

*'Sheep-Dog', 2002, etching on Magnani Aqueforti 310 gsm, image size 37 x 34.5 cm. Edition 40. Printer: Martin King (APW)*

## Profiles in Print – EUAN HENG

The prints of Euan Heng are deliberately enigmatic, implying a narrative, often imbued with humour and self-referential iconography, but there are few clues for any meaningful decipherment. Text by Prof. Sasha Grishin.

**L**UCIDITY of means, restraint, a dry wit and a probing intellect are some of the characteristics of the prints of Euan Heng. His imagery demands decipherment. It hints at crossing boundaries, the perpetual L'Étranger seeing the world for the very first time, and it is a world which is full of astonishment and tinged with the uncanny, where new rituals are enacted to address old practices.

Euan Lindsay Heng was born in Oban, Argyllshire, Scotland on 26th February 1945, the second in a family of five. His father, Horace Raymond Heng (known as John), was a Londoner, ship's engineer who during the war moved to Scotland and between trips to sea worked on dry-docks. Heng recalls, 'he was the classic privately educated middle class Eurasian boy from a "Chinese" family; however, the experience of the war and then his

experience in the Glasgow shipyards changed him and he became a member of the Glasgow communist party.'<sup>1</sup> His mother, Margaret McGowan Watt, was a Scot, the daughter of a coalminer, who was an anchor for the family which finally permanently settled in Bellshill, a mining and steel town on the outskirts of Glasgow, where Euan Heng spent his childhood.

At home there was little understanding or encouragement for the arts. His father, who was an accomplished model builder, once he had abandoned the shipyards to work on the railways, provided the family with rail passes which enabled them to travel to England annually, where they stayed with a paternal grandmother for the summer. Here lay Heng's early exposure to art. On his father's yearly fortnight's holiday they would be taken around London's great museums that Euan loved – the





'Signal Not Detected', 2003, lithograph (four colours) + watercolour (yellow) on Somerset paper, image size 24 x 21 cm. Edition 15. Printer: Peter Lancaster (Lancaster Press)

V&A, British Museum, Science Museum, Natural History Museum, National Gallery and the Tate Gallery.

'Neither my father nor my mother knew anything about art, absolutely nothing, but at the Tate my father would always try to talk about Stanley Spencer's *Cookham Resurrection* ... Looking back, this probably sparked my interest in Spencer's work, which lasted for years.'<sup>2</sup>

Schooling was not a satisfying experience for the young Euan Heng, although he did have a number of inspiring teachers, including the art teacher Millie Froom, but one day after his 15th birthday he left school, worked a number of jobs in Scotland before travelling to London and by the time he was 16, following in a long family tradition, he had joined the merchant navy. He spent about four years sailing widely around the world and visited Australia on several occasions. The passion for art never left him, but it had to be balanced with the necessity of earning a living, and although his talent was spotted early, and at the age of 15 he was offered a place as a "gifted student" in the Pre-Diploma course at the Glasgow School of Art, but even the modest fees went beyond the scope of the family budget.

After a decade of sailing and working various jobs, Euan Heng, now married with two children<sup>3</sup> and aged 25, in 1970 enrolled at the Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee, as part of a tiny intake reserved for students of "outstanding artistic ability", who otherwise were deemed unqualified for admission. The college functioned along the lines of the Bauhaus model with the first two years of a hybrid syllabus, where students were taught alongside the architects and designers. The teacher who had the most impact on his studies was the Head of Printmaking, Sheila McFarlane, and when he could specialise in his third year, he threw all of his energies into printmaking. He recalls his experiences at art school: 'Like most students, my work was varied and for me figurative – I had intended to specialise in

'In Your Own Backyard', 1979, etching and aquatint on BFK Rives 250 gsm, image size 53 x 27 cm. Edition 10. Printer: Edition A – The artist/3rd state – Antonietta Covino-Beehre

'Nocturne', 2005, etching and aquatint on Somerset paper, image size 23.5 x 36.5 cm. Edition 30. Printer: Andrew Gunnell (Chrysalis Publishing)



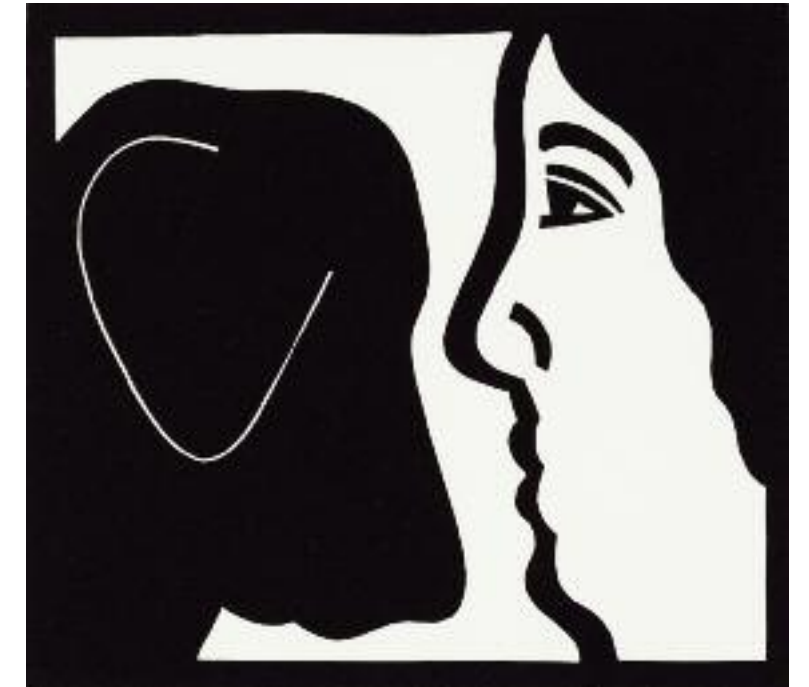
'Climate & Position', 2003, lithograph (three colours) on Somerset, image size 24 x 21 cm. Edition 15. Printer: Peter Lancaster

painting but at the beginning of my third year I moved to printmaking for the final two years of the program, plus a further year of postgraduate study. Although my main practice is still painting, even as an undergraduate it struck me as possibly a "futile" activity and in many ways I still have my doubts – I truly believe that the place that painting might hold, or has held over the past 50 years, is now a contested space.'<sup>4</sup>

Most of his prints from Scotland, which are sparse in number, are etchings and engravings on modest scale and in their imagery relate to his paintings. Although as a student he was attracted to the art of Joseph Kosuth, Joseph Beuys and Sol LeWitt, his more natural affinity lay with the work of Max Beckmann, Fernand Léger, Patrick Caulfield and the Scottish artist James Cowie, which through a natural progression led to his revision of the great "Italian primitives" – Piero della Francesca, Duccio and Giotto. As he recently observed: 'Looking at my work today you can follow "a classical" trajectory from a simplified figuration through analytical cubism and how those influences manifests in my current work. I have always preferred the cool to the hot.'<sup>5</sup>

The graphic element with the precise linear articulation of form has always been central to Heng's practice and was in step with his training where his teachers advocated an analytical approach to figure drawing, one in which expressivity was occasionally acknowledged, but never expressionism. In the first year, drawing was complemented by anatomy taught by artist anatomists from the department of anatomy of the university. Perspective was a separate study shared by students in architecture, and modelling from the cast was in the sculpture department. Drawing was a compulsory subject over the four years of the course and in the post-graduate year he was obliged to attend at least one life class per week. Following his graduation in 1975, Heng was awarded a Scottish Arts Council bursary to make new prints at Kirkcaldy House Print Workshop in Montrose, north of Dundee, where the director was his first printmaking teacher and mentor, Sheila Macfarlane. He made a few etchings, but concentrated on painting and participated

'Char Cow', 1982, etching and aquatint (three colours) on BFK Rives Grey 250 gsm and on White 250 gsm, image size 30 x 30 cm. Edition 6. Printer: on grey – the artist and on white – Diane Fogwell.



'Profiles', 1999, linocut on Zerkal Woven 140 gsm, image size 18 x 19 cm. Edition 15. Printed by the artist



'Look-alike', 1998, linocut on BFK Rives 180 gsm, image size 20 x 20 cm. Edition 30. Printer: Dianne Fogwell (Artist Book & Editions at ANU)







'Head Piece', 1980, etching and aquatint on Hahmemuhle 230 gsm, image size 44 x 27 cm. Edition 10 (incomplete). Printed by the artist



in group shows in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee and held a solo exhibition at the Stirling Gallery, Stirling. The Hengs and their two daughters migrated to Australia in 1977. He had previously visited as a merchant seaman and liked the country. Also his in-laws had migrated in 1969 and settled in Canberra. The initial plan was to stay in Australia for five years to gain overseas experience and have bigger family unit while the girls were growing up, but this changed to a lifelong commitment to Australia and its arts scene. In 1978 he moved to Wagga Wagga to take up the position of tutor in drawing and printmaking at The School of Visual and Performing Arts at the Riverina CAE. It was a small school, but had at its helm the dynamic, experimental artist Arthur Wicks, who converted a country town art school into a creative hub attracting artists of the calibre of the Italian Mario Merz and the Australian John Olsen.

Euan Heng reflected: 'As schools go it was the opposite of Duncan of Jordanstone and at times truly exciting ... close friendships were struck with the silversmith Chris Mullens, the sculptor Simon Klose and his then wife, the sculptor Elizabeth Pressa, and the painter/printmaker Meg Buchanan – from each of these friends ... I learned very quickly about the history of Australian Art ... At Wagga I taught etching, relief and screen printing and under Arthur's influence – photographic screen-printing.'<sup>6</sup>

In Heng's etchings of this time, including *In Your Own Backyard* (1979), there is a strong sense of an anecdotal narrative, a clever interlinking of levels of a suburban reality and a virtuosity in the handling of intaglio techniques. It is an international vernacular pop imagery, with a debt to the Stanley Spencer heritage, but as yet with few concessions to an antipodean reality.

In 1982 he took up the position of Head of Printmaking at the Gippsland School of Art at the Gippsland CAE in Churchill and almost overnight the imagery in his art started to change with the introduction of the dark satanic mills of industry, power stations and slagheaps juxtaposed with dairy farming. In a significant exhibition of his new work held at the Australian Galleries in Melbourne in June 1984, a new simplified imagery emerged where profiled heads appear against a bleak industrial landscape. This marked the beginning of his mature works, where he had found his own authentic voice as an artist and he has spent the subsequent three decades refining and distilling his imagery, compositional structures and techniques.<sup>7</sup> Seven linocuts were shown with a number of related oil paintings. In a print such as *Prelude to Dance* (1983), there is a crowded juxtapositioning of forms with confrontation between the centrally placed frontal nude and her fully clad male partner, intersecting abstracted planes and a smokestack in the background. The work was described in the catalogue essay as belonging to the tradition of art with an "existential power"<sup>8</sup> and tapping into the heritage of Beckmann and Balthus. With its sense of detachment, tight linear articulation and engagement with social issues, it also brings to mind a parallel with the work the Melbourne-based artist, John Brack, whose work Heng had seen in the major retrospective exhibition held at the ANU in Canberra in 1977.<sup>9</sup>

Heng stayed in Gippsland for 15 years before relocating to Melbourne in 1996 to take up the position of Associate Dean in Graduate Research in what was to become the Faculty of Art and Design at Monash University. Through to the present he retains a link with Monash University. From 1999 onwards he spent a considerable

*Winter Fragrance*, 2003, lithograph (four colours) on Somerset paper, 24 x 21 cm. Edition 15. Printer: Peter Lancaster (Lancaster Press)



'Two in the Bush', 1979, etching and aquatint on Hahmemuhle 230 gsm, image size 45.5 x 24 cm. Edition 10. Printed by the artist

amount of time in Italy, initially at the Australia Council Residency at the British School in Rome and subsequently on numerous occasions in Prato, at the Monash Research Centre, where a range of imagery, pictorial devices and a certain sensibility entered his art.

His prints are deliberately enigmatic, often imply a narrative with self-referential iconography, but there are few clues for any meaningful decipherment. As in a Piero fresco, movements deliberately betray little emotion and monumental forms are stripped bare to their essentials so that nothing more can be taken away without loss of legibility. There is a sense of theatricality, or at least a shallow stage-like space, where the bulky figures perform their slightly absurd rituals, such as juggling with balls, rushing to a landfill, a snail admiring its shadow, a man admiring a snail or a dog, funny little heads or simple compositions reminiscent of tarot cards. The dour Scot is a much abused stereotype and the cool restraint of Heng's art, where nothing is overstated, but all is distilled, refined and if anything is understated, can lead to a simplistic reading of his prints. They are in fact imbued with humour, a dry, subtle, subversive and witty commentary on life, often masked by an apparent one liner. Over a four-decade practice as a printmaker, as well as painter, draughtsman and neon artist, the closest parallel remains that with Léger and his majestic, monumental simplicity. In a famous aphorism attributed to Léger,



'Dog', 1982, lithograph (four colours) on BFK Rives 250 gsm, image size 50 x 75 cm. Edition 10. Printer: Kaye Green

he reputedly said: 'What does that represent? There was never any question in plastic art, in poetry, in music, of representing anything. It is a matter of making something beautiful, moving, or dramatic – this is by no means the same thing.' This is also the most appropriate response to the same question occasionally asked of Euan Heng's prints.

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. Euan Heng, written response to author's questions, typescript, 17 Feb 2013, p.1
2. Euan Heng, written response to author's questions, typescript, 17 Feb 2013, pp.1-2
3. He married a Scottish woman, Catherine Nugent, in 1965 and their daughters, Lindsey and Audrey were born in 1965 and 1967
4. Euan Heng, written response to author's questions, typescript, 17 Feb 2013, p.5
5. Euan Heng, written response to author's questions, typescript, 17 Feb 2013, p.6
6. Euan Heng, written response to author's questions, typescript, 17 Feb 2013, p.7
7. See discussion in Gary Catalano, *Euan Heng, Australian Galleries, Melbourne, May 1995*
8. David Thorp, catalogue essay, *Euan Heng, Australian Galleries, Melbourne, June, 1984*
9. Sasha Grishin, *John Brack Retrospective: Paintings and drawings 1945-1977, ANU Melville Hall, Canberra, 1977*