

Wendy Rhodes Picken

Paper title: **Etching drawing: tactile engagement and temporal evidence**

This paper will present an insight into the tactile engagement enjoyed when drawing materials are exploited through the materiality of etching.

I will introduce two artists whose engagement with drawing *en plein air* is at the centre of their practice and for whom an enthusiasm for materials takes their drawing fluently from paper to etching plate enabling them to trace temporal progress. First, Jason Hicklin RE who is inspired by the interaction between sea, sky and land and who creates etchings which incorporate a material understanding of place. And, secondly, Ian Chamberlain ARE whose forensic investigation of surface describes a temporal appreciation of place. Both artists bring sketches and observations back to the etching studio to explore drawing through an extended material investigation.

When an artist is engaged with drawing it can be assumed that their focus is solely with the subject being drawn but such assumptions ignore the tactile and haptic experience of handling drawing materials. The practice of making a drawing outdoors, *en plein air*, amplifies these experiences and the drawings which are made become expressive and experiential responses to place. Drawing enables the artist to explore atmospheric conditions and topographical sensations underfoot as well as a representation of the scene before them. The materials the artist engages with at this stage are materials of expediency – sketchbooks which usefully fit in a pocket, pencils ready sharpened, or, maybe an eraser or water brush. These are necessarily expedient and chosen through tactile trial and error. Paper is chosen for its weight and grain and pencils because of their mark making potential. The materials chosen by Hicklin and Chamberlain for use in the etching studio bear a close tactile relationship to those chosen when they are drawing. Hicklin draws with a thick graphite stub on paper and prefers, stubby waxy materials for drawing in the etching studio, while Chamberlain opts for sharp graphite pencils and a fine needle point for etching.

(You may not have tried etching before and I'd like to provide an opportunity for you to engage with the materials of drawing on an etching plate and so gain a sense of the processes that I'm discussing. *Examples of copper prepared for etching are explained and passed around the audience with relevant drawing tools*)

An engagement with drawing on an etching plate is a process which engages all the senses. The language of etching reflects the intense physical and material relationship between maker and material - ground, smoke, bite, de-grease, scrape, burnish, resist, wipe, polish, soak and press. These

words are tangible, tactile links to a form of industrial making resonating with suggestions of corporeal effort and labour.

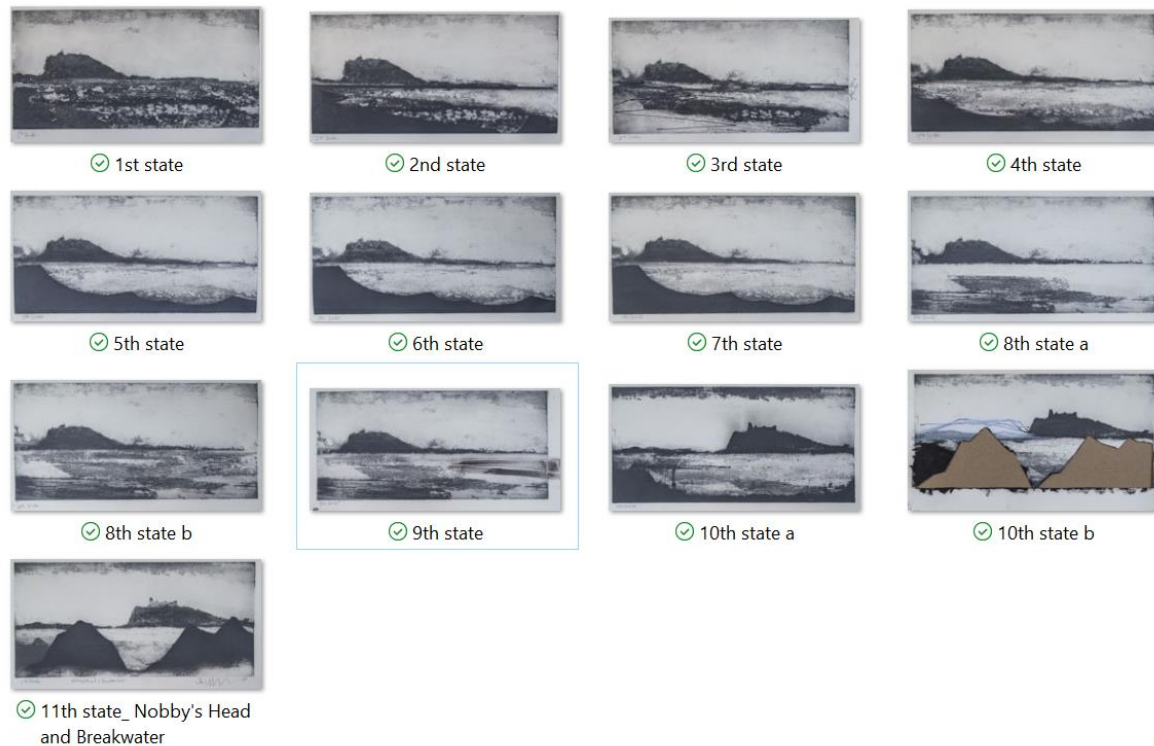
At each stage of an etching process there are fascinating material interactions, with wax, metal, acid and ink - and the drawing reveals itself in a different form through the tactility of substances used. The rub and glide of graphite on paper, the smooth as silk sweep of needle through wax; a catch of fingernail against etched metal, the roll of tacky, sticky ink, and the polish-buff and glide of scrim wiping the plate.

There is an inherent sensuousness to the processes, "... the tactile and sensuous knowledge of line and surface" which Ingold (2011: 211) tells us guides practitioners through the terrain of their practice. A drawing begins as a trace of graphite which lies so thinly over the sheet of paper that running finger tips across the mark is barely registered. Once etched (by submerging the plate in a corrosive bath) a drawing on a metal plate can carry a myriad of textures, from fine shallow lines to deep scars in the surface and can feel very rough to the touch. Some marks are similar to fine sandpaper; there are lines which score the metal and areas opened up as shallow sunken wells and in this way the drawing is transformed into a textural matrix for trapping ink.

Petherbridge (2010: 122) lyrically states that a piece of paper "...is understood to exist in a state of desire for the line"; an etched metal plate now exists in a state of desire for ink. Ink is spread, wiped, polished and printed. Then the new drawing is revealed. There can be many revelatory moments in the creation of an etching but the first happens after the initial process to a plate. The moment the paper is pulled back from the plate the artist sees the drawing as they have never seen it before, because the drawn image is now reversed. This reversal opens the artist's eyes to the potential for revision, and so more additional drawing and corrections are applied to the plate and more revelatory moments follow.

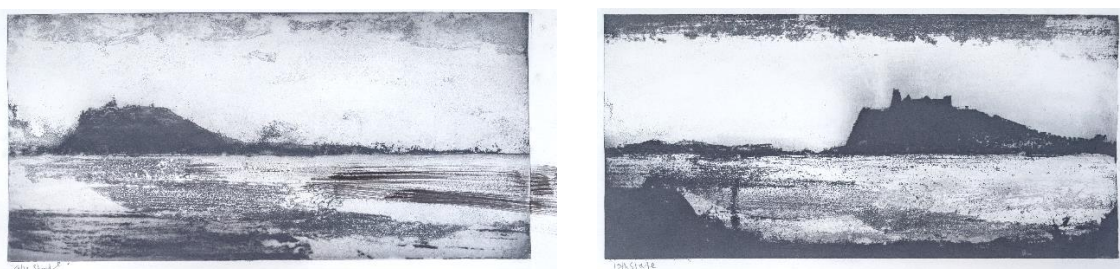
J. J. Gibson (1979: 23) discusses the various nature of surfaces which have substance, or volume, or exist as sheets – in the process of etching the surface begins to incorporate and illustrate such categorisations. As the etched drawing progresses the metal plate whose substance began as glossy and smooth becomes pitted and scored, dulled and deformed through disintegration, shifting its volume but in so doing emerges as a matrix holding an image. The once smooth sheet of paper is indented under pressure as the print is taken, inversely raising ink from the surface - the printed drawing exploits the surface in both additive and reductive form.

When a print is taken from a plate a moment in the life of a drawing is caught and fixed. This ability to deliver concrete evidence of the progression of a drawing by printing a state proof after each revelatory process is a crucial and beneficial material quality of etching.



An etching by Jason Hicklin transformed through 14 proofed stages, by kind permission of the artist.

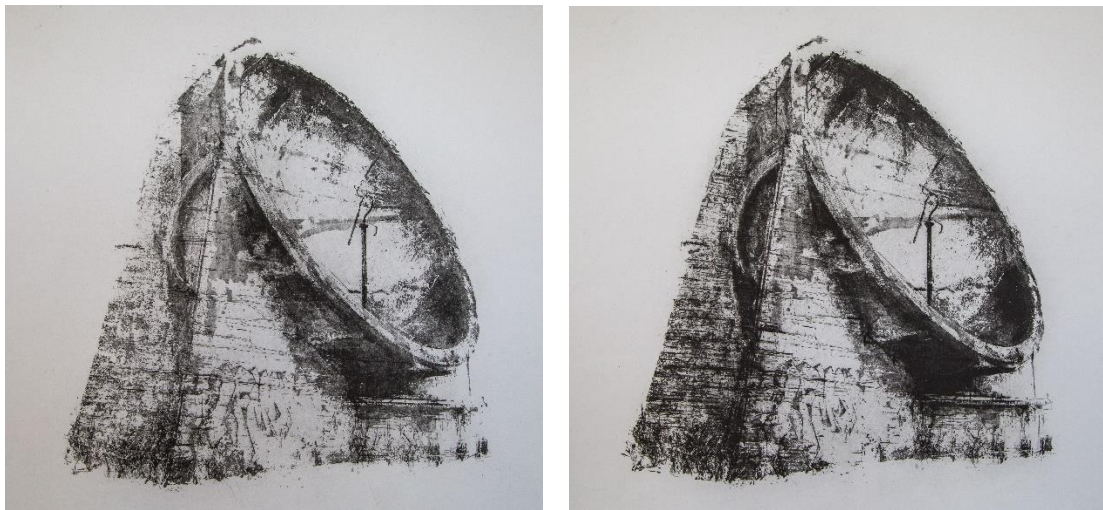
A plate can go through any number of processes each one introducing new textures and mark making – and it is printed after each process, each state is caught as a material trace. A print taken after an etching process is called a proof - the proof of the drawing is now seen in the print, and the proofs can be laid out side by side enabling the etcher to trace the life of their drawing. These are glimpses of moments in time and evidence of creative progression. Proof states provide unequalled temporal evidence of the materiality of the artist's concept and a tangible material trace of the processes that have been explored.



9th and 10th a state proofs by kind permission of Jason Hicklin.

Between each stage the drawing on the etching plate develops, sometimes changing subtly; sometimes dramatically and a new proof print exists to record each stage. The changes can be quite radical as shown between the two proofs taken from one plate by Hicklin; The land mass in this print has been erased from one side of the plate and re-etched to the right, foreground has been added and the sky has been strengthened.

The two prints by Chamberlain, show that changes can very subtle - the tonal values have been strengthened on the proof to the right, achieved by re-drawing on the etching plate. Other areas have been sharpened and brightened through burnishing, a technique which replicates the effect of erasing. A reciprocal understanding of drawing enables the artist to apply knowledge to both paper and metal mediums.



State proofs by kind permission of Ian Chamberlain.

An additional quality of creating proofs is the potential to overdraw and explore the material and creative variables possible in subsequent processes. Hicklin draws over his proofs to test tonal variations, mark out perspective and as a template for additional mark-making. Chamberlain employs a personal notation system drawing coded diagrams of textural details and tonal values, observations and decisions made through a close study of the proof.

Through drawing-as-etching haptic and tacit understanding facilitate an exploitation of concepts and materials. A preference for one material over another comes from learning by doing, understanding what links the inner materials of experience, idea and emotion and the outer materials found in drawing and subsequently in etching. Hicklin has found that a heavy weight paper bound into a solid block provides a portable, weather resistant surface which suits the terrain of island walks in places such as St Kilda and the Orkneys. Chamberlain prefers a lighter paper which he can use to sketch

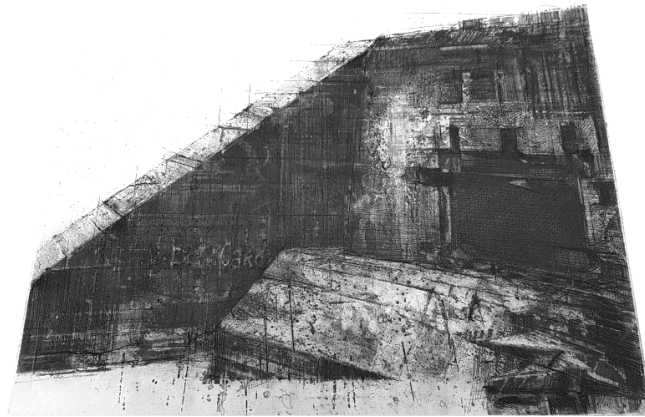
visual notes and take rubbings from obsolete cold war listening posts. Back in the studio Hicklin wants a tough surface to draw on; one that will hold heavily worked layers of graphite, and enable vigorous erasure; Chamberlain prefers a cheaper shinier surface of paper that his pencil can slip and slide against. Similarly in the etching room Hicklin turns to zinc and steel because of the granular properties which vary in each batch of metal, and his material understanding of place and process create connections with social histories. An enlightening example of this came about through his research of St Kilda.



St Kilda by Jason Hicklin, by kind permission of the artist

Hicklin discovered that zinc had been imported to weatherproof the roofs of the cottages, but rather than improving life on the island conditions were made worse rather than better through an increased amount of condensation. The zinc was ripped off and considered a useless material. Hicklin enjoyed the parallel of using zinc to make his etchings, corroding the image in nitric acid, and imagined the St Kildan inhabitants saying that the best thing to do with zinc would be to dump it in acid! A once useless material is now given a new materiality and is creatively exploited.

Chamberlain prefers copper because of the fine quality of line and subtle nuance of tone. His rendering of Atlantic wall bunkers present a forensic investigation of the surface of the subject and of the etching plate itself.



Bunker III by Ian Chamberlain, by kind permission of the artist

By rendering the material effects of erosion through surface texture, water stains and graffiti a temporal appreciation of place is described. When Chamberlain visited the bunkers, situated on exposed stretches of coastline in Denmark, he was met with the full force of the weather, wind and sand combined to exert a powerful energy. The experience of drawing while the wind hurled sand into his face as he battled to hold down sketchbook pages, allowed for a tacit understanding of the effects of coastal erosion and resonated with the material qualities of etching – of eroding an image into a surface. For Chamberlain the corrosive properties of etching, provides an ideal conceptual process through which to represent the surface qualities of the structures.

In conclusion –

The artist who etches applies their concept to a creative method which takes them through a number of material processes, each one requiring both knowledge and curiosity, and is richly rewarded. Etching is a constant interchange between ideas and surface, but always remains contingent on the drawing. Printing each state provides valuable moments of reciprocity; using etching and drawing materials to assess and reflect on progress. The final conceptually enriched print emerges from this exchange as a materially different image from the drawing which marked its inception - and that is the engaging appeal of etching drawing.

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References

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