



ARTICLE OVERVIEW

The Print Center highlights monumental sculptor Martin Puryear's etchings and offers a different perspective on the artist's work. Pam Forsythe reviews.

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Powerful printmaking

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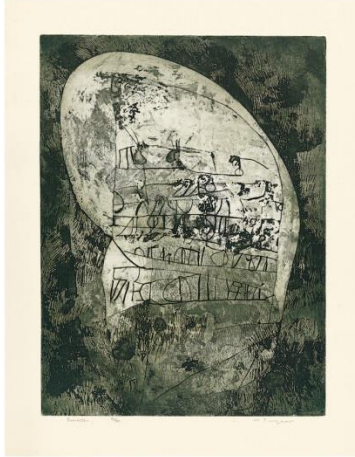
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Martin Puryear's artistic output is structured like a cream-filled cookie: two layers of etchings with monumental sculpture in between. The Washington, D.C.-born artist began creating works on paper in the 1960s and returned to the medium at the turn of this century. His early and recent work is surveyed in *Martin Puryear: Prints, 1962-2016* at the Print Center.



Martin Puryear, "Untitled V1 (State 1)," (2012) could be a blueprint for "Big Bling." (Image courtesy of Paulson Fontaine Press.)



Rorschach on the Schuylkill

Which is not to say Puryear abandoned sculpture. Along Kelly Drive, *Big Bling* (2016) rises 40 feet high in a temporary installation. Suggesting a high-heeled shoe, an earring, or even an elephant, it offers a Rorschach test to rowers, runners, and drivers alike.

Among the works on view at the Print Center is *Untitled VI (State I)* (2012). It could be Bling's blueprint, though in this iteration it appears like a large sitting cat. The resemblance confirms that whatever the medium, Puryear's work flows from the same creative stream.

Woodblock and intaglio

While studying at Catholic University and then serving with the Peace Corps, Puryear made woodcuts and etchings. Rather than photographing the experience while he taught in Sierra Leone, he sketched and illustrated letters home. Work from those years includes a woodcut, *Dog* (1965). It's a stark X-ray of a starving canine in which outer form and inner bone structure are simultaneously visible.

While *Dog* arrests the eye, *Dome* (1965) is more nuanced. In an aquatint etching of what could be the view from a Roman rooftop, Puryear provides a cityscape of textures. The sky is smooth and the striated dome suggests copper, though the piece is not colored in. A wall is made of rough brick, and circular windows below the dome allow viewers to peer into the darkened building.

Animals and ancient objects

Besides exploring new media as his career progressed, Puryear's style evolved from representational to abstract, a transformation beautifully illustrated by *Bull* (1962) and *Diallo* (2013). *Bull* is a woodcut in which the steer's body seems not merely inked with wood but carved from it, the grain staking out wide swaths across shoulder and haunch. The image, however, is sharp and clear. While still identifiably a bull, *Diallo* is abstract, just an elongated triangle to form the face, two curling horns that look more like old telephone cord than lethal weapons, and one winking eye.

The Art Institute of Chicago's print and drawings curator Mark Pascale called Puryear's "Rune Stone" (1966) "a full-out treatise on the techniques of engraving, etching and aquatint." (Image courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery)

Puryear's early etching *Rune Stone* (1966) is a tour de force of technique, writes Ruth Fine, guest curator for the exhibition and a former curator for the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. In terms of quality and subject matter, it is of a piece with his more recent *Phrygian (Cap in the Air)* (2012).

Both works are richly textured, dense, solid — a result of techniques that include soft ground etching and aquatint. In aquatint, printing plates are treated with acid to produce tonal variations that have been compared to watercolors.

Rune Stone, shaped like a fingerprint, appears to have been eroded with time and nature. The viewer feels the dampness of the surface, permeated by dirt and leaf mold, interrupted only by incised marks made by an unseen carver. In reality, it was the work of the unseen artist, scraping and polishing the image through multiple stages. In *Phrygian*, the ribbed, pointed cap tilts as if windblown, and the eye feels its thick softness.

Illustrating *Cane*

One gallery is devoted to Puryear's illustrations of Jean Toomer's experimental novel *Cane*, a work first published in 1923 and considered a landmark of the Harlem Renaissance. Puryear read the book — which addresses race and being black in the United States through both fiction and poetry — in the early 1970s. Proofs of seven woodcuts (2000) inspired by Toomer's female characters are on exhibit, as well as a leather-bound limited edition with a wooden slipcase designed by Puryear. The slipcase is fashioned of African wenge, Swiss pear, American walnut, and sugar maple. Unlike the two-tone images, these woods display a range of natural colors.

The rare volume appears in a case, open to the page about Esther, who encounters the threatening King Barto as he goes into a religious trance. Puryear illustrated the passage with a view of Esther's hair — wavy tendrils, as referenced in the text — and a single oval eye. Though only a partial view, the cuts comprising her image are wider and seem closer to the viewer than Barto, who is shown as a single thin line curling from eye to brow and back down to cheekbone, lips and shoulder. Being able to read the text from which Puryear worked is fascinating; It would be interesting to read the passages for Karintha, Becky, Carma, Fern, Avey, and Bona, whose interpretations are also on view.

Just as Puryear's art straddles genre and scale, its qualities shift from precise edges to cottony splotches, prickly fields to burnished expanses, bold black-and-white to a rainbow of grays. What's on view is not so much the evolution of a body of work but the amalgamation of Puryear's evolution as an artist.

BROAD STREET REVIEW

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