

THE SINUOUS AND FURROWED LINE

The Relief Prints of Arnold Shives

IT IS AN IMAGE OF A ROCK TOWER and is carved out of a scrap of battle-ship linoleum. It is 5 ¾" by 2" and is entitled "Early Mountain". There is another scrap of aging linoleum, 3" by 6 ½", done in the shade of Hudson Bay Mtn., Smithers, B.C., after three arduous weeks of climbing in the glacier-endowed Howson Range.

And so began an involvement in relief printmaking that started more than 40 years ago and continues to the present. In a way, not much has changed. David Milne, who for several years ran a ski lodge in Lake Placid, N.Y., said of drypoint lines: "they're like ski tracks in fresh snow." It's a compelling sensation — not dissimilar to drawing a steel blade over a copper plate — that sensation of puncturing and furrowing the grey surface of a rectangle of linoleum.

For a few years in my late teens I did lino-block prints. I'd carve a piece of lino and then print it onto cheap Manila paper, using a table-spoon as a press. There followed five or six years when I didn't do any relief prints. During my last year at the University of British Columbia and the four years spent studying art in the San Francisco Bay Area I produced no relief prints. I did some etchings and some small bronzes, but mostly in my early and mid-20's I painted.

Though I came up with half a dozen diminutive woodcuts in 1969 and 1970, it was in 1973 that the world of printmaking opened up for me with my discovery of Bert Binning's and Wayne Eastcott's initiative, the Dundarave Print Workshop in West Vancouver. For two years I worked monochromatically, mostly using black ink. In 1974, some two dozen black and white linocut and woodcut editions rolled off D.P.W.'s Charles Brand etching press.

In early January, 1975, after mulling over the technical problems associated with producing colour prints, I settled on the technique pioneered more than half a century before by Edvard Munch. The cut-block technique involves cutting the woodblock or the plywood-backed linoleum into sections, thus forming a jigsaw pattern. The pieces are inked separately and then put back together: voila, a multicolour print in one run through the press.

The year 1975 was a focussed and pivotal year. The late painters Toni Onley and William Kurelek responded positively to my cut-block prints, and with an exhibition scheduled for the Pollock Gallery in October (in large part through the endorsement of Toronto painter Jack Bush),

I threw myself into producing a significant body of colour relief prints.

The ideas for the prints derived from weekend excursions. I'd drive in my Volkswagen Beetle towards Squamish or Whistler, sometimes with friends, sometimes not. I would scramble up a trail, often climbing a peak like Garibaldi, the Stawamus Chief or the Lions. The photos and sketches from these trips provided an abundant image bank. Back in the city and choosing the most suitable sketch and/or photograph, I would make numerous quick studies in coloured pencil.

After distilling the image I would do several full-scale drawings, simplifying further and modifying. The final stage involved chalking the finished drawing onto the plywood-backed linoleum. Then I'd take my electric saber saw and cut out the pieces. Before as well as after sawing out the pieces, I would carve the linear and patterned components, working intuitively and improvising, employing V-shaped and U-shaped gouges. Arguably the most challenging aspect of the process was, however, the final stage: the proofing and editioning.

In 1976 the painter Gordon Smith introduced me to Rob Wilson and his wife Diane. Rob and Diane had just launched their custom lithographic and relief printing service, and for more than five years I supplied Crown Printers with lino-blocks and final proofs (B.A.T.'s or Bon à Tirer's). A number of my most successful editions were printed by Rob and Diane.



N. Y. Publisher in Sydney © 2004 Arnold Shives

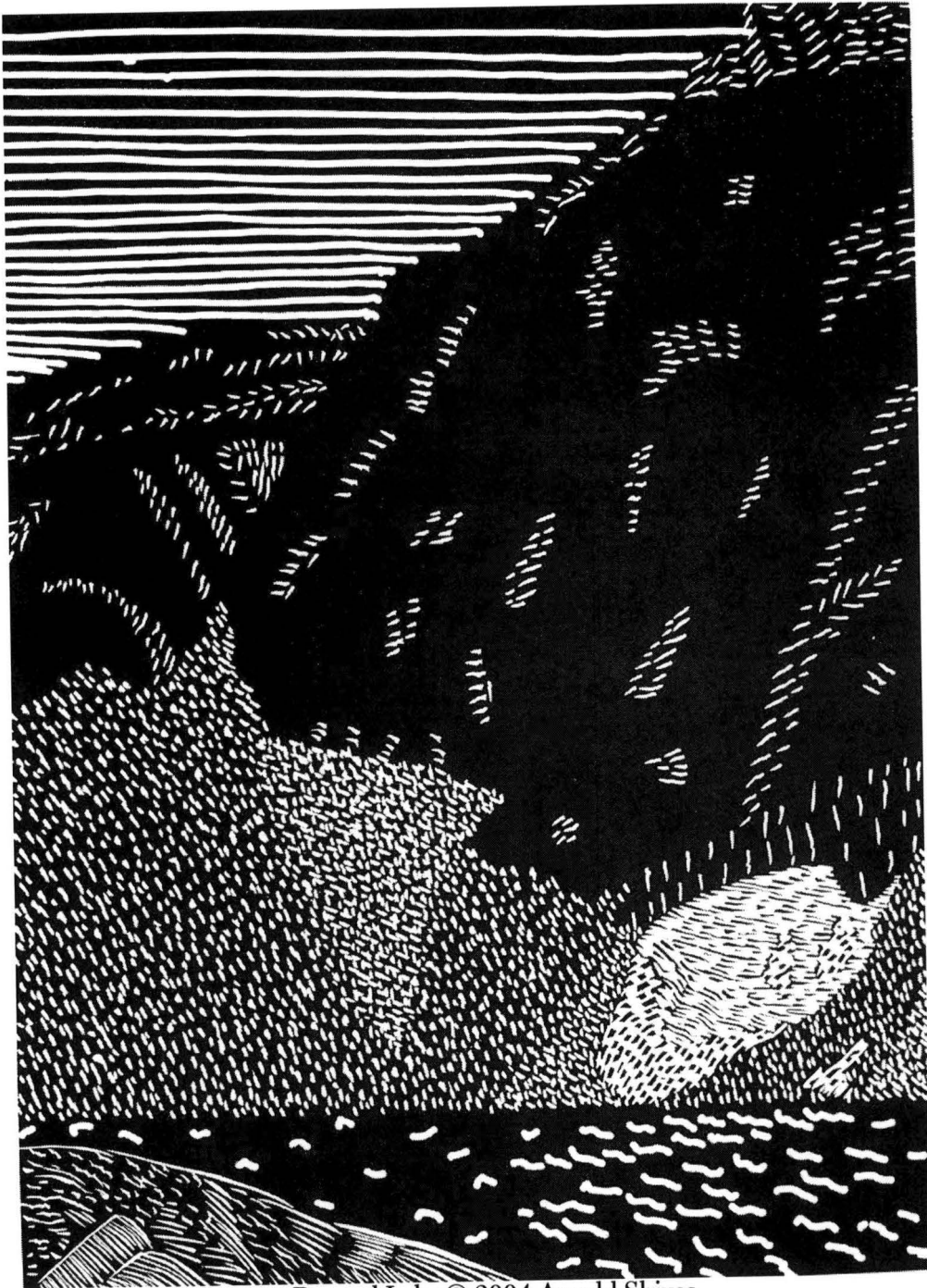
Over the last twenty years relief printing has not been my foremost concern, due mainly to a persistent urge to explore new media. For two or three years in the mid-90's a studio technician, Tom Pruitt (now at Graphic Studio in Tampa), assisted me with sculptures and prints, and helped me bridge these two disciplines. With Tom's encouragement we exploited the carved and routed birch plywood, initially intended for back-lit wall sculptures, and proofed them. Some of these wood-blocks I later sent to Toronto for editioning by Atelier GF's Susan Farquar and Robert Game. It was Robert and Susan who editioned "Forest Tangle".

In the late 1990's, another Toronto printer, Lorna Livey—besides doing several dozen intaglio editions—also editioned four or five lino-blocks for me, such as "Rugged Lake" and "Klackarpun Summit I".

During the last few years I've done about a dozen relief prints, like "Forest and Blown Ash", "Arctic Beech and Binna Burra", and "N.Y. Publisher in Sydney". Currently I am working on illustrations for a book project, "Firesnags", with Montreal writer and art critic John K. Grande. I've proofed three images carved in Soft-Cut, a rubber-like material. Marius Soska of North Vancouver's Twin Graphics has scanned these images and will then edition them as silkscreen prints, i.e. the final output will move from the initial relief technique to a stencil technique.

To bring this account to a close, what about my limited edition book, *Mountain Journal*, which won recognition at the Alcuin Society's recent book design competition? Of the twelve images in *Mountain Journal*, two are relief prints. That project, along with other publishing efforts, might be a fitting subject for another *Amphora* article, but it is a whole other story — a story I would prefer to leave to a later date. One thing is certain, though: those years of immersion in printmaking, especially relief printmaking, enriched and broadened my art practice; and without those years spent carving blocks and scrutinizing proofs, it is unlikely to have occurred to me to put text and image together to produce an artist's book.

To see more of Arnold Shives' work please visit his website at www.arnoldshives.com. To contact Arnold Shives please e-mail him at arnoldshives@arnoldshives.com.



Rugged Lake © 2004 Arnold Shives