

Malcolm Christian interviewed by Elza Miles

The 25th anniversary of Caversham Press is commemorated by a series of three exhibitions: *Hats off!* at Tokara in Stellenbosch, *People, Prints and Process - Twenty Five Years at Caversham* at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg and *South Africa: Artists, Prints, Community Twenty-Five Years at Caversham Press* at the Boston University, USA. Although the emphasis of the three exhibitions seemingly falls on the multifaceted processes that canalised creativity at Caversham, my intention is to lift the veil and introduce the idealist-dreamer, **Malcolm Christian** who is the inspiration and living force hiding behind the scenes.

EM: one tends to ignore you **Malcolm Christian** whenever the renowned Caversham Press (established in 1985), as well as Educational Trust (1993-9) and Centre for Artists and Writers (1999-) conjure up. Yet, right at this point, after the 25 year period of the press' existence and expansion, I insist that we halt for a moment to get to know **Malcolm Christian**, the founder.

You were born in Durban on 10th October 1950. Do you think your star sign triggered your interest in art? Did anything extraordinary happen when you were born or when you were still very young?

MC: Yes, I was born at noon on the 10/10/50, the third child of four in a staunchly religious and loving family and lived the first 21 years of my life in Durban and in the same house. The only unusual aspect was I was a very large baby, 10lbs 6ozs - my poor mother! Like most, I am a product of inherited genetic makeup, upbringing, education and individual characteristics.

A striving towards balance, harmony and having difficulties in coming to a decision rapidly, or as one of my favourite and much teased saying, *learning to trust the process*, could be placed at the feet of the Scales of Libra. When thinking about the notion of balance, whether in a personal or broader judgemental context, it is the momentary pause or stasis, in amongst the ongoing dynamic of life that provides our fleeting understandings, insights that guide the decision in our lives. Is this not one of the most valuable gifts that we need and can give in this time of the instantaneous, the immediate, an opportunity to pause and reflect?

EM: As a child, did you have a preference for specific clothes or toys? Imagine you were to participate in the Baggage exhibition which you hosted in the Hourglass Project (2000-1) what would have been your luggage?

MC: When you ask that question it makes me think immediately of Gabisile Nkosi's Linocut, In my bedroom. On her arrival at Caversham as part of an international residency with three other artists, I showed her to the cottage and bedroom where she would spend the three weeks. On enquiring whether this was suitable, she replied that it was extraordinary - "It's just like a hotel, Malcolm". Through my eyes it provided a single bed and other basic necessities. So in enquiring further she responded, 'In my bedroom at home in Umlazi Township, we have a bedroom of similar size, but within it there are two three-tier bunks in which each of my sisters and their child sleep at night- a bedroom for twelve. Through this experience I have become aware that my bedroom at home is not the same for all and in this she taught me to recognise the Baggage of Presumption. The luxury of personal space which I took for granted for her was such a rare gift. Much to the chagrin of her sisters', who were fearful that it could be viewed as a negative personal/family indictment, Gabi

created the most eloquent comforting view of the Umlazi bedroom bathed in gentle light and colour which transformed horror into a shared sense of belonging for all her see this work.

So for me the notion of personal *Baggage* is complex, pervasive, permeating all aspect of our everyday lives, seemingly un-reversibly restrictive, diminishing and demeaning our human spirit. But through the process and rituals of interrogation and courage it can be transformed from something not to be jettisoned but an indispensable suitcase in which we carry meaning in our lives.

EM: What were the main interests in your youth? Do you recall any drawings/paintings/sculptures you made as a child? What is your favourite musical instrument and what was the band called, in which you played? Tell me more about that phase in your life. Could that and your experience with the meditating yogi fit in with the story-telling project you also hosted?

MC: Choosing a life path in the visual arts was a surprise for all, not having done it at school and after false starts in Architecture and Accounting. My majoring in sculpture when I look back probably reflects a childhood passion for building 'things' with much-treasured tool-sets and being an avid collector of sticks and stones of evocative shape or texture, the latter which still holds a fascination for me. Whilst at school the closest thing to an involvement in the arts was as a drummer in a teenager band during the Pop era of the 60's playing at school dances and festive celebrations.

My later and ongoing interest in matters spiritual is something integral and valuable to me. It is a means by which I learn to listen with a different ear. It provides a language, structure whose sole purpose is not to communicate specific meaning and that at once amplifies the uniqueness of each of us whilst reinforcing that we are part of a common continuing search for meaning and relevance. It is bound up with the notion of giving dignity and worth to a life which we share through the sound of our stories.

EM: What inspired you to follow a career in Fine Arts? Did you have art as a school subject?

C: Looking back, so many of my life choices have come out of a sense of unease, an instinctive and intuitional rather than solely a strategic decision - driven by vocation, rather occupation or comfortableness.

Going to Art School in Durban, then known as the Natal College for Advanced Technical Education, was because of its reputation. It was a vibrant creative hub during the early 1970's. It attracted a staff and students who later taught at many of the Art Departments throughout South Africa and reached prominence. However, it also reflected the exclusion and privilege afforded under the rule of apartheid.

EM: who were your teachers and fellow students at Art School (Natal Technical College)? Why did you focus on printmaking and specifically screen-printing? Did you have any role models?

When and where did you get to know Ros (nee?), who was to become your wife and ever supportive life companion?

MC:

During my three year course my focus was in Sculpture with no printmaking experience. During my final year I took a separate qualification in Photography in which I taught prior to undertaking postgraduate study England on being awarded an overseas scholarship.

The choice of Croydon College of Design was because they offer a sculpture and film-making programme which seemed to combine both my areas of interest. However on arrival this didn't live up to expectations and I asked to join their renowned International Postgraduate Printmaking Programme even though I lacked printmaking experience. I spent the remainder of the year working in etching, my only formal training in printmaking to date. The physical tangible processes involved in intaglio connected with my affinity with tactile sculpture processes and a love of tools, whilst the opportunity to work with artists from many different countries, allowed me to appreciate the universality of core issues with the uniqueness of individual perception and expression. This was reinforced when Caversham began running international programmes in the late 1990's.

In 1970 just prior to my starting Art School, I met Rosmund Davey, Ros, who was training to become a Home Economics teacher and on completion of her course she joined me in London where we were married. Her training certainly provided her with the skills and knowledge for a role when Caversham Press came into being whose reputation amongst artists was not simply for printmaking but all the memorable meals that Ros prepared. She made food and the rituals around breaking-bread an integral part of the Caversham Experience.

On our return to Durban in mid- 1975, we both taught, Ros at a local high school and I part-time in printmaking at three arts departments in Durban, M. L. Sultan College and the University of Durban-Westville and at NCATE prior to being appointed head of printmaking at Natal University, Pietermaritzburg. Five years later, I established the departments in Screenprint and Lithography at University of the Witwatersrand

EM: Why did you choose to study at the Croydon College of Design in Surrey? How did you benefit from your studies and stay in England? Was the approach there different from the one in SA? Why did you return to SA? Did your *Implement Series* reflect on your return? In *no 2* of the series you showed a spade: what does it imply, and the other implements? How in hindsight, in connection with what you had achieved at Caversham would you interpret these tools?

MC:

That is interesting, I haven't thought about those prints for decades, not even making my own prints in the studio at Caversham. Whilst teaching, which I loved especially the connection on a one on one basis, I always found that if I tried to work on my own work then I saw the student's requests as intrusions, something that built resentment in a solitary pursuit. I always remember what the lithographer and calligrapher Ben Shan said in *The Shape of Content* appertaining to the teaching of art in institutions by artists – we start by being primarily artists and secondary teachers but before long we become secondary artists and secondary teacher. It is why I decided that I would put my creative endeavour into being a spade in other's hands, a collaborator, sharing resources, knowledge and responsibility

Looking back at that image, it reflects the dignity icon- like status of something that is used for menial tasks carrying the patina of hands, a residual reminder of other's hard labour that allowed us the privilege of living and realising visions. That this comes with the responsibility to share these benefits as a source of recognition and affirmation of our human spirit, not separated, exclusive but empowered, integrating the duality of growing ourselves in order to increase our contribution to others.

It also recognises that building our lives starts with the raw materials of self-interest and to this is added those are the blocks both tangible and ephemeral which expand us into the creative beings. As with the spade used to dig foundations and mix the mortar for binding the blocks enabling us to build wider and higher, our creative spirit and legacy is like the water which is required to evaporate in order to provide the strengthen and sustainability. This creative spirit is not lost but reforms in a continuing cycle and it is this understanding that gives us the courage to embrace change and to build in hope.

The artist brings something into the world that didn't exist before, and he does it without destroying something else. -John Updike, writer (1932-2009)

EM: what inspired you to do a master's degree in Fine Arts, what was the subject of your thesis and who was your supervisor?

MC: The commitment to further study after returning to South Africa was because of my role as a teacher which within the formal institutionalised context, qualifications are a pre-requisite. But beyond this it provided a focus and discipline for me to expand my knowledge in the area of printmaking even though as the research title, *The object in print and the print as object* suggested I still recognised my affinity for the tactile.

EM: on your return from overseas you lectured printmaking at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, did you enjoy teaching? Why did you move to teach in Johannesburg at the University of the Witwatersrand?

MC: The happiest times of teaching were at Technikons, now known as Universities of Technology. There one had the luxury of uninterrupted time with the students who weren't rushing off to lectures. The move from UKZN Pietermaritzburg to the University of the Witwatersrand came about through my participation in a sculpture completion and where I met the newly appointed Professor Alan Crump. Through his instigation, printmaking was being established as a Major option for Fine Art students to select. Etching taught by Maestro, Pino Cattaneo, had been offered as a minor for many years and my role was to establish the screen print and Lithography departments. Time spent there not only grew my professionalism but provided the network of colleagues, artists and institutions that formed the basis of those who were to use The Caversham Press facilities.

EM: At the time you decided to move to the countryside you and your family lived in Johannesburg, why did you make such a drastic decision? Do you recall any similar decisions in your life?

MC: My time at Wits was one of enormous growth and challenge. We had two very young children, had just built our house Pietermaritzburg when I decided to take up the position which proved to be a wrench for Ros but who was as ever supportive.

As I said the move to Johannesburg was an essential part of my growth. I always think that Wits made one decide what you wanted to do with your life and without the support and network that I developed Caversham would have come into existence. Even though exciting and stimulating, there was a deepening sense of unease, an unnatural fit for me in the exclusive nature of formal educational institutions at that time.

This was also reflected in Ros and the family, who found it difficult to settle. I had been approached by UCT to fill a position as head of printmaking, so in some ways the dynamic/mindset of change was already part of our thinking.

EM: How did you and Ros find the derelict 1878 Wesleyan Methodist Chapel that became your home and studio in the midlands of KwaZulu-Natal?

MC: At this time, we visited dear friends at Caversham Mill Pottery to break our journey to Durban where we spent time with family. David and Michele Walters who founded Caversham Mill Pottery had been our neighbours and our children had gone to pre-primary school together when I was lecturing at UN (Pmb). That evening David and I walked along the dirt road in the peace and quiet of the country side, an extreme contrast to the loud energy of the city and came across the abandoned chapel. Climbed over the padlocked gate and walked around the graveyard, peering through broken dusty windows. There was an instant connection coloured by my romantic character already seeing it transformed in a collaborative printmaking studio, a place for continued 'spiritual' work, not restricted to particular doctrine, creed or colour but in the form of the creative spirit – accessible to all who needed such a facility.

EM: Who helped with the renovations and when did you move in as a family as well as hosted the first artists? Who were your first guest artists? As Caversham Press was the only professional printmaking studio of its kind in SA at the time did you have a clear plan of the direction you intended following? Did you have in mind any model studio elsewhere which inspired you? Did your establishment have teething problems and how did you make ends meet?

MC: Having experience in building using recycled material previously we followed the same model, buying doors, windows, beams and flooring and staircase from demolisher yards and using local artisans to construct a roofed brick and stone shell whilst I undertook the carpentry. We used the church to store all our household furniture whilst we made the house habitable and moved in on 1 July 1985 and then focussed on transforming the church into a workable print studio. Our first artist was Robert Hodgins who came to Caversham as part of the first project The Johannesburg Centenary Portfolio. He arrived on the 27 September followed by the other four artists that the Johannesburg Art Gallery had selected.

As to a clear strategic plan or model from which to draw, neither were present. This still holds true. It is like making a linocut of your life where one starts with all possibility and through many tentative

steps and numerous proofs the image is created in the process of removal. There is no going back but looking back bring the magical realisation that even this destructive cutting away, results in layers of rhythmic marks and patterns that give authenticity and power to the image of a life and a dream.

This sense of history and place and the residue that remains of rituals of belief and meaning I find powerfully present and I sometime think that this was once of greatest gifts that Caversham gave me. A growing reliance and trust on my intuition, deeper listening and reduced dependence on patterns and criteria associated with value, I had used previously. In some ways this also was reflected in the artists who came to work. The peaceful and reflective environment, provide neither platform nor audience to play to.

Naturally this approach dynamic and continues to present teething problems even after 25 years because so much is constantly evolving and therefore 'new'. I suppose that it is that way I approach even the technical and often cringe at the term master printmaker. With the lack of formal printmaking training I have developed a collaborative approach that is based on an artist's intent and then trying to develop a process that reflects this. It keeps alive inventiveness and provides challenges enabling us to grow in complementary ways.

EM: When the *Centre for Artists and Writers* was launched was your dream of working with writers realised. Tell me more about your fascination with book binding and printing as well as your admiration of Eric Gill.

MC: The name of recognised the broader context and history from which contemporary printmaking has evolved. Caversham had worked with writers, predominantly poets since the early 1990's. This has always been from the base as a visual arts organisation building bridges between literary and visual artists but continue search for ways to increase our contribution.

I have always loved books and the history of printing has included text and image/ illustrations. When working with five botanical artists and five fine arts around the subject of Flowers as Image which sort to challenge the negative perception appertaining to both 'flower painting and derogatory title, as applied to certain images as mere illustration. As part of this I had worked with Douglas Goode a Cycad specialist and one day at breakfast I suggested that we produce a book of hand-coloured lithographs with letterpress text. It was agreed so with no knowledge in this area I visited a number of Private Presses in the UK and attended a Designer Bookbinding Conference at Oxford University. There I met Johann Maree the resident conservator and bookbinder at UCT at a Designer who began running annual bookbinding workshops which continued up to the present. In 1998, Caversham Press published the first and only volume of Cycads in Africa. Constructing books comes naturally to me and I revel in it. It is probably an answer to a need to make form and meaning. I still dream of a day when we have a bindery, skill and capacity to produce bound limited editions.

EM: You also worked with botanists and artists doing botanical drawings. Please talk about your encounters in that field and the ensuing exhibition.

MC:

EM: In our society senior artists are often overlooked, yet you maintained that we honour the links in the chain and you accommodated respected senior artists along with the vibrant young. Please expand on this notion.

MC:

EM: Dreams do come true, what do you wish for the future building on the foundations laid by Albert Adams, Gabisile Nkosi, Dan Rakgoathe, Sthembiso Sibisi and Vuminkosi Zulu Robert Hodgins

MC:

Ideas

Fragile

Dynamic

Empowerment

Significance

Basics of art and law

Fundamentally, a spiritual person

I hope that those that follow see themselves as custodians of this place of life and death, of creative ritual and belief both individually and communally. That it remains a dynamic place of change.

Do not take yourself too seriously. Consider from the standpoint of eternity. Judge Amadeu de Prada – Night Train to Lisbon by Pascal Mercier

People for Plates , Souls for Screens and Partners for Prints

close eyes
done by touch
feed on to cacette
developing drum