

THE ART OF THE ACCIDENT: Ruth Channing's Technique

By Jennifer Hylton

When looking at Ruth Channing's work it is immediately apparent that she treasures the expressive potential of her media, drawing attention to the materials and to her process of making as much as to the image itself. For Channing, getting physically involved is essential - she describes her approach as "tactile, dirty, and messy" – and the vitality of the method is integral to, indeed inseparable from, the dynamism of her work.

Although fluent in many media, Channing almost always works spontaneously, eliciting the magic of the accidental. Whether as a printmaker, draftswoman, painter, or sculptor, she chooses to solve aesthetic challenges organically, allowing each new image to become an act of discovery. Along the way, accidents become incidents, and incidents become elements in the development of visual ideas. She embraces the unforeseen. "I want you to see the mistakes," she says, echoing a principle she learned in Paris at the workshop L'Atelier 17, led by printmaker Stanley William Hayter. Hayter's influence on Channing was profound. "His workshop was *dedicated* to the experimental," she says. "That's how I learned - you try anything. The 'mistakes' could be better than what you planned, your subconscious being richer than your conscious."

This interplay of the deliberate and the incidental is especially evident in Channing's printmaking. Whether etching or engraving, she refuses to begin with a clean, perfect copper plate. While other artists tend to fight or obscure material imperfections, Channing turns the idiosyncrasies into prized points of interest, seeking out plates with scratches and blemishes and weaving those details into the image as she works. She also draws attention to the tactile in her choice of paper – high-end material like Hannemuhle, Rives BFK, or Pescia, with a bumpy weave – working a warm, thick, black ink, often tinged with brown, across the surface, and sometimes even grinding her own inks for the most pure connection possible to her materials. To ensure that the impurities are always reproduced along with the textured backdrops and sinewy richness of her own line, Channing keeps her editions low, rarely pulling more than twenty images from a plate.

It is clear that Channing is a master of materials in her use of both aquatint and etching, engaging the processes for multiple effects. In *Yvar at the Piano* (2006), she emphasizes the depth of the pianist's black jacket, an area made by deeply-bitten aquatint, by wiping the surface of her plate clean, resulting in an image of dramatic tonal contrast; in other works, she brings drama, expression, and individual character to the image by leaving ink on the surface of her plate, a process evocative of Rembrandt. In *The Forger* (2006), Channing leaves only a small portion of the image untouched by surface ink. "The forger started out as a line etching, with lots of stuff in his cell, even a jailer," she explains. "The more I covered up, the more it evoked jail. At the same time, of course, the more he became personally free - it's just him and his art." In all these uses of ink to obscure her own line, Channing effectively creates by destroying, using the medium itself to rein in the image and pare it down to the essential.

In the suite of 23 etchings based on madrigals of the Renaissance composer Carlo Gesualdo – and especially Madrigal 8 and Madrigal 13 (1996) – Channing's love of material is equally evident, using the multiple flecks, pits, and wispy scratches of the plate to enhance and compliment her velvety-rich trembling line. She adds layers to this dense and active surface, creating a dramatic tonal field that encloses her sensual, cropped figures through a high-contrast aquatint. In *The Doge's Carnival* (2000), Channing also surrounds the etched lines of her beguiling man and woman with high contrast, but here she allows the aquatint to veil her figures, creating a grainy superimposed sheen in the foreground that pulls our attention away from the subject matter of the image to the material surface of the print. This spatial ambiguity between figure and ground mirrors the tension between the characters in the image itself. In addition, Channing creates yet another texture and tone in the lower portion of the image, brushing acid directly onto the plate in the technique known as spit bite, to create and even greater tension and dynamism.

For Channing, all media yield an act of self-discovery, but she is happiest when etching, because she feels that it sates both her emotional and her physical instincts. As one of the most direct of all printmaking processes, etching encourages the freedom of line and rapidity of handling – evident in works like *Mars Worshipping Venus* (2006) and *Woman with Turtle* (2006) – that lets Channing’s hands keep up with her protean sensations. “I discovered that in etching I could express content that I couldn’t express in any other medium,” she says. “Digging into a metal plate to draw has a primal and sculptural quality. It liberates my imagination.” Even when engraving, a technique in many ways more difficult because it requires the artist to carve directly into a resistant plate, Channing’s lines remain fluid, almost calligraphic. *Women of Paris* (2006), with its quick and competent line, is a perfect example of the artist’s cool confidence and her comfort in the medium.

But Channing’s love for materials, process, and experimentation are also evident in her paintings and drawings. In *Lady in Bath with Dog* (2007), the artist uses walnut ink, breathing an immediately-felt warmth and intimacy into the picture. By preparing the canvas through a washer/dryer cycle to create wrinkling, then surfacing it with layer upon layer of light ink washes, Channing gives the drawing a physical and textural identity apart from its subject matter, and creates space in an entirely innovative way, until the final image becomes like a kind of graffiti upon an aged and crumbling fresco. The ink and conte drawing *Pregnant Nude and Bald Artist* (2006) also has a dominant physicality, its background made of delicate all-over scribbles. These marks serve much the same function as scratches in her prints, drawing attention to the surface and material, and allowing the viewer to share in Channing’s delight with the art of making.

The tension between image and surface infuses Channing’s work in other ways, as well. In *Artist and Model* (2006) she paints a frame onto the canvas to create a sense of space that brings attention to the painting as a flat object (and substitutes for traditional space-creating devices, like perspective). The curtains in the image add to the picture’s flatness, making us aware of the materiality of paint. The painterly surface of *Circe* (2004), which frames a mythological sorceress surrounded by a sea of Philip Guston pink, has an expressive and sensuous tactility. In this work Channing incorporates letters – another form of surface patterning – that string together without meaning, creating the effect of text without the need to understand words. In *Pregnant Nude Lace Curtain* (2005) and *LuLu* (2005), the artist uses lace to create a consistent surface weave that interferes with our reading of the pictures as three-dimensional spaces. The painting *Mars and Venus* (2004) superimposes a modern-day version of Mars and Venus framed on top of a larger, more abstract rendition of the mythological figures, conflating inner and outer image: pieces of the larger image invade the space of the smaller one, while the smaller “picture” sits directly on top of the larger one, acting as an opaque screen that forbids us visual access to the image beneath.

Whether drawing attention to the format of her medium or engaging the accidental, Channing’s work highlights the elements of process and making, sharing her passion for materiality with the viewer. Regardless of her medium, the artist constantly surprises and challenges conventions with her unrelenting experimentation. By pushing the boundaries of technique and taking risks, by allowing chance and serendipity to permeate her process, Channing hopes that something magical will happen. It does.

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