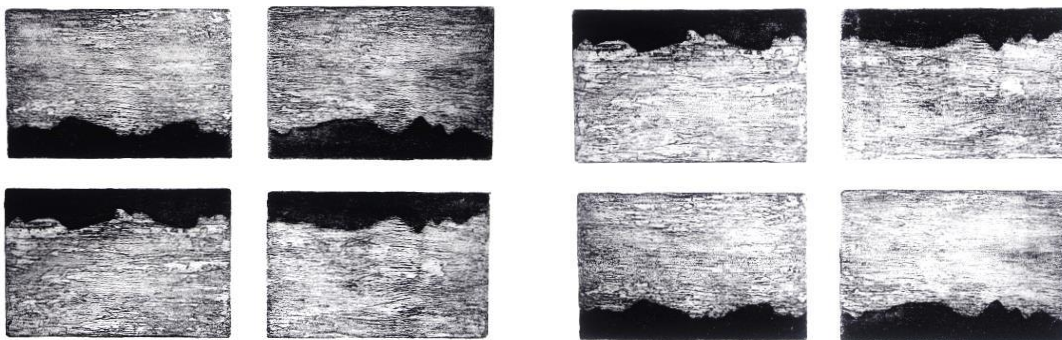


‘this god, the river & this river, the cosmos.’



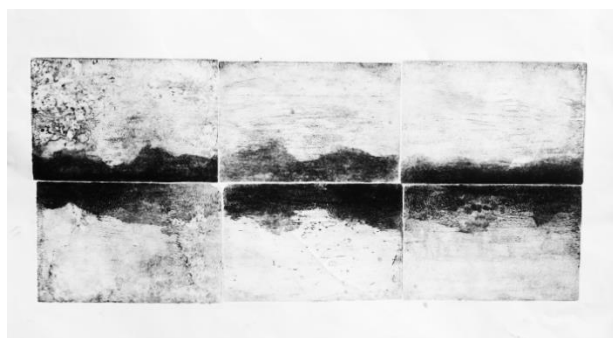
‘this god, the river.’ ‘ B& W. four 6”X 4” zinc plates. aquatint.sugarlift.drypoint.

‘this river, the cosmos.’ B& W. four 6”X 4” zinc plates. aquatint.sugarlift. drypoint.

Firstly, it should be stated these two sets of prints are trial proofs. The etchings attempt to represent artistic notions of human perception I am exploring. After all, what is personally involved to orienteer - through sight & mind, knowledge & culture - to what one understands is ‘real’. Is reality also a combination of sensory and societal impulses that operate together on each individual? Perhaps, to even want to change or build upon what is ‘true’?

The same four plates were used for both sets of etchings.

The first of these two series of four part etchings was originally envisaged with two rows of three etchings each to accentuate the long central dark area.



Trial proof of original six part etching format printed on copper plates using sugarlift & aquatint. A format which may be revisited on a later occasion.

However, I decided it was more convenient to highlight notions such as Time, Memory, Perception and Eternity by ‘downsizing’ the etching to ‘four quartets’; thus aligning with T.S. Eliot’s poem *Four Quartets*. The title *‘this god, the river’* is in reference to the opening lines of *Dry Salvages* where the river is seen as a ‘strong brown god’.

To T.S. Eliot the river is easily navigable; following an already known course and leading to an already known destination; thus if a life 'meanders' - like a river - new knowledge will not be attained.

The poem meditates on the sea which by its very vastness opens up the way to many courses (unlike a river) leading to a never ending array of delta possibilities for the human soul.

There is also the mystery of not knowing to what end the currents may take us – whether it be good or bad. The sea with its various currents can take us anywhere and so it is best we gain new knowledge to navigate successfully through unknown territories. It is the stars above which provide the most dependable navigation including the Sun which is also a star.

To what though must the human soul ultimately navigate too? In T.S. Eliot's scheme of things it is to move towards divine enlightenment; knowledge gained - or regained - will steer us away from a directionless, meaningless drifting to rocks that will leave our precious life being no more than a 'shipwreck'.

If T.S. Eliot's river is truly a 'small god' the starting point is one's mortality from which eternity can be worked towards by mentally traversing to that ultimate never ending 'cosmic sea' - the Universe.

As for rivers one may wish to think of the ancient Oceanus a divine river that circled the known world. Oceanus provided the world with all of its fresh water. Rivers do offer life. Yet, there is also life beyond the riverbanks and human beings need not be static. We need not stay fixated on one point of view in our experience with the world. Actually, depending on the context an opposite point of view to what one normally holds too may even need to be taken into account.

According to one's phase of life the river can be a source of reassurance when stability is required; while in another more dynamic period of one's life it may prove valuable to take up the opportunity to explore larger not well known waters when the alternative is to be marooned in still waters which may leave the human spirit stagnant.

Life is organic. We are living beings, not static rocks that wait for fate to chip away at us. In Ulysses we see an active actor dealing with gods, a Cyclops, Sirens, temptresses and finally with the suitors who were after his wife Penelope during his troubled but finally successful return to Ithaca.

Heraclitus remarks '*character is destiny*'.

We can have ultimate control.

In examining nature (and we too are nature) one may attempt to look beyond the processes of erosion - which duly change physical shape - to see evolution as a grand process of growth. The patterns that exist in nature can help guide us from a sense of feeling entrapped to reaching a deep inner sense of spiritual liberation.

We can laterally negotiate any labyrinth.

To seek *out*, to see life in an open thinking way.

Art offers the mind the opportunity to consider what lies beyond the proverbial three dimensions.

To apply discovered new 'mental dimensions' to all spheres of life.

The artist can be the ferryman taking other souls not to the underworld but to eternity.

Divine enlightenment.

To reach 'a spiritual state of being' that is 'one with the eternal'.

To have endless possibilities be possible.

To understand everything for all time.

To even be outside time.

To have no fixed absolutes.

To have 'relative absolutes' co-exist.

Truths changing in accordance to the relationship to what assumptions or beliefs or premises are around them.

Forming 'contextual truths'.

A truth maybe what it is but it may be given new meaning if in a changing surrounding.

In the *Four Quartets* I have always been intrigued by the issue of Time (such as in the case in *Burnt Norton*) especially with the notion of the cycle of Time. Of Time returning to 'the same place' (as *Little Gidding* states) so a person can see the same place 'for the first time.'

Memory. Knowledge. Experience. Lead to a re-evaluation of life.

The two main four-framed images presented here can be seen again and again in a new way each time; returning to view them by ever differing convolutions of perception.

'this river, the cosmos'

The four etching plates repositioned to create a new image while at the same time relating to the original etching. Yet, still a 'new creature' which introduces opportunities for other perceptual and thematic interpretations.

Although there is an obvious interplay between the two etching quadrants and between the etchings within each quadrant every individual print can still be viewed as a separate entity.

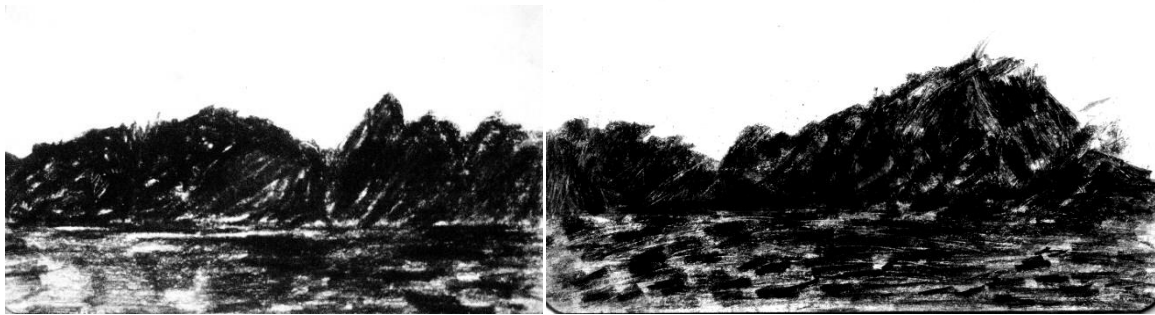
(In a religious sense ‘divine enlightenment’ is perhaps to reach a state of being that makes a human being nominally ‘one with the eternal’ as represented by endless living possibilities; to understand *everything* for *all* time, to be even, in fact, outside time. One can also argue that there is not always fixed absolutes but rather there also co-exists relative absolutes in which truths can change according to their relationships to what is around them thus forming ‘contextual truths’. A truth maybe what ‘it is’ but can be given new meaning in a changed surrounding or presentation).

In regards to the *Four Quartets* I have always been intrigued by the issue of Time in the first quartet poem *Burnt Norton* with the notion of the ‘cycle of time’; and of time returning to ‘the same place’ as stated in the last quartet *Little Gidding* so as the viewer can see the same place ‘for the first time’. How memory, knowledge and experience can lead to a re-evaluation of life. In this case, the two main ‘four-framed’ images presented here can be seen archetypically again and again in a new way each time by returning to view them through ever different convolutions of perception.

It was also decided to reposition the four etching plates to create a new image that relates to the original etching but at the same time introduce new perceptual and thematic interpretations; thus the title of the second intaglio quadrant which is *'this river, the cosmos'*.

Although there is an obvious interplay between the etchings each print can also be viewed as a separate entity. It is also envisaged the viewer can perceive the image/s in different ways e.g. determining if it is the light or dark areas which are either solid or ephemeral. Appearances are in the mind of the beholder. It is a matter of seeing in a particular manner or choosing to view via one or other of the multiple avenues of logic - or instinct - a human brain may wish to take on board - or has been trained by cultural upbringing and social influence to adopt.

Although apparently an abstraction the dark areas are actually based on sketches of riverbanks of Cooks River a local idyllic natural waterway near where I live in suburban Sydney.

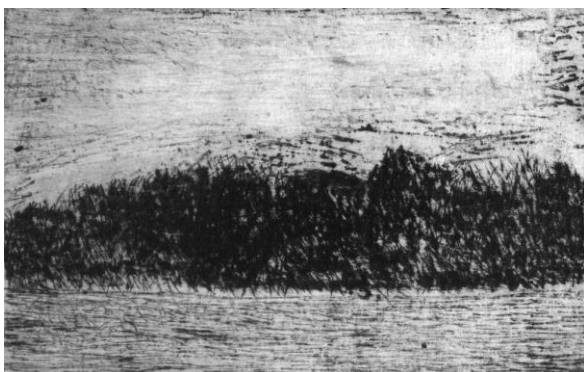


Cooks River (Goolay'yari*) sketches. *Aboriginal name for this river.

Thus a sketch based on the real world is used to create an *'abstract impression'*. The river is an appropriate element from nature which in a universal sense is often used as a metaphor relating to life, the universe etc.

Put in the river is calm

Take for instance how I have previously used a riverbank drawing in an etching titled *'It Will Pass'* and what I wrote for it:



Walking beside the calm water I imagine the ceaseless flowing river in Herman Hesse's *Siddartha* with its 'thousandfold song'...the river's voice of experience is full of both sadness & desire; yet the current is always heading towards its goal...thus I silently consider how any personal tribulation can eventually be overcome by entwining – in this existence – one's mental, spiritual and physical self to an over-riding, life-enhancing sense of a perfect 'eternal unity.'

'It Will Pass.' 'B& W. 6"X4". drypoint. copperplate. Cooks River.

An artist is an archaeologist of the mind. He or she can explore human consciousness to see how the human brain determines what reality is. To even then attempt to extend the ability of the cerebral cortex to further understand what is *real*. In the case of the second quadrant the ultimate ‘abstract impression’ is for the human mental sense of an ‘unseen or mythical metaphysical’ as truth. Human comprehension has to go beyond the particularity of a river as a serpent slithering over the earth’s landscape to also envisage the boundless dimension of a ‘river beyond’ which we know as the cosmic universe. The cosmos can be identified in its eternal aspect with the boundless dimension of human consciousness. The river is representative not only of one person’s history but of all human history and of the history of the universe. In the case of Heraclitus he uses the river as a way of helping us to understand that everything we perceive is not always as it seems:

‘You could not step twice into the same river; for other waters are ever flowing onto you.’

While the Stoic Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius makes the following allusion to time as a river:

‘Time is a river, the resistless flow of all created things...’ (*Meditations*. BOOK FOUR: 41).

I also whimsically add:

‘One thing hastens into being, another hastens out of it. Even while a thing is in the act of coming into existence, some part of it has already ceased to be. Flux and change are for ever renewing the fabric of the universe, just as the ceaseless sweep of time is for ever renewing the face of eternity. In such a running river, where there is no firm foothold, what is there for a man to value among all the many things that are racing past him? It would be like setting the affections on some sparrow flitting by, which in the same selfsame moment are lost to sight....’ (*Meditations*. BOOK SIX: 15).

The plates for each intaglio quadrant were originally meant to match up as one plate. The idea being that this one image was unified by fragments seamed together and which these seams could be undone and strung together again to form new visual combinations with new visual and abstract meanings. However, I was unable to avoid both vertical and horizontal white lines in the printing process which kept making it very clear that the image was made from four separate plates. Although frustrated by this unwanted result, it then finally occurred to me to create an equal amount of narrow white space between each etching which allowed each intaglio work to exist in its own right but still share a relationship with the neighbouring prints. It also occurred to me that the final complete image of a riverbank could be finalized within the imagination of the viewer. The four fragments become one in the human mind. Which leads to a central notion of the two groups of etchings which is that memory, time and so forth – those ‘conceptual binds’ that connect and relate our human experience to

both this exterior physical world and to our inner emotional realms can consist of - or are - many fragments or modulations stitched or entwined together to 'unite' to form a 'uniform' sensation or recollection. This at least seems to be what the past is as we make sense of it when we look back and envisage the undulating panorama of images, memories and experiences that is a human life and the rather temporal nature of life *per se* as each life eventually disappears into the *nothing* 'shadow' of no life - death. Yet, there are many 'mini-deaths' along the way as each day passes by never to return (and which, it may be suggested, we try to metaphorically hold onto and grasp through human culture such as by music, art, writing, photography and so forth. Nevertheless, like Orpheus - who despite all forewarning - still chooses to turn around to view Eurydice knowing that she would then be lost to him forever; the final annihilation of each individual experience cannot be prevented no matter what 'mortal tactic' we employ to keep a hold on it...).

The etchings can be viewed independently but - seen interdependently with each other - one may note that our typical linear co-ordinates of orienteering with the world need to adapt and expand to take on a multi-perspective way of viewing; a sort of 'conceptual Cubism' within the mind rather than on the picture plane. 'Top', 'bottom' and other such linguistic mental prepositions overlap for instance in the bottom two etchings whereby the top dark areas also form the bottom of the riverbank when viewed in combination with the two etchings above them - of which the mind has to take into account if mentally 'fulfilling' the river image.

Also if one takes a close look it can be seen that the bottom of each half of the river bank is actually has a mirror outline of the top riverbank area which may lead one to consider is this a 'reflection' of reality in itself rather than reality. Or is reality merely a reflection of what is 'made real' by what is 'trained' to be so in the human mind. Also as a consequence of this mirror representation the quadrant of etchings can be turned around making the top the bottom and the bottom the top.

Thus the images can be viewed in a variety of ways of which one major possibility is that the dark and light areas can simultaneously be viewed as both ephemeral and solid. The dark areas can be viewed as the river banks but also one may choose to view it as 'dark eternal space' if seeing each etching as an independent work; the light area could be envisaged as the clear space of 'sky' or the undulating, fluid space of 'water' but in turn also be viewed as the rough texture of rock.

On a somewhat technical point I found it revelatory that as I burnished away at the areas of the zinc plates to make them lighter I was - in a paradoxical way - leading to a pictorial result where those areas could be viewed as thick and solid on the printed paper if one chose to do so.

(It seems, especially with modern physics in mind, in the artistic pursuit of exploring what is 'real' the more one can give an image a more ethereal quality

as if ‘depicting nothingness’ the more closer one may be with such ‘visual apparitions’ to what is the ‘substance’ of what is reality).

The possibilities are up to the mind rather than the eyes. It allows the mind to expand to more possibly consider ‘eternity’ not being directly restricted by the physical senses. It is to be said the way one looks is not to be directly closed in and entangled in what some would call ‘modernist’ mental confusion but rather to have the mind tend towards and led to open *revelation*. Such is the case in the second quartet of etchings whereby the nominally dark and empty spaces have been reversed so that the clear areas now in the middle and by which through the title the viewer can speculate that what is in front of him/her is a vast stream of a starry, galactic cosmos filled with the *mass* multitude physical elements of the Universe that can be *seen* e.g. stars, planets, nebulas, galaxies etcetera; white empty space not as sky or water but as fiery cosmic furnace. Pushed to the top and bottom edges are the realms of indefinable dark matter that make up so much of the so called ‘empty space’ of the Universe. No longer are these dark areas solid river banks (although symbolically this interpretation could still hold). Through the linguistic context of the title the mind must re-examine what it is viewing which has also occurred by the *same* four images being re-positioned with each other. (The different ways of seeing intimated here also harks back to the well-known psychological visual image which one can view as an hour glass or two faces in profile). We also see a ‘breathing’ in rhythm between the micro realm of the river transformed into the macro realm of the cosmos; a connection between two scales of reality in much the same way as there is a yet to be quantified connection between the paradoxical miniscule world of quantum physics and the grand plane of time, mass and gravity of the theory of relativity. Flux and stability in relation to each other; (scientifically speaking we have moved from Ptolemy’s ancient glassy sphere universe of clean line white light concentric circles to a more unknown and mysterious world made up of twentieth century discovered irregular buzzing atomic apparitions that can on the grandest scale form nebulas). The ‘cosmic-world’ pattern between these two quadrants of reality could easily be imagined as repeating dynamically and forever; just as there is the dynamic order of DNA strands that entwine together to continue and energize life in an endless variety of ways. (It is Kandinsky who infers that the creative spirit is hidden by *matter* and thus there is the objective to unveil the creative spirit and so it can materialize to then be in touch with the human soul. For him, in the nineteenth century there was a lack of ‘inner creation’ for there was an emphasis on ‘material appearances’ which led to a sterile one dimensionality. One may also say that although human intellect can play its part in the creative process it seems it should not be at the expense of human intuition. Do not straightjacket the human spirit, allow our soul to be released into the ether...to be in touch with ‘that ultimate ether’ that is the cosmos...).

To try to reach a more neutral understanding of reality – that is without any

human preconception - one would perhaps have to consider the Creation before the time of actual human existence; let us say much as what was in place in the first few 'days' of the idealised Garden of Eden. The reality of all existence then only had 'value' by the 'divine' physical laws that constructed it; without the added 'utilitarian functions' and 'aesthetic interpretations' later subjectively placed upon it by the human race – a predator species which attempts to exploit all the elements of Nature with such full dominance as to 'objectify' reality to its own prevailing 'truths'.

To examine reality in such a '*pure way*' (perhaps impossible...) it is perhaps best then to meditate on natural objects rather than on manufactured ones. Although it has to be said that as scientific ideas started to prevail over an ever increasingly archaic theocentric worldview Cezanne's apples and oranges in the nineteenth century and even with the still life paintings of the Cubists Braque and Picasso we see the use of everyday objects as actual identifiable 'elements of nature' being used in a way to help perceive on a heightened 'neutral' conceptual level (i.e. without the 'creative hands of God' or the pictorial 'trickery' of Renaissance perspective which although a scientific human application became to be seen as pictorially distorting objects according to the angle from which they were seen; just as much a 'divine morality' distorted human behaviour as being either 'pure' or 'evil') the real underlying structural laws of Nature - which are 'value free'.

One can also consider Giorgi Morandi's deceptively simple domestic bottles the same way but let's meander 'off course' and consider the beer bottles by Jasper Johns. I mark him out due to the recent influence of his ideas on my art - or rather the influence of other people's ideas about his ideas about his art on my art – as it should be said that from what I have read Jasper Johns is rather coy about interpreting his own art. Although neutral objects, it's been said they were done as a sort of in-joke after Willem de Kooning complained that you could give Leo Castelli - the art dealer of Jasper Johns - two beer cans and he could sell them. Yet, when we look at the sculpture *Painted Bronze (Ale Cans, 1960)* we do not think of this 'insider art world story' as the art text books do not so readily mention it but rather on how this artistic readymade (an echo of the found object ideas of Marcel Duchamp who much appreciated the art of Jasper Johns) whereby the subject matter of a still life is now the artwork itself. Yet, apart from this insider challenge to what art *is* that is – two beer cans or even a light bulb are made to look like real beer cans or a light bulb as a sort of play on what are the underlying aesthetic precepts that lead us to define what a work of art is – cultural perceptions which were first challenged by Duchamp with his in/famous urinal what more interests me is not so much the cultural context but rather the *political* one. Why are we even bothering considering these two beer cans which even make it into the mainstream art text books? If they were Australian beer cans sculpted by an Australian artist would they be in the art books...or if so...would they be taken so seriously? Probably not. An

American light bulb or a target or two beer cans have an 'imperial aura' about them if they are from New York overarching any other meaning (or lack of meaning) the artist has originally given them (even on a subconscious level) for a beer can from the centre of the American Empire is more fascinating to study than a can of beer from some global outpost like Australia, even though Australian beer is of a much higher quality. American art not only had a heightened cultural prestige – brought on by the Abstract Expressionism art of Pollock and others - but an elevated political pre-eminence even if works like those of Jasper Johns were not overtly political. Yet, in the case of Johns all his work in the art textbooks resides in the shadow of his politically ambivalent *Flag (1954-5)* with its collage-encaustic painted Stars & Stripes. The American flag is perhaps, the most powerful global symbol of a mass-popularised notion of democratic freedom in the Cold War period. Although the art itself may have not have any 'political essence' to it *per se* a society that elevates an artist who does a sculpture of beer cans or another artist who painted large canvases with all those cosmic whirls was surely a society that allowed every *individual* to *freely* express their 'individuality' no matter how incongruent such artistic expression maybe to otherwise more mainstream cultural notions. (If you are an 'art insider' you will know I have read '*How New York Stole The Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom & the Cold War*' by Serge Guilbaut). However, good art survives the underhand co-opted political propaganda role it may have imposed on it such is the case of much of the New York art of this period which was not - for all appearances - being produced to support the status quo; unlike the mannerist politically overt Socialist Realism 'worker's art' of the Soviet period which is now seen as having a rather quiche quality to it these days. (With the 'Russian democratic experiment' in mind which gave the workers 'their gulags' consider how the truly revolutionary *avante garde* art of the Constructivists and others like Kandinsky and even the music of Shostakovich and films like *Battleship Potemkin* by Eisenstein or novels like *Dr Zhigavo* (Boris Pasternak), *The Master & Margarita* (Mikhail Bulgakov), *Life & Fate* (Vassily Grossman) and *One Day In the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Alexander Solzhenistyn) have only been progressively enhanced in their creative stature by the artistic test of time even though the art had to be produced within the oppressively rigid constraints of a totalitarian state and unavoidably at times even for it. Of course, there were exiles like Stravinsky as well as Diaghilev with his famed Ballet Russes and the artistic likes of Kandinsky and Chagall who both had to keep moving on to safer pastures due to the rise of Nazi Germany. While others like Shostakovich always famously had his bag ready for the 'midnight knock on the door' from the KGB which thankfully never came – for him, at least).

Jasper Johns is an art genius – let that be clear.

Furthermore, in the present period of art where all the worst excesses of Aldus Huxley's 'happy time' society have come shockingly to the fore and which is

manufacturing (I dare not use the ‘c’ word – *creating*) so many sterile and empty-minded ‘art’ objects the genius of the still breathing Mr Jasper Johns is even more vividly clear. Regarding contemporary living artists of international stature there are perhaps only a handful - William Kentridge and Ai Wei come readily to mind - who are on par with Johns in terms of their heightened intellectual rigour. Interestingly, there are quite a few Asian ‘emerging artists’ who are providing audiences from their old colonial masters with some thought-provoking work as this continent further develops allowing it to finally come out of the historical shadows of its post-colonial past. There are also Chinese artists who are outwitting their political class; cleverly making ecological, social and political artistic points as this North Asian giant starts to deal with growing urbanisation while still having to face up to well publicised on-going social disparities, corruption, human rights issues etcetera. While in Australia there is a particularly rich seam of politicised Aboriginal art whereby artists such as Gordon Bennett, Tracey Moffat, Judy Watson, Ian Abdulla, Sally Morgan, Vernon Ah Kee, Ricky Maynard, Brook Andrew, Destiny Deacon amongst many, many others who have incisively touched upon the post-colonial intersection (or vicious ‘incision’) between Aboriginal society and White Australia.

Beer cans. Light bulbs. Torches. Paint cans and brushes.

Numbers.

Jasper Johns and his equally famous numbers both painted and printed and sometimes on top of each other to be worked out on the same sheet of lithograph paper. Paintings of digits are not still life artworks as such but the following 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 0 are the product of human invention. More interestingly, they are Hindu-Arabic symbols sourced by the West for its own practical economic purposes. Writing is an invention of the ‘cradle of civilization’ which, according to my primary school education, is the fertile lands between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers - that part of Ancient Mesopotamia which is now mostly encompassed by war torn Iraq.

With the ‘miracle appearance’ of human beings in the proverbial Garden of Eden – which ironically, on planet Earth, is considered to be in the Mesopotamian region - there eventually came with the human progression to differing agriculturally based societies a need to *record* and *measure* the dimensions of the Earth’s *territories* and what such lands *produced* and *provided* for an emerging ever more masterful humankind. Wedge shaped – better known as cruciform – strokes lined into wet clay using a reed pen was the beginning of a physical recording of a highly sophisticated abstract perception of the world which developed into other uniform written codes that found many alphabet and number systems.

(Time as we personally know it on a day-to-day level is a human invention. The ‘timelessness’ associated with eternity is something I envisage was a consistent omnipresent Arcadian never ending quality (actually, a quality

without beginning or end if you think about it...) of the Garden of Eden before the established intrusion of human civilization. History equals not only recorded time but 'time' itself. 'Prehistory' is and contains the purity of an unrecorded, *unobserved* un/reality).

The human need for the *symbolic measurement* of a human devised reality would, one could argue, subvert the previous human interest in simply pictorially displaying the known real world such as that had already existed for thousands of years with cave painting. In fact, abstract symbols would become to be seen as real as the visible world. Jasper Johns challenges or even undermines the 'symbolic theocracy' of human abstract thought by hopefully having us 'relook' at numbers as 'shapes' in themselves rather than as mathematical linear/curved signs used for the counting and use of objects, temperatures, airliner descent angles, lift floors, apartments, reading glasses, movie lengths, restaurant bills, money currencies, land areas, house sizes, animal stock, nuclear missiles, skyscrapers, eye strengths, drought records, haircuts, art market prices, television screen sizes, centimetres, inches, book pages, utility costs, calories, armies, populations, life expectancy, economic growth, flood levels, heights, credit card debts, widths, pixels, light watts, scratched growing children's heights on the kitchen door, depths, amounts, satellite signals, test patterns, weights, sport scores, intelligence codes, computer languages, mobile phones, stock markets, massacres, birth predictions, drill sizes, clothes, car doors, hats, stockings, machine parts, furniture, kitchens, bathroom sinks, birth death and obesity rates, pie eating competitions, polls, rocket launches, elections, bird migration patterns, melting icebergs, fish sizes, archaeology rulers, television ratings, entertainment guides, tree rings, space travel, product costs, speed, light years, arrivals & departures, interest rates, bank accounts, wages, ages, time etc.

A '9' in a Jasper Johns painting is 'allowed' the freedom to merely be a circle with a downward stroke, as if one is looking at a random pattern swirl on the top of coffee cup froth. Yet, it can involve a major conceptual shift for a human mind so culturally ingrained since the kindergarten age of five to view this '9' none other as a very *real* quantity amount; to actually par away all symbolic association with *this circle with a stroke coming down from the bottom of it*. (So I write while ironically using another symbolic pattern known as letters 'A', 'B', 'C' 'Z' etcetera to communicate to you - the reader - using different combinations my invisible thinking about the symbolic and possible non-symbolic association of the following stroke '9' or for that matter the 'pattern' '999'. The closest we may come to 'seeing' numbers and letters without their symbolic association is maybe with viewing a foreign language that we do not know although even in this case although we don't know what the letter may mean we still 'know' or 'believe' that the letter exists as a symbolic representation not of itself but of a coded meaning which we are yet to 'break.').

Perception itself devises reality not just ‘reality itself’. I assume this maybe the matter that Jasper Johns is getting at and which can possibly have *real* consequences in one’s life. (This is also whether the circumstance/s has/have to do with numbers/letters or no numbers/letters *per se*).



If I were to consider still life motifs I would consider such ‘found objects’ as the milkshake maker and the milk bar flavour container from my childhood/teens as I grew up in a milk bar. Yet as a child of Greek Cypriot migrant parents even such nominally ‘neutral objects’ (subjectively chosen) are infused on a psychological level with the many societal issues related with such a non-typical upbringing. The old milkshake maker from the 60s is a sort of ‘family totem’ these days and which I keep in my old kitchen. Such an emotional sense of ‘spiritual nostalgia’ is further enhanced by the passing away of my father which brings up on a more universal level human issues of reminiscence and memory

In our beginning is our end infers T.S. Eliot in *Little Gidding* and thankfully we now reach the beginning of this end; and what a cursory look at Jasper Johns and his numbers especially draw us too is to the notion of allegory – of all things.

In the case of still life I have mentioned that a focus on such ‘neutral subject matter’ by the likes of Cezanne who was more interested in the way nature constructed itself e.g. an orange was really a sphere, a mountain was really a cone, a house - a cube, a human arm really a cylinder and so forth – it is certainly a scientific underlying structural appraisal of one’s surrounds; but an apple in a Dutch still life was not merely an apple when it was most probably also meant to be a sign to forewarn the viewer that an apple – the fruit eaten by Adam and Eve – is a reminder of human sin which only leads to human suffering and to eternal damnation if divine repentance is not sought.

Dutch art was littered with other *vanitas* symbols such as a skull on a table which - obviously enough - was a reminder of death. It could be placed on a table which may also have a glass of expensive wine. For the new burgeoning middle class now buying art it could be prompted with the sober thought that the material comforts presently being enjoyed would still all come to a mortal end; one’s life had to still be morally held into account for the Final Judgement.

A Dutch apple may equal human sin while a Cezanne apple may equal a sphere.

Allegory – it is in both. There is an active-interactive-interplay between both eye and mind as the viewer recognises that the object before him/her subtly represents more than just what it is from the real world. Yet, the ‘other subject

matter' that is represented can only come to be conceived in the spectator's *mind*.

Conceptual art *per se*.

An apple is not an apple in our two examples for it is something else: whether it be a religious-metaphysical proposition such as 'sin' or a concrete object like a sphere which more likely is still perceived as an abstract proposition if the viewer is aware of Plato's Theory of Absolute Forms. *Allegory* I have learnt from reading '*Figuring Jasper Johns*' by Fred Orton alludes to a Hellenistic idea when around 270 BC a new word *Allegoria* appeared and basically meaning 'other speaking'; that's to say talking about something while actually also meaning something else.

In landscape – which, in principle, are what my etchings actually are - allegory is often utilized to allow the world which is presented to often represent something else: such as a beautiful forest scene is really to be seen as valuable economic property for the good of the nation owned by the 'charitable' capitalist baron patron who sponsored the picture or the same forest, but in another painting, is to be perceived as an idyllic example of a religious or mythological arcadia by a more intellectually refined cerebral audience. A thirteenth century dynasty Chinese landscape may have a similar forest scene with mountains all covered with mist with much empty space hovering above all signifying in a Zen like way the mysterious creation of form from a formless void. In other words, landscapes are obvious artistic examples that are often infused with subjective human perceptions involving our ever differing relationship with Nature.

Consider also the haunting mood of a German Romantic forest as well as the momentous musical/astrological/mystical landscapes of the great Lithuanian artist & composer M.K. Ciurlionis (1875-1911). As for American Modernism one cannot go pass Georgia O'Keefe's abstracted flowers and grand desert landscapes which - along with the occasional reference to a sort of 'magic realism' (I'm thinking of a cow skull floating in the sky) - also developed a simpler serene Zen quality to her art towards the end of her long life.

In regards to allegory and landscape one painting which is of particular interest is '*The Tempest*' (circa 1506-8) by the extraordinary Venetian artist Giorgione. Although there are many recognisable motifs in this work with its 'eternal aspects' there is the paradox that its overall meaning still remains a mystery. No art commentator I have yet come across seems fully confident as to Giorgione's intention. (If so, there seems to be an ever slight dose of hubris).

A mother and child on the right are in the foreground; along with a young man holding a staff in front of a broken classical column on the other side. These human figures are lost in a tree filled landscape which has a city in the background. What is notable is the lightning strike in the stormy sky in background. One also notes a small bird on the top of a roof. The whole canvas

is naturalistically painted with an uncanny accuracy. Its vivid sense of reality is only overarched by the enigmatic mood that is conveyed. All is still. Tranquil.

It is surmised by some art commentators that the woman and man represent Eve (with her babe Cain) & Adam in the Garden of Eden. The coming tempest is apparently a foreboding of God's wrath upon the first human couple.

To others the lightning intimates to Zeus who will strike down the man who is the mortal Iason. As mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey* this unsuspecting human being had committed the 'crime' of sleeping with Demeter who is the earth mother goddess of plant growth and perhaps more importantly in the context of this image – the sister of Zeus. (In this interpretation the child in the image – who has been conceived by Iason and Demeter - is the god of wealth Ploutos). The broken column which represents a life cut short backs up the idea that the young man standing in front of it is about to be struck down by Zeus's lightning bolt. (Zeus, apparently, would go on to rape his 'dear sister' to produce Persephone).

The bird on the roof is a crane which infers fertility but also displays the need to be vigilant to divine vengeance. This bird stands on one leg with a stone in the other foot; which will be dropped onto the other leg if it falls asleep; thus keeping the bird awake. Yes, we must be wary of what can happen next in this life.

Still others infer we are witnessing the Holy Family resting during their Flight into Egypt. Here are mortals on the way to rescuing the still vulnerable union between Eternity and Mortality (as seen in the babe Son of God).

The woman 'a gypsy'; the male 'a farmer or soldier'...it is unknowable...for me the piercing lightning strike is akin to a rip in the universe with temporality interrupting eternity; not unity between the Eternal and Mortality but disruption; it could be signalling the Fall of Humanity. Nature overcomes us. Death is introduced. (I think of T.S. Eliot's title '*What the Thunder Said*' in the *Wasteland*). Thus the 'sudden movement' of the lightning strike introduces the idea of Time into this still timeless scene.

The Eternal Present is undermined by an earthly notion of yesterday, today and future. (The orbits of the stars and planets now have to be considered). The transience of natural reality interrupts the eternal whose unseen dimensions are infused through the fabric of the Creation. (Circles within circles). Thus this transience is a visible constant to us that separates us from an unseen eternal dimension which can only be re-awakened in the human mind and soul through a dormant spiritual insight which has to be allowed to emerge and grow; to allow for a re-infusion of the Eternal into our humanness to bring about a lasting restoration between what is immortal and mortal.

A modern audience may wish to consider the meeting point between the three dimensionality of this world with the multidimensionality of a quantum universe. (As the poet Frank O'Hara - who Jasper Johns knew and through I have learnt about through my reading of his art - infers in his poem *In Memory*

of My Feelings is that - on more a human level - yes, we *grow* which is to realise we are not static beings, that in our lifetime we may change from one self to another and to another and still yet to another and so on. Not just physically, but spiritually within our maturing personality...to never be the same, to always be transforming, like a snake constantly shedding skin to be renewed; to negate the old to have a renewed beginning. To seek an ultimate unity...' We are not stone. Demeter can also cultivate not only the earth but our minds).

Ultimately, Giorgione ingeniously shows us that we must rise above the 'winter of our mortal discontent' within ourselves so as to be in union with Nature; to perhaps reflect on the essential invisibility of life...of moving particles upon moving particles which unite harmoniously on every level...as well as to no longer have a divisive separation between the physical and spiritual...significantly, I think the mastery of Giorgione is that although he has placed in his landscape particular universal symbols with well-known meanings it is still a work open to multiple readings. It's apparent sense of 'unknowing' and 'ambiguity' which allows for such 'open interpretation' is to me a strength to this work allowing it to remain continually conceptually fresh and visually relevant to a varied audience - even to a twenty-first century audience jaded by the mental conundrums of post-modern aesthetics. (It does somewhat bemuse me that while the flashy art herd congregates at the Venice Biennale this little gem of Renaissance 'conceptual art' stays tucked away at the local *Accademia* when it should be placed at this 'show time' on centre stage for full display and for full artistic consideration - and praise).

I consider Giorgione a genius.

There doesn't always have to be a 'one right way' to perceive an artwork when it seems the artist has not encouraged one particular point-of-view (which raises the question that reading the work in many ways was always the artist's intention anyway. The 'unknowing' actually makes this work more humane).

The Tempest maintains one's faith in an 'open universe' of myriad artistic possibilities; as reflected in this multi-layered artwork which I suspect Jasper Johns would appreciate.

In a way it also confirms Marcel Duchamp's apparently subversive supposition that an artwork only has ultimate meaning from what the spectator who observes it actually *thinks* of it. It takes two to tango in Duchamp's eyes and just does not rely on the artist's reasoning to provide art with its cultural/political/social/spiritual/metaphysical relevance.

I admire Giorgione and keep him and his art 'in mind'.

Thus, it has to be said that presently considering issues of human perception by using landscape (although leading to abstraction) as a starting point I am probably adopting a romanticized approach to reality in the sense I express my subjective *feeling* of nature's relevance to me and in a way allegorizing my artistic response through the titles I have chosen. A scientist wants to prove a

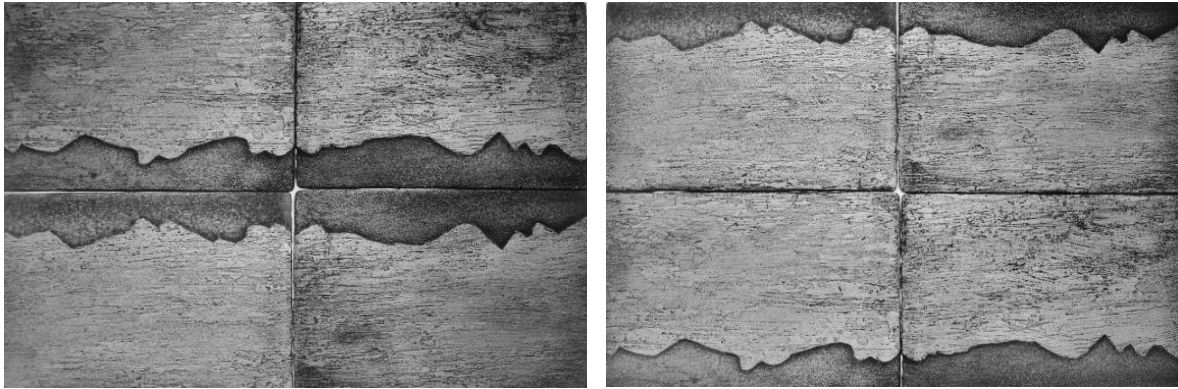
theory to make it fact. An artist explores and presents ideas to maybe also find what is not so much factual to satisfy the human mind but rather what is revelatory to ultimately enthrall the human spirit. A scientist may wish to do that too but from my dim understanding the onus is still more on ‘objective facts’ rather than ‘subjective ideas’ (if such a binary distinction to all ‘human exploration’ of the world and universe really needs to be made). Quantum physics with its many multidimensional ‘physical paradoxes’ should never trouble a romantic. (I assume there are also a few ‘scientific romantics’ as I wish to also make the important and necessary point that any distinction between science and art as well as to all other ‘divisions’ of human knowledge, insight and endeavour are ultimately false – we are ‘whole beings’ with ‘whole minds’ simply expressing different ‘partitions’ at differing points of our whole lives).

Thus, I must admit I artistically probe into reality somewhat ‘blindly’ not wanting at first to trust not so much the analytical realm of human thought but rather initially, with a sublime conscious emphasis, on human *instinct*. To respond, rather than to dictate...I am ‘simple’ in my initial philosophical approach in that at the end of the day I fall back in my thinking to such popularised suppositions such as the eyes are the ‘windows of the soul’ or the ‘doors of perception’ as espoused by William Blake.

The two sets of intaglio ‘four quadrants’ are only an *attempt* to further laterally open us to ways of ‘new vision’ in which the images maybe perceived by the spectator in a way not at all envisaged by the artist.

Yet, what is hoped – to continue the reference to William Blake is a mindful expansion of the ‘Human Imagination’ which will allow the human spirit to expressively breathe a little more easier; as I agree with William Blake that ‘Human Rationalism’ can suffocate the human soul so with that in mind it always seem beneficial to further loosen those cold chains of chilling Aristotelian binary logic that when are too tight seem to limit rather than strengthen the multi-dimensional aspects of human possibility which I dearly desire. (Although, to give Aristotle his due it was he who said: “change in all things is sweet.”).

After all is said and done, one is never really wholly ‘neutral’, such is life and art. For *all* is subject to *growth* (or inversely to decay) and thus subject to *change* and the paradox is that although we may seek to understand what seem to be universal constants in the Universe at the same time nothing seems to stay the same - although a ‘single truth’ can exist - it is also a matter of trying to perceive the inherent pulsating ‘truth/s’ that possibly resonate along a ‘thin line’ where the indefinable matrix between an ever transformative, undulating mortality dynamically connects (and which can also be infused) with a dynamic ever stable (but never stale or fossilizing) mysterious, immeasurable eternity.



The four zinc etching plates formatted in both combinations.

Notes.

For the above text I provide the following references; which, while it is not exhaustive, I have attempted to make acknowledgements whenever possible; but, if it is an issue, I apologise for not being more precise.

1. *'Four Quartets'* by T.S. Eliot. Faber and Faber. *Wikipedia* was useful for providing some general information on T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets along with more particular notes under the heading of each quartet title. Another source of information on the internet was *Spark Notes*. I wish to acknowledge that I have 'woven' some ideas from these websites into my musings.
2. I presume I obtained the Heraclitus quote from the internet but as for Marcus Aurelius please consider *'Meditations'*. Translated by Maxwell Staniforth. Penguin Books. 1964 edition.
3. *'Figuring Jasper Johns'* by Fred Orton. Harvard University Press. 1994. Other books worth considering on Jasper Johns include *Jasper Johns* by Michael Crichton. Harry N.Abrams. Inc. 1977 & *JASPER JOHNS/IN PRESS. The Crosshatch Works and the Logic of Print* by Jennifer L. Roberts. Hatze Cantz. Harvard Art Museums. Jasper Johns. Prints 1970-1977 by Richard S. Field. Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut. 1978. I must also mention that I admire the rough hewn effect of the encaustic quality in Jasper Johns's paintings.
4. *'How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War.'* Serge Guilbaut. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. University of Chicago Press. 1983.
5. Information on cuneiforms was actually gleaned from a second hand book for primary/lower high school students titled *Investigate World History*. Paragon. 1999.
6. The reference to Chinese landscape was from *Symbols of Eternity. The Art of Landscape Painting in China*. Michael Sullivan. Clarendon Press. Oxford. 1979. As for Giorgione's *Tempest* unfortunately all I can say is that I had a cursory look at some internet articles/videos after doing a web search on this painting and its artist. As for the likes of Marcel Duchamp, Jackson Pollock and cursory observations of other artists/art movements etcetera several generalist/specific art books/biographies were referred too from my personal library.
7. However, I should make specific mention of the well-known early twentieth century works *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* by Wassily Kandinsky & *The Blue Reiter Almanac* edited by Wassily Kandinsky & Franz Marc (Both 1912. Munich. Although it should be added that *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* was printed in December 1911 although dated 1912). When I mention Kandinsky's ideas I more or less paraphrase him.
8. One other book I also specifically note is *ETCHINGS* by Fred Williams. Introduction: John Brack. Catalogue: James Mollison. Published: Rudy Komon Gallery. Jersey Rd. Woollahra. Sydney. 1968. Flicking through it just now I saw *Plate 51* which is a quartet of grainy textured etchings titled *'Landscape Quartette.'* I wonder if this grouping of four small rectangle etchings had some subliminal influence on me. His long thin Murray River panel etchings are also worth a look and can be found in *Fred Williams An Australian Vision* by Irena Zdanowicz & Stephen Coppel. The British Museum Press 2009.

Nicholas Nicola. July. 2013.