



*REPORTS & REVIEWS*

Pete Williams' artworks for *The Three Imposters* by Arthur Machen

Review by Hywel Pontin

First published over a century ago, in 1895, "The Three Imposters" was penned by the Caerleon born writer Arthur Machen (1863 – 1947). The book consists of a series of interwoven stories and tales, that resonate with the darker side of our psyche. "The Three Imposters" is a book that incorporates an episodic narrative. Each of the tales inter relate and are connected to the search through the dark streets of London by "The Three Imposters". These "imposters" are members of a secret society whose quest is to search for a missing Roman Coin that commemorates an infamous orgy by the Emperor Tiberius.

Although he was writing in the later part of the 19th and early part of the 20th Century, Machen's work, has been and continues to be influential, especially within the horror genre.

Machen's novella "The Great God Pan", published in 1894, is regarded as a classic of the genre. The famous American horror writer Stephen King describing it as "Maybe the best [horror story] in the English language." However, for many it is "The Three Imposters" and the stories within it that have been regarded as among Machen's best works.



This new publication of "The Three Imposters" is continuing with an exciting commissioning initiative, established by the Publishers. To illustrate and to add an additional visual dimension to the books, artworks have been commissioned from some of the Country's foremost contemporary visual artists. This process where an artist is commissioned to create work in response to the writings of the author, allows for challenging and exciting unions to be formed. A new dynamic is created in the response by an artist working in a totally different media and are bringing new interpretations and meaning to the visions created by Machen. I was intrigued, excited and have waited with anticipation to see Pete Williams' response to Arthur Machen's "The Three Imposters".

Pete Williams describes himself as a Printmaker / Artist, but he is much more than that, he is immersed in the creative process. It is a way of life. As a teacher, educator, artist, runner and the driving force behind the Print Market Workshop, Pete Williams personifies the sense of the creative and radical spirit. He is forging his own path, undeterred by others and by convention, on a journey of discovery and creative endeavour.

Printmaking and drawing are at the core of Pete Williams' work. It all starts by the act of mark making. In both, printmaking and drawing, it is the process, the way in

which images are revealed through a technical narrative. Light emerging from darkness, and calm from the chaotic. Producing art and engaging in creativity is about taking control and bringing order to a disorderly world.



What drew a young Pete Williams to this way of working? It could be that Pete Williams was drawn to printmaking partly as a reaction to the chosen paths of his brothers. One a painter and one an architect. It could partly be a subliminal response to his father's engineering background. By choosing printmaking as his media of choice, it has allowed him to forge a unique lifelong creative path. Part of a wider familial artistic and creative practice, but independent in voice.

Pete Williams' passion for printmaking began to fully materialise and manifest itself during his foundation studies at Farnham. Gaining the support for his "apprenticeship" from his father, Pete began his journey exploring the handmade and technical mechanics of the art and craft of printmaking. This passion continued to grow and develop with his studies at Cheltenham School of Art and then at Brighton University while completing his MA in Fine Art Printmaking in 1989-91.

Printmaking is a political and egalitarian art form. At its core is the vision to make art accessible and in reaching wide audiences. Pete Williams is the co-founder and Director of the Print Market Project Cardiff. "The Project" was established in 1996 and is still operating and continuing to develop more than twenty years later. Print Market Project is part of network of independent print workshops across the country, bringing facilities and professionalism within the reach of local communities. Print Market Project is housed in a converted 18th Century Barn, in Canton

Cardiff. Within these modest premises, operates a fully equipped printmaking studio and gallery. Williams calls it 'A most Important Space'. He is so right; The Print Market Project is "a most important space" not only for Cardiff but also for Wales and the International printmaking community.

Pete Williams has been exhibiting his own artwork, including print and drawings, both nationally and internationally for over two decades. Williams has a dogged determination, often shying away from the obvious routes travelled by others. Through having an inherent sense of self-reliance and self-belief, he has formed strong links in the Printmaking communities across the world, in particular the USA and China.



For Williams printmaking is a totally immersive process, but at its heart and at the heart of all his creative work is the act of drawing. Mark making and drawing is the basis for everything, Williams is rarely without a sketch book. He often has numerous and varied drawings "on the go" at the same time. He festoons the walls (and any other surface) in the studio with embryonic ideas. These pictorial thoughts and musings may or may not mature into realised works. However, the act of continual production gives him an endless opportunity to travel new and unexplored avenues. Williams refers to the work of Sutherland, Piper, Nash and Moore as some of his greatest influences. It is, however, the drawings of these great artists that form the inspiration, the sculptural image emanating from the paper.

Drawing is Pete Williams' way of experimenting with ideas, it prevents the "process" of printmaking getting in the way of his creativity. The act of mark making creates a fluidity. From the initial idea or spark of inspiration, through the exploration on paper and to seamless transition of the final

image. It is only at the last stage in the development that the technical mechanics of printmaking engage. In this way of working, he creates a space that allows for the separation between the process and the application of making. Pete Williams spends a considerable amount of time preparing; mixing the inks; selecting the paper; preparing the screens, plates and stones. This action becomes almost meditative, a way of uniquely focussing the mind. There is, for Williams, a subtle distinction between the process and act of making.

Within the studio Pete works with 18th century presses, these are almost sculptural objects in their own right. All of the images he produces are created by hand, however Pete is always rethinking the way we make objects and the processes needed to create them. In essence he is using old presses in a contemporary way.

For this commission "The Three Imposters", Pete immersed himself in the text. Over many weeks he was to be found reading and re-reading the narrative. Each time he re-read the text the light was shown a little brighter on its meaning and broadened his understanding of Machen's intent. Williams' images are not precise renderings but are loose interpretations on the narrative rather than illustrations in a formal sense. They capture the mood and essence of the thread of stories rather than pictorially reiterate the prose.

For "The Three Imposters", Pete Williams has created twenty drawings, these are reproduced in the publication. Alongside these works, however, a suite of etchings has been printed that are based on the drawings (but these are not within the book). These etchings being one step removed from the original narrative and are starting to reference Pete's own line of thought.

Pete Williams deconstructed the book. Literally taking pages out of the book, sticking them together to form a prepared paper, creating a built surface on which to paint, draw and print. The paper used to create the final images, has been born from the very source of the inspiration itself. Machen's text becomes the background and the surface on which the stories are printed and are seen in a new way. Pete Williams focused on detail, choosing specific words and phrases within the text. These become the starting points for a train of thought that led to the words being made real through drawing. Like the book, the images are sequential and are designed to be viewed in a specific order. This sequence of drawings and etchings become multi layered, like the book they operate on numerous layers. There is an internal intimacy between text and image, fiction becomes reality. These are sensitive works, they come from a unique place, they are not illustrations but are something beyond the illustrative. Within the images threads of narrative become visible, there is an ambiguity of meaning between Machen and Williams. The words of Machen and their interpretation through drawing is open to a varied response from the viewer.

Over a century ago Machen produced a multi layered, complex and episodic sequence of interrelated stories, that delved into some of our darker characteristics. Machen's work still has the ability to create powerful images that tap into our psyche. Pete Williams' has literally taken the very

words of Machen in “The Three Imposters” and transformed them into a complex narrative of interwoven images. These images lead the viewer to explore the world of Machen and their own world in a new questioning way.

*Hywel Pontin, 2019*



Pete Williams currently has a solo show at Oriel Canfas Gallery, Cardiff, Wales, until 8th December.  
<http://www.orielcanfas.co.uk>