

KATHRYN MADILL

RED RIVER



RDS GALLERY

Red River: Kathryn Madill

Kathryn Madill draws selections of images from her catalogue of visual ideas for *Red River*. In her signature mediums of mezzotint and prepared book surfaces, she harks back to more than one previous series. *The Red Forest* (2010), for example, was a collection of works that depicted figures in the foreground of a red wall of foliage, with sometimes the images of observed burning chairs. Single images that formed elements of larger allegorical schemata, like the burning plane in her watercolour series *Time is Bleeding* (2010), are located within new configurations. The axe, dress, shoe and bucket, from the white page of a work entitled *The Silent House* (2013), are placed on the covers of scholastic-red books. The work entitled *Blue Knife* (2019) in the *Red River* series is an exquisitely rendered boat, an image that Madill has returned to many times during the span of her practice. In *Red River*, a dark red watery depth is the cohesive element that she chooses to contextualise her voice.

Madill's specialisation in mezzotint informs the thematic quality of her work. As a technique that renders light from dark, burrs in the metal plate produce a deep velvety colour. In combination with other intaglio techniques and through painted book surfaces, she renders objects as small poetic motifs on experience or memory. These works ask viewers to read something extraordinary into everyday objects, at times navigating incongruous visual connections: a car floats beneath a horizontal tree and a single shoe is placed beneath a white metal bucket. I think of the accoutrements that accompany daily life, of chopping wood and carrying water. Yet, as the keel of the boat cuts

beneath the surface of red water, carrying a well of deep blue in its bilge, *Red River* takes me further afield.

In the way that dream symbolism holds unconscious power only for the dreamer, *Red River* evokes the idea of a mythological geography. The Red River or Red Water in Chinese mythology is said to come from a mountainous range that represents the centre of the physical, metaphysical and spiritual universe. Prescient apocalyptic associations entangle with a reading of our current reality of climate emergency; water has turned to blood, lapping the side of a floating car, or staining the soles of my shoes. From another angle, I think of women's herstories where blood has been a material that expresses agency. A range of associations for the viewer spiral out beyond the autobiographical symbolism of the artist.

These readings are not descriptive of Madill's intentions, and the objects return to themselves again as depictions of the everyday. In these works, I walk a knife edge between an interpretive horizon and the ground of each image. This reality beneath the surface emerges again in the image of the sleeping figure floating with her arms around her daemon: a personification of the psyche. Madill has a way exploring the depths of collective experience and mythmaking, yet she is taken only so far by the impact that Jungian psychology and its theories of archetypes once had upon the arts. Ultimately, she is aware that the power of the image resides in its mystery and this could perhaps be the centre of her practice.

Joanna Osborne, December 2019

I have found this life of making art is like a life of learning another language, a new vocabulary made up of images accumulated over the years.

Kathryn Madill

Kathryn Madill hails from Ruatahuna located in Te Urewera, spending the majority of her childhood in Taupo, and in Dunedin, where she now lives and works. She graduated from the Ilam Art School, University of Canterbury (1971), with a Diploma of Fine Arts, having majored in printmaking. Soon afterwards, she bought her own press. Since that time, she has painted and made prints, many of which are now held in private and public collections across Australia and New Zealand including the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

In 2004, she was an Antarctica Arts Fellow, in which capacity she visited the world's fifth largest continent with poet Bernadette Hall who describes her as 'a most literate painter'. Kathryn designed the book *Settler Dreaming* (Victoria UP, 2001), a collection of Bernadette Hall's poetry, also producing a series of drawings for this same volume. Her work has appeared in the iconic New Zealand literary journal *Landfall* and as part of the Printer in Residence Program at the University of Otago. She has also furnished artwork for numerous book covers. Her sustained collaboration with New Zealand authors remains a significant and defining feature of her oeuvre, along with her extensive exhibition history in this country.

Judith Laube notes that: 'Kathryn Madill has an intensity of focus, which is evident in everything she does, her mezzotints, woodcuts and paintings display a strong sense of purpose and a determined attention to detail. Many of the images chosen are, or once were, common objects.' When such objects are 'taken from a domestic context and made central to a work, a hidden life and further meanings surface, which can assume a powerful significance for the viewer....' Madill's interest in the everyday suggests the affinity of her project with that of other women artists of her generation such as Kiki Smith or the earlier surrealist painter Leonora Carrington. Madill comments: 'I wouldn't say I was a radical feminist, but I have been feminist in my thinking since I was a teenager....It's not overt or conscious – I don't consciously do it.'

Joanna Osborne recently completed a doctoral thesis that considered the nature of interdisciplinarity at the nexus of art history, religion, and theology, titled "Black light" / "Whiteness rests my mind": Evocations of the Spiritual in the Art and Practice of Ralph Hotere and Joanna Margaret Paul' (University of Otago, 2019). She has published on Joanna Margaret Paul, Ralph Hotere and Allie Eagle, most recently "The flowers remember / the sugar bowl remembers", *Quotidian Wonder and the Painter/Poet Joanna Margaret Paul*, in *Thresholds of Wonder: Poetry, Philosophy and Theology in Conversation*, ed. Jennifer Reek and Francesca Bugliani Knox (Routledge, 2019).

References: Kathryn Madill, 'A Catalogue of Belonging', *Landfall* 235 (2018), 96-104; Bernadette Hall, 'Kathryn Madill', ed. Sally Blundell, *Look This Way* (Auckland University Press, 2007), 77-84; Judith Laube in 'Invitation', published on the occasion of the exhibition 'four stories', 20 November – 20 December 2001, Janne Lande Gallery, Wellington, 2001; Naomi Arnold, 'Of Life and Death', *stuff.co.nz*, 26 August 2009.

Image: *Red River* (Kathryn Madill, 2019, mezzotint/dry point)

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