

CLOUDS, AIR AND WEATHER SYSTEMS IN PRINT

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Air meets air – an incipient encounter. When a printed atmosphere is separated from its matrix on the press bed or, in the case of screenprint, when the final mesh film is lifted from the sheet below, the image of air comes into direct contact with its prototype. As evident in works from horizon-piercing Gothic spires to John Constable's luminous cloud paintings, air and its systems have long beckoned to makers as things to be moulded, represented, infused into their art. In print, a distinct tension is embedded in these processes, for print's many techniques, all entailing direct touch of sheet and matrix, are emphatically airless. Yet atmosphere and print communicate in intriguingly parallel ways, through contact and changing pressure. The line etchings of clouds in Alexander Cozens's treatise, *A new method of assisting the invention in drawing original compositions of landscape* (1785) (see page 234), and *Cirrus* (2017) (see page 235), a screenprint with embossing by Victoria Burge – prints of different eras – take celestial phenomena as their subjects. Both works evoke the ways that air itself functions as a medium while also calling forth the atmospheric qualities of print.

The aim of *A new method* was to serve as a practical guide for artists by systematising the rendering of landscape. Within the pamphlet, a set of twenty illustrations depicts the sky in

different moods. These sky images are arranged in a progressive sequence with terse captions explaining their contrasts, for instance: 'The same as the last, but darker at the bottom than the top.' Working in line etching, Cozens crafted his monochrome skies solely through the orchestration of contrasts between printed lines and unprinted paper. Simply by varying the density of lines and their hatching, he achieved lyrical tonal variations within each sheet. The unprinted paper poking through the etched lines becomes light shining through the clouds or dancing across their surfaces. Each composition is a fleeting vision; as Cozen's lines come together and then apart, clouds appear and disappear, and light flickers. His etchings show the sky to be a channel, communicating obscurity and revelation, reflections and refractions, and an array of temperaments.

There is a poetic contravention – indeed another kind of contrast – between the message and the medium in Cozen's sky etchings. In each sheet, Cozens has stilled the sky twice, first encoding various arrangements of sky, light, and clouds through the careful placement of lines on his etching plates, then sending his plates to print, where his images were forcefully fixed to paper. But clouds and vapor are perhaps the most palpable natural examples of evanescence. Cozens acknowledges as much. His construction,

'The same ..., but ...', repeated throughout the sky etchings, bows to one of the atmosphere's essential qualities: its mutability.

Burge's *Cirrus* is also concerned with celestial systems and entropy. Its circuitry of lines and points draw from the stabilising visual language of cartography and age-old human efforts to map the sky. At the same time, these marks, so often employed in the service of orientation and wayfinding, seem subsumed into the print's wafting nebulae. Grid and atmosphere seem to dissolve into one another. As with Cozens's lines, the density of marks and hues fluctuates irregularly across the pictorial field, evocative of the fluid, and sometimes surprising, pressure changes of weather.

Cirrus is not an etching but a screenprint; its image is built up with four successive layers of ink squeezed through mesh stencil screens, one screen for each colour in the print. It may seem counterintuitive for screenprinted marks, in their matte opacity, to represent air and clouds, but again a tension in the technique proves illuminating: the ink, like air, passes through screens, coming into contact with matter on either side. The image produced is an effect of its displacement under pressure.

Of particular note is the fact that the inked portion of *Cirrus* does not comprise the entire print. A platemark frames the image, registering the blind embossment of the paper subsequent to the screenprinting, a highly unusual combination of printing methods. Platemarks are depressions in paper produced by passing it through a press together with a printing plate. Sheets with platemarks are objects in relief; in other words, they allow for the intrusion of air into the dented portions. *Cirrus*'s inked image thus sits behind a shallow pocket of air within the sheet itself. Unlike with screenprinting, platemarks always occur when printing copperplate etchings and therefore are not typically understood as carriers of meaning in those prints. However, considered together with *Cirrus*, the platemarks of Cozens's etchings take on significance as infusions of actual air into his illustrations.

In *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, scholar John Durham Peters encourages us to understand environments as media; like television, the

internet, paintings, sound recordings and poetry, natural elements like air are also repositories of readable data and processes. The sky etchings in *A new method* and *Cirrus* are in one sense, ledgers of the information that their artists have gleaned from the atmosphere. But more than this, through print, Cozens and Burge engage with the very ways that air communicates: Cozens, by puzzling through the coding of translucency and shadow through only the placement of lines; and Burge, by articulating the expansion and compression of airflow through the layering of inks squeezed through screens.

Cozens's sky etchings and Burge's *Cirrus* have released themselves from the horizon. As prints, both works are images fixed to (and indented on) paper, but as depictions of the natural world, they are unattached to the ground-tethered grids of Renaissance-era perspective. They are readings of the atmosphere's messages as well as material and technical emulations of its communicative processes. They are gloriously ungrounded, fully in, and of, the air.