

Orderly Disorder

PROFILE Timothy Riggs discovers careful control and equivocal colour in the French artist **Pascale Hémary's** urban landscapes

Although Pascale Hémary has made a number of etchings and some striking lithographs, her work is profoundly shaped by linocut and woodcut, the processes that she has used from the beginning of her career and that form the largest part of her work. For more than a century these media have been intimately associated with Expressionism: the movements in northern Europe that blossomed between 1900 and 1910, and the Neo-Expressionism of the 1980s and 90s. When Hémary was a student at the *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Paris (1989–94) and making her first prints, Neo-Expressionism was still a headline in the *News of the Art World*, and I see some echoes of the style in an early group of face and figure studies and in the landscapes that followed: a spontaneous crudity in the cutting and gouging of linoleum, and an anguished distortion of form. But in the course of the 1990s this gave way to a style that I am tempted to call 'Post-Expressionist': the tool marks are still evident but more carefully controlled, and so is the emotional expression. The work is calmer but also grander, in keeping with the large scale and complexity of her most recent prints and their focus on architectural mass and space. The dialogue between two and three dimensions is increasingly sophisticated, and further enhanced by the introduction of colour.

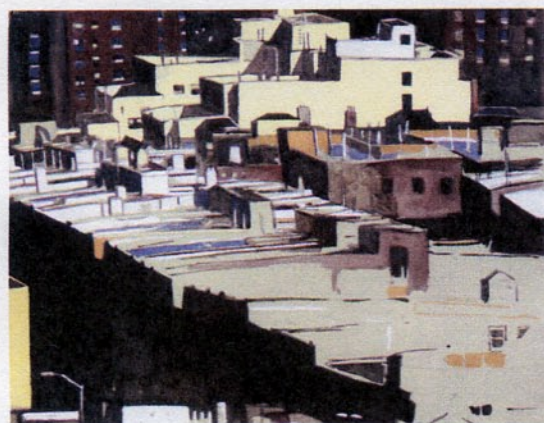
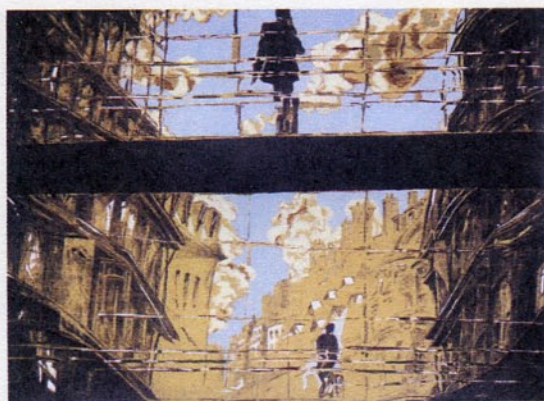
Colour and light

Hémary's use of colour follows two paths. *Washington Heights* is one of a number of drawings in gouache, often on a grayish paper, that

are delicately handled in cool tones, with a sense for natural light and atmosphere. But in more finished gouache paintings like *View of the Flatiron District* and above all in the prints, colour is bolder, flatter and more abstract. Its role is primarily to create light and shade. The linocut *All Roads Lead to Rome* looks back to the chiaroscuro woodcuts of the sixteenth century, where degrees of shade were represented by an arbitrary range of reds, yellows or greens that had nothing to do with natural colour. For *The Marché Saint-Honoré* Hémary depends very little on the crayon shading and scratched-out highlights that one expects in a lithograph, and relies instead on a coloured paper and hand-coloring for a similar chiaroscuro effect.

It is particularly interesting when a print's colour modulates between a descriptive and a chiaroscuro function. The primary triad that Hémary often uses, a subdued yellow, a pale sky-blue and a powerful brick-red, produces a descending scale of value appropriate to a chiaroscuro woodcut, but at the same time it coincides with the brick, stone and sky that are natural elements of an urban landscape. In *Médiathèque at Nevers* the light blue in the truss-work of the roof is close to its actual colour, but on the wall at the rear the same blue and the yellow read as sky-light versus sunlight on a stucco wall. The red, and a second blue so dark that it functions as black, simply indicate deeper degrees of shadow without reference either to the colour of a surface or the colour of the light that falls on it. The colour scheme has a technical reference as well, because like many of Hémary's recent works this is a reduction-block print: the four colours are printed from a single block that is gradually carved away to print successively smaller areas. Although not essential, it is logical with this technique for the artist to proceed from the lightest colour to the darkest, since each will need to cover portions of the larger area printed in the previous colour. The image emerges from the triple function of colour as part of a printing process, as a way of modelling light and shade, and as a representation of actual colour.

In *St. Katharine Docks in the City* the colour sequence emerges in the same way from the reduction block method, but in this night



scene objects have no colour of their own and hardly any volume; only the artificial light itself has colour. Hémerly's use of a yellow-green-red triad powerfully suggests the artificial lighting of an urban landscape; the contrast of darkness with glaring light; black shadows and glittering reflections.

Aleatory City

Hémerly's current exhibition, on view until January 15, 2015 at the Médiathèque Jean Jaurès in Nevers, reveals a vision of the city that passes by the grand monuments and urban spaces to celebrate the ordinary fabric of a district. Whether in the Parisian background of *All Roads Lead to Rome* or the roofs and water towers of the Flatiron district in New York, she gives us the sense of buildings that blend together without losing their own individuality. Her recent drawings and the lithograph *Traffic*, arising from a visit to Udaipur in India, have the same feeling. 'Aleatory' comes from the Latin word for dice, and throwing a pair of dice gives you something random within a framework that is actually structured – you cannot score less than two or more than twelve. Throwing dice repeatedly produces a kind of orderly disorder – regular irregularity – and the same kind of pattern appears in Hémerly's views. The pattern itself has a character that depends on the city (or the district within it) but that shares a family resemblance with the patterns that arise in other cities across the world, because each arises from the interaction of individual builders, limited space, and a common culture.

But what happens when something breaks the pattern? Hémerly's most recent images portray the interaction of order and chance, old and new. In *The Médiathèque* the carefully planned irregularity of a steel and glass addition collides with the carefully planned regularity of a seventeenth-century building. In *The Marché Saint-Honoré* the casual growth of a nineteenth-century street appears through the grid of a new building. Yet in these prints the new itself conveys visions of the past: the glass train sheds and exhibition spaces of the nineteenth century. Similarly, the boats in the foreground moored at St. Katharine

Docks are the sailing yachts of the rich moored in front of a block of upscale offices, and yet in Hémerly's hands the slim masts and curvaceous hulls, visible in a preliminary drawing, take on a more massive appearance in the woodcut. The squared-off hulls with heavy masts and rigging evoke the sailing barges that would have been part of the region's commercial traffic a century ago. Whistler spoke of twilight making Thames warehouses into Venetian palaces; Hémerly's nocturne manages to hint at the vanished warehouses of Whistler's time.

Throwing a pair of dice is usually part of a more complex game, where the high score is not necessarily the best one and where strategy may interact with chance. The history of a city could be seen as an endless dice game. The stakes may be low, when a shoe store replaces a grocery, or high, when a highway cuts through an old neighborhood. Over time, successive apparently random throws turn a middle-class neighborhood into a slum or gentrify a warehouse district. A new building changes the urban fabric and in return, over the years, the fabric changes the building. That is what I sense in Hémerly's urban landscapes.

Pascale Hémerly: la ville aléatoire, exhibition at the Médiathèque Jean Jaurès de Nevers, 5 October 2014–15 January 2015; Catalogue: *Pascale Hémerly: la ville Aléatoire* (Nièvre Imprimerie Normalisée à Varennes-Vauzelles, 2014)

Further information

Further examples of the artist's work can be seen at www.pascale-hemery.com/oeuvres-recentes/. Hémerly's early work is extensively reproduced in *Pascale Hémerly: Œuvre gravé et lithographié: catalogue raisonné préfacé par Michael Edwards, de l'Académie Française* (Editions Malbodium Muséum & Musée du dessin et de l'estampe originale de Gravelines, 2006)

Images

View of the Flatiron District (2010) Painting in tempera on wove paper, 2700 x 3600 mm
St. Katharine Docks in the City (2013) Woodcut (reduction block) printed in four colours on Japan paper, 800 x 600 mm, edition of 10
The Marché Saint-Honoré (2012) Lithograph printed on toned paper and heightened with tempera, 530 x 750 mm, edition of 5
Washington Heights (2010) Painting in tempera on wove paper, 340 x 435 mm
The Médiathèque, Nevers (2013) Woodcut (reduction block) printed in four colours on Japan paper, 1200 x 800 mm
 Photographs courtesy of the artist. © Pascale Hémerly