

GALLERY
STRATFORD

VIRGIL BURNETT: BETWEEN LINE & FORM

On View January 23 – April 10, 2011



This exhibition is a celebration one of Stratford's most respected artists. Virgil Burnett's work can be found in books and illustrations around the world, but his reputation is perhaps strongest right here at home, where he continues to be an active member of the artistic community. He is not only an artist - better known in recent years for his sensuous clay sculptures and life drawings, but also for his exquisite illustrations and lithographs - in addition, Burnett is an accomplished art historian, author and teacher, and an inspiration and mentor to many. **BETWEEN LINE & FORM** provides a rare opportunity to consider Burnett's work in all these realms, to see the connections between the different art forms and to explore the themes and inspirations threaded throughout his work, including the importance of life drawing to his practice and that of other artists.

Born in Kansas in 1928, Burnett began writing and drawing from an early age, in part inspired by the books read to him by his father:

... Bible stories, Arthurian legends, tales of Robin Hood. The books from which he read were usually illustrated. I remember especially the drawings of Howard Pyle...
(excerpt from Burnett's artist's statement for the exhibition)

This creatively rich beginning inspired in the artist a love of storytelling and a devotion to drawing, which would continue throughout his life and fuel much of his writing, drawing, printmaking and, later in life, sculpture. It is from this fertile imagination that the fantastical world of Montarnis would arise in 1980 -with its marvellous village emerging from a disembodied head - so eloquently articulated in through words and images in Towers at the Edge of a World. Tales of a Medieval Town. And yet this imaginary world seems almost real, precisely rendered and steeped in history and legend, and bearing similarities to the village in Burgundy where Burnett has a home. Indeed, most of the works in this exhibition share the sense of timelessness that this combination of realism and fantasy conjures up.

While Burnett wrote and drew from an early age, he would go on to study painting with Edward Melcarth at Columbia University in New York. Melcarth was a Social Realist painter who inspired in Burnett a passion for drawing from the nude model, as well as a love of antiquity, Venice and Venetian art. In fact, in 1977, Burnett dedicated his illustrated book Skiamachia (meaning "shadow battle" in Greek, hinting at the mythical nature of its contents) to his teacher: a fitting tribute for a book of stories and illustrations drawn from classical mythology, inspired by Ovid. Burnett went on to

receive a Master's Degree in Art History from the University of California, Berkeley, where he researched the English literary influences in the work of the French painter, Eugène Delacroix (including Shakespeare, Scott and Byron). Although trained as a painter and art historian - evident in his fluid lines, clear articulation of form and choice of subject matter, which are clearly in the European tradition but uniquely his own vision - writing and drawing would continue to be his primary passions.

In 1956, Burnett arrived in Paris to study Art History as a Fulbright Scholar. It was there that Burnett met many of the artists and writers with whom he would collaborate through the years. He also had the good fortune to meet Maurice Darantière, the respected master printer and publisher of artists' books who was acquainted with many of the influential artists and writers of the time, including Jean Cocteau, Gertrude Stein and James Joyce. Not only did Darantière expose Burnett to the creative possibilities of the illustrated book, he encouraged him to take his illustration work seriously and exhibited Burnett's early drawings at his studio in the Hôtel de Mansard Sagonne in the Marais.

By 1960, Burnett was working primarily as an illustrator in Europe, creating cover illustrations for Penguin paperbacks, which gave him broad exposure, and working with poets such as Daryl Hine, with whom he collaborated on numerous projects. A particularly fine example is his work with the poet in 1961 on Heroics (dedicated to Darantière), with its exquisitely succinct burin engravings of characters inspired by myth and legend: Don Juan, Anne de Joyeuse, Tristan, Patroclus and Hippolytus. Although now faded by time, these illustrations are an early indication of the artist's incredible confidence of line and complete ease in rendering the human form. It also demonstrates his incredible artistic range and ability to choose the most appropriate subject and approach, depending upon the particular needs of the text. Burnett would go on to collaborate with many writers throughout his career - including David Kuhn, Robin Magowan, Constantine Cavafy, Jerome McGann, Rienzi Crusz and Stratford's S.K. Johannesen, all of whom are included in this exhibition. In 1966, Burnett founded Padeloup Press, which has been publishing artists' books ever since, originally from its base in Chicago and from Stratford since 1972, when Burnett arrived to teach art history and drawing at the University of Waterloo.

While in Paris, Burnett had also met many artists, including his life-long friend, the painter David Hill, whom he memorialized after his death in the stunning lithograph entitled *The Funeral of Marsyas* (1977). For those unfamiliar with the classical myth, Marsyas is flayed alive by Apollo for having the audacity to challenge the Olympian god to a flute-playing contest. A Neo-Classicist painter of the European tradition at a time when New York's Abstract Expressionism was all the rage, Hill was entirely committed to his art. Burnett chose to bid farewell to his friend through a re-imagining of the ancient story, with medieval rather than classical characters at the graveside in a theatrical *mise-en-scène*, in the process transcending time and place, creating a personal tribute on the universal themes of death and grief. Here, once again, there is a sense of suspended animation that is common in much of Burnett's work, as he merges myth, legend and fantasy with historical references and realism to create timeless images and stories.

Throughout his life, Burnett has frequently collaborated with other artists. In this exhibition there are two particularly delightful examples: the book Doubles: Dialogues in Drawing by Virgil Burnett and

Michel Devrient, published by Padeloup Press in 1983, in which the artists each completed drawings begun by the other; and the sculpture *Ceres* which Burnett created with Nicholas Rees, a former student and now friend and collaborator. In addition, *BETWEEN LINE & FORM* is itself a collaboration of sorts, as it includes an installation of life drawings by artists who meet at Burnett's home on Saturday mornings to draw the human figure from the live model. This part of the exhibition consists of work by Susan Benson, Helen Edmonds, Glenn Elliott, Ellen Erenberg, Karen Fletcher, Susan Green, Judith Horner, Nicholas Rees and Isabella Stefanescu. I would argue that collaboration is a fundamental aspect of Burnett's practice: no doubt influenced by his early work with writers in Paris, but also inspired by an essential generosity of spirit and a strong belief that art should be shared.



BETWEEN LINE & FORM provides a rare opportunity to explore this collaborative spirit and consider together works by Burnett in a range of media – beginning with a sketchbook, a selection of broadsides, books and illustrations, drawings and sculpture, and ending with an installation of life drawings by Burnett and local artists. In considering all these works together, we can see the connections between the different art forms and explore the themes and inspirations threaded throughout his work. We can see how Burnett goes from text to illustration, selecting the subject and approach that will enrich the written text, creating an image that is both precise and visually arresting. We can see how the characters and themes explored in his writing and lithographs inspire his sculpture, while his appreciation for antiquity and a lifetime of drawing the human figure influence its form. In much of the work themes from myth, legend, theatre and fantasy merge with history and perfect articulation on the page to create a compelling and convincing image that seems to transport one to another time and place. Behind all this is a life-long respect and passion for the practice of drawing, and life drawing in particular. While his approach may vary, depending on the subject or art form, Burnett's confidence of line is unmistakable in all his work – as is the centrality of the human figure.

Cindy Hubert
Guest Curator

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