



Wound, ©1995 Alan Magee.
monotype with watercolor and black pencil, 14 x 11 in.

Archive: Alan Magee monotypes

What is it that makes this singular body of work so moving? To understand its hold on us one has to go off alone with it. Only apart and undistracted can we begin to grasp the significance of these enigmatic faces. Like funerary masks, they suggest at once both the living and the dead. Bearing the look of something unearthed from archeological rubble, they document the perfect fitness of Shakespeare's term, "the tooth of time."....

Alan Magee brings to his craft an uncommon understanding that art shares a plate with history. It does so not by depicting circumstances, tracing alliances or trade routes but by giving expression to the passage of time so as to know it from within. Working with his own materials, his own tools, his particular affinities and quests, Magee sets his bench close to the workshops of history....

Robert Kee, an RAF flier in the Second World War, despaired of communicating the reality of war even in his own diaries. Rereading them in 1971, he commented in *Liberty*: "No wonder it is those artists who re-create life rather than try to recapture it who, in one way, prove the good historians in the end." Kee's point was not to diminish the primacy of historical evidence. He simply aimed at giving due weight to a parallel truth: that memorable testimony about those facts requires a power of empathy that is often found more vividly through the images and metaphors of art.

Such is the testimony of these scarred, divided and sutured faces. Technically distressed in the process of creation—the inked plate scored, blotted, abraded, each manipulation leaving behind its own record of disturbance—both surface and intention join to convey simultaneously the physical shambles of war and the psychic wounds that linger in its wake. Significance is not something added here, like a sauce, but organically bound to the means of creation. Each image becomes its own archive, a visible memoir retaining on its surface the memory of a moving hand and the gradual unfolding of the artist's purpose....

I was touched by these monotypes when I first saw them. In the course of writing this—in the time it takes to find words that might keep faith with what is wordless—I have come to love them. I cherish the profound pity in them. The tenderness with which they have been caressed into being is more than technical. It is the work of a contemplative sensibility, with a delicate hand, in the cultural recesses of its age.

This is an excerpt from the catalog essay *Archive: Alan Magee Monotypes* for an exhibition at the Berliner Philharmonie, 2000, and the Portland Museum of Art, 2001.

©Maureen Mullarkey, an artist who writes on art and culture