



"Tight", soft ground etching and aquatint, 2015

*The Intricacies of People /  
20 colour etchings by Robert Pugh*

Exhibition: April 21 - May 27, 2017  
Opening Reception Friday April 21, 7:00pm - 9:00pm



Alberta Printmakers Gallery  
4025 4 Street SE, Calgary AB

The Intricacies of People / 20 colour etchings by Robert Pugh  
Essay by Mary-Beth Laviolette, March 2017

Robert Pugh is a senior artist whose artistic practice began to take shape in England in the 1970s. Over the years, much of his time has been devoted to painting despite acquiring a press twenty years ago and creating, over time, an oeuvre of printed works. Five years ago Pugh started producing figurative colour etchings nineteen of which are on display at Alberta Printmakers. One engraving with aquatint is also included.

These art works involve some of the oldest techniques in printmaking but in the hands of a capable artist like Pugh there is a vitality, visually speaking, that makes these small-scale prints speak totally of the present. Underlying it all is an informal style of drawing that avoids the illustrative while conveying as much as the viewer needs to know. It's a case of : implied but never revealed, evoked but never declared.

This approach plays well with the subject matter addressed by the artist. Let's call it the quotidian or a preoccupation with everyday moments in the artist's life and his friends. It's people that interest Pugh and in each etching generally some kind of scenario is depicted. A naked man dips his foot in a Cold stream, a couple embrace in a deep Kiss. In Rain, running for cover is a man attired in a bright striped red shirt and blue jeans while in a crowded Rooftop Café a patron near the back holds forth.

The exception to all of this ordinariness is Squeeze where inspired by a 1977 video, a woman visitor is required to squeeze past a naked and stone-faced Marina Abramovic, the performance artist. The other woman's expression is one of uncertainty or perhaps embarrassment. Through compressed body language, this artwork evokes a quiet intensity that gets repeated in other prints such as Tight (2015), Asha (2016), A Drink (2016) and others.

Responsible for conveying all of this, is his sketch-like drawing which transfers well to his etchings. The drawing seems to be a spontaneous affair but according to Pugh is the result of absorbing information from photographs he has taken or borrowed from friends. A lot of process is involved then in this trajectory from photograph to drawing (several) to a soft-ground etching. As a viewer I was compelled to ask: where's the photo? It was nowhere to be seen, hence, a convincing conversion.

In addition to the etching itself, the artist employs two and sometimes three aquatint plates – one with warm colours and the other with cool to enhance the humanity of the scenario he has created. Here tone plays a role rather than line; giving us a sense that some of these images are located in a tropical environment. It doesn't take much but the experience of rain pelted down on a Pink Umbrella (2016) or being a blue-shirted tourist in a crowded Beach House (2016) is lucidly implied. Most beautiful among the twenty prints is the aquamarine-drenched background in front of which a gesture of kindness is performed in *The intimacy of strangers* (2017).

Finally, is the spirit of Edgar Degas being channeled somehow in these prints of Robert Pugh? The French artist is best known for his paintings of ballerinas but he was also a prolific printmaker (monotypes) noted for the ease of his mark making. Pugh's work is completely of a contemporary kind but the spirit of urban life is also a strong feature too. Conveyed is the conviction that even in the very ordinary matters of life compelling images are to be found.

*Mary-Beth Laviolette is an independent Art Curator & Writer, living in Canmore Alberta.*

*Robert Pugh is a painter and printmaker living in West Sussex UK. He attended Byam Shaw School of Art, Obtaining a Distinction degree. He has attended classes in Printmaking at Morley College, Camden Arts Centre and Brighton Independent Printmakers. Pugh is a member of the Printmakers Council, East London, and Brighton Independent Printmakers.*

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Alberta Printmakers (A/P) is a non-profit, artist-run centre founded in 1989 in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. The organization's goals are to increase public awareness of print media, to engage a diverse audience, to provide resources for the artistic community and production facilities for printmaking.

A/P has an open membership, and is governed by a board of directors. Management and administration of A/P's activities are the responsibilities of its Directors, who reach out to volunteers in accomplishing A/P's goals. A/P also hosts residency and summer student programs.

[www.albertaprintmakers.com](http://www.albertaprintmakers.com) / 403.287.1056

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