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Reflections on the art of Erwin Eisch

Kevin Petrie

‘Your hands are cold’, he said, rubbing them warm.

This is my memory of the first time I met Erwin Eisch. I was preparing to teach a printmaking class at Bild-Werk Frauenau, the creative summer school that Eisch set up in 1987 in his Bavarian home village. I recognised him at once, perhaps from the books on glass I’d read as a student. My hands were cold after being in a bucket of water and Eisch noticed this when he shook my hand. Shaking hands now seems like a very intimate thing to do in these ‘Covid’ times. This open and generous ability to connect with others is typical of the man as well as of his art. Hands are important in Eisch’s art. We see them open and welcoming, tentatively reaching into the unknown, touching other hands, emerging from bodies and the ground, flexing in surprise, holding, resting, guiding, showing. But I think never harming.

Erwin Eisch was born in the Bavarian village of Frauenau (valley of the women) in 1927. If you look carefully you may spot Frauenau’s Baroque church with its onion like tower in some of Eisch’s artworks. In this exhibition, you can see both the church and examples of the hands motif in the drawing ‘Frauenau and Frauen – hands’. Eisch says the 1751 paintings by Franz Rauscher on the ceiling of this church were a great influence. The paintings in the church offer a view of heaven with figures floating in space. There are similarities to motifs in Eisch’s work. There’s a Madonna figure with arms and hands outstretched. In Eisch’s work similar figures might be the Virgin, a mother, a lover or an angel perhaps (see the painting ‘Angel for Coburg’ in this exhibition).

The eyes ‘sparkle’ in the Rauscher paintings as do the eyes in Eisch’s works. Other figures gaze at each other, benign and benevolent, across the void. There are figures seen inside the torso of a larger figure – another Eisch device. There are figures on the ground and flying in the air - as we see in Eisch. Although this is a painting of heaven, for me, the overriding theme is humanity and connections between people. Eisch often says, “Heaven starts on the ground.” One views this painting from the ground (perhaps the day-to-day world of the living), but the ceiling painting makes me think of the power of imagination, dreams, and perhaps of those who are no longer with us. For some, this will connect to religious belief. So heaven may start on the ground, but is also literally above Frauenau on the roof of this church. Eisch is also rooted in

Frauenau, but his work is concerned with all things human on and between the ground and this metaphoric “heaven” he often talks of.

Although Eisch is known as a “glass artist,” he works across painting, drawing, printing, and sculpture. In terms of glass, Eisch might be thought of as the European pioneer of ‘Studio Glass’ – that is glass used as a creative material by an individual artist as opposed to in a factory for mass produced products. Eisch’s great collaborator, Harvey Littleton, is often described as the “Father of American Studio Glass” as he was the first to set up a glassblowing course in an American university in 1962. Littleton first met Eisch that same year, when he was touring glass education programs in Northern Europe and tracked Eisch down in Frauenau. Both artists had a life-long friendship and the impressive range of prints made by Eisch using Littleton’s ‘vitreography’ methods of printing from glass plates is perhaps one of the key legacies. I had the privilege, in 2011, of looking through 50 years of Eisch’s prints in his home. Inspired by seeing this work afresh Eisch decided to call Harvey Littleton on the phone. He passed the phone to me and a distant and at that time elderly voice said “we had a lotta fun” from down the line in the USA.

Although Eisch’s work is powerfully personal and idiosyncratic there is a strong theme of collaboration throughout his working life. As well as Littleton, another great collaborator has been Margarete Stadler (Gretel Eisch) who married Eisch in 1962. Gretel is a wonderful artist in her own right, often working in sculpted painted wood and printmaking. She is also the sculptor of the head and other forms in Eisch’s glass work. For example, the iconic heads are made by Gretel in clay in the first instance and from these models two piece moulds are made into which glass is blown. This creates hollow glass sculpture which Eisch paints or engraves adding layers of meaning. The basic forms can be made several times or adapted and can also have different surface treatments. This allows Eisch to create different perspectives on the same portrait subjects.

This exhibition also includes some early collaborative glass pieces by the Eisch's, which are reminiscent of 16th and 17th Century German ‘Humpen’ beakers painted with enamel decoration. In the Eisch examples, we see marriage and family scenes perhaps reflecting the artists own recent union in the early 60’s? One piece is titled ‘Glass and happiness always return. Happiness and glass, how easily it breaks’ which eloquently links subject matter to the nature of the glass material. Nearly 60 years later both glass and marriage remain unbroken.

A more recent collaboration has been with Andy Owen, a Professor of Art at Florida Gulf Coast University. Owen introduced Eisch to a non-toxic form of monoprinting where a thin layer of ink is applied to glass surface and the Eisch removes areas to form figures seemingly emerging from the blackness of the ink. This approach is very direct and akin to drawing. Eisch's works on paper in general show a diverse range of responses to the human condition as well as world events. Ines Kohl has said that for Eisch "drawing is a medium for entering a conversation with others"¹. The drawings and gouaches offer visual responses to emotions, states of being and events. Perhaps they also offer a vehicle for Eisch to have a 'conversation' with himself and to explore aspects of the world?

Thinking about art as a method to understand the world, I am intrigued by two drawings in this exhibition both called 'Motherhood'. Both images show totem like figures which appear to reference glass vessels – one has a wine glass-like foot. To me these images perhaps show two possible aspects of motherhood: protection and entrapment. The figure with the wine glass foot seems to be protecting the children within the 'wine glass' vessel of her body. The children and the mother also seem to be amalgamated as the figure's breasts also become children's heads. In the other drawing the figure seems less protecting and more constrained. The figure seems to be bound in some kind of material and tethered by the breasts to children who are outside of the image area. The mother is raising her hands and what appears to be smoke is exploding from her ears – perhaps in exasperation? Having said that, I have an Eisch gouache called 'Erleuchtung' (enlightenment or inspiration) which has a similar motif of smoke popping from the ears of a figure. So perhaps the mother is experiencing inspiration from her children rather than frustration? Although when Eisch talked to me about my drawing he did mention that he suffers from tinnitus in reference to the smoking ears! These two drawings on the theme of motherhood sum up for me the richness, ambiguity, and complexity of many of Eisch's images. Many of which may appear simple on first glance. I would be very interested to hear what viewers who are mothers take from these two pieces.

Eisch's drawing seems to respond to what is important to him at a given time which might be a personal feeling or experience or World events. For example, I remember in 2011 when visiting the Eisch gallery in Frauenau seeing very recent drawings at the time about the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan and the death in 2010 of Eisch's close friend, the painter Tom Buechner. Another time, I remember visiting Eisch's 'Winter Studio' and seeing piles of gouaches and drawings on the floor which made me

feel this is perhaps a daily form of expression. A couple of years later I saw this urge, perhaps more a *need*, to draw more closely when Eisch visited Sunderland to see his retrospective exhibition that I co-curated with Julia Stephenson at National Glass Centre. Although it was summer we had a lot of rain during the visit and the Eisch's stayed close to the beach and North Sea (Sunderland is known as 'The City by Sea'). This obviously made a great impression on Eisch who said to me "have you seen all the water - coming from the sky and all around us". Living in the Bavarian forest he was perhaps not used to seeing such expanses and quantities of water. He was keen to draw and we found him paper, pens and watercolours and he sat in his exhibition making wonderful watery drawings of strange creatures emerging from waves while visitors looked on. Characteristically he didn't feel the need to keep the drawings and having made them and he handed them to me and asked me to give them to people associated with his retrospective.

This exhibition has some wonderful examples of Eisch's prints so it is perhaps worth considering these in more detail. His printmaking oeuvre is substantial and consists of around seventy-five editions of prints as well as single experimental works and monoprints. Eisch's first prints were made in 1958 at art school in Munich but his printmaking really developed from 1981 when he embarked on prints made from glass plates at Harvey Littleton's studio in the USA. He returned in most years up until 1992 to make editions.

Littleton made his first prints from glass in 1974 after a workshop on sandblasting techniques. He asked a friend to print sheets of glass that had designs sandblasted into them. The results were promising and by the late 1970s Littleton had devoted a part of his studio to printing from glass. Later, the term 'vitreography' was coined to describe the developing repertoire of new printing techniques from glass, which have parallels with etching and lithography. Through the 1980s and '90s, Littleton continued to develop vitreography with a number of master printers at his North Carolina studio. He also started to invite artists to work with the processes, including Dale Chihuly, Stanislav Libenský, and Erwin Eisch.

Let's think about the world that we see in the prints. As in Eisch's painting, drawing, and glass, the action often takes place between the sky and the ground. Figures float in this imagined space – like those on the church ceiling in Frauenau. Sometimes even the ground itself is floating, perhaps reinforcing that our world – or our ground – is part of something much bigger. Eisch told me that the older he gets, the more he feels that some bigger force or "energy" is guiding us. He speaks of "Mr. or Mrs. Serendipity,"

who brought Littleton and his wife, Bess, to his door fifty years ago and changed his life.

Perhaps one of the strongest political statements in Eisch's print-making is his portfolio of ten vitreographs based on the events of the 'Kristallnacht,' or 'Night of Broken Glass,' and commissioned by the American Interfaith Institute. The 'Kristallnacht,' was a series of coordinated attacks against Jews throughout Nazi Germany during the night of November 9, 1938. The attacks on Jewish homes, stores, and synagogues left the streets covered in smashed window glass. This one event was widely reported around the world and is thought to mark the beginning of the 'Final Solution,' leading to the Holocaust. Eisch was only about eleven at the time but talks of feeling a burden of shame on behalf of his country for the terrible events that were to follow. He wanted to make these pieces to try to 'approach' those who survived. These prints are angry in terms of marks and composition and the imagery is powerful and dark. We see running figures, swastikas, skulls, and brutish apelike figures. This work illustrates human stupidity but is still an attempt to connect with others.

In the late 1980s, Eisch began to introduce color into his prints. For example, 'Moonstruck', from 1988, displays some of the advantages of printmaking over painting in its graphic simplicity and clarity. The overprinting of brown on yellow allows the figure to be 'illuminated' in the tree. Printmaking requires the artist to plan this kind of device, unlike painting, which can be overpainted, and so can lead to a very direct powerful image. The dense Bavarian Forest surrounds Frauenau and here we perhaps get a glimpse of what goes on at night. It makes me think of the night when I sat outside my hotel and watched a large and almost full moon rise over the tree-covered hills – thrilling and slightly disturbing at the same time.

An early print made at the Littleton studio is 'Yes, Please', from 1981. This is a monochrome image with line work made by engraving the glass with a flexi-drive engraver. The image offers some of the 'classic' Eisch themes. We see an amalgam of figure, vehicle, and landscape on wheels moving over the ground (so this is ground on the ground). Figures and flying fishlike forms move up to 'heaven.' The latter takes the form of a dark area with three eyes, from which lines project back down to the ground. So the ground(s) and sky become connected and as one. If you look closer, there is an angel-like form, comprised of a large hand with a wing and head, looking down with benevolence (again, similar to what we can see in the church) or perhaps it is welcoming a figure into heaven. There are also numbers. Eisch believes numbers to be very important in life as they dictate time, money, and other systems and offer a

counterpoint to the figures in his art. Look again and you can see a pale but large profile of a head on the left-hand side of the picture. Perhaps this world within a world is actually taking place in one person's head? Perhaps in Eisch's head?

This piece, along with other work in this exhibition seem to show a kind of amalgam of body, land and spirit. Perhaps, more than ever we need to think about this interconnected ecosystem as we consider a more sustainable future? To me, this sums up the all-encompassing and positive nature of much of Eisch's work, which offers a complex and rich world, stemming from one ego but relevant to us all. Eisch's art is based on universal themes and essentially on connections between people. It also deals with the stream of imagination and fantasy in us all, but is also highly responsive to both personal and world events. In short, this is one man's sustained attempt to embrace all that it is to be alive.

Professor Kevin Petrie is Head of the School of Art & Design at University of Sunderland, UK. This essay is in part adapted from his essay 'Windows on our World – Erwin Eisch and printmaking' for the book 'Erwin Eisch Clouds have been my foothold along – Glass and Paintings, Hirmer, 2012.

¹ Kohl, I. (2012). 'Between Heaven and Earth – The Drawings of Erwin Eisch' in *Erwin Eisch Clouds have been my foothold along – Glass and Paintings*, Munich, Hirmer Verlag GmbH. p.130.