



## Studio Stories

**PRACTICAL** Jane Stobart looks at the history of the Printmakers Council, an arts organization that has tirelessly promoted printmaking and printmakers for 50 years since 1965

The Printmakers Council (PMC) will be celebrating their fiftieth anniversary with a major exhibition at the Bankside Gallery in November. Earlier this year they were awarded a sizeable sum from the Heritage Lottery Fund, through their Sharing Heritage programme. These funds will go towards their project 'Telling the Story of the Printmakers Council' and will help enormously with their plans to catalogue, preserve and digitize archive material for their new website and preserve documents dating back to the early 1960s. Once everything has been catalogued, the Victoria and Albert Museum will house the entire PMC archive. A portion of the award will go towards enhancing the Bankside Exhibition. This event promises to include original prints loaned from early artist members, including Bartolomeu dos Santos, Tracey Emin, Anthony Gross, David Hockney, Eduardo Paolozzi, Michael Rothenstein and Graham Sutherland to name but a few. Also included, will be prints from each of their current membership, which currently totals almost 200 artist printmakers. The Heritage Lottery award will also finance a free publication about the PMC, and there will be talks and workshops during the exhibition.

The PMC describe themselves as 'an artist run, non-profit making organization' founded in 1965 'to promote the use of both traditional and innovative printmaking techniques'. Their Membership includes artists, students, interested individuals and groups who exhibit together. Their CV boasts of regular annual exhibitions throughout the UK, Europe and as far afield as Western Australia. The society has been a leading light in the printmaking world, promoting an art form that has often been sidelined within the fine arts.

The idea for an organization dedicated entirely

to printmaking came about in the early 1960s when a group of artists recognized the need for a society that would embrace all of the printmaking processes. At the time, printmaking did not enjoy huge recognition as an art form. Anthony Gross, Gertrude Hermes, Stanley Jones, Michael Rothenstein, Birgit Skiöld, Agathe Sorel and Julian Trevelyan all felt that printmaking needed to be represented and promoted in all of its diversity, and that new developments should be celebrated.

I spoke to Agathe Sorel and Stanley Jones about the status of printmaking in the 1960s. Both artists had recently returned from Paris where they had worked with Stanley William Hayter in his Atelier 17 studio and both felt great enthusiasm regarding the potential for innovation within the field of printmaking. Jones told me that there was no association of artists at this time that was solely dedicated to printmaking in all of its forms and extremely few exhibitions focusing purely on original prints. In 1965, Jones remembers, facilities outside of colleges were almost nonexistent. The exception was Birgit Skiöld, one of the PMC founders who in 1956 established the very first open print studio. Later, Skiöld was instrumental in establishing the British International Print Biennale in Bradford in 1962. It was in the mid-1960s that the PMC and studios such as Editions Alecto came into being. There was a growing interest in printmaking and the acceptance of its importance as an art form.

I asked Jones how the PMC was promoted, when first established. He told me that advertisements were put into *Studio Magazine* and this caught the attention of journalists who were on the look out for something different. Interest began to spread. Gradually, in the 1960s exhibitions of original prints became an annual feature, held in a rentable

gallery called the Art Exhibitions Bureau in Suffolk Street, London W1 backed by the enthusiasm of Robert Erskine who had a gallery/bookshop in Cork Street called St George's. Erskine published prints and was later a partner of Editions Electo. Jones' role in these early days of the PMC was to organize exhibitions, interview new members and raise funds to support the society.

Sorel was an active founder member on various PMC committees for many years and chair for two years. Her memories of the status of printmaking in the early 1960s were equally bleak. She said that artists founded the PMC to promote the establishment of printmaking as a separate department in art colleges, with specially allocated rooms and equipment, not merely a little star wheel press in the corner of the illustration department, as it was in Camberwell School of Arts & Crafts at the time Sorel taught there. Gradually this happened, through perseverance and pressure.

The first documented meeting of the PMC was held on 23 June 1965 at the Federation of British Artists (FBA) gallery in the Mall, with Michael Rothenstein as the acting Chair and Bernard Cheese, Vice Chairman. Prior to this there had been an informal meeting held at Bertorelli's restaurant in Soho initiated by Michael Rothenstein and a document about the aims of the proposed organization. By 1966 the membership of 32 artist printmakers included Valerie Thornton, John Brunson, Harvey Daniels and Sally McLaren.

Since these heady days, the PMC has gone from strength to strength and has never wavered in its belief in the creative potential of the original print. The group have continued to promote the art of printmaking with exhibitions that demonstrate the diversity of the print, with work of a very high standard both technically and conceptually. In addition they continue to cultivate a better understanding of prints and printmaking and encourage interaction between members and printmaking groups.

### Images

*Observed in High Spirits* (1967) by Agathe Sorel. Artist's Proof, Edition of 50, 450 x 560 mm

*Up the Valley (Kirchner Valley)* (2008) by Gail Mallatratt. Woodcut, 500 x 380 mm