

In 2004, Bruce sat down with longtime friend and colleague Bill Salzillo to talk about art and printmaking. The interview was first printed in *Robert Bruce Muirhead, Prints 1969-2006* published by The Amity Art Foundation.



*Bill: When I first met you at Middlebury at the beginning of your teaching career I recall the intensity of your focus on painting. You were not actively engaged in making prints but I know you had had some experience in printmaking at the undergraduate level at the Rhode Island School of Design.*

Bruce: Actually, that's true. I was teaching painting at Middlebury and there was no opportunity to do prints there at the time. I had first taken printmaking at RISD with Herbert Fink who was a good artist and etcher. I was more experimental with drawing materials than I was with oils, and I saw printmaking as a natural extension of drawing. There's just something about the incision and the line and its directness- I just enjoyed it. It was a beginning course and we only touched on the basics of etching. We only did hard ground line etching; no soft ground or aquatint. Herb liked my prints. He commented on my use of space in a couple of nice landscapes. Sorry to say I don't have those plates anymore. I don't think I even have any prints from that time. Even then, ninety percent of my energy was devoted to painting.

*Bill: What about your graduate work at Boston University?*

Bruce: Again, I was pouring myself into painting but the MFA curriculum required printmaking courses. I took etching with Karl Fortess who, I think, was mainly a lithographer. At least the only prints of his that I've ever seen are lithographs. But because there was no lithography press at BU we did only etching. My BU prints were crazy little abstract etchings. But again, it was the line and somehow the

fasciation with the scale and the cutting and the incising that absorbed me- all those sculptural techniques, and working on paper again.

*Bill: Can you say more about your interest in printmaking as an extension of drawing?*

Bruce: Printmaking challenged me to expand my vocabulary and work with new tools. I had been drawing with charcoal and pencil all my life. And the eraser was also a hugely important tool because I needed that freedom to alter the image. The ability to shift things around became central to my aesthetic. This approach is not necessarily compatible with printmaking in the traditional and classical sense. Most printmakers are more clear and decisive about how they want to do things.

*Bill: At BU you were especially close to your advisor Walter Murch who also had a distinctive approach to drawing. Describe his influence on you.*

Bruce: He certainly confirmed a lot of my ideas. First of all I loved his notion of doing anything to begin a work of art. The classic example that he talked about so many times involved putting the paper on the floor and walking on it. He couldn't stand working on a blank piece of paper or a blank canvas. It had to have stuff on it. That accumulated density was a big part of what his work was all about. But he needed something to start with, something that was accidental, to start seeing into the picture. He encouraged this idea of being willing to really change the image. This is an idea that is easy to talk about but difficult to do. He was also tremendously interested in vision. And he looked everywhere for things that would support his vision. He would walk the streets of Boston, searching for bricks or architectural fragments in junkyards or construction sites. He would bring back dried fish from a market or an old radio or machine parts- all that kind of stuff.

*Bill: What did Murch think of printmaking?*

Bruce: He once remarked to me that he had never done a print. I think he was so into the immediacy of drawing. His working methods were very direct. He would paint and draw on the floor- always reworking the emerging image. I just think he was thoroughly immersed in his own drawing and painting.

*Bill: You have already said that when you began teaching at Middlebury College in the mid 1960's, you did not have the opportunity to make prints.*

Bruce: No, at that time there was no press. But I had arrived with some plates and tools from BU. I remember once a colleague named Bob Reiff asked me to do a demonstration using a small table top press. Well it was just awful because those presses can not produce the kind of pressure needed for intaglio printing. It wasn't until a few years later when David Bumbeck, a friend of mine from BU, was hired and the college bought a Charles Brand press that I had the chance to start printing again. David is a great printmaker with a national reputation. He had worked with Bob Marx and Don Cortese at Syracuse University and his early work reflected their aesthetic.

*Bill: You mean that Italianate quality.*

Bruce: Yes, I was really inspired. I knew I drew differently from David. I tend to build up my drawings with line while David works much more with volume and shading. His prints had a real sculptural quality. But the breath of his knowledge and his technique was extraordinary. I practically lived in the printmaking studio and stole every bit of that that I could. This was the beginning of my real education as a printmaker. I was also interested in the idea that he changed his images. He scraped and burnished and left things behind. That connected with what I had learned from Murch and what I was trying to do with my own work.



*Of The Earth (detail) by David Bumbeck*



*Little Trees by Bruce Muirhead*

*Bill: So the earliest of your professional prints are from that period in Middlebury when you worked closely with David.*

Bruce: Yes, with David's help I developed my professional skills even down to presentation. When I came for my job interviewer at Kirkland College I had organized my portfolio just like David's with all the prints in envelopes. When the Department Chair saw them he said "Hmm, maybe you can help teach printmaking." I said "I sure can." So I began teaching etching, sharing the studio with Jim McDermott, the sculpture professor, who was then teaching lithography. We had one room for both presses. But it was a wonderful opportunity to grow and to start separating myself from David's influence. I was completely on my own and started to think about other ways of etching.

*Bill: Thirty years later you are still teaching printmaking at Hamilton College. The majority of your retrospective collection at The Amity Art Foundation was done during this time period. How many prints are included?*

Bruce: Well we put together 122.



*Bill: And these etchings show the arc of your development as an artist and as a printmaker. Can you speak about the evolution of your technique and style since your arrival at Kirkland in 1972?*

Bruce: Sure, it's easy to focus on the technical changes first. As I said, I had always been more comfortable drawing than working with paint. Much of this had to do with how I used the eraser. And I found scraping and burnishing in printmaking to be the equivalent to erasing in drawing. It allowed me to experiment with and integrate all that stuff that Murch did with drawing, using kneaded erasers and scumbling with big pieces of chalk and then rubbing and scrubbing it away. I began to think that I could do this with painting too. In other words, I could remove paint and leave traces of the old image behind.

*Bill: Like developing an intentional pentimento so that the underlying image shows through.*

Bruce: Yes, so that the painting becomes about the action of painting. The thing I love most about drawing is the tracing of the thought process rather than the image - the way you see something over a period of time. Rembrandt did that in his prints. You can see where he takes out whole passages, like the one where Christ is brought before the moneychangers. He just wipes out a whole group of about twenty figures. I like the idea of leaving the thought process to the plate. It's like making a movie to me. I began to realize that I could do the same thing with a painting. I could change a landscape all around. The effect is more noticeable with figures. I began to use steel wool and even paint remover to scrub things away, imitating on canvas the action of scraping and burnishing the plate. Part of my teaching philosophy is that you know something by comparing it to something else. I would make two things and compare, scrape it away and then draw back into the part that's been scraped away and re-paint it building it up so that the two processes blend into one.

*Bill: When you describe your process you often refer to historical models. Rembrandt comes up a lot. But more contemporary artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg also employed variations of that additive/subtractive method. Did you look at their work?*

Bruce: Yes, especially Jasper Johns. I love his flag pictures and his maps. He would leave little scars, indications that it's a plan, that it's a process- like scaffolding. There was a big Jasper Johns show at Brandeis at the Rose Art Museum when I was a student at BU. It really impressed me, especially the gray flag paintings. I could see the way he used the idea of an image within an image. I was taken with that idea and began to think about incorporating it into my own work.

*Bill: Can you talk about that device; the frame within a frame and how you use it in your landscapes?*

Bruce: The frame functions as a window or a view-finder. It's a way of dealing with peripheral vision and organizing space. I think all landscape has to do with environment. I'm not a traveler in that I never go very far. I am where I am. The urban/suburban landscape of New England around Boston, Providence and the South Shore where I was raised is a much more crowded landscape. It's more frontal like a garden landscapes . My sense of space began to change after eight years in Vermont. I fell in love with the notion of distance. Here in the Mohawk Valley at times it feels like you can see forever. You also have spacial contrasts with things up close and things in isolation. I love the landscape here- the idea of seeing all the way to the horizon and the hills and horizontal banding, something both closed and far away- the sense of distance and time which is what landscape is all about.

*Bill: Are there landscapes by printmakers that you admire?*

Bruce: Whistler and his brother in-law Francis Seymour-Hayden's prints are just wonderful landscapes. The windows and facades in Whistler's Venetian prints are especially interesting to me.

*Bill: You're describing Seymour-Hayden and Whistler who where famous for working directly from nature. But your prints are all created in the studio. Is that correct?*

Bruce: That's right.

*Bill: Can you describe your working method? How do you develop a print?*

Bruce: I work from memory. I think you have to build up a vocabulary. My own work is actually my primary source. When I was young I drew landscapes outside or while sitting at a window. I couldn't just come up with one in the studio so I had to go outside. And I painted a couple of very good ones. Once I painted a picture from my mother in-law's upstairs window. At BU, I took that painting and did another one from it- a painting from a painting. Walter Murch saw it and thought it was a terrific painting. I must tell you I think it inspired him to paint what I believe to be his one and only landscape.



I had a wonderful studio at BU looking over the railroad yards. I vividly remember painting while looking out my studio window one blustery day in early spring. The sun would go in and out of the clouds and the whole Charles River would be green one minute and gray the next. The MIT dome would go from gold to dull yellow ochre. The brick buildings in the Harvard Business School would be red and then brown. I realized something important as I watched all of this and painted. I realized that a picture is all about change and memory. It's all about putting things together, so what the hell, I'm just going to paint it the way I'm thinking about it. From then on I just had to look and then come in and start putting it together.

In Middlebury, I only painted in the studio. But it was really our move to Upstate New York that intensified my interest in landscape. My wife Elaine and I would take rides, often with friends, and just look at the endlessly strange and beautiful scenery. Most of the landscapes in the Amity Foundation catalogue owe something to these rides. We fell in love with exploring the region; the surreal little towns with names like Stone Arabia and Soulsville. Often we would drive east along the Mohawk through Little Falls, Canajoharie and Amsterdam. South of Amsterdam is the wonderful aqueduct in Schoharie. Driving west the land flattens out and begins to feel like the midwest. This is where we discovered the Montazuma Wetlands. South took us along the old Chenango Canal. And north to the wild drama of places like the Tug Hill Plateau. We loved to drive and look, sometimes stopping to take photographs.



*Mohawk Aquaduct*

*Bill: Did you use any of these photos in your work?*

Bruce: No, I don't really draw from them. A photograph is too myopic. It doesn't help with the space. I might use them occasionally for specific details. Many of my landscapes are about old factory buildings, farm houses and architectural remnants. They are as much about the past as they are about the present

*Bill: These sort of dualities are also present in your figurative work. Do all those mirrors and double images represent the same interplay of vision and memory? Or is it something else? Is it overstating the case to suggest that you are referencing something existential?*

Bruce: The figures are certainly more complicated to talk about. After all, dealing with the figure is like dealing with yourself. They are about existence and a reflection of that existence. I was always interested in the way Giacometti made his figures. The fact that he reworked them almost to the point where they disappeared. And then he would bring them back in a new form. The idea of making a person come and go is an acknowledgement of the fragility of life. In my own figurative work, I almost always begin with two figures, one being a reflection of or counterpoint to the other. This idea was inspired by Rembrandt's "The Jewish Bride". I suppose I've been reinterpreting that image for the past thirty-five years. From that point of departure, the second figure sometimes disappears or takes on a new identity like an angel. The idea of someone coming and going is like a search for identity.



*Reflection*

The individual portraits are based more on Italian painting. They seem more stable and comforting. There is less change; less conflict. Both the portraits and figures, however, are ultimately about states of being. In that sense, they are both intimate and personal. I see them as mirrors of myself just as I see art as a mirror of life.

*Bill: In terms of incorporating aspects of memory in your work, I know that sometimes you begin a new etching on an old plate that you "finished" or just set aside years ago.*

Bruce: Yes, that's one of the problems we encountered while cataloging my work. For example, there is a little circle plate that I did this year that actually goes way back to the early days at Middlebury. I just picked it up one day and started working on it. I hadn't seen or thought about this plate in years and I just started scraping and burnishing and adding different things. There is a great deal of aquatint in these older plates. But now I've returned to a more linear, more direct approach. As I get older, I'm less patient with all the materials and process. I do more drypoint now. There is something wonderful about working directly on the

*Bill: Is that because drypoint so closely resembles direct drawing?*

Bruce: Yes, it does. And I enjoy that directness more and more. Recently, I don't feel like putting aquatints in. I feel like drawing. So I took this old plate and just started drypointing all over it. You can do wonderful things with drypoint but you can't make as many impressions because it breaks down.

*Bill: When you work like this, are you documenting all the different states? How many states do you think exist of a print like that?*

Bruce: Some prints have so many states I don't even want to think about it. Actually, I took three old plates this summer and worked on them with dry point. I do the same thing in painting. There's a painting in my studio that I'm still working on that I began in the autumn of 1965.

*Bill: Do you print editions?*

Bruce: That's one of my problems. I'm too open to creative impulses and the need for flexibility. I make small editions- about ten each- and I figure that's enough for the record.

*Bill: Do you ever cancel a plate?*

Bruce: No, I've never done that. I take care of all my old plates. They're all in play.

*Bill: You talked about doing more drypoint in your recent prints. How has your technical emphasis changed over the years?*



Bruce: With the early prints there was a period of confusion and awkwardness. They tended to be dark and somber and packed. I was just feeding the plate which resulted in a certain density and confusion. As I grew more confident I didn't feel the need to put so much into each image. I developed a clearer vision of what I wanted to add and what I could edit out. I know a little bit more now. There's no need to repeat the same mistakes. I also take fewer working proofs now. I'm clearer about how to get there. I also use more engraving tools like the roulette wheel.



Plate for *The Dream*

*Bill: Have you always used only zinc plates?*

Bruce: Yes, it's habitual. David Bumbeck worked in zinc. And I believe zinc is better for scraping and burnishing because it's a softer metal. I'm told that copper is better for engraving and straight hard-ground line etching. But I'm stuck with old habits and I'm going to continue to work with what I know.

*Bill: As long as we're talking about materials, what about paper?*

Bruce: I guess I'm torn between Arches Cover and BFK Rives. When my prints really work, I think they look best on Arches Cover. It's a mellower, warmer paper but at the same time it offers better contrast. BFK Rives seems to pick up aquatint better but it's colder and whiter. The combination of Arches Cover paper and Bone Black ink is one that always works for me.

*Bill: What about using different colors when printing?*

Bruce: I've printed with as many as four different colors on one plate using the à la poupée technique. I've also done some viscosity rolls. They are attractive and

people seem to like them. It doesn't work with the landscapes though. It only makes sense with the figures because the compositions allow me to isolate passages. But I hardly ever do it any more. Now if I'm interested in color I will add certain pigments like burnt sienna or green or blue to the black ink.

*Bill: Your point about the commercial viability of color prints prompts me to ask how you've managed as a painter, to promote this other aspect of your art.*

Bruce: I've shown prints all over the country. And I've shown overseas too. I'm a member of The Society of American Graphic Artists in New York City and show my work there. In Boston, I show my prints at The Copley Society of Art, where I am also a member. There's just a huge number of printmaking shows that go on in this country. Prints have always allowed artists to broaden their visibility and reach new audiences.



*Bill: Before we stop today I would like to hear your thoughts on Hamilton College's Emerson Gallery show of prints done by your students from the past 30 years. What do you see when you look at these prints? And can you also speak about balancing the roles of artist and teacher?*

Bruce: I thoroughly enjoyed the show. I just love seeing all the work and am overwhelmed by the variety and uniqueness of each print. There are still-lives, landscapes, portraits, abstractions and narratives- just a huge range. I always encourage my students to do something personal and I think that shows in the work.

I've never found teaching to be in conflict with my work as an artist. I love teaching and I love talking about art. I especially enjoy working with young

students in the studio. It's wonderful to see them become engrossed- to lose themselves in their work. I've always felt that you should only take an art course if it gives you pleasure.

There is a give and take to teaching. Sometimes my students take my suggestions but often they don't. That's not so important. What matters is that they engage with the process. Most of the time when I'm teaching them, I'm also teaching myself. I don't think art is made in isolation and teaching is a way for me to collaborate in the studio with young artists.

*Bill: Has your work ever been influenced by your students?*

Bruce: Oh definitely. Well no, not really. I've envied them more. They're very talented. I'm amazed at how much talent I see in them.

