

## The spirit of the age

**DIGITAL** Septuagenarian artist Gerry Baptist talks about his conversion to the digital cause with 'traditional' painter-etcher Tony Dyson VPRE

**TONY DYSON** I have known you for 12 years as painter and printmaker using traditional processes. How recently have you begun to produce computer-generated images and why?

**GERRY BAPTIST** Long before I met you Tony! The first time I used a computer was in about 1986 – a white Mac with a screen the size of A5 paper. Seeing a line appear on screen, when I moved the mouse, was magical. I can't claim that this was a moment of epiphany – I just doodled. But the first time I created images was later in Germany. A friend of mine had an advertising agency filled with computers with graphic pads and it seemed natural to find out what was possible. I wanted to work on sketches I had made, earlier that year, while teaching life-drawing at a yoga school in Greece; I thought I might develop them into a range of jewellery. I used an extremely simple black and white programme that came with the graphic pad. It was a delight to experiment and work through ideas in sketch form. I began to think of etching sheet silver with the figures I was drawing.

I eventually made black prints on transparent A4 sheets; my drawings were photo-etched into the silver sheets that were later used to make up the jewellery. What this showed me was that I could draw on a computer, making it a very effective method of creating images; this was a practical and extremely useful introduction to the business of computer drawing.

**TD** Do you miss the tactile satisfaction of directly manipulating material?

**GB** When I'm working, I really don't think about it. I feel the same seductive visual pleasure from creating an image on a screen as I do any other way. Using my imagination – that's what is important for me, not whether I'm using a copper plate or a screen.

**TD** How can working with what some may see as robotic computer intervention produce images equal in emotive power to those made by hand?

**GB** I think that is a misunderstanding of how a computer works; there's no Big Brother controlling your freedom, you're free to do what you want – though there are moments when 'The computer says NO!'. Numerous artists use computers either to produce digital art or to help them create paintings or other works. David Hockney confided, of his latest large-scale paintings at the *RA Summer Exhibition*: 'I couldn't have done that without a computer. No one could.'<sup>1</sup> And Gilbert & George began to use computers in 2003, helping them to work faster and explore new possibilities.<sup>2</sup>

**TD** But does this answer my question about sacrificing emotive power?

**GB** The emotive power surely comes from the artist not the tools or processes that he or she chooses to use.

**TD** Isn't the seductive ease of generating images through a computer a false trail?

**GB** Probably fresco painters said something similar when oil paints came along. I quote Walter Chamberlain on the history of etching: 'The process of etching and engraving as we know it originated largely as a faster and less demanding alternative to burin engraving'.<sup>3</sup> But what could be easier than a brush or a pencil? All artists have their own path to a deeper truth. Whether this leads them towards historic methods is much less important, surely, than what is produced and its relevance, not the difficulty in achieving it.

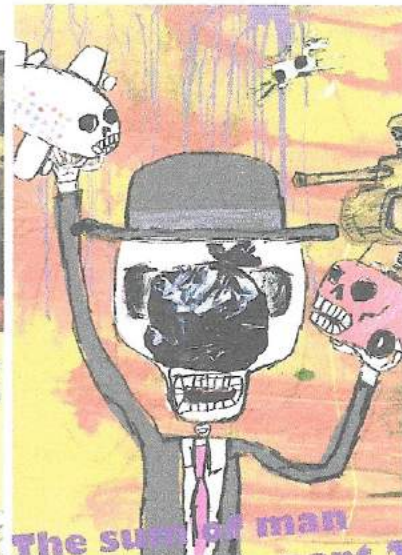
**TD** At the Wrexham Print International recently you won the John Purcell Prize and another of the prints you showed combined digital with screenprint. How do galleries react to your computer-generated prints?

**GB** Some galleries even five or six years ago were negative, mainly, I think, through not knowing what a computer print was or being concerned about colours fading – or because they didn't like my work! But today more and more show all types of computer and photographic prints.

**TD** Isn't there a crucial qualitative distinction between a print made via computer and one which has been handmade?

**GB** A computer doesn't take away the 'handmade' mark; I draw and control the process as I do when etching. Let me turn to Richard Hamilton, quoted in *Printmaking Today*: 'As time goes by' he says, 'I become increasingly aware of the irrelevance of making a distinction between one medium and another, or one process and another, or even one style and another.'<sup>4</sup>

**TD** Traditional printmakers have by and large valued craftsmanship whilst digital printmakers regard 'the concept' as all-important. What is your view?



GB I can't say I've heard those polarized views. There is a 'craft' to digital work – earning a technical skill, just as you must when etching. It is a false premise to think that a computer miraculously does it all for you any more than acid does when you scratch a line on copper. You need to know the type of acid, the kind of line you want and so the length of immersion time. You need different skills with a computer but all these do is to allow you, the artist, to create an image. It is just another useful tool, like a brush or etching needle.

TD Since to me it seems impenetrable, could you explain without using jargon how your images are built up on screen?

GB I was painting a series of abstracts that focused on man's relationship to the land. I remembered school books, which showed how, at various times, the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians or Macadonians had wept across vast swathes of land and the excitement of their achievements stayed with me. Even today we still interfere and encroach on other countries... The paintings began with simple shapes, then developed almost into battle scenes with paint brown and splattered – expressions of the dead of movement. I wondered how the dead would work on computer. As it turned out, they altered dramatically and eventually the paintings were led by ideas developed digitally.

Using Adobe Photoshop, I scanned old black and white maps to use as background and transferred the scans to Adobe Illustrator as, at the time, I hadn't any idea what size the final print would be. Photoshop, as anyone with a digital camera knows, has pixel-mapped imagery that shows up when the picture is enlarged too much; Illustrator, however, is a vector programme with no pixels and therefore images can be enlarged to almost any size. In both programmes, there are 'layers',

rather like on a screenprint; there is no limit to the number of colours you can use, so costs of screens for 'traditional' printing don't have to be considered. I began drawing shapes and colours following roughly the pattern of the land, adding and simplifying, changing colours and forms. When I felt I had enough character in the drawing, I began using strong, simple lines on more layers to suggest movement, similar to the maps from my school days. The thought was of our everlasting need to make change. The drawn lines were lost amongst the pattern work I had painted, so I contained them with a flat colour, making them important. The colours on the computer screen were so jewel-like, they sparkled; when I covered most of the pattern with a simple flat colour, it looked like a necklace thrown across the screen.

The next image started as an aquatint/drypoint etching for the *Small Print: Big Impression* touring exhibition (see p.10). Taking Magritte's painting, *The Son of Man*, as inspiration, I changed the apple to a black bin bag, which, for me, summed up our society's wastefulness and changed the title for what I felt – *The Sum of Man*. I wanted to enlarge upon the idea by including other pictures. Digital drawing lends itself to this as drawings can be swiftly and sometimes radically altered in colour size and composition, while still retaining the original work. I had sketches of cars, with skull-fronts; also sketches of aeroplanes with skull-faces (I later made carborundum prints from both), as well as photographs of some abstracts of mine. I 'collaged' the work together in Adobe Photoshop.

TD Tell me more about your use of screenprint and digital combined.

GB I've been working with Quentin King of Harwood King Printmaking, Newhaven, on several other prints: screen-

prints as well as digital. With my digital work, he takes layers from my computer files and makes silkscreens of them, printing them onto the digital prints. Quentin, an artist himself, has a wonderful ability to see a work and produce it exactly as the artist intended or else suggest ideas that enhance the image.

Alternatively, I make a drawing on an acetate sheet for him to print onto the digital print. Computer programmes have the capacity to produce extraordinary effects. As with etching or other processes, artists decide how they want to work via experimentation and experience, using only a fraction of what is technically possible. Diversity is part of what keeps art alive and I don't want to create a feeling of alienation with printmakers who use traditional methods. Computer art is here to stay – a method of creating images in the spirit of our age.

#### Notes

- 1 A A Gill, *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 17 June 2007
- 2 Gilbert & George: *Major Exhibition catalogue* Tate Modern, 2007
- 3 Walter Chamberlain, *The Thames and Hudson Manual of Etching and Engraving*, 1972
- 4 Pryle Behrman, 'Print polymath' *Printmaking Today*, Summer 2002

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#### Images, left to right

- Necklace and brooches 1991
- From a range of silver jewellery *Guildford Spectrum* 2002 (detail)
- Hexachrome digital print, 1,200 x 720 mm
- Topographik 2* 2001. Hexachrome digital print, 1,000 x 600 mm
- Why don't you bugger off and go enjoy the sun?* 2007
- Hard ground etching & aquatint, 300 x 300 mm
- The Three Graces decide that Fat is Fun* 2007
- Hexachrome digital print with screenprint gloss varnish, 600 x 800 mm (John Purcell award winner)
- The Sum of Man Part 2 after Magritte* 2007
- Hexachrome digital print with screenprint gloss varnish, 600 x 480 mm