

Susan Aldworth: Visual Equivalents by Gill Saunders, Senior curator of Prints at the V&A. Published in *Printmaking Today* - Winter 2023 - Issue 128 – December 2023

When I visited Susan Aldworth's studio in preparation for writing this article, it came as no surprise to learn that her latest project involves working with a scientist who is exploring the possibilities of changing one metal into another. Not precisely the alchemist's chimerical quest of conjuring gold from base metals, but equally challenging, both to achieve and to picture. But Susan is the perfect partner for this endeavour since she has made a career of finding ways and means to give substance to the intangible and immaterial, creating visual equivalents that derive from the very process of printmaking itself – especially etching, with its unpredictable mix of inks and acids, metals and resists. Indeed, we might see alchemy, defined by the Oxford dictionary as *a seemingly magical process of transformation*, as an apt description of Susan's work in print.

Perhaps the earliest of these visual equivalents was born out of frustration with drawing, when she was investigating ways of representing the chemistry of the brain and the idea of consciousness. She felt that drawing didn't work, that it was too literal, describing the anatomy of the brain but not the idea of consciousness, so she turned to print. Making the etching, *Cerebral Blue I* (2005), she threw chemicals into the aquatint on the plate. Within the confines of the vaguely head-shaped outline the pigment 'explodes', and the chemical reaction of the constituent elements is the very incarnation of energy, of consciousness "happening on the page" as she described it to me. This co-option of the print process itself as catalyst for the imagery of the conscious mind marked a significant turning point in Susan's printmaking and she developed it further in the series *Brainscapes* which followed.

Here once again, she made productive use of the accidents and unpredictability that are inherent in the process, with the result that the prints appear spontaneous and uncontrolled, the brain a constellation of gaseous cloudy energy and sparking synapses. In making these prints and the related *Birth of a Thought* series, Susan worked closely with fellow artist and master printer Nigel Oxley, and together they have collaborated to experiment with the etching process, developing what they describe as "a radical form of 'white line' etching which uses chemical activity on the plate itself to mirror chemical activity in the brain." [Susan Aldworth, 'The physical brain and the sense of self: an artist's exploration', lecture, 2007, unpublished]. As Oxley has described it,

“Letting white spirit bleed into meths on top of the aquatint produces a perfect representation of a brain haemorrhage...its staggering to think that all this has come out of one plate and one etch.” [Quoted in [Brainscapes - Susan Aldworth](#)] Susan is rightly insistent on crediting Oxley’s experience and technical expertise as vital to her achievements, but they have explored the process together. In their experiments with negative or ‘white line’ etching they discovered by chance that a line drawn on the zinc etching plate with a permanent marker acted as a resist. This not only gave an unprecedented fluency to the etchings, it also offered a graphic equivalent for the negative line seen in cerebral angiograms. The tangles of white lines that seem to bleed and pulse, fluid and organic, against an infinite blue or black, capturing the brain at work. The prints have been compared (not least, by me) as maps of the mind that chart the process of imagination.

The rich evocative blue of the *Brainscapes* is a regular constituent of Susan’s work, emerging almost as an independent phenomenon, rich in allusion and metaphor. Susan has called this colour ‘cerebral blue’ (as in the title of the 2005 print) and it has become especially significant, because as she has explained, ‘it is a colour many patients say they associate with brain trauma.’ Blue is a colour with multiple associations. Painter Sam Francis claimed it as ‘the colour of speculation’ and for Helen Chadwick, who used it in her installation *The Oval Court*, blue is “the colour where you cannot determine gravity or perspective”. As the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard has said “First there is nothing, next there is a depth of nothingness, then a profundity of blue.” Colour of mind and spirit, symbolic of the mysterious or unknown, a deep blue also has associations with science, with the cyanotype process used in the 19th century for making photograms, or ‘photogenic drawings’ of ephemeral organic materials, as in Anna Atkins’ famous records of algae, seaweeds and wild flowers.

It was cyanotype that Susan chose for her series exploring the nature and lived experience of epilepsy, *Out of the Blue*, in 2020. The phrase ‘out of the blue’ is a commonplace description of something which happens suddenly or unexpectedly, just as events such as epileptic seizures can strike without apparent warning, though deep within the brain there will be signs and portents. Seizures occur when the orderly pattern of electrical impulses in the brain is disrupted by sudden synchronized bursts of electrical energy that may briefly affect a person’s consciousness, movements or sensations. Susan has found vivid visual equivalents for this invisible process when the brain goes

momentarily 'haywire' – a florescent tangle of neurons, their messaging disrupted by the seizure, float above and between a regular patterns of glowing motifs representing the synchronised impulses that trigger the attack. These transcendently beautiful evocations of brain trauma are achieved with the simplest of materials – human hair, iron filings, and stones, laid on the cyanotype paper and exposed to sunlight. Susan has often used hair in her prints, the fine delicate lines offering visual equivalents of human fragility.

If *Out of the Blue* is the mind in a state of turmoil and trauma, *The Dark Self*, a series made in 2017, looks at the mind in suspended animation, consciousness quietened into an unconscious state, sleep. These prints are monotypes on black paper, printed from antique pillowcases, some plain, some richly embroidered. At the centre of each is a dark space where the colour of the paper shows through, representing the portal between waking and sleeping. We talk of slipping into sleep or falling asleep, a sense of being pulled under the still surface of ourselves into a new 'state of mind', as the brain busies itself with dream and nightmare. Wreaths of hair suggest the head on the pillow, but also the restless mind resisting sleep. Scattered across each pillow, or floating in the dark pool at its centre, are feathers – literal references to the pillow's stuffing, of course, but also drifting twisting clues to the mind's dreaming.

Moving away from her explorations of the brain, Susan has more recently looked at grief, prompted by the death of her mother early in the Covid pandemic. Susan has described these six monoprints, grouped under the title *A Puff of Smoke*, as representations of the transitional liminal moment between life and death. Drawing on previous experimental techniques, she rolled black ink onto an aquatinted zinc plate and then worked back into it to create white texture and marks with white spirit, powder resists, human hair and thread. We get the sense of grief, like a knot of pain, sitting in the centre of the mind, engulfing it and blocking out everything else. Flashes of gold suggest precious memories, and the white spots represent lacunae, the things we forget, things that elude the grasp of memory. These prints capture the end of the embodied relationship between the deceased and those who grieve for them.

And then to come back to where we started, we find Susan grappling with the challenges of picturing alchemy using hand-shaken aquatint and the unpredictable reactions in the chemistry of plate and ground and acid. There is a shadowy undersea quality to these prints as pigments bloom and burst in the hazy darkness. Mutability and transformation are embodied in plate and print.

As she has said, “I often work in print as I love the generosity of the medium in the sort of marks and textures you can create...the process allows serendipity and happy accidents”. It is this generosity and serendipity that have been the hallmarks of Susan’s printmaking and fundamental to her quest for illuminating visual equivalents that get to the heart of mind and self.