



Signs and Symbols

ARTIST teacher and Master Printer **Paul Croft** RETMP talks to Gini Wade about his retrospective at MOMA, Wales, and how alphabets have influenced his work

Gini Wade Tell me about your early life.

Paul Croft Growing up in Belfast, my parents are artists and my sister an art historian, so art was part of life. Northern Ireland in the '70s was overshadowed by the Troubles so Edinburgh College of Art [1981-1986] provided an opportunity to escape, broaden horizons, complete a four-year BA and postgraduate year.

GW What sort of training was it?

PC A traditional college, the emphasis was on drawing and painting, object drawing and still-life. This influenced how I think and compose images; drawing, still-life and assemblage remain important to me.

GW What attracted you to print?

PC Method, materials, process and *thinking through process*. For me, printmaking is a visceral, hands-on activity. Also the communal atmosphere – students and staff from all disciplines interact, literally bump into each other: that sense of community is crucial in educational workshops where students learn from observing, collaborating and helping each other in the studio.

GW Tell me about your time in Japan.

PC In 1992, a grant from The Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation¹ enabled me to travel to Japan. I was impressed by the juxtaposition of futuristic *Blade Runner*² culture with ancient Shinto and

Buddhist shrines and temples. For an artist interested in visual language, it was the calligraphic nature of Japanese culture that was inspiring. I was intrigued by the array of Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji³ characters seen as black on white or white on blue. Incomprehensible! Their pictographic quality encouraged me to borrow, adapt and synthesize their signs and symbols.

GW And how did Tamarind affect your career?

PC In 1994, a second grant from the Greenshields Foundation allowed me to enrol on the Professional Printer Training Programme and qualify as a Tamarind Master Printer in 1996. Tamarind provided me with the technical dexterity to become a competent lithographer: to draw, etch and print from stone and plate. I now have a tripartite role as an artist making prints, Master Printer collaborating with other artists, and educator teaching printmaking at The School of Art, Aberystwyth. The experience also led to my writing two books⁴ and, in 2005, I was elected to the Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers [RE].

GW How did your retrospective show come about?

PC As I turn 50 this year, it made sense for it to be a retrospective of 30 years' work. Curating it provided an opportunity to reflect upon themes and motifs that continue to inspire me.

GW Tell me about the earliest print on show.

PC *Stowell's Still Life* [1983] was my first successful etching. Comprising found objects: angular girder, metal fence tips, slate and rusting metal, this print takes account of the anonymity of found objects and the potential for artefacts to assume new meanings. That such objects could evoke menacing connotations was a revelation. In composition, flattening of space has always been intentional – perhaps inspired by layering in printmaking – the image is disassociated from the original still-life and the print becomes an object in its own right; artefacts assume symbolic meaning, they become