

BRIAN LALOR

# INK-STAINED HANDS

Graphic Studio Dublin and the Origins  
of Fine-Art Printmaking in Ireland

With a foreword by Colm Tóibín



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TOM PHELAN

*His work is outstandingly open-minded and adventurous. He takes repeat patterns, silhouette motifs and gestural marks and plays ingeniously with the ideas of symmetry, balance and texture. He also has a sound and distinctive colour sense.*

Aidan Dunne, *The Irish Times* (2006)





Tom Phelan at  
Konstnärshuset,  
Stockholm, Sweden,  
2007, photo,  
Alexandra Ranter.

Tom Phelan (1970–), Studio Manager (2004–7), joined Graphic Studio Dublin in 1992. Having first worked in the Studio while still a student at the Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology, at the suggestion of his print tutor Carmel Benson he took part in a lithography workshop given there by master printer Geoffrey Levy in 1992. Phelan subsequently joined the Studio as its youngest member. He worked under the direction of Mary Farl Powers and then James McCreary. In 1997 he received an international scholarship in Graphic Arts at Il Bisonte in Florence, Italy, and from SD Aerospace, Tokyo, Japan. He has exhibited extensively in Europe, Asia and North America, including at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. In 2006 and 2007 Phelan exhibited in two acclaimed solo shows, at Konstnärshuset, Stockholm, and at the Graphic Studio Gallery.<sup>1</sup> Following a fifteen-year involvement with Graphic Studio, he established his own studio in Vienna in 2007.

As studio assistant, editioner and finally master printer, Phelan has had contact with many prominent artists, including A.R. Penck, Barry Flanagan, Louis le Brocqy, Micheal Farrell, Tony O'Malley and Felim Egan. According to Aidan Dunne, he is best known as a master printer:

Tom Phelan is better known as an editioning printmaker and technician than as a printmaker in his own right. He has worked with numerous artists as part of the Graphic Studio Visiting Artists Scheme. Because of the nature of the beast, it can happen that print-makers become interested to the point of obsession with subtleties of technique. While Phelan is clearly an exacting technician, and while the work in his exhibition of woodcuts and etchings at the Graphic Studio Gallery evidences considerable technical skill and ingenuity, he is also much more than that.<sup>2</sup>

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Tom Phelan's involvement in the Studio was total. The demands of the Studio work were often far from glamorous and required skills neither taught at art college nor requiring refined aesthetic sensibilities:

It was very DIY. Very little grants or funds could be spent on 'getting in a man'. We did it ourselves, maintenance, building, painting. If the roof leaked James McCreary and I were up there fixing it in the rain, or mucking out the gutters to stop them overflowing and leaking into the Studio in winter. We were coming in at all hours for alarm call-outs.<sup>3</sup>

Of Powers and McCreary, the two artists who dominated the Studio during the early years of his membership, he said they 'took me under their not-so-motherly, ink-soaked, prickly wings'.

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Tom Phelan, *Woman with Red Ruff*, etching on solid walnut panel, 23 x 20 cm, Revelation, 2008.

To have two people that skilled, in the one place, it was a fantastic scoop for the Studio. Having one you would think 'that's fantastic', but having two! However, they were like chalk and cheese in the way that they handled things. McCreary almost felt guilty that he had these skills. His lithography skills were stunning. Prints that were shown to people from the Tamarind, the only ones that they were interested in were McCreary's. Whereas Mary was very comfortable with her confidence, which is something, being Irish, that you are always a little bit afraid to feel, of thinking it's arrogant or something. She didn't have that. She knew what she was doing.<sup>4</sup>

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Tom Phelan, reverse  
of walnut panel for  
*Woman with Red Ruff*,  
Revelation, 2008.



Tom Phelan, *Line  
Drawing IV*, woodblock  
on felt, 141 x 85 cm,  
Île d'Hiver/Winter  
Island, 2009.



Phelan's personal credo as a printmaker reflects some of the austerity of Powers' personal dedication to the craft, the conviction that perfection must be sought and can be achieved: 'Attention to detail is paramount, a mantra I still chant with all aspects of my work, whether it's printmaking or painting. If it is not completely perfect, then start again, regardless of time, energy and money spent. I learned from totally committed hard-core master printmakers. The principles are etched in me!'<sup>5</sup>

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