

Interview with Irene Scheinmann

Interviewed by **Margaret Ashman** and **Steve Mumberson**

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I really didn't know anything about the Printmakers Council. Julian Trevelyan, whom I met through a friend, because I wanted to go to Paris to study with Hayter, and when I came back from Paris I didn't have anywhere to print except the local college, and that wasn't really that convenient, so I had the cheek to phone and ask whether I could come once a week and use the (Julian's) studio. In the beginning, Mary, Mary Fedden with whom I became very good friends later on, she said to me,

“Oh, I don't know..... Julian doesn't like anybody in the studio”, so I said to her “Oh, please forget it, I just thought I'd ask”.

When she saw that I wasn't that pushy she said “Oh wait a minute, I'll go and ask him”. So she went to ask him and he said “yes you can come once a week and we'll do it as a trial and see whether it's going to work”. I said “okay”. And he's the one who suggested (it), and then we became, he never really taught me. His book on printmaking - I thought that was the *best* book. I've got it. I bought it in a second hand shop, I was very lucky it was out of print and I thought that was the best book ever, and that really encouraged me to be more experimental and so on. So you know we were discussing things, when he had a problem, once or twice he asked me ‘I'm having problems with this what do you think I should do?’ I learnt everything from his book, more or less. After that he said to me “you should really become a member of Printmakers Council”. I'd never heard of the Printmakers Council, and so he really pushed me. He said “Have you joined? have you joined?”. I hadn't joined, so finally I made the effort and I took some prints there.

When was this?

That was I think in '81. Something like that, I can't remember. So in any case after a very short time I joined the committee and (through) that committee meeting I got to know everybody, thinking about exhibitions and so on. I read once in either the Times or the Guardian, that at the Barbican Centre there was going to be an Art Fair, it was one of the first ones ever. So I said why don't we try the Art Fair, so we took a stand there, because they knew we were a kind of organisation they gave it to us at a very low price and we did that art fair and it was very successful. From then on I started having ideas here and there. In '86 I had an exhibition in New York and then went on to California. At a private exhibition at a private house (in California) I met the director of the Angel Gate Centre (or something) and they had exhibitions, so we started talking. She began talking about other associations. I didn't know anything about them, the Californian, (and) the Los Angeles one, she said ‘If you are going to San Francisco why don't you get in touch with them’. It is what I did, and started doing what's called the US UK Print Connection, which we, or I did through the PmC at that time. We showed in four or five venues in the States and then I got the Barbican Centre, the Circle which now they don't do anymore do they, they do their own exhibitions, they used to rent it out. So I got that, I got seven

venues, we sold that exhibition to other places, and it was really a great success. So that's how it all started really.

And then I had a bit of a do with them. I resigned because I didn't like.... I'm a person who will always say what I think and perhaps it's not very English, I'm not English born but I've spent most of my life here. I tend to say what I really think and that's what committee meetings are for. If we are all of the same opinion there's no point having them really.

You were chairman in the early 90s

No not in the 90s. I was Chairman from '87, or '86 to '88 because I know when I went to California, '86 I wasn't Chairperson then, but I think '87 I became the Chairperson for one year, just over a year, so it was '87/'88

Do you remember who was on your committee?

Well I know that when I joined, Elaine Kolawsky was not alive anymore, she used to be the Chairperson. Of course Stanley Jones was the President. I met him recently actually, I met him at Mary Fedden's whatever.

I've brought along some photographs of early members. It might jog your memory.

These are lovely photographs.. Peter..... Alistair Grant,..... Sally McClaren I met her recently Peter Daghish – I think he was on the committee at one time.

Bernard Cheese – he was not on the committee but I know him. Anthony Gross of course I know. I didn't know her (Birgit) I think she had died before I.....

When you were involved in the PmC where did they used to meet?

We met at their offices, in..... where was it? In this very trendy area now

Clerkenwell

Clerkenwell, it was in the Clerkenwell workshops. There were workshops there at that was the office and now I think they are in SE1 I think are they?

[We are in Bermondsey currently yes](#)

Well I'm glad - I hope that there will be a kind of revival.

[So how was the Printmakers Council viewed at the time? Was it an important organisation?](#)

Well I think at one time it was quite important, really and actually the two.... one exhibition at the Barbican (the exchange) I can tell you..... I've got letters telling me..... I was just clearing up..... for instance, to Rosemary Simmons. She was just full of praise. She said you know what you have done is *amazing* and really I didn't have that much help, I had a little help

and of course. . Harland helped, I don't know whether you know him, Harland Walshaw he was the administrator at the time.

I know the name, he was before my time

You never met him? He used to be at the office. Actually that's why I parted with them. He was a very hard working man who was a photographer and he gave notice to say he was leaving because he wanted to concentrate on his photography. A very good photographer. And they sacked him before..... and nobody knew why. And he was more or less accused of dishonesty. But he had no... he couldn't sign any cheques.....It was only the treasurer and Stanley Jones who could sign cheques. I know all that because I was at the office. So when I took his defence at the committee meeting, there was only one person, who said you had better be very careful because you can be sued, you can't accuse somebody of something like that.

Not without evidence

No, there was no evidence whatsoever, he was a very hard working guy and he was getting so little money and he was working beyond hours, and I think it was really a nasty thing. I just thought it was unacceptable.

How big was the committee

I think we were about ten or twelve or something like that. Of course at committee meetings not everybody could go. I missed a very important one because I was ill and I couldn't go. And that was during the time when he was..... I shouldn't really say that. I'm sorry, I forgot, you can delete it. Because I don't want to cause any.....I'm sorry I forgot it was there....

It will be edited, everything will be edited.

No, but it's not a nice thing. I don't have anything against the Printmakers Council. It was that period which was really very very nasty.

Before I joined I knew there was a history of problems

So when did you join, I know I saw your name all the time

Not until the late 80s

So what would you say is the contribution that you think that PmC has made to British Printmaking?

I would think it did contribute quite a lot. But there was a period when it was really dormant, it really needs..... I don't know what has been happening lately.. because as an honorary member, I don't why they made me an honorary member, because I think the then Chairperson who was responsible for all this he asked me, he said 'Irene, would you put up the idea that all former Chairpersons should be honorary members. I said I'm not doing anything of the sort. You know,,

here I am an ex and I'm saying I should be an honorary member, it's ridiculous, so I said I'm sorry Kieren if you want to do it, do it, I'm not doing it. But that's how I became an honorary member and then they started sending me these things about exhibitions of course I didn't participate in anything, because I was really very very annoyed.

So in any case a lot of these people have become very well known. I think it was Stanley, Michael Rothenstein, Agatha and Julian who started it. I don't know who else.

Peter Weaver was there.

Is he related to William Weaver the art critic

that I don't know

I never met him, I've never even heard of him. Is he a printmaker?

He is, he also is a sculptor

He taught opposite Michael Rothenstein at Camberwell.

I love Michael's later work, I love the more abstract work. It is wonderful work. I've got one of his. I bought the Printmakers Council portfolio. It was actually Joe Winkleman who started it, it was to raise money for the PmC. But I don't know whether Joe was ever.....? I know he was the chairperson of the RE. but he was very involved.

He was active, yes.

Was he a chairperson of the Printmakers council

I don't think he was

I think he did a lot because I remember I was working at Julian's studio and he came while I was there and Julian introduced me to him. And that's when Julian donated an etching, quite a lot of Michael Rothenstein, Piper..... because I bought the portfolio. The one I have of Michael Rothenstein, I don't like at all because it was this cockerel, not the nice ones, because he has got beautiful ones, but this one is really not my taste at all. But Joe Winkleman, as I said raised a lot of money for the PmC.

Was that through auctions or the portfolio

No, selling the portfolio. When we went to that Art Fair at the Barbican it was one of the first Art Fairs ever that I know of in England, in London, and we sold quite a few portfolios. We took it there and we sold quite a few. We were selling it for £300 and I remember I bought one but I bought it at £250 because they gave a discount to PmC members.

So you've got a portfolio

Yes

Perhaps we can have a look

Yes, I don't know where all of them are.....But there are some very good ones in there.

Tell us more about your involvement with California

Well this is the thing, because I was having this exhibition in America, I went to California to see my family. Through that my sister-in-law is a writer, she was very involved in this Angel Gate. It's just outside Los Angeles, by the sea, it's a beautiful Arts Centre. And she invited the director of this centre and she came, that's how we met, to my show, and that's how it started because I said it would be wonderful to have an exhibition here, well you know. And she well why don't you get in touch with other associations here in California and there were two of them, very important ones, the Los Angeles one which was called..... if you are interested I've got the catalogue. I can give you one if you want.

So PmC had an exchange exhibition.

Yes, it was an exchange. I have got both catalogues if you are interested. I can give it to you because I've got copies. And I was very cheeky because I got sponsors. At the opening of one of the shows in San Francisco which was at the World Print Centre, I mean it's a very very prestigious place, I met a man who sponsored that show and somebody introduced me to him and I said to him, oh you know we are going to have this thing... and he said to me call me if you want any help, so immediately as soon as I knew what was happening I called him from London and he said he would be very happy to sponsor the show by giving us one of his presses. I have one, you can have a look at it, I bought one from him. He said I'll give you a press and you can auction it at the Barbican Centre, so that will give him a lot of publicity and of top of it I thought if I'm getting sponsors like this I'd better get somebody really important to open it. So important in their eyes, so then I thought, I'll get the minister for the Arts and it was Lord Luce, how do you pronounce it? He's now something to do with the Queen, her private secretary or something. So he was the minister for the Arts at the time. So I wrote a letter and I didn't get any reply, for three weeks no reply, so I phoned his office and I spoke to his secretary, and she said you cannot talk to Mr Luce, - he was Minister at the time, he is not available. I said can you please give him a message, I really want to know whether he is going to open this exhibition or not because if he isn't I'm going to ask the Prime Minister and it was Margaret Thatcher! I swear to you within 5 minutes I got a call 'The Minister will be delighted to open your exhibition' and of course that was very important for Scott Berglin who manufactures this press. He is really an aeronautic engineer but he met an etcher at Berkley, Karl Kasten you must know him, he's a very good etcher. And this Kasten he sort of manufactures some kind of press which was very easy to use but it was of course done with wood, and this man he's an engineer so they got together and he made it kind of state of the art. It doesn't look great as a press but its fantastic. So it became the KB press, both Berglin and Kasten, and later on I found him, as I said it got auctioned, nearly £2000 for it, which is really..... it sells for much more than that. It was closed bids, I bid for it and I didn't get it I was very annoyed, but later on in any case I bought

one from him. But then when I did the other exhibition, after that I formed my own printmaking association but nothing to do with the printmakers council – no committee meetings, I was like the dictator! You know I chose whatever, but I called it Print Europe because it was about European Printmakers mainly because that worked much better for me, I thought what's the point of having all these committee meetings, because you decide on something and then you don't do it! Because there's no point. You know we were staying sometimes until 11 o'clock at night, talking about what? So in any case that's what I did and I did that Print Europe the same way. Going to 7 museums in England, we got money for it, we sold the exhibition. I didn't have to do very much after that, they came they picked it up... so that I got also the Minister of Arts to open it. Because I got Scott Berglin also coming again also at the Barbican.

Perhaps I can call on your services to find someone to open our exhibition?

Well I don't really know, perhaps the head of..... I don't know if they've ever been very helpful, the Arts Council or someone from the Arts Council?

So how was PmC funded when you were around?

Just by membership, which wasn't really you know.. Exhibitions, I'm clearing out my things because I've got things from the Printmakers Council, from here or there. I've so much paper that I'm stocking here which is ridiculous. So I found something the other day which was interesting. After this fracas with the committee and everything I wrote a letter to everybody to the membership actually, and I said what should happen now, all these exhibitions people are organising. I wasn't the only one organising some people did one with Russia, that was Denise Wiley. She did something with Russia which I took part in actually. I even have the catalogue I think. I somebody else did something in Malta. Together, I wasn't the only one. But these two were very important because they were at the Barbican and they were sold to other museums and also because I got the Minister for the Arts..... and I think in the future you just have to be cheeky. I thought what the hell, you know. They can only say no. In any case a lot of people put very hard work in it. I did suggest that when an organiser raises money for a certain exhibition if there is anything left after all the expenses it should be put away for other exhibitions. Because these exhibitions cost a lot of money.

That's right they do.

So you have to pay rent now this place where you are?

We pay yes, a monthly rent.

You have enough money to cover all this

We seem to be doing alright at the moment. The membership's growing.

It's a sympathetic landlord.

Oh well, that's very important. That place in Clerkenwell was very good. There were some bookbinders, some jewellers, it was like a workshop.

That was a big disaster when that happened because we had nowhere to go. I've forgotten the period now for about a year.

So what happened?

I think Sheila came across Michael and Trevor, through conversation they made an offer.

But why did they have to leave Clerkenwell?

Because the building was being turned into----- luxury

It was being redeveloped.

Believe me there was hardly anything there. Now you go. You, know, apartments for God knows how many millions. It's ridiculous really but that's what's happening all over London.

That's exactly what happened.....the early part of that development was into apartments..... we were priced completely out of it.

I know I don't really know what's going on, really. Also a lot of foreign people with money are buying a lot of properties here. I'm sorry this is outside the..... (remit)

It does affectIt's still a major problem for us.

Money

Money, well yes...

You can generate money by putting on exhibitons but then you have to ask people to pay more. Life for the artist now I can tell you. I have worked for 40 years. I had success more abroad than here perhaps because I did not concentrate so much here . I had a good gallery in Camden and they were selling very well for me. And after that they had to close down because of the last recession. And now I'm not ready, I won't go and ask galleries because they are so awful. Once somebody told me, I have a friend who was a designer and he bought a work of art from this horrible man, Francis Kyle, and he said to me really you know your work will do very well there. He said if you like you can mention my name. I said "look, I don't like mentioning names, if I go, I go under my own steam or whatever". So I was passing Maddox Street, and I went in, I didn't take anything with me and I just when in and I said I'm a painter, printmaker are you interested to see my.... 'Oh Yes, we are always interested, blah blah blah", he gave me an appointment to come a week later at 11 o'clock. I arrived at 11 o'clock, the gallery was closed. I ring the bell, he comes out, and he says "I'm so sorry, I'm running late". And I said, "It's Ok, it's alright, I'll leave my portfolio here and I'll go and have a coffee and come back". I wasn't ... it's Ok. So I went and had my coffee, I came back....it wasn't him, he was sitting on the floor

looking at somebody else's work.....fine, I could have waited for him. He gets his receptionist who was not older than eighteen. I have nothing against young people, she knew nothing about art.....

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