

Overview



Gay Outlaw, *First Painting/First Print*, 2001. Color soft ground etching with aquatint and soap ground aquatint. Paper size: 15-3/4 x 17-1/4"; image size: 8 x 10". Edition 20. Printed by Case Hudson.

Gay Outlaw Trial Patterns

Somebody recently pinned a cartoon on the bulletin board at Crown Point Press. It pictures a snowman waving his stick arms at a group of other snowmen. They are standing around casually as if at a party, and their bodies are made of neat cubes of snow. "Nobody told me it was formal!" says the lumpy snowman with sticks for arms.

I laughed out loud when I saw this joke, and I am recalling it now because I've often heard people say that young artists are mostly interested in emotions, and are rejecting form. If you've been trying to make sense of art by young artists, and nobody told you it was formal—read on.

Gay Outlaw was born in Mobile, Alabama in 1959. She lives in San Francisco with her husband and two very young children. The art for which she is best known has been made of pastry, not treated decoratively, but used for its properties and its materiality. She makes shapes of translucent caramel, for example, and sometimes the caramel melts onto the floor as the exhibition progresses. One of her sculptures, called *Puff Supports*, consisted of stacks of puff pastry leaning against the wall at an angle, like a row of 2 x 4's. And there was a commissioned public sculpture called *Tinned Wall/Dark Matter*, temporarily installed by the theater at the Yerba

Buena Center for the Arts. The undulating tin was thirty feet long and filled with cubes of home-baked fruitcake. You could see the cake through the tin's ends, and you could smell the whiskey in it.

Outlaw studied at the La Varenne Cooking School in Paris, and then she studied photography at the International Center for Photography in New York City. She began using pastry as an art medium, she says, because after she had been working with photography for a while she wanted to move into sculpture. "A sculptor needs to learn how to build things," she explains. "I started with pastry because it was familiar to me. It's a resistant material, and you have to be clever if you're going to construct something with it." Also, she says, she liked the idea that pastry is temporary. "I could work large-scale and have nothing to store."

By now you may be wondering what all this has to do with the odd little etching of an apple and a banana shown on this page. Like Outlaw's work in pastry, the etching is a curious but engaging object. It makes you think: What's going on? What's the point here? It has the character of an amateur artwork from the Goodwill Store, but it's hard to dismiss it. Something keeps pulling the eye back. There is an intensity and a self-possession, and form, yes, almost a grid, almost a cube. It's unexpected. How did she ever think of doing *that*?

The title gives a clue: *First Painting/First Print*. Outlaw's first painting was of this subject. She made it when she was six or seven years old, under her grandfather's tutelage. "I'm an artist now because of my grandfather," she says. "He taught me to draw. He taught me about color. He would look at me and say, 'You're green! Look in the mirror at the shadows in your face.' And I would go through the day looking at colors."

Her grandfather set up the apple and banana still life in her mother's kitchen, where the painting hangs today. "I'm sure he helped me," she remembers. "He even signed my name for me." Why did she recreate that first painting now, here?

"It brought me back to the mind I had as a kid," she explains. "I was intimidated by my grandfather's project for me. And here, at Crown Point, working in a new medium, and with people waiting for me to do something—this was a great gift, but it was intimidating to start out. It was just sort of comforting for me to go back to how I dealt with that feeling as a child."

So she did this print with the same habit of mind as when she made sculpture out of pastry: to learn something, and to find a way to begin that came out of some experience unique to her, a way that wasn't the way everybody begins. She did not set out to impress, or shock. She was not thinking about pleasing—or displeasing—her audience.



Gay Outlaw, *Trial Pattern: Animal*, 2001. Color aquatint with sugar lift aquatint and soft ground etching. Paper size: 24-1/2 x 20-3/4"; image size: 18 x 14-1/2". Edition 10. Printed by Case Hudson.

"When I begin a sculpture project in my studio, it usually feels a little like this," she says. "There's always the question: What is the subject? And what material is it going to be made of? I lay out the whole work process, and then just do the work." Most of Outlaw's sculpture pieces are work-intensive. I thought about one I had recently seen called *Black Hose Mountain* in which she had filled lengths of black garden hose with white plaster, cut the lengths into small angled pieces, and assembled those painstakingly into a room-sized double-peaked mountain. This work was recently shown in New York at the Sculpture Center, and it is now in the collection of the University of California Museum at Berkeley.

In the etching studio, once she had settled on recreating her first painting, Outlaw laid out an apple and a banana on the table and got to work. "I knew what I was going to do," she said to me later. "Actually, part of the pleasure of the piece for me was talking on the telephone about it with my mother, who described the painting in detail so I could remember what it looked like. I was able to nail it pretty quickly after a few of those conversations, and also some trial plates and instructions from the printers." Then, there was a more difficult question. What to do next?

"I was fortunate when I was just starting out as an artist to intern for a few weeks with (photographer) Bill Eggleston," she told me. "And something he said has always stayed in my mind. Whenever he was stuck, and needed a way to proceed, he'd try to imagine the total opposite of what he had been doing. So, after I drew the apple and banana, I went to the other extreme, and did something abstract. But 'abstract' is such a loaded term." Abstract,



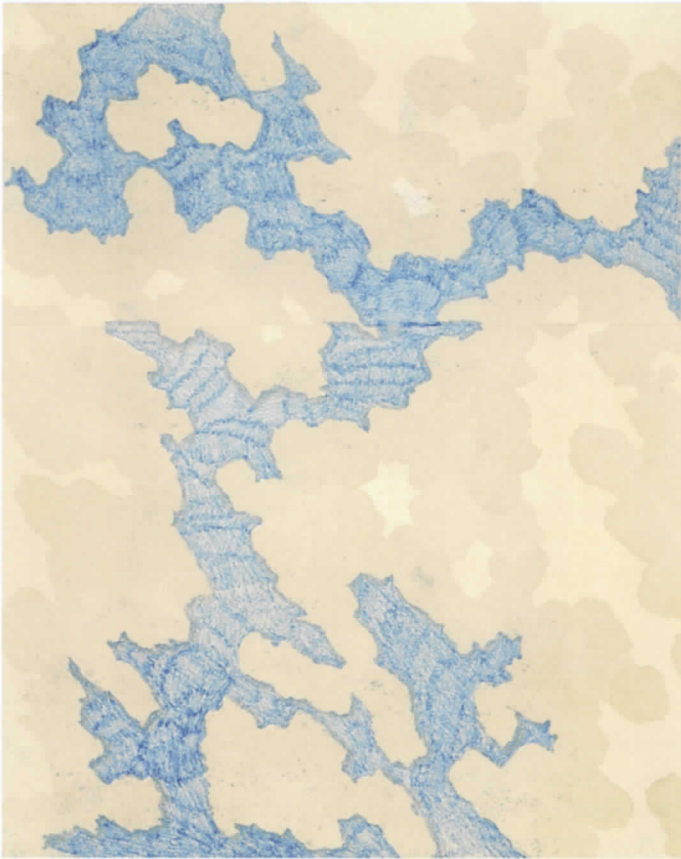
Gay Outlaw, *Trial Pattern: Western*, 2001. Color aquatint with soft ground etching. Paper size: 24-1/2 x 20-3/4"; image size: 18 x 14-1/2". Edition 10. Printed by Case Hudson.

in fact, is what her work is at bottom, the form predominant. But, there is usually a figurative handle—the apple is an apple, and the hose mountain really feels like a mountain with light reflecting from its facets.

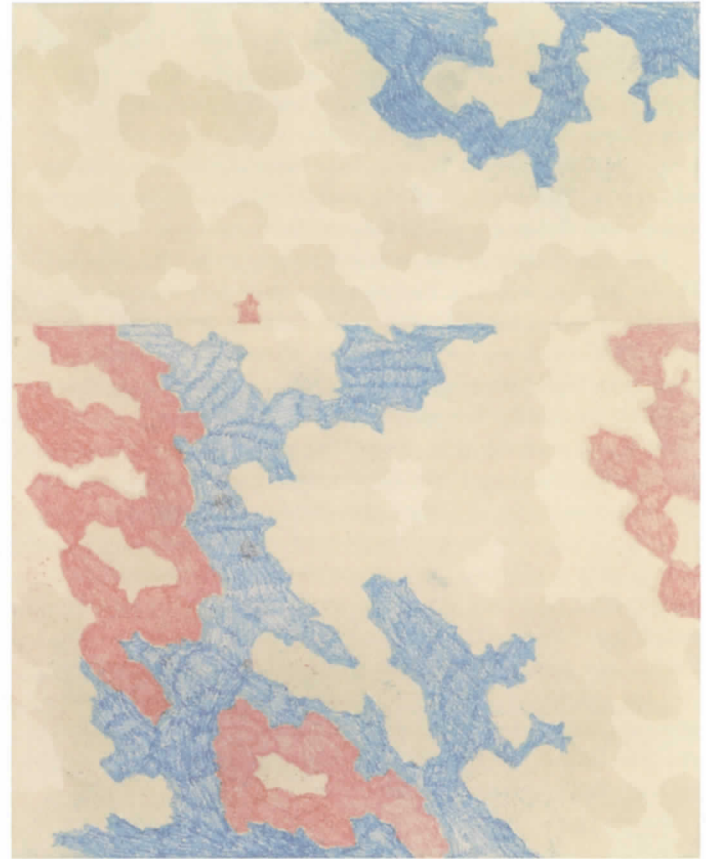
In this case, she began, she says, by thinking about the nature of printmaking. She decided this was essentially layering and patterning—"What would keep you from printing a whole wall with one plate? That could be the point of having a plate," she said. "But the pitfall is the decorative nature of pattern." She brought some books into the studio: pictures of water, pictures of clouds, and *Brassey's Book of Camouflage*. Camouflage was, as she says, "a springboard" in her next group of prints. She used the same plates for earth and sky. She used layering and patterning, but not repetitively.

"In my sculpture lately I've fallen into working with voids and units," she said. "So I started out drawing a pattern on the first plate, then drew in the negative spaces on the second and third plates. I just kept on playing with color until I had used up the time that I had. I tried to stay as dumb as possible, not second-guessing."

Again, the titles give a handle on the idea. In the *Trial Patterns* series, the print called *Animal* is rich and dark, tactile, mysterious. Then there is *Western*, also dark, but dry, lean, parched. The other two, which Outlaw describes as "ethereal" and has titled *Sky*, and *Sunset*, come from a camouflage concept called "dazzle." Here the eye is confused rather than misled as it is in camouflage materials that are earth-toned. Outlaw says the ethereal pair comes from



Gay Outlaw, *Trial Pattern: Sky*, 2001. Color soft ground etching with sugar lift aquatint and aquatint. Paper size: 24-1/2 x 20-3/4"; image size: 18 x 14-1/2". Edition 10. Printed by Case Hudson.



Gay Outlaw, *Trial Pattern: Sunset*, 2001. Color aquatint with sugar lift aquatint and soft ground etching. Paper size: 24-1/2 x 20-3/4"; image size: 18 x 14-1/2". Edition 10. Printed by Case Hudson.

"looking dreamily, watching the sky." It was a challenge to use the same plates for both approaches. The seam that runs through all the prints is, she says, "a camouflage conceit." It is created by abutting separate plates, so there were eight rather than four in each image. That gave her more raw material to rearrange as she added new prints to the series.

The way I have been writing, it would perhaps seem that the etchings described here are Outlaw's first. Actually, they are not. They are, however, the first done with full consciousness of the process. Her earlier etchings are gravure prints, which she thought of as photographs on soft rather than shiny paper.

We introduced Gay Outlaw to you, our Crown Point audience, in our *Gravure Group* portfolio in 1995. To make the prints for that project, she photographed small objects that she had constructed of cardboard, tinfoil, and a kitchen bowl. In one of the gravures, titled *Tatlin*, the bowl, wound with corrugated cardboard, stands in for a monument built in 1920 of iron and glass by Vladimir Tatlin, the father of Russian Constructivism. In the other, titled *Tailing*, a spiral of metal rises glistening from the bottom of the page. "Photographs always want to depict something," Outlaw says. "You have to fight to get them to do something else." The "something else" here is abstraction that is also essentially formal.

Outlaw's formality has a light touch, however. She has a deadpan way of moving ahead that causes each work to seem self-contained, not an inevitable next step from the last. Each new work is a new exploration for her, a trial, probably also a "trial pattern." In

my interview with her, I asked if her way of using process and material as a subject, rather than to depict things, was a legacy of Conceptual Art.

"Yes," she answered. "For me, Conceptual Art is over. But it has influenced everything that's come after it, or is yet to come. I'm interested in ideas. And I'm very interested in material too." Gay Outlaw is a young artist, almost at the beginning of her career. I think she's the real thing. What an artist needs, she says, more than anything else, is "a kind of faith in what you're doing and the discipline to do it."

—Kathan Brown



Gay Outlaw in the Crown Point Press studio, 2001.