

Hidden Mentor

OPINION Lithographer Gini Wade's hidden mentor works in a different medium but finds both the artistic approach and subject matter of Marcelle Hanselaar inspire her own image making

When I was asked to write this article, I was intrigued by the idea of a hidden mentor. Who might this person be? This question led me to consider the recent development of my work and those who had helped and inspired me. After a long career as an illustrator, I took a slight swerve into printmaking via Mike Clement's workshops at the Sydney Nolan Trust. Bitten by the bug, I then did an MA in Fine Art at Aberystwyth School of Art, where there is an excellent printmaking department headed by Paul Croft RE TMP. I specialised in lithography, and there's no doubt that, as my tutor, Paul was my official mentor.

I had to consider the difficult transition from illustrator to artist/printmaker. Illustrations are usually outer-directed, made to complement a text. Fine art is inner-directed and heir to different traditions. I had to think in what stream my work could be placed. I had little attraction for the conceptual canon that still dominates the 21st century art scene but felt I could fit into that figurative, narrative genre, which is also a woman's eye view of the world, exemplified by the work of Paula Rego.

In 2008, while doing my MA, I was very much impressed by an exhibition of work by Marcelle Hanselaar at the Aberystwyth School of Art Gallery. Her work ticked all the boxes for me – figurative, narrative, with that female quality of 'underneathness' that I valued in Rego's images. For me, 'underneathness' implies an exploration of the atavistic underbelly of human relationships, with a strong flavour of subversion. Hanselaar's exhibition included both oil paintings and etchings executed with technical mastery; traditional techniques combined with a fiercely modern sensibility.

Hanselaar reserves the night for her etchings, that more inward time that allows her imagination to go deeper and darker. Her etchings are nearly always black and white. Her subject matter usually draws on her own life. However, they are also universal experiences that range from family and sexual dynamics, desire, pain, grief, and the conventions that bind women. She uses animals, masks and other personal iconography, such as a bed of nails, to denote the savage feelings that lie beneath polite conventions. She has also made many psychologically penetrating self-portraits. In more recent years, her work has extended beyond women's experience to a preoccupation with war and other forms of human cruelty.

Over the years we have become good friends. We have much in common, being nearly the same age, and having a rebellious and adventurous past. However, I feel she is my senior in terms of art, partly because she has been a painter/printmaker for much longer than myself, but mostly because her work is just so good – something to aspire to. She is also extremely professional, and has attained a respected position in the art world. I love the fearless, take no prisoners, quality of Hanselaar's work, which is lightened by compassion and delightfully dark humour.

I realise that she truly is my hidden mentor, as not only do I learn from looking at her work, but also from her excellent advice on art practice and career strategies, such as recommending good print biennales and exhibitions, to get one's work known.

Although Hanselaar's favourite print technique is etching and mine is lithography, I have learnt much from her approach to image making. For example, how she uses the harshly bitten line to express



her often savage subject matter. Using her painterly eye, she emphasises the drama of her images through contrasting tones. She works and re-works her prints through different states to get the maximum expression of meaning. Etching lends itself to making changes. It is not quite so easy with lithography, but it is possible to make deletions, and additions after counter-etching, and her example has helped me to become more adventurous. Hanselaar is also attracted to exploring lithography. From time to time, I have helped her with litho techniques – sometimes mentorship works both ways!

Reflecting on the extent of Hanselaar's influence on my work, I realise it is quite subtle. Although our work occupies more or less the same area, we both have our quite independent visions. My subject matter tends to be lighter; however, I am inspired to match Hanselaar's seriousness of intent and moral engagement in my work. She also gives me helpful technical hints for oil painting. I feel extremely fortunate that she is my friend and mentor. When we discuss my work, I know she will always give perceptive and totally supportive advice.

Notes

Gini Wade's print *Home 2 – Regeneration* was the winner of the Welsh Prize, National Open Art Competition 2016

Images

Between a Rock and a Hard Place from *The Crying Game* series (2017) by Marcelle Hanselaar. Etching and aquatint, 200 x 250 mm, edition of 30

Home 2 – Regeneration (2016) by Gini Wade. Lithograph, 270 x 420 mm