SUMI PERERA RE

Having been awarded a residency in Venice this year, the artist tells us about the experience and how it has influenced her work.

I was humbled and delighted to receive the news that I was the first recipient of the guest artist full fellowship, six-week residency and solo show at the Scuola Internazionale di Grafica (SIDG) in Venice. Immediately I started formulating ideas on how to represent the alliance between the RE & SIDG with me acting as the conduit.

I am an interdisciplinary artist who makes interactive site-specific installations that often take on the narrative of an artistbook. I create multiple modules that can be re-sequenced and re-aligned to develop variable permutations and encourage participatory involvement, to share the final editorial control with the viewer to transform the ever-evolving work. I combine traditional printmaking techniques (etching, aquatint, mezzotint, embossing, screenprint, drypoint, monoprint, collagraph) with contemporary methods (computer numerical controlled, lasercutting, sandblasting, electronic circuits, electro-conductive inks) to create sound and light installations, activated by touch.

My first response to any project is to read and research, then experiment and play with a degree of uncertainty that allows me to generate multiple seemingly unrelated possibilities. I then define a common thread that helps modify and form a more cohesive body of work. I also visited the Venice Architecture Biennale and SIDG in November 2016 to reinforce my plans for the residency in 2017.

Liminal Spaces II in the Bibliotheca Scuola (library), sketchbooks & artistbooks

Stones of Venice, installation in Venice - tribute to John Ruskin

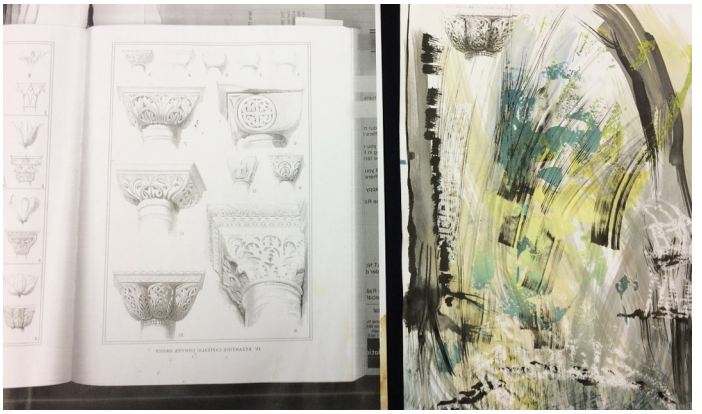
Among these trajectories, my response to John Ruskin's love for Venice and its architecture, especially his thinking as a social reformer and commentator and a combination of what I observed at most of the international pavilions helped me decide the direction I wanted to take with my work. Ruskin's writings, *Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, formed the main trigger points for the bulk of work leading up to the solo show. Stones, mud and sand were collected from my garden, combined with stones, mud and cement paint used by anti-grafitti artists in Venice, who were also invited to draw straight onto some of my prints.

Seven mezzotints of lamps, placed on a backdrop of monoprints and screenprints that lit up/switched off upon touch were designed with a nod to Ruskin and a wink to Martin Creed's Turner Prize-winning work No: 227 [a light going on and off for 5 seconds within an empty room]. These mezzotints were laboriously executed with prints taken at each stage of extreme darkness to light, celebrating the artisan qualities of printmaking.

Set up in 1969 by Lorenzo di Castro (director) and his mother Matilde Dolcetti (artist/tutor), assisted by Roberta Feoli (artist/technician) and Deirdre Kelly (artist/curator), SIDG run regular printmaking, book arts, calligraphy courses and workshops in addition to the extensive Artist In Residence schemes and a rolling calendar of graphic and art design courses and exhibitions.

I had already exhibited in TEXT, an artistbook exhibition curated by Kestutis Vasiliunas at SIDG in 2010. During this residency March-April 2017, I also contributed to two other exhibitions at SIDG, prior to my solo show. The first was a work titled: *Life is like a Box of Chocolates* (inspired by the book Forrest Gump by Winston Groom) for the Festival of Edible Books. I etched plates with architectural drawings of pasta shapes and used chocolate spread as ink to print on bread.

Lamps of Architecture, mezzotints, monoprints, screeenprints, touch reactive light installation & 'illuminated' manuscript



Research material and *Byzantine Capitals,* watercolour and drawing

The second exhibition, called *Volumen* was organized by a calligraphic group run by Kathy Shanks: Venetiae Incipit Scriptorium based at SIDG. Here I showed a three-panel artistbook: *Unbuilding Blocks XII [The Trilogy]* (etching, aquatint, embossing) that hung from the ceiling to the floor.

Many sketchbooks, drawings and photographs (exhibited within the Library of SIDG) were made within the SIDG apartments, during the commute (pedestrian or via vaporetto) to and from the studios, recording sounds (of church bell ringing during Easter and other feasts, the acqua alta warning sirens, the gondoliers serenading, the constant chugging of motor boats, and seagulls) which were incorporated into the sound installation *Inside Out-Outside In*.

Responding to the daguerreotypes favoured by Ruskin, I set up an alternate 'photo booth', reversing the gaze of the 'selfie' where I invited all the Artists In Residence, students, staff and visitors to pose for a snap. Most of the installations were constructed using prints held together by magnets that allowed variable 3D transformations. They were designed to throw shadows that kept changing during the day occupying a liminal space between the real and virtual, adding yet another evolving dimension to the work.

During the acqua alta (high tide) season some of the prints were clipped up and others lengthened further to capture and record the rising water that took on another morphology. A collaborative scroll that I initiated at Bankside Gallery, which had travelled to Cyprus and beyond, celebrating James Joyce and his contribution to books, was flown to Venice and worked upon by other artists at SIDG.

The installation format (flipchart portable books) and posters I designed for the solo show were a tribute to the Venetian Aldus Manutius (ca1452 – February 6, 1515) a leading scholar, typographer (inventor of the italic fonts and fore-runner of the paperback book: *libelli portatiles = little portable folios*). The calligraphic lettering I

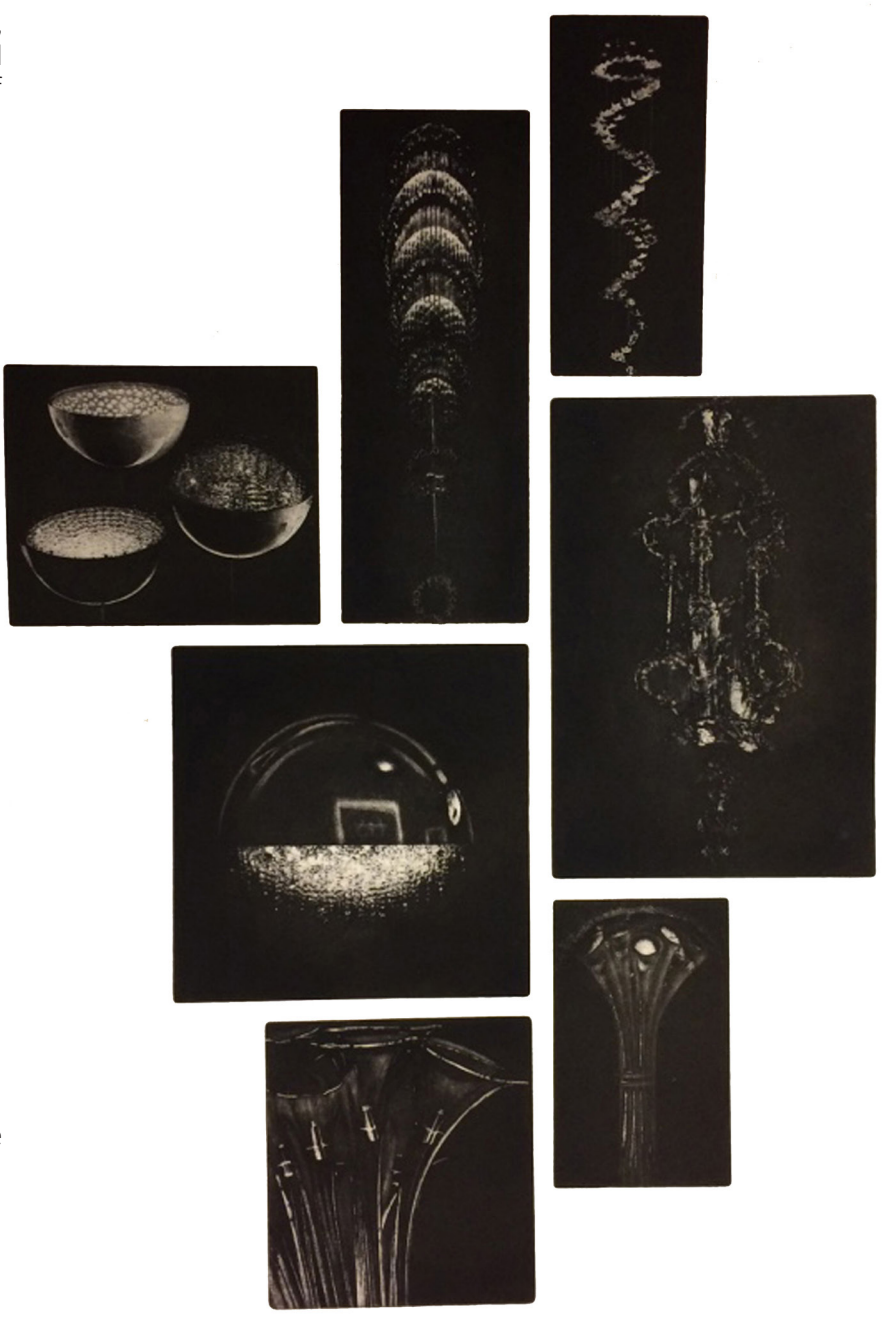
developed during workshops run by Terhi Hurst, inspired by Giacometti sculptures, were based on the side profiles of the Byzantine Capitals of columns that enthused Ruskin so much.

I could wax lyrical about the opportunities this residency offered me. I have so much more work in progress that I still need to finish. Some of these unfinished drawings using stones I asked my fellow resident artists to collect in Venice, were used as starting points for another residency on stone lithography in France at the Pierre Presse Atelier in a 9th century abbey in Marcilhac-sur-Cele. This culminated in the exhibition *Saxa Loquntuur (The Stones Speak)* within St Peter's abbey from May to June 2017. Most of the work I developed in Venice and a sound installation that I had designed to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death for the RE exhibition: *2B or Not 2B* (To Be Or Not To Be) were submitted for the John Ruskin Prize.

This year the prize considered the role of the artist as polymath which clearly Ruskin was. I was thrilled that I was shortlisted and selected for the exhibition *Hand & Eye, Master of all Trades in the Age of Jack* which is on at the Millennium Gallery in Sheffield till the end of October.

I returned to Venice again last month to see the Art Biennale and revisit SIDG for their current exhibition: *S for Scuola, G for Grafica*, featuring work from their own collection including mine. Will I return? Of course! Venice, the Venetians and the SIDG have captured my heart.

Sumi Perera RE



Seven Lamps of Architecture, mezzotints