

Overview

William Bailey's Urbino

The Cookie Jar and the Coffee Pot (an indiscretion)

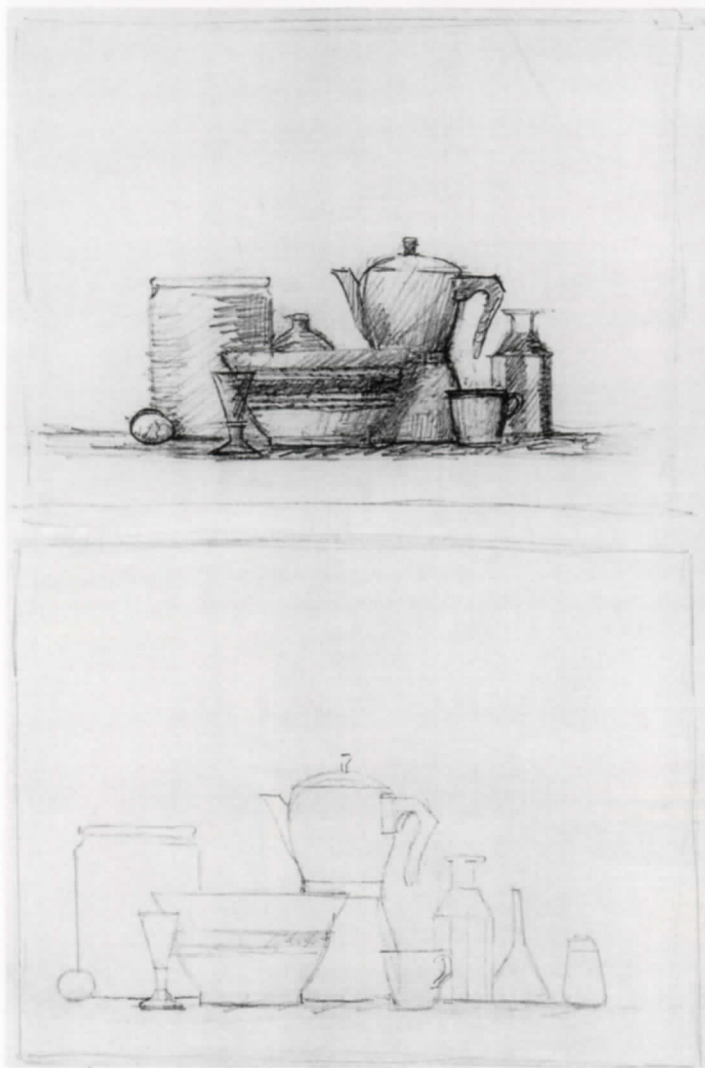


Figure 1

"It would be a mistake to emphasize the objects," William Bailey said to me on the telephone when I told him my tentative title for this essay was *The Cookie Jar and the Coffee Pot*. "They're not really objects. That is, they're not utilitarian. They exist only for their roles in my drawings, paintings, prints."

"Are they symbols, then?" I pressed him, trying to think what I could write.

"No. Their function is not symbolic."

"Metaphoric?" I asked doubtfully, aware that the two words are separated mainly by the relative precision of the first.

"Well, yes, probably," he replied. "But only as a group. The coffee pot is not a metaphor for anything."

"I found a beautiful working proof in the pile you left in the studio," I explained, "Only the cookie jar and the coffee pot are fully inked. The other objects are ghostlike. Since the cookie jar and the coffee pot gave you so much trouble, I thought I could use them to try to recount how the print was made."

He laughed. "I remember that proof. Maybe too beautiful. But, yes, you can show it. Go ahead with whatever you want to do."

"I'll send you the text before I print it," I promised.

Mark Strand, who wrote a marvelous essay for a book about Bailey's work, puts the artist's approach to objects in poetic language. He speaks of the history of still life painting "where not only casualness has been portrayed, but accident as well," and says Bailey's work runs counter to that. "We receive Bailey's paintings only as finished works, breathtakingly concluded," he says, and adds that "their existence, since they appear without origin, is magical." His logical conclusion to this thought is that "the elevation of process—its turmoil and uncertainties—would be an indiscretion."

And so, just between you and me, I commit an indiscretion, aided by my accomplices, the cookie jar and the coffee pot, who exist as working proofs in their individual object-hoods. As prints progress, artists look toward the whole. But printers are consumed by the parts, which are developed painstakingly, the artist often pushing onward toward what may seem like superhuman refinement. We keep going, eager for the revelation, the astonishing moment when we look up at this print we've all been working on and find that the details have submerged themselves into an indivisible whole. Later on, without working proofs, we cannot even recall the stubborn earlier identities of the parts. This is

continued on page 3



Figure 2



William Bailey, *Urbino*, 1998. Color aquatint with hard ground etching. Paper size: 28 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 32 $\frac{1}{4}$ "; image size: 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 23 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Edition 50. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

especially true with Bailey, who turns still life painting, which is traditionally anecdotal, into images as grandly serene as distant views of the Italian towns for which many of them are named.

Bailey's *Urbino* began with a small drawing (figure 1) about the size of the palm of an outstretched hand, a start at imagining the whole. All the objects are here except the funnel, but the coffee pot is more squat than in the print, the vase taller. A second sketch, less finished and on the same sheet, shows the coffee pot much taller than the other objects, and the funnel added, along with a saltshaker which is not in the print. The top of the vase behind the bowl is absent in this second sketch, but it reappears in the print. The coffee pot in the print gains a slim waist. In an interview Bailey has said that he had avoided making a color print until I convinced him that it need not be modeled on an existing painting, that he could do with printmaking the kind of thing that interested him in painting. "It was a matter of looking at the color prints that had been done here," he said. "I got interested in at least trying it. Now I'm sort of hooked on it, and I'm getting better at it." *Urbino* is Bailey's third color print.

After putting his drawing in faint outline on a plate, Bailey and his printers developed the whole thing tonally, in steps, with extremely delicate aquatint bites, each thirty seconds to four minutes in the acid (it takes about an hour to get to black). Daria Sywulak, the printer in charge, tried to dissuade the artist from doing this, since the bites weren't strong enough to carry most colors convincingly, but he was used to developing black and white prints in this way and it was what he wanted to do.

You can see the step biting in the partially printed bowl in the working proof on page one (figure 2). It isn't visible in the print. The faint gradations of tones finally were

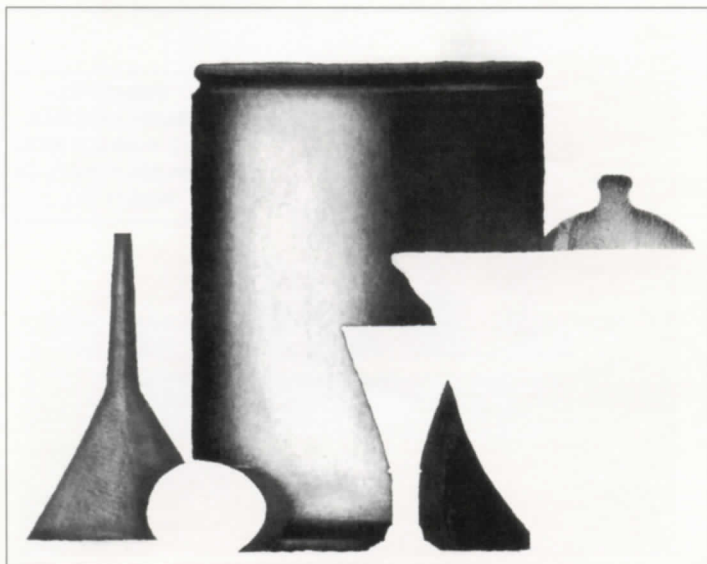
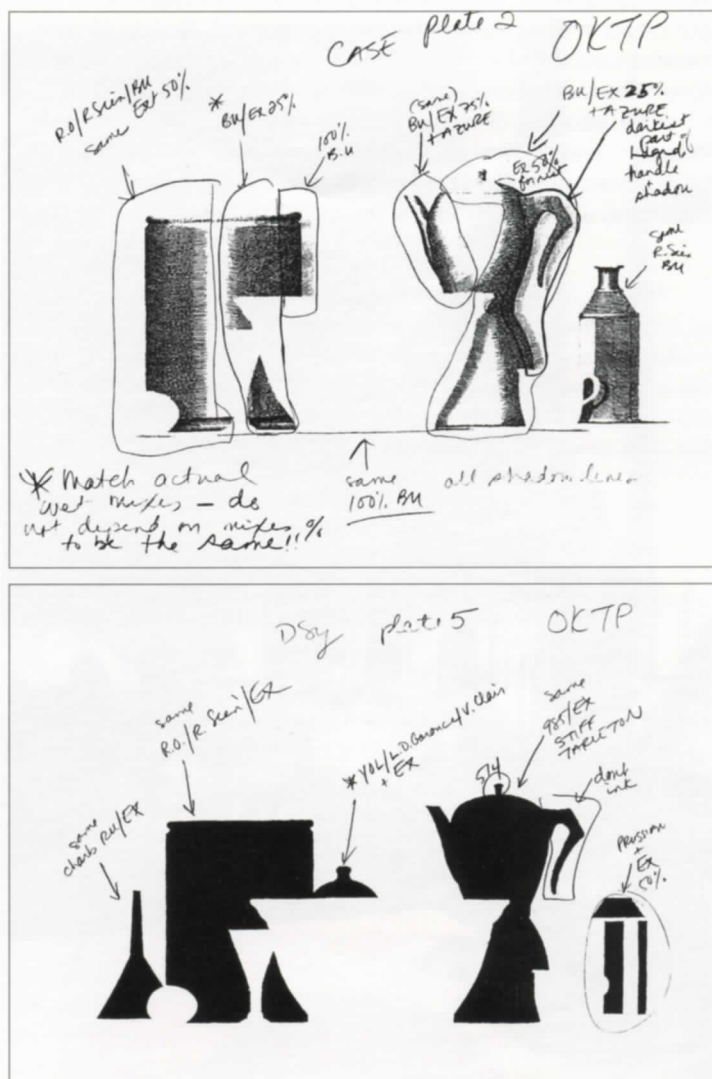


Figure 3



Figures 4 and 5

obscured by heavier bites in the dark objects, and were scraped out in some of the light ones when we thought they were looking dingy. The step bite plate ended up being used mostly for one layer of the background color, although some of the delicate bites in the objects are still there, and—Daria says—maybe Bill can see them. We printed that plate in raw sienna, a brown similar to the color behind the cookie jar and coffee pot in the working proof in figure 2. Though it was made first, it was printed third in the sequence of seven plates that make up *Urbino*.

The first two plates printed are both hard ground plates on which the artist drew fine accumulations of lines to create shadows. If you look at these lines in the print, you may think they are all printed in the same color. But they are not. Two hard ground plates were needed to separate the objects so they could be individually inked. In this print each object has at least one mixture, sometimes two or three.

In figures 4 and 5, we've illustrated two of Daria's printing worksheets, and you can see that on Plate 2 (inked by Case Hudson), the lines on the left side of the cookie jar are printed in a mixture of red ochre, raw sienna and burnt umber with 50% transparent extender. The center of the jar and the right side of the base are burnt umber with 25% extender, and the spot where the shadow is darkest is 100% burnt umber. This kind of fragmentary inking is an emergency measure with us. The plate is etched more deeply in the darkest shadow area—but if we don't guess the perfect amount of depth for an area, we can compensate by putting extender in the ink. Beside the bite and the ink, of course, there is a third factor in play: the way the artist drew the lines. He adjusted the drawing as he went along, mainly adding more lines, but occasionally scraping some out.

The second worksheet is for plate 5, inked by Daria (DSy), an aquatint plate. The cookie jar is all inked in one color, mixed from red ochre, raw sienna and extender. Daria wrote "same" above it because the color didn't change from the working proof before this one. (It did change in the pink vase, marked with an asterisk, with the new formula of yellow ochre light, *laque de garance*, *vert clair* and extender—we make the generic colors ourselves from pigment, but we buy some inks ready-made, and those with the fancy names are from France.) Let's look at the coffee pot. Its knob is inked in Graphic Chemical brand 514 black, and its body in a mixture of Charbonnel brand 985 black and extender. We gave up on the handle (don't ink) on this plate (you can see it in the working proof figure 2). A new handle on a different plate prints the one in the final print.

On the worksheet, it looks like the cookie jar is a solid color. It was solid at one point; we covered up the step biting with the intention that Bailey would polish out highlights. He did this beautifully on the rim and the base, but the amorphous face of the jar was more difficult and he worked very cautiously, with many proofs. It was going fine, almost there—and then suddenly, too much. "He was really unhappy when he saw that proof," Daria remembered, pointing to the fragment shown in figure 3. We put on another aquatint, but the shape of the mistake was still there.

Two weeks had gone by, Bailey and three printers working every day, and he flew back to his home in Connecticut with the two full color proofs you see here, one as good as we could get it, the other with a yellow background (figure 6). ("I just want to see something radically different, anything," Bailey had said.)

When he returned for another week three months later he had drawn on one of the proofs (figure 7). You can see the drawing clearly. "This is fuzzy, but I think more hard ground will solve my problems," he said. So he and the printers jumped in again, building up the shadows bit by bit. Daria scraped out most of the cookie jar and put another



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

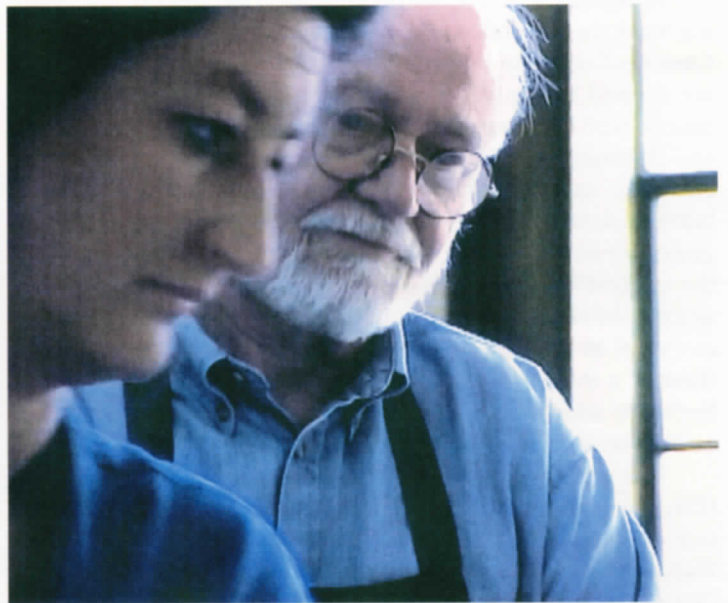
er aquatint on. This time all trace of the errant shape was gone. When the printers pulled a proof in which the shadows in general seemed to be working, they cut out the objects in order to pin them over various backgrounds, to settle on the final color. This was a time-saving device, as each full print takes three printers about an hour to pull.

In the cut-out proof (figure 8), the cookie jar had settled down, but the coffee pot remained recalcitrant. It had two problems. The awkward way its new handle joined its body was fixed with careful scraping. But the unconvincing shadow of the bowl against it was more difficult. "Bill made that shadow three times on three plates," Daria explained, "And he didn't necessarily make it the same each time. Then, he fiddled with it, scraping around the edges, and no matter what we did we'd either have a bit of a light line or a bit of a dark one." In the end, we settled for a bit of a light one and after printing each print we filled in the light spots by hand with a brush and some of the same ink.

So now you know the secrets. Does it spoil the mystery for you? I hope not; it hasn't for me. As I have been writing this, the final proof of *Urbino* has been hanging beside me, and I continue to find it a revelation and a pleasure. As Robert Hughes wrote in *American Visions* about one of Bailey's paintings, "Its calm array of pots, jugs, eggs and bowls make up an ideal form-world. ...All groping toward the idea has been submerged—an extreme opposite to the American taste for works of art which bear the signs of their struggle, unedited, in their final form." That taste is still being shaped by Abstract Expressionism, I think, and Bailey's opposition to it is genuinely original, even radical.



William Bailey, *Montefalco*, 1998. Hard ground etching printed on Gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 17 1/2 x 15"; image size: 5 7/8 x 6 1/8". Edition 20. Printed by Daria Sywulak.



Master printer Daria Sywulak with William Bailey in the Crown Point studio, 1998.

Remember that Bailey described as "too beautiful" the working proof on page one, which is full of the signs of struggle. The final print is just beautiful enough.

—Kathan Brown



William Bailey, *San Marco*, 1998. Hard ground etching printed on Gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 17 1/2 x 15"; image size: 6 1/8 x 5 1/8". Edition 20. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

Summer Etching & Photogravure Workshops

June 22-26, July 6-10 and July 13-16, 1998

This summer is the eighth year Crown Point has offered its etching and gravure workshops. Many participants return summer after summer. We welcome those new to intaglio and gravure as well as those who are experienced. Kathan Brown, founder-director of Crown Point Press, will begin each workshop with short remarks, and will be available throughout the week for informal discussions. Each workshop lasts one week, Monday - Friday, 9am to 5pm. Daria Sywulak, Dena Schuckit, Brian Shure and Case Hudson will lead the workshops. Please call 415-974-6273 for a brochure.

Having for many years wanted to etch, I have been delighted by the Crown Point Press workshop. The director, her staff, and fellow workshopers have provided a spirited, exciting, intensely educational environment. Without the extraordinary experience of this workshop, learning the basics of etching in five days would have been impossible.

—Carey Welch, Warner, New Hampshire



Notes

In the Crown Point Gallery

William Bailey: *Still Lives*

March 15 - April 18.

Nathan Oliveira: *Copper Plate Figures*

April 23 - May 30. Reception for the artist, May 7, 6 - 8pm

Shows and Exhibitions of Special Interest

Karen McCready Fine Art, 425 W. 13th St., New York, exhibits *Blooming: Contemporary Prints, Drawings, and Photography on the Theme of Flowers*. April 2 - May 16.

Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Gunter Brus, John Cage, Terry Fox and Tom Marioni are among the artists included in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949 - 1979*, at the Geffen Contemporary, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, through April 12.

The Art of Richard Diebenkorn travels from the Whitney Museum to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, through May 26.

Sperone Westwater, New York, exhibits new work by **Richard Tuttle**, through March 21.

In February, **Pat Steir** began a drawing on the wall of the restaurant at the Whitney Museum. She drew for more than a week, and the finished piece is on view until the end of the summer.

A retrospective of the work of **Chuck Close** is on exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, until May 26. The show will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington D.C.; and the Seattle Museum of Art.

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