Aquatint Etchings by Stephen McMillan

by Kris Johnson

While looking at the artwork of Stephen McMillan, what comes to mind first is a Mozart symphony, the delicate layers of instrumental voices coming together to form a complex and precise whole. McMillan creates many of his prints from an artistic etching process known as aquatinting. Though I was unfamiliar with the term, I was fortunate enough to receive a first hand tutorial on this process of meticulousness and foresight from the artist himself.



Though I have a difficult time grasping certain technical concepts, when McMillan explained and simulated the process, it was relatively easy to comprehend. He begins his pieces with a copper plate which is then completely

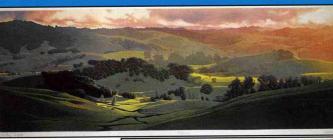
covered in rosin dust and heated; the purpose being to create acid resistant dots on the surface. These dots make it so that the whole of the copper surface is not eaten away during the acid bath. After he has completed the rosining, he can begin laying out his artist design. Working free hand and mostly from

photographic images, he begins to lay down his image, in what looks like brown goop, onto the



Aside from receiving an education on the process, I learned a great deal about the artist himself and his attitudes on his work. McMillan, a California native and a recent addition to Bellingham, brings to the arts community a poignant style and deep understanding of the earth. His art, though he does not see it as intentionally speaking any one message in particular, does make a statement about the importance of developing a deeper







connection with the earth and how that connection will help us understand ourselves on a higher level. This general theme throughout his work has been derived from the intimacy he has developed with the earth throughout his many trips into the wild and from his observation of natural patterns and images.

Aside from his art expressing significance and meaning, perhaps even a cultural critique, it is also incredibly striking. From our conversations, it was apparent that McMillan remains very humble in the face of his success as an artist. This sense of modesty did not alter my feelings of awe and privilege getting to talk with someone who has made it their life's work to create beauty.

With his many years of experience with aquatinting, he has learned how to capture the quidditas of mustard flower in full bloom lining the hills in Napa County, California, the formidable strength of the wind as it whips snow off a mountainous ridge in the Pacific Northwest, and the serene presence of ripples on a pond in the bustle of San Francisco.

Stephen McMillan's work is shown in many galleries in his native California, and in local galleries as well, including the Blue Horse Gallery and Pacific Marine Gallery in Bellingham, Waterworks Gallery in Friday Harbor, and Fine Impressions in Seattle. To view his work, learn more about his life, and gain more knowledge about the process of aquatinting you can also visit his website www.sonic.net/aquatint.

Kris Johnson is a freelance writer studying Creative Writing at Western Washington University with additional focuses in Women Studies and Environmental Studies.