

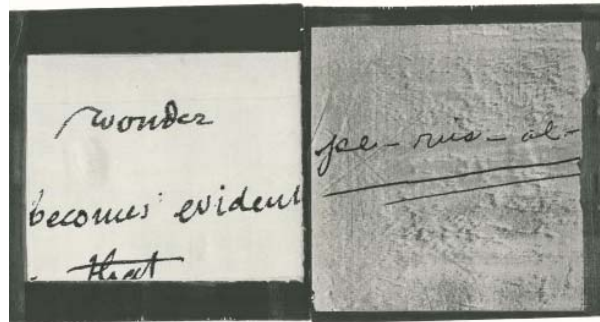
Accomplish That Creative: Hester Stinnett's Transcriptions

John Caperton

While the works in *Transcriptions*, Hester Stinnett's latest series of prints, are both visually dense and technically complex, her hand in the making of the work at first seems to be quite light - they appear to be direct replications of snippets of writing from existing texts. In *Over the Commonplace*, for example, we see what appear to be two sheets of paper joined together. On the left is an enlargement of a quickly scrawled note, the paper worn and creased as if it had been found crumpled at the bottom of a pocket. On the right, beautifully drawn lines mark out text written in the penmanship of a different time. In this series, as in much of her earlier work, Stinnett embraces chance and the use of found material as part of her process, relying on the grain of a piece of wood, or the way ink floats on water, to determine the final markings of a print. Many of the works she has made over the last ten years include written texts that were not made by the artist at all, but by her mother while she was descending into a dementia process. Made only for herself, these notes, with their lists, diagrams, and reminders, show someone struggling to make sense of the world. These notes are seen here as well, but for the first time Stinnett has combined them with another text, the hand-written manuscript of an essay by Joseph Conrad.

Conrad, the Polish-born English novelist, wrote the Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* six months after he completed the manuscript for that unfortunately named short novel. (In fact his American publisher insisted on changing the title of the book because he thought no one would buy a book with the word "nigger" in its title.) Conrad's novella is a swash-buckling tale of the high seas, but Conrad recognized it as a critical achievement in his development as a writer, acting as a bridge from his earlier adventure-based writing, to his mature masterpieces—including *Heart of Darkness*, written the following year. The Preface is Conrad's artist manifesto, and has become one of the best known statements of artist's purpose in modern fiction. In the essay, Conrad compares writing to the other arts and implores writers to aspire to be true to the

"visible universe," to use the "power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel... before all, to make you see." Despite its dated vocabulary and syntax (there are several convoluted sentences discussing plasticity in the arts), the Preface is a powerful read, and Stinnett, who has taught at Tyler School of Art for more than twenty years and mentored scores of young artists struggling to describe their intent as artist, felt an immediate connection between her work as a teacher and the Preface.



And Pity, 22 1/2" x 30", Monoprint

Despite its final polish, Conrad's essay did not flow effortlessly from his hand, and his difficulties with it are quite clear in the original handwritten manuscript. This remarkable autograph is in the collection of Philadelphia's Rosenbach Museum & Library and was shown to Stinnett by their assistant librarian, Greg Giuliano. The document is heavily, almost frantically, edited; many pages are virtually black from wavy lines that cross out entire paragraphs of text. Some passages are piled with as many as four lines of corrections, making it easy to lose the flow of his argument. With its emotional pronouncement of the role of the artist and its beautiful illegibility, Stinnett knew she had found the inspiration for what became this impressive series of prints.

These works were created through a process where

enlargements of the passages are transferred onto inked woodblocks, then printed. In each work, snatches of text from Conrad's Preface are juxtaposed with the words from the notes written by Stinnett's mother. Usually each source is presented on its own panel, with the two panels then butted up side-by-side, or one over the other. And while it is hard to make out any narrative meaning moving from left to right (or top to bottom), we nevertheless try, finding links and rhymes in the texts, and where there is no apparent connection between the texts, we find links visually. In *And Pity*, the panels contrast Conrad's "becomes evident" with her mother's "pe-ru-sal," both suggesting reading or looking. In *Accordingly*, the two panels are linked by their completely marked-out texts. But the marks they made could not be more different and as Stinnett put it, "The touch reveals the thought." Her mother's edits are hasty and unsure, scratchy and impatient, while Conrad's marks are fluid and confident, playful, almost artistic. At the same time, Conrad's writing feels like a continuous stream of thought, running out of his hand effortlessly, even the revisions seem to come easily. With her mother, each word seems to show effort—the script is inelegant and the words purely functional to the effort at hand. In *Over the Commonplace*, there is less struggle in the five stacked lines of Conrad's corrections, than in her confused and manically rewritten S's at the start of the word "stroke."



Sincere Endeavors To, 30" x 22 1/2", Monoprint

Stinnett notes that her mother and Conrad "are similar only to the degree they are different from us... both seem equally removed from the quotidian consciousness we usually inhabit." It is also obvious that the texts themselves were made for very different purposes. Conrad knew that he was writing for the public, while her mother was making personal notes; Stinnett considers them "direct transcriptions

of unguarded thoughts meant for oneself." They speak much more than they were ever meant to.

The simple system of juxtaposing the two texts falls apart in *Discard Ideas*, the climax to the series, where the two sources flow into each other's panels. Conrad's writing extends across the top—we see the words "more profound" and "forgotten" emerging out of a mass of heavy black edits. At the bottom, in her mother's uncertain hand, the word "epergne" (a silver basket often used as a center piece) is written. Stinnett's mother, who owned an antique shop and would have come across obscure fine things with forgotten names like this, made notations suggesting the word's pronunciation—first "apron," which is replaced with another approximation, the more obscure "apern." We can only guess why the simple system that held for the other works has broken down in this one. It suggests that a simple comparison of an artist arriving at genius and a woman losing her mind to confusion, with their obvious connections and heart-breaking differences, is not the story this series is telling us. We have to remember that this is not a correspondence between these two writers; the real agent of this series is neither Conrad nor Stinnett's mother—they are being read here, and rearranged, and made sense of, by us.

If *Discard Ideas* is the climax of the series, then *Sincere Endeavors To* is the conclusion. In this work, the two writers both offer exhortations: Stinnett's mother cryptically encourages ("Come up / Crepe myrtle") while Conrad unsurprisingly commands ("accomplish that creative"). And here we see that the series is not a comparison of confusion and genius, it is about the struggle of transcribing something from the real world into something that is art. This series questions how much an artist can control their material before it is no longer a reflection of what Conrad called the "visible universe." In her work, Stinnett has repeatedly shown that the only way for an artist to accurately bring the real world into their work is to acknowledge that the world is constantly shifting, its meaning slipping away as quickly as it seemed to arrive.

Facsimiles of the Conrad manuscript courtesy of the Rosenbach Museum & Library, with special thanks for their assistance to Bill Adair, Greg Giuliano and Karen Schoenewaldt, PhD.

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