

Katy Macleod - Writer, educator, art critic and theorist  
Reader at Kingston University  
[www.katymacleod.org.uk](http://www.katymacleod.org.uk)

*The eye exists in an untamed state. The only witness of the Wonders of the Earth at an altitude of thirty metres and the Wonders of the Sea at a depth of thirty metres is the wild eye that can see colours only in terms of the rainbow. It presides over the conventional exchange of signals that the mind's navigations would seem to require. But who will set up the ladder of vision?*  
Andre Breton, 'Surrealism and Painting', 1928

Most artists fell short of Breton's demanding approach to art but there is something useful to understanding what art is about in these few lines because it is always about the relationship between what is seen and what has been understood and although that might sound very simple, in that relationship is all the complexity of just being alive. Perhaps there is something about the very physical nature of making prints and the requirement for the whole absorption of the body as well as the mind which binds Ripley into making his work. The processes of making prints is distinctive primarily because of the demands of the equipment, whether this be the printing press or the material on which the impress is made. Simon Ripley certainly describes his work as a very particular process:

I make linocut relief monoprints on handmade Japanese papers...I always start physically, by cutting into the lino block. A range of colours are overprinted one at a time –wet on top of wet ink to build up texture and merged colours...I also use a large 1850's Columbian relief press never removing the piece from the press until it is finished.

This is a step by step process: first the cutting into the surface,(more MDF than lino nowadays), to allow for a white detail, or the colour of the paper; then black across the whole surface to provide something for subsequent colours to fight against; then warm or counterbalancing cool colours; then shapes or marks; then, perhaps new cuts into the original black surface. It is a coherent process with a logic determined by the colours. So it is colour and the knowledge of colour and the experienced sensing of how one set of marks will work against another within the limitations of the cuts in the surface which could bind the practice of print making to a skill based craft. However, these prints, 'Hyrangea' or 'Desire' are unique; these are prints which stand in for what we conceive of paintings to be on one level at least. But Ripley finds painting curiously lightweight. He prefers the process of cutting into and pressing down with this extraordinarily heavy equipment and the limitation of the one piece of paper, held until the print is made, which is so very different from painting where the canvas can bear so many workings and erasures, false starts and re-conceptualisations. With this process, the print maker has to work with the limitations he has set and work against the possibility of failure as a constant. Of course that is very much part of what keeps Ripley enthralled and most especially as the first colour he prints nowadays is black. But whatever the process, these works speak of a numinous world which is not the everyday and not what is precisely seen, in spite of the titles. It is a world dependent on what is not quite seen and not quite understood because it is not dependent on words; it is a different kind of articulation. These are abstract forms which relate to sensations and ideas and meditations on themes which are as old as the hills. They are both exuberant declarations of what colour can do in relation to shape, line and form and invitations to think differently about the material world, where the artist and:

*...his sense of the essential and infinite must be realised plastically. He must express his notions of reality in terms of shapes, space, colors, rhythms, and the other plastic elements which we have described for they constitute the language...*

Mark Rothko, 'The Myth and its Presentation in the Plastic Language' in Christopher Rothko, 2004

It is a language which Mark Rothko, an artist whom Ripley very much admires, plumbed to its depth. Rothko was one of only two key influences named to me when I visited his studio. The other is Helen Frankenthaler and with both, the working through of ideas is of central importance and for Rothko sticking to a practice which aimed at revealing 'truth' was what mattered. In this practice of print making the full experimentation with methods and the adherence to a truthfulness of thoughtful being is always present; their truthfulness is what counts and they are truthful to what has been caught with the imagination's eye and retained through the strenuous processes of production.