

Published on the occasion
of the exhibition

Carole Shephard
A Path Less Travelled
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Northart, Tāmaki Makaurau

DIGGING DEEP

Essay by Helen Schamroth ONZM
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Notes

1. Carole Shephard: *The Territorial Divide: Critical Issues in Contemporary New Zealand Printmaking*, 1997
2. Ruth Pelzer-Montada, Editor: *Perspectives on Contemporary Printmaking: Critical writing since 1986*, published 2018
3. Jennifer Roberts: *The Pull of Print, Part 2 Reversal*
<https://rb.gy/kicekv>
4. Hastings Art Gallery, Te Whare toi o Heretaunga, 2021
5. Yves Klein Blue (YKB), which was developed and used to express the intangible aspects of human existence.
6. Jennifer Roberts: *The Pull of Print, Part 6, Alienation*
<https://rb.gy/kicekv>
7. Ruth Pelzer-Montada, Editor: *Perspectives on Contemporary Printmaking: Critical writing since 1986*, published 2018

Engaging with Carole Shephard's exhibition '*A Path Less Travelled*' (Robert Frost) is like reading an engrossing memoir where revelations invite the viewer into the artist's psyche. The titles of her works offer coded insights, while the multi-layered abstracted images encourage the viewer to dive deep to discover her innermost thoughts, her memories and her fears. The exhibition is personal, intimate in its content, never literal, but rather an evocation of her emotional responses, all expressed through the medium of print which she believes offers her many options.

Such honest revelations of her responses to life's challenges expose the vulnerability of an artist who cherishes her lifelong commitment to her art, fellow artists and students, alongside her life as a wife, mother and grandmother. She seldom shirks from this internal narrative as she explores her philosophy of life, and her perception and instinct guide her through memory and testimony. She creates an image of beauty while simultaneously offering a way to penetrate the surface in order to reveal what might be struggling to become evident.

The intellectual rationale that was most evident in her teaching and Master's thesis (1) has permeated her own art practice. The question of the place of print in the arts lexicon is an evolving story for her, whether from a modernist viewpoint or more latterly a post-modernist perspective. In a lifetime of making and teaching art, along with championing women artists, print has played a significant part in her arts advocacy and practice, and for a number of years she has expressed her concern for genres of work that have struggled for their rightful place in contemporary art history. Yet she has hope for a new wave of printmakers making their mark, some of whom are creating one-off images rather than multiples – a mode of working she also now mostly employs. Rather than analysing the technicalities of the print processes, the viewer is always encouraged to engage with the content, with what is evident, what is implied and what is concealed, while being exposed to her innermost thoughts.

She has not been alone in this thinking. In 2011 Jose Roca wrote in his essay *The Graphic Unconscious or the How and Why of a Print Triennial* (2): "Can the *ethos* of printmaking serve as a framework through which to understand contemporary artistic production? And, by extension, can a close reading of contemporary art from the perspective of the printed image productively illuminate our understanding of the world?" The question could well be asked of Shephard.

Another question might be asked of her – why persist with print apart from being subsumed by the addictive nature of the labour-intensive processes? The answer might be that active manual engagement is important to the artist, but even more that print provides a unique way of layering images and allowing her ideas to emerge. She has recently enjoyed working with clay which she finds calming and it is interesting that print has parallels with labour-intensive craft processes, which have equally been relegated to being less important genres in an art historical sense. This has never put this artist off her chosen medium.

While working with clay provides consolation, she returns to print in order to really probe her emotions and to truly express herself. Print is a perpetual challenge, notwithstanding her mastery of the processes. Creating works with multiple layers is fraught and continues to induce a certain level of anxiety as she grapples with content revealing her deepest thoughts. In the 70th Mellon lecture series *Contact: The Pull of Print* (3) Jennifer Roberts states that printmaking destabilises us and leads us to think differently. The corollary might be when an artist like Shephard reveals the challenge of understanding the human condition, the viewer also becomes destabilised.

In Shephard's essay *It's the Why*, 2021, which accompanied the exhibition *Out of the Shadows* (4) she writes 'At a time when art is noisy, brash and attention-seeking, print realises the appeal of silence, contemplation and in-depth scrutiny. Silence in this context is not about absence or invisibility, but a conscious desire to make the unknown, known.'

The way she makes the unknown, or unrecognised, known is sometimes subversive, at times assertive, as in the work *Proof of Intent 1 – Blueprint for Yves*, 2013. She uses collagraph, screen printing, flocking and constructed objects, and directly expresses the quest for legitimacy of print. On a grid of aptly chosen ultramarine blue squares are printed the words PRINTVERSUSPAINT – a protest at the lack of print visibility in the *New Zealand Printmaking Award*, run by the Waikato Society of Arts. The wall work is bookended by small constructed objects in glass vitrines bracketing the insistent debate. The museum-like presentation of the sculptural objects appear to recall Shephard's doctorate exhibition *Lieux de Memoire: the object, the artist and the museum (The Site of Memory)*, 2002. In 2023, ten years later, this major award will separate print from painting, thus giving it equal status, a move for which Shephard has repeatedly agitated.

The assertive title *Proof of Intent 1* could also reference the late 70s and 80s when she first advocated for women's art, challenging the rationale for the lack of women in significant exhibitions. But it's equally a statement about the present when women artists are still less visible in high profile exhibitions, and print is yet to be seen as a medium worthy of exhibition, critique and finding a rightful place in Aotearoa New Zealand art history. Shephard's use of a multiplicity of processes producing layers of images offer her a path to exploring life's challenges as well as her emotional responses, without revealing all in a single quick viewing. Nowhere is this more evident than in what she describes as her 'mental health file'. Her assertiveness and her vulnerability are palpable in works that tackle more openly discussed 21st century attitudes to issues of ageing and mental wellbeing.

I am NOT a Butterfly 2019 is a large work that employs relief, drypoint etching and flocking to evoke a Rorschach inkblot test, once used as a psychological analysis tool, subsequently discredited and dubiously brought back into recent medical use. The image is printed over two large sheets of paper that butt up to each other, the 'seam' joining the elements. Jennifer Roberts (6) describes how the mind of a print can exist somewhere in the seam. It could be that Shephard is pushing through the seam to seek what is concealed, perhaps to enquire: What is truth? What is history? This seminal work that was exhibited in a joint invitational exhibition of prints from the Netherlands and Aotearoa New Zealand, *Distant Kinship: Verre Verwanten* which travelled in both countries.

Shephard describes the period during which she created the works for *Distant Kinship* as one of her darkest times, and the works from 2019 certainly reflect this. Some of the titles of these works, like *Letting the waters settle*, *The nightmare garden*, *If I close my eyes*, *The depth of darkness*, *Like a kite in a hurricane* and *Waiting for the thunder* eloquently convey her thoughts. She uses silk aquatint, an alternative to more traditional mezzotint, to achieve a dark velvety softness, and teams this with collagraph and gold leaf, the whole image overlaid with a linear screen produced using woodcut to tell a story of beauty and pain. In *Letting the waters settle*, the screen hovers over swirling water that catches light, like a hint of optimism. It's as if she wants to protect herself while creating some distance between her and the viewer in order to regain equilibrium, allowing artist and viewer to pause, to breathe deeply.

Her life changed when Shephard moved from Auckland to Kāwhia with her husband in 2006. She acknowledges that the rural setting altered how she perceived the importance of her environment. Her emotional response became apparent in the series *Like a Thief in the Night*. Ideas, scraps and fragments from the past combined with those of the present explore the relationship between human beings and their physical and metaphysical world.

One of this series, *The Heartbeat* 2019, using drypoint etching and chine-collé, is a poignant response to the moment in 2016 when her husband John had a near-death cardiac arrest and she kept him alive until help arrived. The series became an emotional response – not reflecting, but tapping into the memory. Never literal, her work is imbued with an intense feeling, layers densely superimposed as if shutting out her panic. Only the title provides a clue and reveals how memory plays such an important role in her oeuvre.

An extension to this series was *Finding/Making Room to Breathe* where drypoint etching, monoprint, collagraph and chine-collé provide a rich print vocabulary. At times she has reconfigured existing plates and imagery into deliberate complex compositions, and what is most notable is how the overlapping components, each beautiful in itself, appear to nudge each other to allow white space – the breathing space – to emerge. 'I wanted to create a sense of fracture and collision with the opportunity for escape – survival. Hence the open spaces.'

Ageing and memory are recurring themes. The artist acknowledges that memories can fade or be disconnected from their original context. Shephard 'Is memory simply a flickering suggestion? What is this urge to reconstruct from simply a trace? ...For me memory feels like pieces of disused clay slapped onto and against one another – an irregular mound of lumpy fragments – signifying not an ordered mind but a characteristic of the entire ageing body. If memory is stored throughout the body as has been suggested, is context-dependent and highly sensory, cues can be anything at all.'

As if to validate Shephard, Deirdre Brollo writes in her essay *Untying the knot: memory and forgetting in contemporary print work* (7)

'Imprint and impression, trace and recollection, are deemed inseparable; without corresponding physical trace, no memory is possible.' She goes on to say 'While contemporary art practice has shown considerable interest in memory as a subject, such interest often manifests as metaphorical representations of memory, of imprint or impression. In seeking to evoke a sense of trace or touch, it presupposes that this physical proximity, the evidence of this closeness, represents an authentic record or 'memory', **T.I.M.E.L.A.P.S.E.** takes prints into the third dimension and reveals Shephard's acceptance of ageing. The handmade laser-cut accordion book comprises woodcuts, assembled in collaboration with artist Beth Serjeant, and two sculptural objects as bookends. One is a glass vitrine with a sample of her current hair plus samples of different colours, the other a silver-framed tortoiseshell hair comb that belonged to her grandmother and a sample of her mother's hair. Beautiful long curly red hair had been a signifier of Shephard's persona for many years, not that she always considered it beautiful. Apart from occasionally meddling with the colour chemically, the colour has modulated to a gracious pale white/grey. For her, documenting the changes that have occurred over 75 years provided a tangible way of understanding and accepting the hair that characterised her Irish ancestry and events in her life.

Shephard has visited parts of Ireland where her ancestors lived. *Standing Stones* 2021 (gallán or menhirs in Irish) is her response to the numerous stones that she describes as standing tall and proud in farmland and fields. She admired their sculptural qualities, the cover of lichen and mosses displaying the passing of time. When researching them she discovered they could be perceived as a marker between the living and the dead – symbolism she has used in a number of works, often in the form of a shadow – a recurring symbolic element. To her delight she came across the incredibly perceptive writing and drawing about shadow by 7-year-old Romany Sharkey which is included in the exhibition.

It is a fitting coda to an exhibition that offers visual delight along with powerful personal insights into the human condition. *Digging deep* is more than an excavation – the insights are given form, articulated through mastery of print and its possibilities.