

Interview with Agathe Sorel
Margaret Ashman and Graham Smith
On Thursday March 12th 2015 at 10.30 am

Perhaps we can start off by asking you how you got into printmaking

Well, I was at college, in Hungary we did a little bit of printmaking at college. Then at Camberwell I also did a print for my diploma work which was well received. They had Michael Rothenstein there, working, and at the time we only had a little star wheel press at the Illustration department and we did whatever... The silkscreen was done by Textiles and there was a litho room, but other than that printmaking as such didn't really exist. And Michael Rothenstein was really rather disgruntled that whatever was taught was very little and very academic. We met several times at his flat in Beaufort Street and were trying to figure out how to..... you know..... promote printmaking. And we had Julian Trevelyan, Anthony Gross, Alistair Grant and Birgit Skiold there on occasions and it was decided that we should form a pressure group, which was called the Printmakers Council, and here's the first letter, which perhaps you don't have.

Perhaps you could just read out a snippet from it.

It is just stating about the Printmakers Council that it was formed on the 23rd June 1965. I can scan this off for you if you don't have it.

That's very useful, thank you.

Because we didn't hit on this idea until quite a long way down the discussions, that there should be a pressure group called the Printmakers Council who would promote printmaking, experimental printmaking, and also the educational advantages of that. It was all sort of worked out and pointed out and it was thought that we should form this pressure group, the Printmakers Council, and so this is the first document that I have. I gave quite a lot of my documentation to the PmC a few years back and I think that you should probably find it somewhere?

Hopefully, yes! I hope so, that's very interesting about the early formation..... So when you were a member were there particular events, shows or PmC activity that you can tell us about in particular.....

The Barbican concourse gallery exhibitions were always very exciting and of course we had it free in those days. It was all over that half circle, (the Curve) it was Clive Jennings who organised it. That was quite memorable. And of course the Bradford Print Biennale was organised by the PmC and it happened that Birgit Skiold went to Bradford and talked to the director there who was Peter Bird and she was so persuasive that they got married!

And this is how the Bradford Print Biennale started.

Hockney did the poster didn't he for the first one.

Hockney, yes, yes. And of course this was international and people got invited and there was really some very very exciting work, arriving internationally, and I was on the jury. I think that I was on (the jury) three times and (for) the documentation of the material we had a professional photographer engaged and part of the slide collection is from the originals of these exhibitions. which was really really exciting, and so it's a pity that you don't have it any more!

I've brought the catalogue along, because you're in it. In the catalogue, I'll find it..

But this was repeated several times wasn't it.

Oh yes, it was a yearly event, well bi-annual

Eleven was the last one, 22 years and then it went over to another

It's called The Hibernia exhibition which continued. That is finished now. Because they thought it was rather expensive.

Here it is. We've just seen that one upstairs. (The wise and Foolish Virgin)

Oh right. I didn't realise that, yes. That was the first time I was showing this very very controversial work. I was shaking in my boots. Hayter was coming over who was actually quite doctrinarian in many ways, in his technique but he was very, you know, appreciative.

So what kind of reputation would you say the Printmakers Council had at that time?

Oh, *great*, I think it became *establishment*, and what we achieved is that virtually in every art school in the country and not only every art school but in every evening class etc it was established that printmaking departments got not only *established* but *staffed*, and *extremely_well equipped*. You know we could order whatever we wanted, you know in terms of equipment, *big rollers, presses, chemicals, colours, everything* and the materials were usually free to students, and that was absolutely great because otherwise they would only have been able to afford lets say little copper plates of *that size*, but instead (they could afford) *big* (ones) and (they were) doing experimental prints. And we had dark rooms and I don't know whether you can remember, in Camberwell we had this dark room established in the litho room where we could have a professional sort of set up for photographic printing. And it was very experimental and people were trying out *all kinds* of exciting things.

We were talking to Peter Weaver and he said that the Printmakers Council contacted all the art schools in that period to get lists of what equipment they had to try and promote..

It's here in the magazine

Yes, yes, yes, a list of what people have

So in a way they were really instrumental in really pushing the craft weren't they

Absolutely and it has become *very* well known and *very* established, with proper staffing. In a way a bit too much because you know (they) not only had lecturers who actually taught, they had a dean and they had administrative staff which went over into the present set up, which is a bit bureaucratic and doesn't deal any more with the real issues in my mind.

Do you remember the early touring show organised by a lady called Heather Hawkins, I think.

No, no, where did they tour?

I think it was in the UK in the sixties; we suddenly discovered something about it and wondered whether you remembered anything.

There were lots of exhibitions like that

Heather Hawkins, 1967 – 1973, a travelling exhibition

They also had these big auctions, to which people donated very generously with quite big name artists and some of my slide collection also originates from that you see because these are photos from original prints and not from books.

So tell us about when you were editor of the magazine?

I was a committee member for a *very, very* long time and then we decided to start this magazine and I wrote quite a lot of the initial articles and selected the material, it was very work intensive. I did quite a few copies as you can see and when I gave it up I became Chair for two years and that was a lot of work because we had very ambitious projects

Such as?

Well, we wanted to establish a permanent place and we wanted to get the finance for this and I approached banks and everything with a business plan to do it, because we had this gallery at Beak Street, I don't know whether you have a record of it, it was a framers shop with limited space, but next to it there was a whole building which was for sale and I had produced a proper business plan of how we could occupy part of it and let part of it, but in those days they wouldn't accept it, you know, from a small unknown organisation. I wonder whether they would today, whether it would be more likely? Because the RWS is doing a similar project, I don't know whether you know. The building that they own which is next to the National Gallery, just next to the shop; they seem to have the lease for that and they've produced a business plan where the RWS would keep part of that premises and have the permanent collection there and some exhibitions but also let office space. The developers would promote it and come on board and *they* will have their apartments on top, so once they convert these apartments they are worth millions as you might imagine. Nowadays people are more open to that sort of arrangement.

Was your idea to perhaps have equipment in there that people could use? Presses?

No it would have been a gallery.

So at that time were you in a small gallery did you say?

It was next door, it was a Beak Street framing shop.... And it had a fair amount of space at the back and we had changing exhibitions there. But obviously it wasn't big enough to show the full range of membership etc and this is when this idea occurred to me.

I wonder if it's still there? It would be nice to have a photo and put it in Imprint.

Michael Rothenstein was telling us about the restaurant, Bertorelli's? I don't know whether you went there?

Oh yes, yes, yes, and of course (we met) in *his* apartment mostly, in Beaufort street. No they had prints as well at Bertorelli's and they allowed us to show.

Can I ask you what (influence) your membership of Printmakers Council has had on your career?

Oh it was very, very important yes. You know it kept me going and active for a long time and the fact of being in touch with so many good artists. And of course I dropped out when we had a meeting about new entries, new members. And I insisted that there should be some selection and I was voted down. You know all these juries and committees are biased in some ways but if you change them regularly I think that is the best way to overcome that. So I then joined the RE.

So this move towards non selection, where did that come from? Did it come from the members?

Well, I think it was said that we were so broke that everybody should be allowed and we should then have more income from their subs.

So that was heavily weighed in favour of not having selection then.

That's right

So it wasn't a sort of move towards political correctness

No, no it was purely financial, and I didn't agree with it. So this is why I sort of gradually dropped out. It is true that there were *very very* good members being proposed who didn't get elected, because you never know the constitution of the committee I wasn't really in favour of complete amateurs, you know, joining. They needed some sort of competence.

I think it puts quite a few people off now, joining the printmakers council. It puts off some really good artists who don't want to be associated with a non selected group

So how do you cope with this

Well we try and put on some really interesting shows that they want to be part of

Were you a member when the mini print started?

No, not really and I don't actually do very small work, A4 is still a size that I do because I can print it off here and I find that between the two printers and with specially coated paper I can get a really good quality print.