Crown Point Press
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Overview

Richard Tuttle

Mandevilla

"What's the name of a beautiful flowering plant that is blooming right now in California?" Richard Tuttle asked a friend who loves gardening and who had come to pick him up at the finish of a week's work with us at Crown Point.

Looking at the set of seven aquatints he had just completed and realizing his motive in asking, she replied unhesitatingly, "Mandevilla. Its blossoms are pink, very much like the pink you've used, and in California it is a hardy evergreen climber. In New York it's grown in greenhouses."

"These prints are an important step for me," Tuttle replied, assenting to the title. "A lifting-out of a descent, leaving behind an underworld. In the past few years, I've been very involved with brown, black, and white—and I've wanted to see my work on gray walls. This is a change. This is a very joyful set."

I agree wholeheartedly. These prints lift the spirit; I can hardly take my eyes off them. But after my initial visual response to an art work, I like to enhance that by trying to find another way-in, thinking about how the artist approached the work. With his remarks in mind, I consulted a catalog of Tuttle's 1997 London exhibition called *Grey Walls Work*, and found the underworld idea mentioned. "There is an idea that the work from this period is underworld related—that it is, as if, a trip to the underworld. The...undesirability of that may be a feature," Tuttle wrote. Much of what was illustrated uses brown, black or white, but those aren't the only colors. *Warm Brown* (92.1.94), for example, is a piece of natural brown Masonite covered with letters in various colors and sizes and, over them, two densely-painted black twig shapes. The Masonite is fastened to the wall with white-headed nails passing through drilled holes.

After he completed the *Warm Brown* works, Tuttle explains in the catalog, "a crisis developed, which was resolved by a group of 20 works called *Whiteness* (1994)." Each of these has three parts. The one shown in the catalog has two that are twig-like, the third a found object, and all of them raised from the surface of the work. "My sense was that the first 2 parts were surface things, and the 3rd part was out of the 'deep'. The first 2 were like callers calling to some other place, world, being, and the 3rd was from there, but was also a connective between 1 & 2," Tuttle wrote.

In working on the prints, Tuttle spoke to us of a "call and response," but here the interaction is within the group of prints itself. The seven *Mandevilla* prints are numbered in the order they were made, and the first call is the red square in *Mandevilla 1*. The response is in the brown bar, Tuttle said, but at the same time the yellow bar in the next print answers. The calls and responses go on through the whole set, ending with the green square in *7*, which is a response to the pink one in *6*. In the set, pale pink is the strongest color—"The strong has become weak, and the weak strong," Tuttle said. He is aware that this kind of thinking is romantic. "We may think romanticism is filled with sentimentality and false emotions," he said, "but Goya was romantic. Romanticism is about ideas."

Ideas in Tuttle's art provide structure, an armature for his imagination. When he first came in the door at Crown Point, as we were walking toward the studio, he engaged me in a discussion of the theoretical value of printmaking. "Techniques exist because they have particular benefit to artists for search and research," he said. "Rembrandt found prints a perfectly natural place to be, a place to do research for his painting. A printing plate is material that is immaterial. The print has complete integrity right from the start."

Later on in the week, I more fully understood his remark about the integrity of the print as he spoke with enthusiasm about a small collection of Sassanian seals he had recently acquired. These depict royal likenesses, imaginary animals, monograms, sometimes scenes. They were carved in Persia from the 3rd to the 7th century C. E., before paper was used in the Western world, and were made to press into wet clay tablets to give the owner's assent to agreements made with others. The owner wore the seal on a thong around his neck. Tuttle says the seals themselves, like the printing plate, are uninteresting. But when they are pressed into something soft —or "printed"—a beautiful and magical image appears.

At the start of our project, in response to Tuttle's discussion on the importance of technique, I volunteered the information that the intaglio printing process is the only one that can vary the depth of the ink film. It is the only way of printing that embosses the ink into the paper according to how deeply the plate is incised. It also provides an embossed mark at the plate edge. Tuttle used both these concepts in *Mandevilla*.

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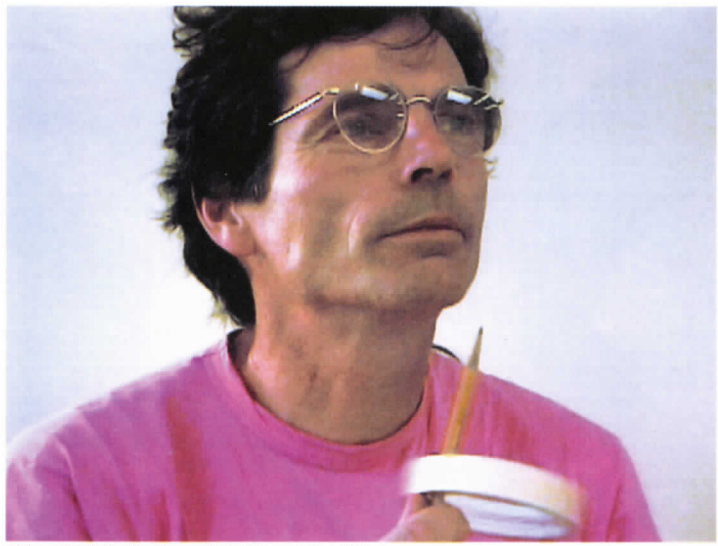
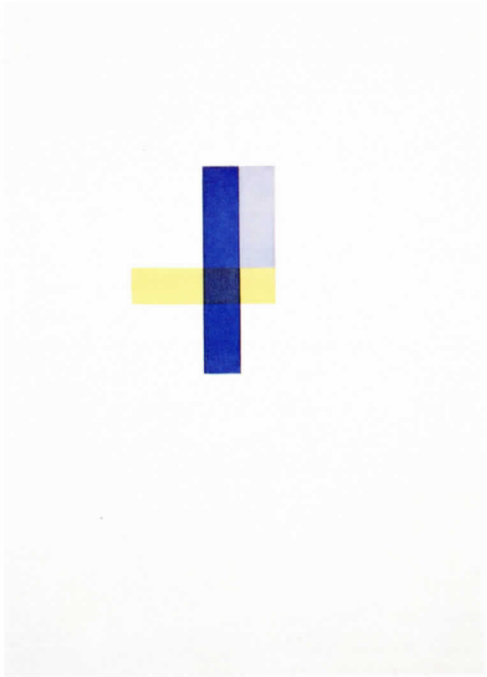


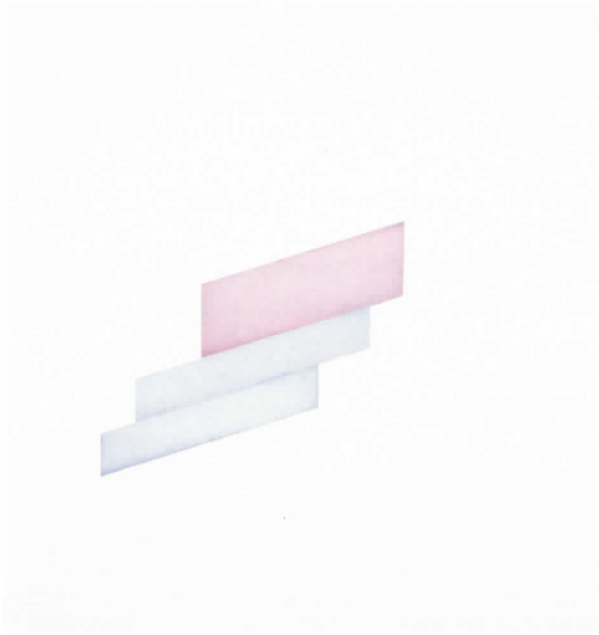
Richard Tuttle in the Crown Point Press studio, 1998.

Richard Tuttle, ***Mandevilla 1***, 1998. Color aquatint. Paper size: 13⅞ x 21⅞"; image size: 9⅞ x 17¾". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

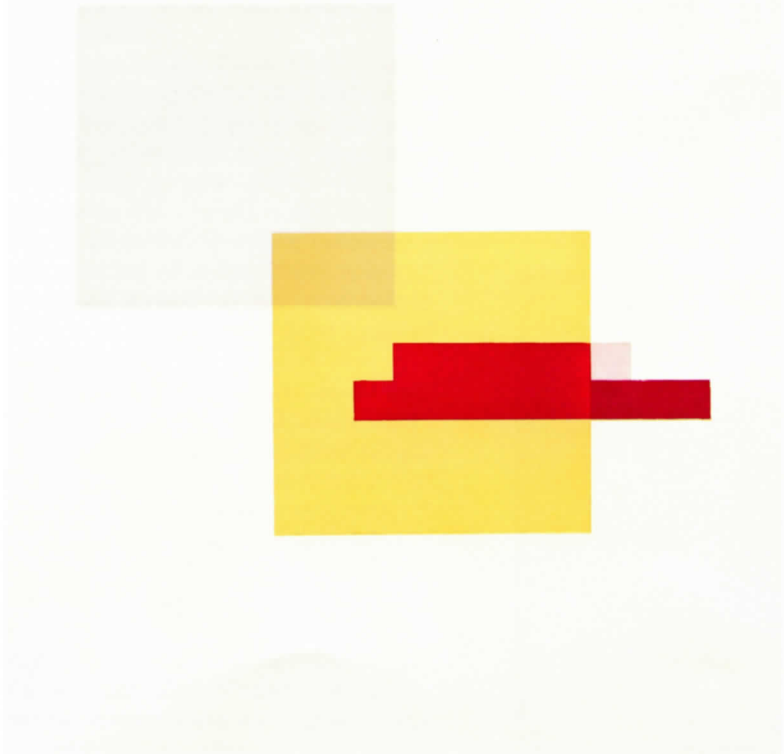


Richard Tuttle, ***Mandevilla 2***, 1998. Color aquatint. Paper size: 23⅞ x 18"; image size: 19¼ x 13⅞". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

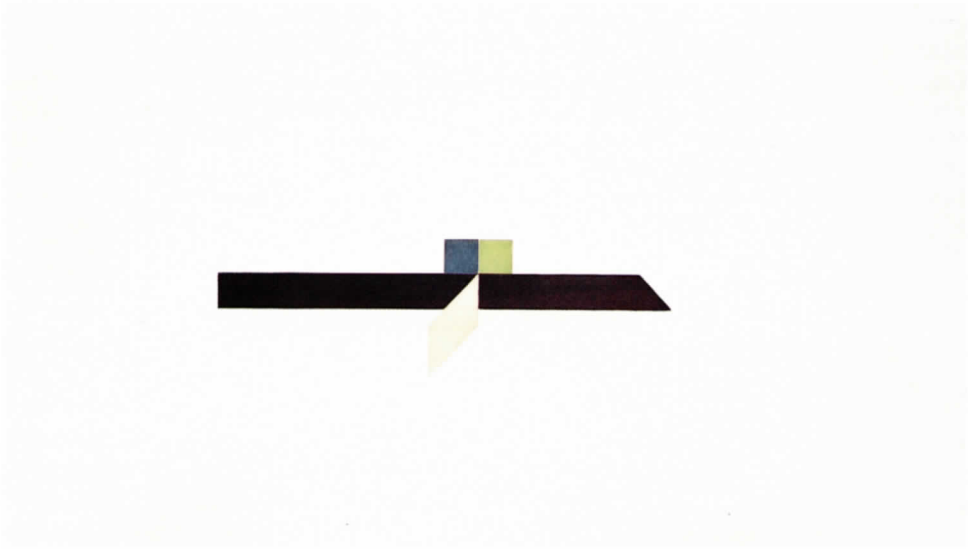
Richard Tuttle, ***Mandevilla 5***, 1998. Color aquatint. Paper size: 22 x 22"; image size: 18 x 18". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



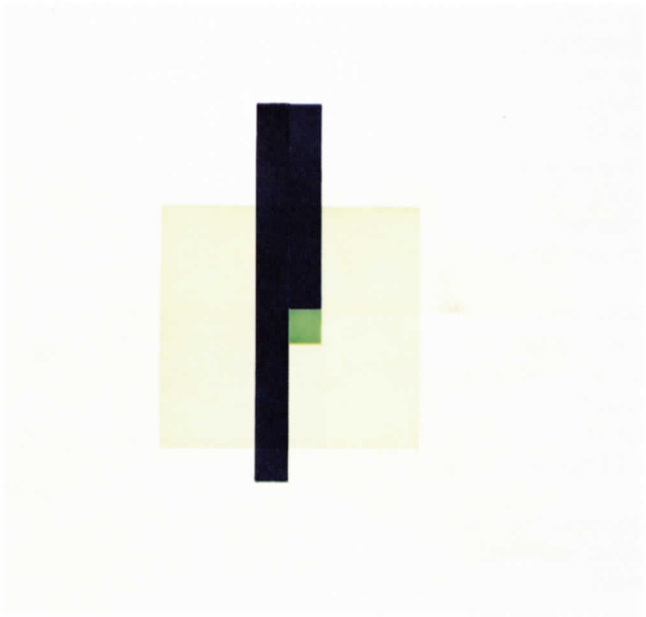
Richard Tuttle, *Mandevilla 3*, 1998. Color aquatint. Paper size: 23⅞ x 21⅞"; image size: 19¾ x 17¾". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



Richard Tuttle, *Mandevilla 6*, 1998. Color aquatint. Paper size: 26⅞ x 24"; image size: 22¾ x 20". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



Richard Tuttle, *Mandevilla 4*, 1998. Color aquatint. Paper size: 19⅞ x 33¾": image size: 15⅞ x 29¾". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



Richard Tuttle, *Mandevilla 7*, 1998. Color aquatint. Paper size: 21⅞ x 24";
image size: 17¼ x 19¾". Edition 40. Printed by Dena Schuckit

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He started with brown, but it is left behind after the first print. The colors, he said, should not simply *be* colors. As he and printer Dena Schuckit mixed the colors and printed them until they were right, he explained that the Chinese would say this one "actively partakes of brown." Western color often seems to simply fill in between lines, he commented.

The brown bar in the first print is actually two small aquatint bars, one shorter than the other and printed over it. One has black added to brown, the other white. Each leaves an embossing at its edge, a sculptural concern, Tuttle said. The third element is a small square of pure red color (no black or white added) on a larger plate whose edges define the boundaries of the image. The flat image is, Tuttle explained, "painterly," but in the work overall "the line between painting and sculpture is not stated." The sheet, itself, is sculptural, he added, and suggested it be hung inside a mat when framed, so that the edges remain visible.

This procedure is carried though all the prints in the set, with each having one painterly element and several sculptural ones. The concept of very low relief sculpture relates, he said, to the work in his last exhibition in New York in 1998. For this show, Tuttle cut sheets of plywood roughly into envelope shapes, each layered with an "envelope flap" of another thin piece of plywood which provided an edge. He then painted or drew over the whole form. "Invariably, the restraint of the added shape or mark renders the surface spacious," Roberta Smith pointed out in the *New York Times*. Noting that Tuttle's work is usually of reduced scale, with space around it, Robert C. Morgan in the magazine, *Review*, described the artist as "not a space-taker, but a space-giver."

"When they work, they jump out to fill the whole space," Tuttle said as he made minute adjustments in the prints to bring each one to that point. The space is occupied, but at the same time spacious, and these prints work with elegant simplicity, without added embellishment. How does he make them work? I watched him do it, and I couldn't say. He arrived with just a scribble of a bar with a square below it, and moved forward through the set of seven. There is not much trial and error. It's as if he already knows, even before beginning, where the notes belong and exactly how many of them there should be, as Mozart did.

At the end of the project, with one small task saved for later completion, I worried aloud that he would forget what he had been thinking. He laughed. "I can't remember people's faces or names sometimes, and I can't remember what I read or what I have to do next week, but I can look at a work done ten years ago and tell you how hard I pressed, what I used, the way I was thinking."

Barry Schwabsky, writing in *Artforum*, described Tuttle's work as "the concretized aura of an attitude," and Kathleen Whitney in *Sculpture* magazine said his work is "completely imaginative...rather than a summarization of existing thoughts." So many artists nowadays are summarizing existing thoughts, it is no wonder Tuttle's work seems so extraordinarily original. "Contemporary artists owe it to artists of the past to move on, to find a new means of expression," Tuttle says. How does he do that? By making distinctions and getting it right. What does he mean by "right"?

Paul Nesbitt asked him that question in an interview published in the *Grey Walls* catalog. "When someone dresses 'right', walks down the street at just the 'right' pace," Tuttle replied, "it is magic to me. If someone chooses the 'right' word...something happened (or a lot of things happened) to choose that word. What people object to is that we are not in control of it. I am much given to find the 'rightness', but probably it is a subdivision of something, because it doesn't seem like an end."

Who among us doesn't know what he means, hasn't seen that person walking down the street, hasn't, in fact, sometimes been that person? Each of us remembers a moment when we dressed exactly right, chose the right word, called a winning play, or came out of difficulty with accomplishment—not having been fully in control of it, and not doing it as an end in itself.

But, in control or not, we know where we started—with a skill, an idea, an approach. These prints started with a call which first traveled to an underworld, then received a bright response. In his images, Tuttle said, "one cell gave information to another," and in the studio the printers gave information to him. "Something happened in the week we spent together," he concludes, "And we have tangible evidence of that in *Mandevilla*."

—Kathan Brown

Richard Tuttle was born in 1941 in Rahway, New Jersey and studied at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut. His first solo exhibition was in 1965 at Betty Parsons Gallery where he continued to exhibit regularly until the early 1980s. By this time, he had had solo shows at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1975), the Kunsthalle Basel (1977), and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1978). He has continued to exhibit widely in the US and Europe, and is now represented by Sperone Westwater in New York.

Two small green squares are placed edge to edge to print above a black bar. At Crown Point, 1998.