

As a child I used to enjoy looking at complicated repeat patterns in wallpaper in my parents' house and the "spot the difference" drawings which appeared in the weekly magazines. This enjoyment continues. There is something fascinating about trying to discover the structure or the variation in things. It is probably something we do all the time to make sense of our existence. I experience the same fascination and satisfaction when I look at the prints of Maria Lucia Cattani. Does this mean that they are appreciated on the level of decorative and simple puzzle solving? In a way it does. It is these elements that make the work initially accessible. The game playing engages the viewer in close scrutiny of the picture, and from the scrutiny emerges the complexity, beauty and bravura of the work.

It becomes increasingly difficult to focus on the whole image as our exploration of one colour in the pattern seems to take place on a different focal plane from another. We become entangled in a labyrinth of colours, line, gesture, and space.

The process of intaglio is one of the most rigorously disciplined and technically complex forms of printmaking. In its most common manifestations, dry point, and etching in which the effects of acids on metals often reveal chance discoveries when the print is pulled from the press, one thinks of the small finely detailed, monochrome pictures, crafted from lines scraped or scored with a fine point, perhaps with subtle traces of aquatint. In contrast, Maria Lucia makes prints which are often monumental in scale, in which large brush strokes of colour appear to disregard many of the traditions of the medium and develop an affinity closer to painting.

The technology of intaglio is an essential part of the creative process for Maria Lucia Cattani. The initial coating of the plates with grounds and varnishes; the alchemical application of acids; the laborious physical process of inking and cleaning the plates; the preparation of the papers, and the final running of the material through the press, hidden from the eye, to reveal its secrets at the end: all these practices contribute to the final image, and all these practices, it would seem, should act as modifiers or barriers between the hand of the artist and the finished work in ways which are not encountered in other two dimensional practices of painting and drawing. Despite the considerable importance of the technology (Maria Lucia finds the press in particular an essential mediator between herself and the work) the final results remain clearly hand made and retain a directness not usually associated with the medium.

Printmaking is also a process often involving reproduction and editioning. Printmaking by artists has in the past, been a way of reproducing work for a large market. Prints are editioned and published, for in most printmaking processes it is possible to use the plate, block, screen, etc., over and over for relatively large editions. Maria Lucia's earlier work followed in this tradition, and exists in small limited editions. This has now been abandoned. The reproductive nature of the medium is now developed within the work itself. What once may have been an edition of nine, becomes now nine parts of a single work. The same plate is frequently used in a series of works, but always the image produced will be different and frequently unrecognisable from others. The plate may be rotated into many different positions, colours may differ, fragments only of the plate may be printed, or the ink may be applied irregularly in the form of monoprint. Thus the one plate is capable of many variations of image. By superimposing one version of the inked plate on another, a patterning of mathematical complexity can develop. By superimposing

two or more plates, with their associated variations of colour, rotation, inversion, etc., the equation seems to develop infinite proportions.

The result of her own individual process is an intuitive, expressionist approach to line and colour linked to a grid and structure with the geometrical complexity of nature; a dance between chance and order.

Nick Rands

1994