

# MICHAEL KANE

*and his relief printed works*



SUBMITTED FOR BACHELOR OF DESIGN IN  
VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS N.C.A.D

by  
*Sheelyn Browne*

*April 1987*



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

Many thanks are due to Michael Kane for his time and help in order for me to write this thesis.

REFERENCE  
ONLY

National College of Art and Design  
LIBRARY

The reasons for choosing Michael Kane (painter and graphic artist) as opposed to any other Irish artist as a subject for this thesis are many. Firstly, he is an artist who has contributed to Irish art enormously. He has represented Ireland in numerous international exhibitions including The Salzburg Biennale; the Biennale of Graphic Art, Ljubljana; Premio Internazionale, Biella; International Exhibition of Drawings, Rijeka, International Exhibition of Graphic and Serial Art, Segovia, Biennale of Graphic Design, Brno, Ist. European Biennale of Graphical Art, Heidelberg; A Sense of Ireland, Fine Art Society, London; Six person International Exhibition, Rauma and Tampere, Finland; Contemporary Print Makers from Ireland, Birmingham, Alabama; Making Sense 1983. He was a co-founder of the Project Arts Centre in 1967, and he was also a member of Group 65, which is what constitutes for the first time in Ireland, the nucleus of a School of Painting.

Inspite of all this Kane is an artist who has always had a relative lack of popular and critical success, probably due to the fact that he has resolutely refused to toe the required line, and is concerned not so much with art for art's sake as with art for the many things which it effects besides itself. Kane feels *"the essential interaction of art and life itself had never been fully acknowledged in Ireland; Art was created in silence and unconscious of its' purpose which led to the inevitable degeneration of much work into a state of vagueness"* .

Bib. 2

Kane claims that he has long since ceased to read the words of the Dublin art critics due to their constant discussions in aesthetic or formalistic terms which ignore his works' emotional content, which is with what

Kane is primarily concerned. He is concerned very much with the idea of expressing his ideas, notions, feelings and beliefs about life; every aspect of it. From the very beginning in the early '60's' Kane's art has concerned itself with so-called non-visual values; frequently expressing outrage at the castration of human life. Kane feels the human figure must be a human that feels, it must be a creature whose predicament is recognized so that the ultimate result is not ignored. In other words, Kane is usually concerned in creating more than just a pretty picture, and much more interested in making a statement.

The area of his work this thesis will concern itself with is that of his relief printed works as this medium is the one most suited to him, more than likely because of his slightly aggressive and extremely expressive temperament. One can really sense by looking at the end result of a number of his works in this medium, the pleasure he gets out of 'hacking' at a piece of wood in order to express what he feels about a particular moment or thought. This gives his relief printed works their air of forcefulness and strength, although there are a number of cases where Kane is obviously lacking in confidence and struggling with the medium. Looking at his early works in this medium and tracing his style, execution of the medium and influences, right up to his present day works, his development in technique, colour, subject matter and monumentality is outstanding. It will be important to trace his contribution to Irish graphic design because there is absolutely no record anywhere of the actual cover designs he produced.

Michael Kane was born in Dublin in 1935 and was brought up in Ashford, County Wicklow. He disliked school intensely, both primary and secondary, probably due to his rebellious nature, which he readily admits to still having and which comes through strongly in a number of his works. He was not unusually gifted at school where the visual arts were concerned and the main thing that kept him occupied during his school years were books, of which there were plenty in his home.

It was not until Kane reached his late teens that he discovered what his ambitions were, although they seemed rather abstract and unfocused at first "*at the age of seventeen I would have been perfectly happy to have been a monumental stonemason or a copy-writer for an advertising agent, a cartoonist say or someone making fashion drawings*".

Bib. 3

Kane left school at the age of nineteen, after which he was unemployed for a short period of time. He got a job working nights in a telephone exchange in Dublin, which meant his days were free and that he was earning money, so he enrolled as a student at the National College of Art & Design in Kildare Street. He worked hard, read, drew antique statues and did a lot of life drawing. "*I used to rather like the cast room because it was quiet and one could sneak in there and be alone and work very quietly and nobody could see how bad your drawings were*".

Bib. 2

Kane once again became frustrated and unimpressed by the teaching he received. He could not see any value in the process that his tutors carried out. He felt they were trying to mould him into producing work that they considered acceptable and gave very little encouragement to his or indeed any of his contemporaries work as individuals.

After two years Kane decided to get out before it was too late and set off for Spain with a friend. The trip lasted about a year and gave Kane the breathing space that was much in need. He taught English for a while in Madrid and Seville. Eventually he moved on to Northern Italy. On the way back he stayed in London briefly and in 1959 he was back in Dublin again looking for employment, of which he acquired almost immediately in an advertising agency where the painter and designer John Skelton worked. Skelton liked Kane's work and hired him, and this was really where Kanes' career as an artist began, as a painter at this stage.

Kane became a member of a group called *The Independent Artists Association* which began to mount exhibitions in 1960. The title of the group was chosen after some discussion in which an effort was made to find a title that would indicate that the group was composed of artists having a lively response to the age we live in. It was within this group that Kane's contribution to Irish graphic design began, when in 1970 and 1971 Kane designed the catalogue covers for the Independent Artists. When designing these he used cut-out paper shapes which resulted in lively decorative forms.

This technique, which is fast and cheap works beautifully in an elegant and loose way, and creates an image which is bursting with movement, especially in the 1971 catalogue. One of the people Kane feels he was greatly influenced by in his earliest years was Henri Matisse, and this design illustrates that. If one studies this illustration Matisse created with cut-out paper (Fig.1) and compares it with Kane's cover design (Fig.2) there is a very strong similarity in the overall effect. The reason Kane's cover design is so effective is because of its poster like effect, both in looking at the front cover, and also looking at the entire cover, back and front, vertically. Either way it would make a very effective poster. The other reason it works so successfully is that its visual impact as a motif in black and white still works beautifully and Kane uses it decoratively throughout the magazine, which gives it an overall togetherness and continuity.(Fig.3).

Kane's design experience in designing the catalogue covers for the Independent Artists proved useful and led him into launching the magazine 'Structure'. Kane said "*I wanted it to be an art magazine, as well as a magazine of literature*". Ten editions of the magazine were published between Spring '72 and Winter 1978. Within twelve months of its initial publication four editions of Structure had been published. Prose, fiction, verse and articles on many diverse topics were printed. Kane started to experiment with lino-cut in 1972, and it was Kane's prints that made Structure quite unique, at least in Irish terms and they were really the starting point to what has resulted in some superb pieces of work, especially of late.

Kane started using the lino-cut for small illustrations or decorative fillers in the first two editions, which then developed to full blown illustration and cover design. Having discovered the technique of lino led him to abandon painting for a while. The primitive technology greatly appealed to him and he claims it was with lino and woodblock he found expression.

Looking at some of the designs he used as decorative fillers (*Figs.4,5 & 6*), they have not got much to offer, they are sparse, quite crudely rendered and extremely 'kitchy'. In *Fig.5* for example the illustration is clumsily rendered, and looks as though it was achieved in a desperate hurry. The marks he makes are coarse, do not compliment each other in any way and little or no thought has gone into the creation of form, and in *Fig. 6* the female figure looks as though his reference material was a wooden mummy of sorts and he is lacking any real feel as to how the human figure works, and the general overall appearance is cold and insensitive. Also looking at some of the cover designs he created for 'Structure' it is obvious he is just getting to know the medium, although at a glance they work to a degree, they have an extremely clinical and stiff feeling to them for example in Vol.1 No.3 Autume '72' (*Fig.7*), here Kane's design is quite crudely boxed off, rather staid, and extremely cold in appearance, and is quite starved of any character. He is using marks in the hand just for the sake of decoration, which do not really do anything and are just floating in mid-air. This clinical type of illustration is also apparent in Vol. No.4 Winter '72' (*Fig.8*) where again Kane is lacking in confidence with some of the marks he makes, for example under the oxygen mask around the neck and shoulder line where he is desperately trying to achieve form, the white marks have a tense and unsure feeling about them.

The design works to a degree with help from the type, but if one studies the illustration alone, not much effort is being made to create form, and it is really rather flat and solemn in appearance. If one moves on to a later edition, it is obvious Kane has started to look at the way in which some former artists handled the medium, and has allowed their influence to attribute to his work, and as a result he is starting to create illustrations with more depth. For example 'Structure' Vol.2 No.4. 1975 (*Fig.9*) it is obvious that the German Expressionist, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's techniques have started to influence Kane, in the way he has created the pipes, which is much the same technique Kirchner handled the dress of 'The Woman Buttoning Her Shoe' (*Fig.10*) This technique is simple, but extremely graphical and strong, and Kane has managed to achieve a very strong feeling of depth and tangibility to this design, and he has managed to make something which is extremely boring in reality into an interesting interaction of cylindrical shapes creating an almost abstract pattern. 'Structure' Vol.2. No.3. '74' (*Fig.11*) is very effective and is probably the most successful out of all the 'Structure' covers he designed. The way in which he handled the faces of the 'Women of Dublin' all with such intensely characterised, expressionistic faces, not one resembling the other. He's really captured within this a feeling of human despair. Also, his use of positive and negative, the way in which he has divided the page in two, and left directional bits of line on the right-hand side which gives the image a strong dynamic sense both upwardly and inwardly, also the sense of depth starting from the foreground, and moving to the figures in the background and then the continuation of the marks on the right-hand side background veering one's eye even further on. This illustration in the way Kane handled the women's faces is extremely derivative of the

German expressionist era. In 'Structure' Vol.3. No.2 (*Fig.12*) where Kane has used the hand again as a design motif grasping the flower. If one looks at this and compares it with his earlier hands Vo.3. Autumn '72' (*Fig.7*), his development in the handling of the form is vast. Kane has started to work a lot freer with the marks he makes, handling the medium in a much more confident way. The direction of the marks he makes all enhance the form rather than just create a flat image. The forcefulness and strength Kane has managed to achieve using fast, fluent lines for the wrist giving the image its dynamic strength, combined with his use of shadowed areas, and then with the direction of the lines used for the flower stem, taking your eye off in another direction giving an extreme sense of tension, which magnifies the clutching power of the hand which acts as a sort of knot in the centre.

Almost at par with his involvement with 'Structure', Kane was commissioned by Peter Fallon, who was editor and publisher of the Gallery Press, to do some book cover designs which were books of poems and plays by Irish authors. For many years people have noted something very recognisable about Gallery Press Books. Peter Fallon started using coloured antique laid paper for the dustjackets and this combined with Kanes' illustrations gave the covers a unique appearance. I feel the cover designs that work most successfully are the ones where Kane designs and carves the type aswell, because this gives the individual design an overall unity and keeps in line with the character of the illustration. An example where Kane has not done this, and as a result the cover design is disasterous, is that of 'Comparative Lives', Harry Clifton (*Fig.13*) and it is not due to the illustration, which has a

strong sense of direction and tension, but is ruined by the Universe typeface which has the appearance of being thrown at random on the page with little or no thought as to how it could enhance the illustration, and instead of complimenting it, it is fighting with it.

Most of the designs for these covers work extremely well and have a very strong characterised style to them which is ideally suited to what they represent. For example in 'Marginal Zones' Peter Sirr (*Fig.14*), where Kane has somehow achieved with lino an image, which has an extremely carved quality, with a sort of timberlike edgy effect which enhances the illustration furthermore, as it represents a forest scene. Kane also designed and carved out the type for this cover, which is bold and loose and compliments the quite intricately densely decorated illustration beautifully. The other cover Kane has combined his design skills both in illustration and type is in 'Adharca Broic' (*Fig.15*) In this the type is also carved from lino and the spindly serifs of his letterforms have a very delicate clawlike appearance which combines it with the sparrow claws in the illustration. The entire design is wonderfully delicate and the type gives it an Irish character without being too typical.

'Site of Ambush' (*Fig.16*) is one of the covers Kane himself feels works most successfully. This I feel it does to an extent and the idea of using the print twice to re-enforce the sense of tension and angst portrayed in the illustration is original and bold, but Kane has lost the character in his technique that he managed to pertain throughout the designs of the other covers and this illustration has a rather stern animated clinical feel to it.

At Kanes best there was an extremely delicate fineness of line in some of the illustrations he produced and I think the cover illustration he did for 'Sing me Creation' (*Fig.17*) is a fine example of just that, the movement and gracefullness of this illustration is beautiful and is created entirely with the use of swift flowing delicate lines which is quite difficult to achieve using lino.

Peter Fallon only rejected one of Kanes' designs, which was the image for a book of plays by Tom Murphy, because he thought it was misrepresentative of the content, and it was from this that Kane decided to use only lettering on the cover of the play. His arrangement of press type or lino-cut letters are very effective and striking, and it was from this the Gallery Press decided to commission Kane to design a typeface (*Fig.18*). This he did and very successfully. Each individual letterform has its' own character and has a 'twiggy' tangible feel about it, something that is quite hard to find in catalogues, and yet the letters used together in context work extremely well. An example where Kane used this typeface is 'The Wishbone' (*Fig.19*) and in a way this is probably the most striking out of all the covers. It is clean, uncrowded, has a delicateness of it's own, full of character, and is very effective.

Moving into Kane's private works there is a remarkable difference as to how Kane handles the medium, especially in comparing them with the book covers he did for the Gallery Press. One would almost think they had been executed by different people. One very noticeable thing about Kane's work is that there is no such thing as his sticking with one particular style. By the mid '70's Block Printing had become the major artistic pretension for Kane. He found that the wood especially, gave a terrific possibility for monumental work, and he felt he got woodcutting onto a plane of plasticity, which was equal to what could be achieved in painting. The direct, clear images obtained, greatly appealed to him, so therefore he did not feel he was losing out in neglecting painting.

Kane has lived in Waterloo Road for a long time, which is very near to the stretch of the Grand Canal which serves Dublin as a red light district and this played a large role in the providing of subject matter for Kane's earlier prints. Other prints were related to such things as urban life, and what he considered to be the social conditions of most of the people of Ireland today. Kane has always felt a threat from buildings, technology, and indeed any man-made devices, which seem to move in and take control or suffocate human breathing space or anything that is natural.

The print '*What Worn As Have Marked the North....*' from 1973 (Fig.20) says it all. This has a clinical, cold, almost dead feeling about it, but this time it works because it's exactly what Kane wants to get across. The railway line, the large ugly pipes, and the tall clustered blocks of flats in the background all trying

to outdo the other, and then to top it all, the layer of fumes closing in on top of them, reinforcing the claustrophobic threat these objects are creating in society. At the top of the print Kane shows a tree which is the only thing in the entire composition one feels for a moment is alive, but is it, not really, because Kane has squashed it into the top of the image, flattening its' natural growing methods. In other words, what Kane is trying to say is, anything natural in our environment is gradually being pushed "out of the picture" and is being replaced by ugly great bricks and plaster. A lot of thought has obviously gone into the composition of this print and each of the shapes created contrast and compliment each other immensely, which is more than can be said about *"That's What Poetry is this Morning"* 1975 (Fig.21). Here Kane uses a car to symbolise man made and destructive objects in general, again taking up too much space in society's lives. As a statement the image is quite strong, in the way Kane portrays the car, which is, as a large crumpled heap of metal almost resembling a pile of rubbish. In doing this Kane is getting across his feeling of the large area of space this heap of metal takes up in our lives and what a piece of waste material it really is. This is further magnified by the small, seemingly insignificant portrayal of the male figure, who is situated in a tight cramped fashion in the lower half of the image. As an illustration, in so far as technical and compositional values are concerned, it has not got many qualities, if any. There is no specific style being executed, rather a jumble of confused looking marks, and no thought has gone into compositional values. The car is just floating in mid-air, providing too much weight at the top of the image and the overall effect of the illustration is 'bitty' and totally disjointed.

National College of Art and Design  
LIBRARY

Rather a number of Kane's prints, particularly his earlier ones, have a very strong surreal flavour. For example, "*The Hour to Sacrifice Sleep to Science*" 1975 (Fig.22), and also an illustration he did keeping to the theme of urban life and social conditions, "*Dimly I Shall Create the Scab on the Green Curse*" (Fig.23). The way Kane handles the face of the figure in "*Dimly I Shall Create the Scab on the Green Curse*" is very similar to the way in which some of the surrealist artists handled theirs, and in particular those of the sixteenth century Milanese painter, Giuseppe Archimboldo, who was one of the ancestors of surrealism. For example, if one looks at '*Spring*' (Fig.24) and '*Flora*' (Fig.25) by Archimboldo and compares the way in which he handles his figure's facial features, with that of Kane's, the resemblance is immense, with the large rather bulging eyeballs, the large space between the eyes and eyebrows, and the full, almost sculptured looking lips.

Bib. 7

Other prints which were also executed in 1975, were obviously triggered off very much by Kane's awareness of his surroundings, in so far as he lived close to the red light district of Dublin. The surreal flavour continues to be evident in some of these prints. For example in '*The Persephone of Pembroke Road*' (Fig.26). According to the legend, Persephone was the daughter of Demeter and Zeus. Hades, God of the Underworld lured her with a beautiful flower and carried her off to his dark kingdom. Kane's Persephone is depicted as a classic beauty with fine straight nose and firm round breasts, and is seemingly waiting in anticipation for a male to come and carry her off. Her profile appears in

silhouette in the oval mirror, and what would seem to be her profile appears again standing in the narrow doorway behind her left shoulder. The illustration works well in many ways. There is a tactile quality about the print, achieved by extreme variations of textures, which contrast and compliment each other beautifully. The straight controlled panelled ceiling both inside and outside the door gives the illustration depth and contrasts strikingly with the large floating flowers in the wallpaper. This, in turn, compliments the marks which Kane uses to create the figure, which are once again derivative of a style the twentieth century German artist Kirchner used.

A print that has a number of the same qualities as "*Persephone of Pembroke Road*", 1975 (Fig.26) is "*White Sovereign of Dreams*", 1975 (Fig.27). Here again Kane has used the panelled ceiling, but also floor boards in this case, which combined with the open window should create a wonderful sense of depth. Instead, the entire image is brought to an all too sudden halt by the black wall in the background, which seems to almost float detached from its surroundings. As far as the figure is concerned in this illustration, Kane has managed to create something that is nothing short of monstrous. None of the marks he makes mean or represent anything, and as a result he has invented a figure which looks like a deformed creature who is made up of several people.

In "*Promises of the Night*" 1975 (Fig.28) Kane has reversed the situation, somehow turning reality on its head. A naked young woman sits in the driver's seat of a car totally distracted or oblivious to her surroundings. This contrasts with the rather naive, almost squeamish, grin of the hungry customer.

Although parts of this illustration (the inner detail of the car for example) are rendered skillfully, Kane has somehow managed to handle the female figure in a cruel and insensitive manner, so that she looks as though she could almost be made out of the same material as the car roof.

*"The red haired waitress was abducted by a bookseller"* (Fig.29) continues to explore the theme of the predatory male and passive female. The red haired waitress stands naked in a book-lined room and is the victim of a middle class man with carefully groomed hair, striped shirt, patterned tie and dark suit, all serving as the flimsiest veneer. For his real character it made quite obvious in his features; the small piggy eyes, the pursed lips, and the viciously pointed nose. There is a distinctly surreal flavour, once again in the handling of the female's facial features and in the way her hair is depicted. Kane seems to be unsure as to how to attach her arms to the rest of her body, and as a result they appear to be clumsy and dangle in an uncoordinated fashion.

Moving to 1976 and looking at two prints which are untitled, Kane introduces the motif of a hanging beef carcass, sawn neatly in half to reveal its ribs and backbone. The message which emerges from these two prints is very obvious. The woman perceived by the once again predatory male as simply so much meat to be used at will. In the first of these prints (Fig.30), on the right hand side, a naked male butcher siezes a naked female from behind. She seems to offer no more resistance than the carcass does to the butcher. In the second (Fig.31) a female nude either asleep or unconscious, occupies the lower third or so of the composition, and the two standing figures are inspecting her. The female is delivering a kick to the seemingly

unconscious figure, treating her in the same manner as she might have treated a carcass getting in her way.

In these prints Kane's style of execution has once again taken a different route. The marks he makes in the two prints are very fluent and are built up in a free, confident manner. Kane was obviously very much influenced by the German Expressionist Max Beckmann in the way he handled the medium. To illustrate the point if one looks at Beckmann's "*Self Portrait with Bowler*" (Fig.32), the fast fluent marks he achieved are almost identical in parts to those in Kane's prints. Kane's illustrations are very strong, in so far as it is very obvious to see almost immediately what Kane is wanting to say, which could, in this case, be described as overtly sexist, lacking any form of subtlety.

Due to the intensely worked surfaces Kane executed in the formation of the figures, and the extreme lack of any surrounding detail, apart from a few light horizontal strokes for the ground and more vertical strokes in the background, the components of the illustration are thrown boldly into viewpoint. Once again Kane gets straight to the point, and is uninterested in working in background detail that may distract one's eye from that which he is fundamentally concerned.

Kane handles the medium in the same manner in "*Girl with Pigeon*" (Fig.33) 1978. This illustration, together with the previous two, have a delicate symbolist approach, which in a way is very untypical of Kane's character. These three prints are the only ones he produced in this style.

A number of the prints Kane produced of women are very 'edgy', flanked for example with meat carcasses. This was due to a personal failure Kane was going through which obviously resulted in a certain unconscious attitude towards women in general.

*"Others then were probably expressions of unconscious tendencies in my own psycho-sadistic impulses and so on"*

Bib. 7

Kane's mastery of the simple black and white lino-cut soon led him to experiment with colour and then with wood blocks, which he started in 1977. Although he was just starting, he had no inhibitions about using bright and forceful colours. The lino-cut *"Study for the Baptism of Christ in the Dodder"* 1977 (Fig.34) and the woodcut *"Torso"* 1978 (Fig.35), were two of Kane's earliest attempts at printing in colour.

*"The Study for the Baptism of Christ in the Dodder"*, is supposedly a self-portrait, which seems to imply *"I am Christ, so is everyman"*, and simultaneously this aligns itself with the mockery and the absurdity of the title, of using the River Dodder as a place for the Baptism.

The most striking quality about this print is the colour Kane uses, the complementary reds, blues and browns which work extremely well together, and are really what give the image its sense of forcefulness and appeal. The way Kane renders the facial features of 'Christ' is very effective, not in a pleasant way by any means, but in rather a horrific way. The face has the appearance of being badly scarred or even freshly grated in parts.

Henry Sharpe described the '*Torso*' (Fig.35) as an image of brutal insensitivity, with which I am afraid I have to disagree. There is a sensitivity apparent in the way Kane handles the figure that is not visible in many of the other female figures he depicted. He has shown a female of strong features, and a very strong sense of presence. Kane has handled the form confidently, and the small fluent marks he makes are all working in a dynamic way enhancing and creating her from especially around her neck and breast area.

In 1979 Kane produced "*Girl with Dove*" (Fig.36). This is a print that stands out on its own amongst all the other works in which Kane has depicted women. Firstly, it does not have any of the sexual connotations that all his other illustrations of women contain, apart from "*Girl with Pigeon*" 1978 (Fig.33). It is just a straight forward image of a girl holding a dove. This illustration is very strong in a graphical sense, and Kane has just used large flat areas of black and white, revealing a tranquil image which is very different to his usual manner of handling the medium, which is generally in an extremely emotional and quite often aggressive manner. The composition of this illustration works beautifully, with almost an equal balance of white and black being used, creating an extremely powerful image.

Kane also returned to the theme of psychological butchery in 1979. As Kane is not a vegetarian one must assume that he bears no particular grudge against butchers. His butchers ply their trade on a purely metaphorical level. Their purpose is to remind us of the extent to which we have made an

abbatoir of life. Kane has said *"It's not untrue to say that everyday of the week one can read of a horrifying murder case or a political atrocity of some sort, so therefore we are living literally in the middle of the most atrocious butchery and the most appalling inhumanity of man to man and it literally frightens me at times to contemplate this. It is obviously very strongly part of my consciousness, therefore it has to get into the art"*. Bib. 1

Kane has combined this notion, which of course is perfectly true, with his intense bitterness towards women and, once again, has used the imagery of butcher hanging meat carcasses, alongside women in two colour woodcuts, as he did in his earlier black and white versions of 1976 (Fig. 34 & 35). The compositions of both images are very similar, and although little has been added to the psychological content of his earlier black and white versions, Kane's use of complementary colours have given the images an intense forcefulness. In these prints the butcher passes by the female nudes and carcasses with an expression that is torn between repulsion and frustration. Here again the female nudes are depicted in the same way as the carcasses, as showpieces and one is unable to communicate with them. Kane is obviously using the butcher in place of himself, and his own personal failure in communicating with the opposite sex and as a statement once again he boldly and expressively gets across his point.

Kane feels he has always had an ambivalent attitude towards Frances Bacon, in so far as his philosophy, technique and his whole method of handling himself are concerned. Kane's depiction in these two prints of the facial features of the male head, as bold, thick set, and tight-lipped, is very closely related

to some of Bacon's depictions of human features. For example *"Study of Isabel"* (Fig.39), or a *"Self Portrait"* 1972 (Fig.40). Taking into consideration the use of different media, the resemblance in features of Kane and Bacon's heads is quite remarkable. Both of Kane's prints are extremely emotionally and aggressively executed so much so that certain details of the prints, especially in *"Interior with Figures"* (Fig.37) have resulted in a "squelshty" uncontrolled mass of marks giving a general overall unfocused appearance to the print.

During the Winter of 1979-80 Kane went to Zurich. Here he produced five woodcuts. These images resulted from an impending sense of personal crisis. Kane's marriage breakdown was effecting him considerably. *"I was living in almost total isolation in the attic of a villa which was deserted otherwise overlooking the lake of Zurich. It was Wintertime and it was a very fruitful time of personal exploration. The sequence of prints began there"*. This sequence Kane referred to as the Zurich Suite. Four of these prints are concerned with the Biblical characters Judith and Solome. Some of these prints are once again very derivative in style of some of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's prints in the way the medium is handled. For example, if one looks of Kirchners' woodcuts *"Sanatorium Walk"* (fig.41) or *"Stafelalp"* (Fig.42) and compares them with Kane's prints (Figs. 43,44,46 & 47). There is quite a strong resemblance in technique, which is a contrasting assemblance of sharp, spiky, angular marks, obviously achieved with a knife, with other flat chunkier areas rendered with a gauge.

Bib. 1

In "*Study of Salome*" (Fig.43) Salome is depicted as a nude dancer, dancing to the music played by her father's retainers. Kane's portrayal of women became increasingly bitter, and scornfully rendered, due to his acute feeling of sexual alienation and threat from them as a result of his marriage breaking down. Kane's Salome is maliciously made up of sharp and severe features; her extremely pointed nose, small scornful eyes and jutting breasts all combine to create a cold, harsh and insensitive female. Kane handles the medium confidently and is somehow much more in control emotionally of the medium. In some of the previous statements he made, one felt he was so emotionally wrapped up in making a statement or in getting across a point that he almost forgot himself in handling the medium, and little effort was being made to produce technically appealing images. For example, in "*That's What Poetry is this Morning*" (Fig.21) or "*Promises of the Night*" (Fig.28) Kane has produced little more than a made mesh of uncontrolled marks.

Although Kane has handled the composition of "*Study of Salome*" reasonably well there is something very stiff about the whole image which is probably due to the rather short, stumpy arms and hands Kane has given her. In "*Salome with the head of Gottfried Keller*" (Fig.44) Kane continues to handle the medium in the same style. Salome is depicted in an almost identical fashion as in "*Study of Salome*" (Fig.43) and still retains the rather stiff and awkward pose.

Gottfred Keller was a nineteenth century novelist and Town Clerk of Zurich. Kane saw numerous portraits of him and also a large stone head placed near the lakeside. His introduction of the mild mannered Keller was just to reinforce and magnify the sharp, spiteful features of Salome.

The illustration is uncannily similar to "*Head of Ludwig Schames*" (Fig.45) a woodcut by Kirchner. Once again there are similarities not only as far as the characters' facial features are concerned but, also in the whole feeling and composition of the print. One would almost think it was too much of a coincidence, in the way Kane portrayed Keller's beard, the vacant and heavy lidded expression in his eyes, and his nose and also the female in the background having the same pointed and sharp features.

The two prints Kane produced concerning Judith, "*The Preparations of Judith*" (Fig.46) and "*Judith and Holofernes*" (Fig.47) are probably two of the finest achievements of Kane's career to date that were produced in black and white. They stand out on their own, not only because of the way he handled the mediums, which is in a fluent, confident manner, but also because of their compositional values, especially where "*Judith and Holofernes*" (Fig.47) is concerned. The book of Judith recounts the story of a great military campaign waged against the Hebrews by the Assyrian King Nebauchadnezzar. The Assyrian Army, under the generalship of a certain Holofernes, sweeps all in front of it. The Hebrew city of Bethulia is placed under siege. Enter the heroine, a beautiful woman named Judith. She confides to the city of Fathers that she will accomplish a great deed on her people's behalf. Accompanied by her maidservant, she

leaves the city and enters the Assyrian camp. She is welcomed by Holofernes and remains unmolested in the camp for a number of days. Holofernes is determined to bed her, so he invites her to feast in his tent. She accepts willingly, and gives the impression that she will comply with all of the general's desires. Everybody else eventually leaves and Holofernes is left alone with Judith. He lies upon his couch in anticipation, his wits somewhat befuddled by wine. Judith seizes his sword and strikes the head from his body. The head is carried, secreted in a bag, to the city where it is later displayed above the walls. Dismayed at the general's death the Assyrian Army retreats in disarray.

Kane's use of the "*Judith and Holofernes*" theme seemed appropriate at the time to his own plight, as he used it in terms of bitter contest between male and female. Here Kane shows the female as the domineering character who is, or seems to be, in total control of the situation almost to the extent of crushing the male who he has depicted here as being confused and almost suffocated by her force.

Kane's handling of the composition is extremely clever in this illustration. The figures take up almost the entire surface area of the print which could have resulted in a cramped, awkward and suffocating image, but Kane has used the distant view of the trees out the window to release this feeling and give the entire image a wonderful sense of breathing space. This also gives a sense of depth to the illustration, which is further magnified by the large close up of the male's hand, almost giving the impression of forcing itself three dimensionally out of the foreground of the print.

Having looked at these prints which Kane achieved so successfully and then having to move onto the fifth print "*Woman with a cigar*" (Fig. 48) it is somewhat of a disappointment. There is absolutely nothing positive one could say about it. The composition is disastrous, and is crudely boxed off to the extent of being claustrophobic. Kane has handled the medium in a seemingly "couldn't care less" fashion. He has crudely and insensitively hacked the piece of wood, especially where the arm of the character is concerned, resulting in dispersed marks which seem to be just dangling in a lost fashion, not really knowing where they are supposed to be going on doing. The overall result of the print is disjointed and extremely clumsy.

The same abrasive, raw and insensitive approach in handling the medium is also very much apparent in "*Couple*" 1980 (Fig. 49) where again Kane has forgotten himself in what is an obvious frenzy to release something from his mind onto paper. The composition is crude and unimaginative and the marks he makes are lost and confused. Kane rashly jumps from one technique to another with no inbetween stage, especially where the female character is concerned. He moves from the thickly gauged areas of the near side of her face to a dangling mesh of lines that do not adequately relate to her forehead's contour. This is seemingly done in a rash way in order to prevent the two characters from bleeding into one and other.

By 1980 Kane's woodblocks were becoming bigger and bolder. A colour woodcut Kane produced in 1980 "*Lot*" (Fig. 50) was a print relating once again to his own inner complexes and the theme of ill-matched lovers.

Here Kane has depicted the female as being the character in control of the situation. The somewhat older male, a blind slave of his own desires, has innocent and harmless features almost to the extent of being pathetic. Kane has taken a calmer and much more subtle approach in his use of colour than he did in his previous prints. In doing this he is using warmer pastel colours. It is with Kane's use of colour, and the handling of the characters' facial features, which is crude while emanating a real sense of human feeling, that gives this print a strange ironic sort of charm. This, it does really not really deserve, in so far as the rest of the print is handled in a raw, edgy and insensitive manner.

*"Car Park With Two Heads"*, also 1980 (Fig.51) is a print depicting two prostitutes waiting for a customer. This print is a disappointment in more than one way. The composition is regimental, stiff and uninspiring, and almost looks as if Kane carved the characters and the car on separate pieces of wood and then superimposed them onto a common background. The result is a detached image, looking rather like a jigsaw where the pieces do not fit. The sombre green background is antagonistic to the pale blue used in the image, further magnifying this disjointed jigsaw like quality, not only has the image in its entirety got this quality but the way Kane depicts the characters' features is also crude, with patchy areas of colour floating at random in a gory manner.

Inbetween these phases of producing work where one has to really search for the good qualities, both technically and compositionally, Kane has a habit of suddenly reminding one that the ability is there by producing a piece of work like, *"Vignette for J.J."* (Fig.52). This is a striking graphic image he did for the Gallery

Press in 1981. Some of the most charming pieces of work Kane produced were for the Gallery Press. This was probably due to the fact that they were for a particular story or event that he could look at objectively, rather than something he was wrapped up in psychologically or emotionally. As a result he handled the medium accordingly, which was in a calmer, more fluent fashion but still retaining the expressionistic qualities.

The technique Kane uses in "*Vignette*" (Fig.52) is once again very similar to a style practised by E.L.Kirchner and Kane was obviously very much under his influence when doing this illustration. One can see this very clearly if one looks at "*Man with Lapdog at the Cafe*" (Fig.53) a woodcut by Kirchner done in 1911. This technique is one of using flat, clean, contrasting areas of black and white with the use of minimal marks being made to capture detail. Kane's use of this technique in "*Vignette*" has resulted in a clean, direct and extremely strong graphic image.

Kane speaks of the fact that he feels he got woodblock printing onto the same plane of plasticity as his painting. This is obviously very much what he was trying to achieve in two colour prints, "*The Boiler House*" 1981 (Fig.54) and "*Two Heads in a Landscape*", 1982 (Fig.55). The result is not really very convincing. Kane has tried to use the same technique as he does in some of his paintings like "*Self-Portrait*" (Fig.56), a technique of using flat areas of colour to achieve form. This technique, as he has used it in these two images, is somewhat stretching the medium

beyond its limits and has resulted in the prints looking as though they might have been achieved by a computer. It is a technique somewhat alienated from a woodcut.

Both these prints are quite obviously self portraits, only this time Kane has depicted himself as being somewhat of a joker, ridiculing the situation between himself and the person who was once part of his life, with a tea cosy on his head in both cases.

The largest print Kane ever produced was that of "*Car Park*" 1982 (*Fig.57*) which was 5ft. by 7ft. In doing this he divided the surface area of the print into three different sections or images. The depictions of the images are combining the threat which Kane feels from the materialistic world with the psychological torture he himself feels he is going through in relation to the opposite sex.

In the first section of the print the male figure with whom Kane is obviously associating himself is suspended by his feet and is dangling in a cramped fashion vertically down the entire surface of the print. In the second section his hands are tied, and his face holds an agonisingly painful expression. In the third he is being crushed by the lid of a car boot. In the middle section Kane shows the head of a female figure walking past, oblivious and unmoved by her surroundings in a smug and unattached fashion. The placing of this character in the central section, as Kane did, is what unifies or gives the illustration as a whole continuity. It is as though she has just passed the first scene, is at present in the second, on her way to the third. Kane has given this print a

story-board or comic strip format, with the animated, caricatured features of the components. It is quite an achievement to produce a print this large. In doing so Kane feels he has really pushed woodblock to the limit in terms of scale and he feels that he has satisfactorily achieved in print the plasticity and monumentality of painting.

Bib. 7

In "*Girl with Red Hair*" 1983 (Fig.58) Kane switches back to the surreal way in which he depicted his female characters in some of his earlier black and white prints, like "*The Red Haired Waitress was Abducted by a Bookseller*" or "*Dimly I Shall Create the Scab on the Green Curse*" (Fig. 23). Only now Kane is handling the medium in a much more sympathetic manner, resulting in a softer, more sensitive image. The stiffness apparent in the technique he used in these two early prints, as in the styling of the figures' hair in "*Dimly I Shall Create the Scab on the Green Curse*", has been left behind. In "*Girl with Red Hair*" (Fig.58) the figures' hair has a flowing and interlocking movement that moves with the sway and the line of her body in a flowing rhythmic movement, giving the print a graceful and elegant feel about it. There is a dynamic quality about the print in the angle of the pose Kane has given her, with almost all the lines and marks he makes moving in one upward directional sweep. They flow into one and other, giving the image a terrific sense of movement. Also, the colours Kane uses work beautifully together, complimenting each other in a harmonious way.

Kane's most recent works have loosened up considerably. He has become much more confident both in so far as the size of the piece of work is concerned, and also in the number of colours he uses.

In 1986 the Art's Council commissioned twenty artists to do a piece of work for an exhibition called "The School Show", of which Kane was one, *"The obvious answer was to depict something reminiscent of my school days Brother Francis R.I.P. (Fig.58) is a depiction of a particularly vicious Brother, since deceased, who taught me in secondary school"* Kane shows an extremely evil close up image of his old teacher, clenching a cane and snarling gleefully out towards the viewer. The greys, pinks and yellows Kane uses work extremely well together, and he has managed very successfully to emanate the feeling of a teacher with whom everyone, looking back on their school days, can associate with.

Bib. ?

Kane's latest print *"The Room" (Fig.60)* is a sort of dream evocation. The sitting figure is not actually a self portrait, but is just a figure with whom Kane associates himself with. He is looking into a mirror at two people making love, in a nostalgic way, remembering the past. Kane has placed the tea-cosy on the sitting figure's head once again as he did in *"Boiler House" (Fig. 54)* and *"Landscape with Two Heads" (Fig.55)* Kane says the reasons for using the tea cosy as a form of hat in these prints is just in order to bring in a light hearted element into what are otherwise bleakly treated illustrations. He also feels that the pre-renaissance painter Pierro della Franchesca may have influenced him, because he quite often depicted his figures in landscapes with tall and decorative hats.

Bib. ?

Kane sees his prints very much as accomplishments to painting, "At their best they have at least as much punch as painting". He himself feels his techniques in this medium are limited and at times very rudimentary. This is especially true of some of his private works, where Kane is just interested in saying something to the viewer fundamentally, and is not interested in displaying skillfull techniques. For example "That's What Poetry is This Morning" (*Fig.21*) or "Woman with a cigar" (*Fig.48*). But he has proved in other works that the ability to produce technically appealing works is there, and this is especially true of some of his commissioned works, for example the cover illustrations he produced for the Gallery Press.

It is true to say that as far as the subject matter of Kane's private works are concerned, he is somewhat repetitive. The theme of ill-matched lovers raises its' head continuously throughout a number of his prints in some form or another. Kane seems to be much more concerned with improving or reinforcing a particular statement. This he does by, for example, introducing colour as he did with "*Interior with Figures*" 1979 (*Fig.37*) and "*Figures in an Interior*" (*Fig.38*), which are virtually restatements of the theme explored in his two earlier untitled prints of 1976 (*Figs. 30 & 31*). Right up to his very latest print, "*The Room*" (*Fig.60*). Kane is portraying himself as an outsider looking in at a situation, in which he feels due to his inner complexes he is unable to partake or is allienated from.

The main thing that attracts me to Kane's work in general is the strength and urgency apparent throughout. I really feel for someone who is only in his fifteenth

year of producing prints, which is not even his sole occupation, he has really proved himself as being very versatile in his handling of the medium.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.

1. Sharpe, Henry. Michael Kane - His Life and Art.  
Bluett and Company Limited, 1983.
2. Sharpe, Henry. "Making Sense", Ten Painters 1963-1983.  
The Project Arts Centre, 1983
3. Fallon, Peter. Gallery Press Graphics.  
Gallery Press, 1983.
4. Kane, Michael. Structure Magazines.  
1972-1978.
5. Kane, Michael. Realms.  
Gallery Books 1974.
6. Newspaper Articles:  
O'Reilly, Tom: Michael Kane and Vincent Browne  
in Galway.  
Irish Times
7. Several Interviews With Michael Kane.  
January 27 / February 4 / March 3 1987.