

'Letting in the Light'

Opening of Susan Mannion exhibition at the Blue Egg Gallery, Wexford, 2 September 2016

Roger Bennett

I felt incredibly chuffed and honoured when Mary Gallagher invited me to speak at the opening of this exhibition. We all know Mary as the owner of one of the very best and most beautiful galleries in the country, putting on a hugely impressive number of superb exhibitions since she opened it in 2011. But there is also a side of Mary which is not so well known: she is a brave and articulate advocate for crafts and for craftspeople, prepared to speak out and to tilt at organisations and bureaucracy. This is terribly important at a time when the crafts community of designer makers is feeling quite vulnerable. Many art colleges here and in Britain, squeezed financially, have been shutting down courses in disciplines such as ceramics and glass-making; quite simply, it is much cheaper to put 100 students into a lecture theatre than to provide them with studio spaces, materials, equipment, technicians, etc. The rebranding of the Crafts Council of Ireland as the Design and Crafts Council of Ireland has sent breezes of anxiety into our studios. So, we are very lucky to have somebody as passionate and clear-sighted as Mary on our side, and I am delighted to have this opportunity to thank her for all her seen and unseen support of the crafts sector.

I have a very shameful confession to make: when Mary contacted me, I had to admit that I didn't know much about Susan Mannion. But in the last couple of weeks, I have had such fun, stalking Susan on the internet – how did we ever manage before? – and falling head over heels in love with her work. And then on Monday she called to our house and I was able to bombard her with questions. I would urge everybody to have a look at the website which she shares with her photographer husband Matthew Gannon, yewtreestudio.ie, where you will find a wealth of fabulous images and marvellously clear descriptions of techniques and of how she approaches her work. There is a fascinating blog, mostly written during residencies at the Dock in Carrick-

on-Shannon and the Cill Rialaig Retreat. Incidentally, my internet searching turned up the not insignificant fact that Susan's husband and my wife like the same brand of gin!

If you have already been able to have a look at the exhibition, you will have seen that she uses a variety of printmaking techniques – wood engraving, wood cut, lino cut – as well as the very different but not wholly unrelated discipline of copper enamelling. She says that of these wood engraving is her favourite. Because I work with wood myself, I was fascinated to learn something about the techniques. Wood engravers use extremely sharp blade-like tools to cut into the wood – the tools have wonderfully arcane names such as spitsticker, scorper, burin. The blocks are very hard and dense, boxwood or lemonwood, and the surface is the endgrain, as smooth as a mirror; they are 23.3mm thick, the height of type, as they have traditionally been used in printing to accompany text. The wood is so hard that the incising process is very slow, precise and painstaking; Susan has described to me how she must slow herself down before she starts working, and how the activity itself is meditative and calming. Wood cuts are different, in that the working is done on the side grain or plank of the wood; the tools are mostly u-shaped and v-shaped gouges; it's possible to take bigger cuts and so the artist can work more quickly.

In this exhibition Susan is showing pieces from the start of her career right up to now, including Japanese woodcuts which she worked on during a residency in Japan earlier this year. Her previous solo exhibition took place last year, 'A Raid into Dark Corners', in the Strule Arts Centre in her native Omagh, during the annual festival celebrating the Omagh writer Benedict Kiely. 'A Raid into Dark Corners' is a phrase which Seamus Heaney used about Benedict Kiely's writing. In that exhibition, Susan responded in particular to events and places from Benedict Kiely's novella 'Proxopera', which was set in and around Omagh at the height of the Troubles, and she also drew on her own intimate knowledge of the area, and on her own bank of memories. The phrase 'A Raid into Dark Corners' had a particular personal resonance for Susan who at the time was mourning her father's recent passing. The title of this

exhibition, 'Letting in the Light', refers to the healing process in Susan's life as she comes to terms with her bereavement – but 'Letting in the Light' also poetically captures the process in relief printing where the incised marks do not take ink at the printing stage and so come out as white or light. Thus, from dark to light: there is a happy balance between this exhibition and last year's.

I said earlier that I have fallen in love with Susan's work. I'd like to try to explain, briefly, why. As a maker myself, I delight in the superb craftsmanship and mastery of technique in Susan's art. I love the attention to detail, the exquisite precision. She is a perfectionist – even the frames are perfect in their detailing, individually made from walnut by a master craftsman. Susan is fascinated by patterns – in rocks, in cloud formations, ripple lines in water, trees against the sky, the textures of pavements. She has told me how she regularly goes walking with her sketchbook and ipad, photographing and drawing, collecting images which might serve as stimuli for new work. But she also sees the bigger picture, looking to the horizon both figuratively and physically. She was an archaeologist and a museum curator in her previous life, and it's not fanciful to see how this influences her interpretation of landscape, digging imaginatively through the layers of history, and analysing the marks made by people on the natural topography.

But I think that what appeals to me most is the rich sense of depth, a depth which comes from the various sorts of layering which occur in her work. This may be the physical layering of one colour over another, printing from one block then another. Or one image over another. For example, in 'Two Lovers', she has combined the tight lines of a black-and-white wood engraving of two rocks with the flowing lines of a woodcut, the blue water which surrounds and separates the rocks. Or a narrative image over a landscape image. In 'Two Lovers' she is responding to this description by Benedict Kiely in 'Proxopera':

“There is a place in the lake called the Blue Stones. Twenty feet out from the shore

and in shallow water two conical blue rocks stand up a few feet above the surface and look at each other as if they were in love, lovers turned to stone and unable for all eternity to touch or taste.”

Similarly, the apparently more abstract print 'Reflection I' was made by using two blocks, black overlaid with grey-white which reacted with the black and turned bluish. This picture shows the outline of her home town of Omagh, including the two rivers which meet to form the Strule, and this is overlaid with an image derived from a childhood memory, a memory of a bomb blast in which she saw plate glass shop windows splintering and falling silently. (I know this because Susan has told me; of course we don't need to know this to appreciate the picture and we can each interpret it through the lens of our own narrative.)

If you look at Susan's cv, you will see a very impressive list of prestigious exhibitions, including the Royal Academy of Arts summer show and regular inclusion in the RHA's annual show. You will also see a long list of residencies, courses and masterclasses, many of them at the West Dean College near Chichester. Susan is constantly adding strings to her artist's bow, learning new skills and techniques. Her recent residency at the foot of Mount Fuji to study Japanese wood cut techniques introduced her to a freer and more fluid method of print making, using softer woods, different tools, water-based inks instead of oil-based ones. For Susan, this type of print-making complements the very intense and concentrated process of her regular wood engraving.

And something rather different: at West Dean College Susan discovered the craft of copper enamelling, in particular enamelling on copper vessels. In many ways this seems to be the antithesis of wood engraving: hot and dramatic, working in three dimensions, on two round surfaces – interior and exterior. A whole new set of challenges. Susan describes how she uses the copper surface as a canvas, applying the glass and firing it, adding layers of colour in multiple firings and cutting back through the layers to the blackened copper, similar to the cutting back and and mark-making

of her print work. Unlike wood engraving, which is tight and controlled, there is an exciting element of chance in the enamelling process – when you open the kiln you are never quite sure how the piece will come out. Wood engraving is usually and traditionally black and white, although Susan does sometimes use colour and relishes the challenge of pushing out the boundaries. With the copper enamelling there are fewer restraints, and she is free to play with the full colour spectrum. I think these are gorgeous pieces. I love the thoughtful colour combinations and gradations, the allusions to the textures and shapes which are so important to her, such as the silhouettes of bare trees and shadows on water. And they are so tactile and sensuous, just the right size to cup our hands around and explore with our fingertips.

I will end with a short extract from the catalogue essay written by Terry Sweeney, the curator of the 'A Raid into Dark Corners' exhibition. I think this captures beautifully the essence of Susan's art practice:

“Susan Mannion seems to release an energy embedded in the compacted grain. She appears to inscribe with light, peeling away the past and fusing it with the present. The technique highlights her technical precision, her sensitive, close and accurate observation as well as her bold, strong draughtsmanship.”

And so I declare this wonderful exhibition open. Please look closely, and enjoy! Please tell all your friends and acquaintances and small enemies to drop everything and come see! And I hope that an outbreak of the strain of must-have measles hits the Blue Gallery, so that, by the time the exhibition closes, every piece will have a red spot.