

# Overview



*Untitled (diagonals)*, 2009. Color aquatint with soft ground etching. 18 x 12<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-inch image on 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 17<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-inch sheet. Edition 20. Printed by Inne Kjørle.

## TOMMA ABTS

*In the spring of 2009, German-born and London-based painter Tomma Abts worked for two weeks making etchings in the Crown Point studio. In the early fall, Crown Point's director, Valerie Wade, interviewed her through email.*

**Valerie Wade:** When I first invited you to do a project at Crown Point Press, you mentioned that a print project had been on your mind, and I was glad you felt that this was a good time to try it. When preparing for your visit did you have a clear idea of what you wanted to do?

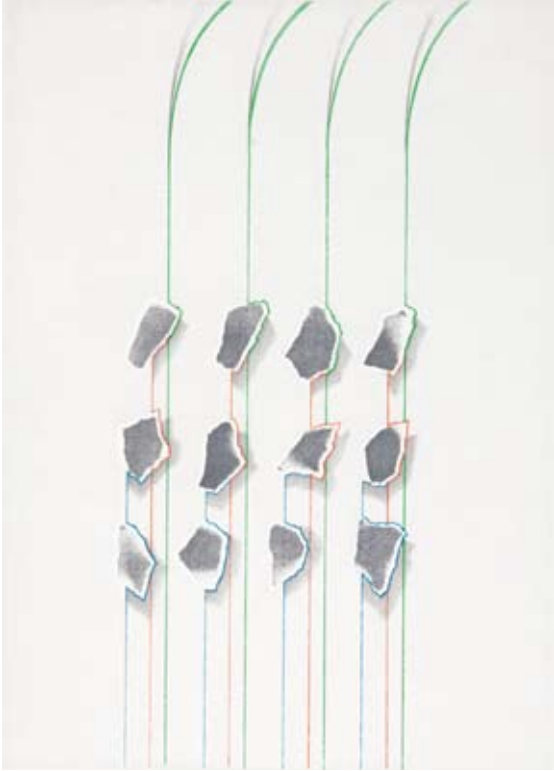
**Tomma Abts:** I had no idea at all! I only knew that I had a preference for etching as a printing technique. I really like the look of the particular effects that can be created with it. I guess I knew that I wanted to find a size for the prints that would feel right first; I needed a structure because everything else was completely open. So we looked at different-size copper plates and paper,

and once I found the size that felt appropriate, I felt I had more freedom to explore. This is how I work generally—I don't make plans or designs. I begin with nothing; I only have the specifics of the medium, in this case an etching plate.

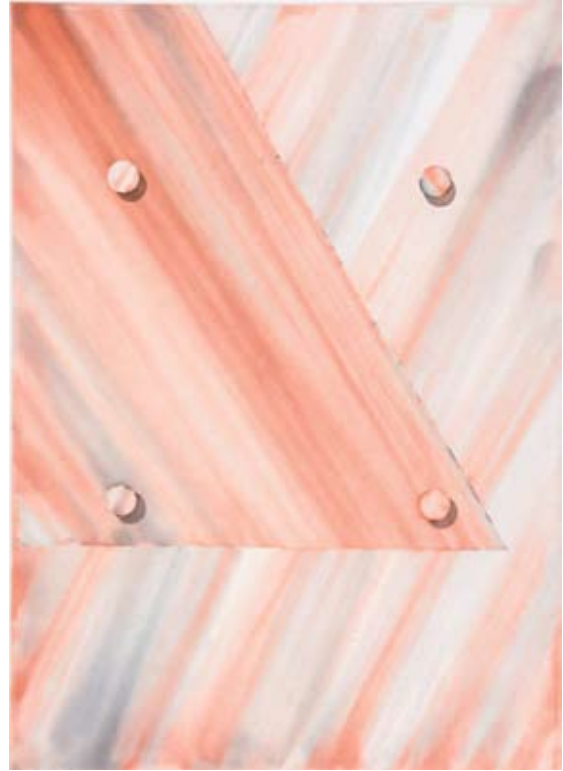
**VW:** You let the medium guide you?

**TA:** Yes, what could I do with this process? I definitely wanted to use a variety of techniques, to create surfaces, color fields and lines in a way that I couldn't do with either painting or drawing. But to have some possible starting points I brought along lots of photos of my small drawings. These are mostly quick notes of visual ideas, in any material that came to hand, watercolor, collage, ink, pencil, etc.

**VW:** One of the special characteristics of the copper-plate etching process is the ability to layer images by adding or subtracting a plate, and printing a proof of each plate as you progress. This



*Untitled (12 bits)*, 2009. Color soft ground etching with aquatint reversal and aquatint. 18 x 12<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-inch image on 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 17<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-inch sheet. Edition 20.



*Untitled (triangle)*, 2009. Color spit bite aquatint with aquatint. 18 x 12<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-inch image on 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 17<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-inch sheet. Edition 20.

enables you to see a particular image in many different states and make decisions as you go. Did this flexibility help you develop your images?

**TA:** It helped me a lot, as it is much easier to change parts, or to quickly try something and then use it or not. When painting I have to adjust the whole surface whenever I make any changes, and this layer will always be embedded in the final surface. Here I could manipulate each layer separately, and then decide whether to add or subtract it, or do it again slightly differently. The layering is lighter and more playful. But when I arrived at the final version of each print, I would know that I wanted it like this exactly. I wouldn't think, "Let's change the background from green to blue," just because it is so easy to do that in printmaking. The end results are precise.

**VW:** In the studio when you were working on the plates, I watched as you fluctuated between extreme concentration and complete spontaneity.

**TA:** This is what happens when I am painting too. I go back and forth between very spontaneous and intuitive moments, throwing whatever comes to mind into the equation, and then editing it, being overly reflective and self-conscious in order to define what I have thrown in more clearly, and make it work with what's already there.

Saying this makes me think that whenever I do an interview,

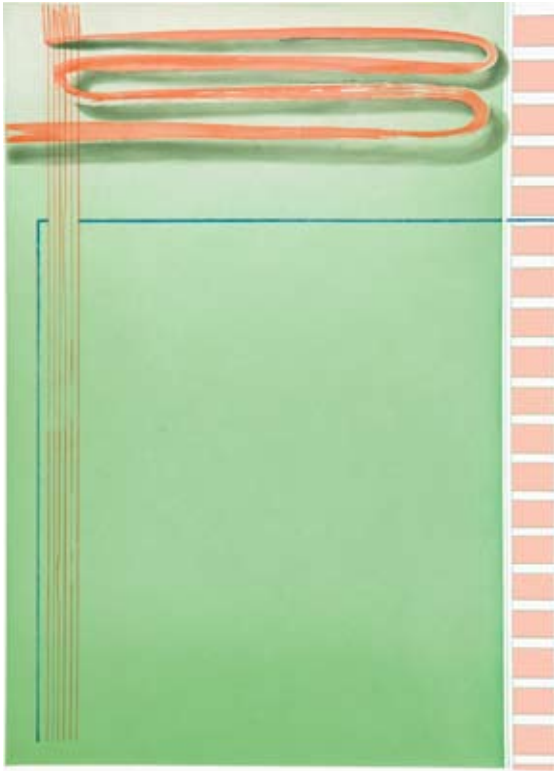
the same issue arises. Because there is a lack of external references in my work, the statements I make about painting or drawing, or in this case etching, seem to me to be general statements about each process.

**VW:** It seems like the different etching techniques offered you a kind of movement between something that is very precise and particular and something that is fluid.

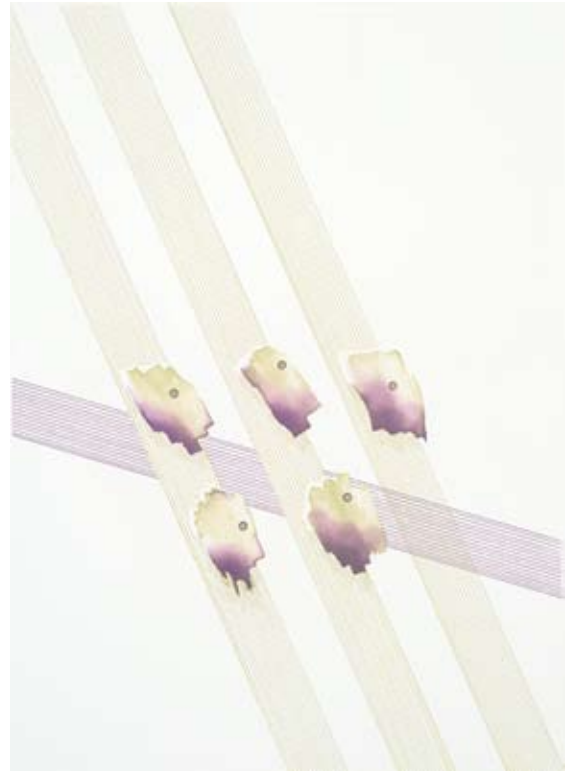
**TA:** The etching technique carries its own, sometimes unpredictable, effect that I could then decide to integrate into the image, or even make the subject of the print. For example, *Untitled (12 bits)* began with the experiment to lay down bits of torn paper onto the copper plate and these elements then became the subject of the print.

**VW:** I've noticed over the years that the painterly quality of certain etching processes is very appealing to artists. For example, the technique of spit bite aquatint creates a watercolor-type brushstroke as in *Untitled (triangle)*. You made this print by painting acid directly on the plate through an aquatint ground, then blocking out that area and painting with acid again in the other direction, creating a type of counter motion.

**TA:** In my paintings it is usually the very first layers that I stain with watery acrylic paint, and then I work with oil paint on top, leaving some parts of the layer underneath open. And sometimes these areas are still visible in the finished painting. I use watercolor more directly in some of my small drawings to make marks or



*Untitled (brushstroke)*, 2009. Color water bite aquatint with aquatint, hard ground etching and drypoint. 17<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 12<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-inch image on 23 × 17<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-inch sheet. Edition 20.



*Untitled (5 spots)*, 2009. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with hard ground and flat bite etching. 18 × 12<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-inch image on 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 17<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-inch sheet. Edition 20.

shapes. But it was new for me to create an image completely out of fluid brushstrokes as in the print *Untitled (triangle)*.

**VW:** In *Untitled (brushstroke)* you used water bite aquatint to create a tone that seamlessly transitions from dark to light. Water bite is like a scientific process—an aquatint ground is applied to the plate, then it is submerged at a slight incline in a water bath. Next, a printer pours acid into the water along the bottom of the plate. Since acid is heavier than water, the acid stays concentrated at the base, but slowly creeps up as the printer continually adds more. This creates a deeper etch at the bottom of the image and a lighter etch at the top. The subtle gradation creates a contrast to the hard ground lines you drew on the right side of the image.

**TA:** I thought water bite aquatint was a beautiful technique, so I definitely wanted to use it. It makes up the background plate for the print. Though working with a number of plates allows more flexibility, it can on the other hand be more complicated to make a particular mark. In this print, for example, I wanted to create the effect of a single brushstroke. I used two plates, one with sugar lift to create the graphic flat area of the brushstroke and the other with spit bite to add the irregular volume of a watercolor brushstroke. On paper I can simply paint it in one go.

**VW:** During the two weeks that you worked in the Crown Point studio you completed five color etchings that include painterly gestures and also graphic elements. Do you see the imagery in

these prints as a synthesis of your painting and drawing?

**TA:** I don't think the prints are a synthesis; I think they occupy their own place. The imagery evolved from the etching technique. In the drawings the empty space is the background; it's just the paper. In my etchings the background has a more material quality. It is of course not as material as in the paintings, where there is always an ambiguous relationship between background and foreground. But unlike in the drawings, the etchings' backgrounds are colored—except for *Untitled (5 spots)*. Even in this print the background is part of the image, because the plate is impressed into the paper and you can see its edges.

**VW:** Painting is a solitary activity and for many painters it can be a very private time. How do you feel about the experience of going from the privacy of your studio to working with other people around you?

**TA:** I really enjoyed it! You constantly have to discuss with the printers what you want to do next, so the work evolves from a dialogue. You have to be able to trust someone else's expertise. It forced me to make decisions quicker and it was of course possible to make decisions quicker, because the printers do a lot of the hard labor. I also liked that I couldn't control every detail as much as with painting or drawing; you can manipulate what you do with the acid, the ink, etc. to a certain degree, but not completely. So the technique becomes part of the work.

# Crown Point Press

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### Chance and Construction

A group show featuring five color etchings by Tomma Abts  
September 22 – November 28, 2009

Join us at a reception for the artist, Thursday, October 22, 6-8 p.m.

## In New York:

Visit **Crown Point Press** at the International Fine Print Dealers Association fair, Booth A28, Park Avenue Armory at 67th Street  
November 5 – 8, 2009

## In Washington DC:

### *What's It All Mean: William T. Wiley in Retrospect*

Smithsonian American Art Museum  
October 2, 2009 – January 4, 2010



## TOMMA ABTS

Published by Phaidon Press, 2008. Hardback, 136 pages,  
60 color illustrations. \$49.95

This first monograph on Tomma Abts provides an extensive overview of more than ten years of work. It includes essays by three critics (Laura Hoptman, Bruce Hainley, and Jan Verwoert) and full-color reproductions of thirty-seven paintings and eighteen drawings.

Visit our online bookstore at [www.magical-secrets.com](http://www.magical-secrets.com) to order.

