes, have changed. An education in the arts, especially in London, is now beyond the reach of many without financial help. The foundation will offer grants of £10,000 a

year to three or four students, continued annually for the duration of their chosen course; they can also access Ackroyd's studio. The grants are intended for those studying the visual arts or music and Ackroyd and a board of trustees will award them on a mix of merit and need. The aim is to help those who haven't had help before.

Music and art were the north and south of his Leeds childhood. His mother put him on to one, his brother the other. Born in 1938, Ackroyd first started drawing when he was eight. His brother, 12 years older and just home from war service in the RAF, was a keen fisherman. "He would get me up at four in the morning and we'd run down to the middle of Leeds and get on the milk train, right up into the Dales, and we'd fish for salmon and trout all day long. And I would draw the river and just be immersed in the landscape. That's when I started always carrying a drawing book." His mother insisted he learn to play the piano. "And she wouldn't let me get out of it, for which I am eternally grateful."

• Artist Norman Ackroyd: 'I took a punt on a Bermondsey warehouse with holes in the ceiling'

Ackroyd's father, a butcher with a busy shop to run, taught him to carve an animal into joints. "We all had to learn it. No excuse. That's a great skill. My father was a master craftsman." His siblings all went into the family trade and couldn't understand what the young Ackroyd was up to: "What's this guy doing going drawing?" His grammar school had a very good art master with a track record of getting pupils into Leeds Art School. It was here that Ackroyd discovered etching. Students could do woodcut or lithography or etching. "And I chose etching because I'd seen some very good etchings in Leeds Museum."

The Wychwood in Winter (2022) by Norman Ackroyd

NORMAN ACKROYD RA/JOHN BODKIN

His affinity with etching was “instant”. He likens it to a musician picking up an instrument for the first time and taking to it immediately. “Oh, I want to play the saxophone. I want to play the piano. I want to play the double bass, I want to play the *cello*.” He says “cello” with reverberating emphasis. “And the cello just ... fits. And etching just fitted. I loved the medium and I’ve always loved drawing in black-and-white.”

In etching, in the simplest terms, a metal plate is coated with an acid-resistant ground, usually of wax or resin. Lines are then drawn through the ground, exposing the metal. The plate is immersed in acid, the exposed metal is “bitten” and so the lines are incised. The ground is then removed and ink is applied to the sunken lines but wiped clean from the surface. Plate and paper are then passed through a printing press under great pressure to transfer the ink in the recessed lines on to the paper.

Ackroyd at work in his south London studio with an etched plate

MICHAEL LECKIE FOR THE TIMES

MICHAEL LECKIE FOR THE TIMES

Ackroyd worries that art schools around the country are abandoning their etching studios. He puts it down to laziness and risk aversion — the acids and fumes can be dangerous and etching needs to be properly taught and supervised. “An etching studio without acid is like a pub with no beer. Etching is about acid. Rembrandt knew it, Dürer knew it, Goya knew it, Picasso knew it, Hockney knew it, I know it.”

His studio takes up two floors of a Bermondsey warehouse. Printing presses below, drawing space above, archive above that and living quarters at the top. When I pop to the loo upstairs, there’s a tiny watercolour drying on the radiator by the bath. The foundation will be funded by sales of Ackroyd’s prints and, in due course, by rent from the flat. He has been very successful, with devoted collectors on both sides of the Atlantic. His prices range from about £600 for an etching to £6,500 for a monoprint with watercolour. He is a Royal Academician and was made CBE for services to engraving and printing in 2007.

• How Frank Bowling’s generosity can inspire a new generation of artists

Illness has forced him to spend time “just sitting down with my feet up”. His children worry he’s bored. “I’m not bored. I’m daydreaming. I think people have lost the ability to daydream. That’s when the penny drops about something, that’s when you get really excited. And it happens in perfect silence.” He clears his throat: “For oft, when on my couch I lie/ In vacant or in

pensive mood/ They flash upon that inward eye/ Which is the bliss of solitude;/ And then my heart with pleasure fills,/ And dances with the daffodils." He lifts his eyes and raises them to a bunch of daffodils on the desk between us. They seem all the more yellow against the ink stains.

"I'm not bored. I'm daydreaming. I think people have lost the ability to daydream"

MICHAEL LECKIE FOR THE TIMES

He does have a mobile phone — it rings during the interview — but it's a brick, not a smartphone. He hasn't touched a camera in 20 years. "If I want to remember something, I stare and stare at it and then draw it." He's interested in what screens are doing not just to our eyes, but to our hands. He mentions that Roger Kneebone, professor of anatomy at the Royal Academy and a director of surgical education at Imperial College London, is encouraging his students to play with Lego because they've spent so much time on screens that they haven't fully developed the ability to work with their hands in three dimensions. As with surgery, so with art. How do you counter this screen stiffness? "By drawing and painting. Pick the paper up, sharpen the pencil, clean your brushes after." Clean fingernails are optional. Ackroyd has a true etcher's fingernails: indelibly black. He lights another cigarette. Does he smoke while he works? "I smoke most of the time," he says, half guilty, half gleeful. "It's too late to stop. Anyway, I enjoy it. Very contemplative."

His voice isn't at all rasping but soft Yorkshire even after 60-odd years in London. I am pleased to see a box of Yorkshire Tea beside the sink. Ackroyd is both plain-speaking and transportingly poetic. I feel a prickle up my spine when he talks of standing on the island of Iona imagining the life of St

Columba, arriving by boat in AD563 to found his monastery on the edge of Europe, the edge of everything anyone knows. That's what Ackroyd is trying to capture first in watercolour, under a great golfing umbrella while out in the elements, then in etching at home in the studio. "When I stand and look at the landscape and the mountains of Mull, I'm seeing exactly what St Columba saw when he was standing where I'm standing now. Although the landscape has changed with wind and rain, it won't have changed much in 1,500 years."

Clare Island, Co Mayo (2023) by Norman Ackroyd

NORMAN ACKROYD RA/JOHN BODKIN

Ackroyd has a remarkable eye and a remarkable mind. We talk about county cricket, monastic scriptoria, Schubert's Impromptu in G flat major and Ackroyd's near neighbour the fashion designer Zandra Rhodes. He took her on one of his boating/drawing trips. Picture: "This splash of pink in the Atlantic ocean." Today Ackroyd is wearing charcoal-grey trousers, a worn woollen waistcoat that is also grey, a washed blue check shirt, and one pink sock, one purple.

There's a map of the British Isles on a stand at one end of the studio. It is prickled with pins where Ackroyd has been and drawn. At one point he gets up and turns the map on its long edge so that the North Sea is at the bottom and the Atlantic along the top. He wants to show me how the endless ocean might have looked to St Columba. In a way, that's what an artist does: turns the world on its side, sees it anew, remakes it in acid and ink.

The London Original Print Fair is at Somerset House, London WC2, March 21-24 (londonoriginalprintfair.com). The Norman Ackroyd Foundation can be contacted at norman@normanackroyd.com

Art & Design

Art Reviews

Related articles

IMPROVE

Artist Norman Ackroyd: 'I took a punt on a leaky warehouse'

June 23 2023, 12.01am

Katrina Burroughs

THE ARTS COLUMN

How Frank Bowling's generosity can inspire a new generation of artists

March 01 2024, 12.01am

Richard Morrison

Off on holiday

Hit the road ju

Comments (8)

Comments are subject to our community standards and participation guidelines policy, which can be viewed here. By joining the conversation you are accepting our community rules and terms. Update your commenting notification settings here. Our policy is for readers to use their real names when commenting, find out more here.

Mr Calum Sutton

Add to the conversation...

Sort by Recommended

KDaniel

20 MARCH, 2024

What a joyous man, and profile

Reply · Recommend (17) · Share

M Winchester

20 MARCH, 2024