

The Prints of Patrick Caulfield: a Collector's Appreciation

By Fowler W Martin

I think is not uncommon that we do things in life that we did not set out to do. I did not set out to collect Patrick Caulfield's prints, but many years later I find myself with a small collection that is broadly representative of Caulfield's 35 years of activity in this field, a period in which 90 editions of his prints were released.

The 17 prints in this show span almost the entire period – going from simple, highly representational works, such as *Earthenware* (1967) to images of greater complexity, to simple images again, but now slightly more abstract.

They were arranged in Seattle University's Hedreen Gallery in September 2008 not by date, but rather in an attempt to best please the eye. A book of all of Caulfield's prints, arranged in order of completion, was available at the reception desk for inspection as was other material about the artist and his work.

My interest in Caulfield's prints developed – rather indirectly -- as a result of living in Tokyo for five years during the early 1970s. I was a foreign correspondent for a financial news service and tried to live that life, keeping my possessions to a minimum such that, in theory at any rate, they could all fit in a single taxicab. Sky-high rents and tiny apartments made it relatively easy to stick to that goal. Consequently, I did not buy any works of art.

But I did come to appreciate a certain form of Japanese brush painting. These relatively simple, black and white images seemed very restful amid the non-stop intensity of life in a noisy, densely populated city where everyone appeared to be constantly on the move.

In 1975, I relocated to London, ready to buy a flat and settle into a more comfortable style of life. With the housing market depressed as a result of very high interest rates, I soon found one in Chelsea, just off the King's Road and not far from Sloan Square where I caught the Underground to reach my office near Fleet Street, then the center of the British newspaper industry.

The flat was reasonably large with rooms on more than one floor, but it was a little like a tunnel in that the only windows were on the two ends. In between lay what seemed like acres of bare wall space.

The low-cost option would have been museum-type posters. But by then, I felt I was ready for a step up to "real" art – in this case what are known as original prints. These are issued in limited editions and are generally numbered and signed by the artist. I was familiar with such work because I'd long been a fan of prints made by artists such as Andy Warhol and Alexander Calder. But that was before I thought I might purchase one.



The route from my flat to Sloan Square took me past a shop displaying a rather eclectic collection of art objects, surely assembled primarily with interior decoration requirements in mind.

It had an extensive window display and one image that caught my eye was a black and white print of a spider plant, or at least some part of such a plant, the remainder obscured by -- what? Perhaps the top of a table?

It took a couple of months of eying it every day (perhaps I was hoping it would sell and I wouldn't have to take the plunge) before I finally developed the courage to buy it – already framed and ready to hang.

It was then that I discovered it was a silkscreen print done in 1973 by a British artist named Patrick Caulfield. I had never heard of him.

The print was indeed called *Spider Plant* (1973).

After living with the print for a while and finding that I liked it a great deal (it was, indeed, a very restful image promoting a sense of cool serenity after a hectic day in the newsroom), I returned to the shop and asked the owner if he had any more – particularly in black and white. He had none and was unable to suggest where any others, if they existed, might be found.

As a financial journalist in London, one reads “The Financial Times” and some months after I purchased *Spider Plant*, I read a review in the FT of a new edition of Caulfield prints, being published by a gallery called Waddington’s in Cork St., the heart of the London art world. There I met Alan Cristea, who oversaw Waddington’s print operations (and later bought the division, forming Alan Cristea Gallery) and through him, became acquainted with Caulfield’s other work and with the work of a number of contemporary British artists whose prints Waddington’s, and later Alan Cristea Gallery, published or stocked.

Although I didn’t realize it at the time, my life as a collector of prints had begun.

Caulfield, who died in 2005, was a significant member of a loose group of post World War II British artists who re-defined art in England. His work, which consists of paintings as well as prints, resides in the collections of a number of major art institutions.

What is the salient feature of Caulfield’s work with prints?

In my mind these images offer viewers what might be termed a passport to aesthetics – a relatively easy, but at the same time intriguing path to understanding what makes the felicitous arrangement of forms and colors in a defined space satisfying in the sense that one experiences, at a minimum, a sense of pleasure in looking at them, not just once, but repeatedly. That having been accomplished, viewers, through additional consideration, may be able to achieve measures of emotional, spiritual and intellectual satisfaction as well. To one degree or another, I have found all of these over the years.

What follows is my personal appreciation of some of these images – comments that are meant to be provocative as opposed to dispositive.

At first glance, these prints might be seen, in their apparent simplicity, as works of no great consequence.

“Why in the world did you buy that thing? Anyone could make something like that.”

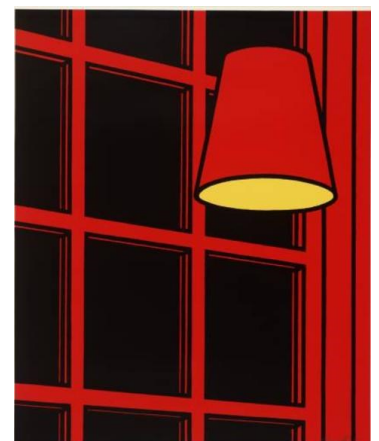
I got a number of comments along those lines years ago as friends first gazed upon what I had purchased.

Time, if nothing else, has shown the error of such views. Caulfield’s bold, distinctive prints easily stand apart. It is very difficult to mistake them for the work of any other artist and hard to find anything similar. We are all familiar with the expression “less is more.” In a similar vein, it may well be more difficult to produce images that are satisfying in their simplicity than impressive in their complexity.

Caulfield’s images of common objects and familiar interior scenes are first and foremost highly approachable: few if any viewers will find themselves mystified by the artist’s subject matter. So one can move immediately to the treatment of what is depicted and begin to think about why it is satisfying and attractive -- or not if you think otherwise.

For the most part, Caulfield utilizes fields of uniform color contained within precisely defined outlines to depict objects or scenes that have been reduced to essential minimums – ideal material for the silk-screen technique. Devoid of unnecessary embellishments, these images depict essences, giving rise to moods, emotions and memories while at the same time satisfying the eye. But for those who want to go further, there is also considerable intellectual content and a sly sense of humor in a number of these works.

Consider, for instance, the four-print sequence *Interior: Morning, Noon, Evening, Night* (1971)



Monet, perhaps most famously, urged us to consider the idea that objects may not be of any particular color: cathedrals and haystacks change color in different light.

Anyone who has spent time gazing at Puget Sound knows this to be true. Yet our brains, having been told what color something is supposed to be, tend to correct for changes in lighting, resulting in us seeing, for instance, a certain garage door as “white” even though it really isn’t much of the time. In photography, this is known as automatic white balance, or making continuous adjustments within the electronics of a camera to compensate for the changing color of light.

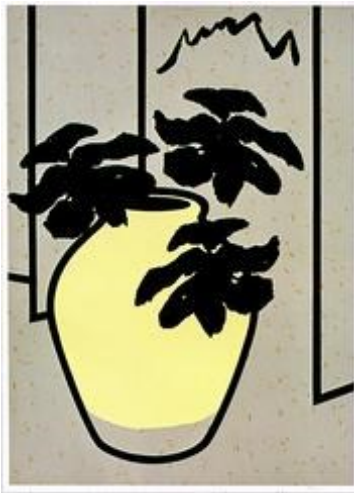
Looking at Caulfield’s *Interior* series, one can see that, within the bounds of flat color fields, the artist has provided what might be considered accurate, conventional depictions of the color (or absence) of light during the four times of day under consideration. But knowing that surfaces such as window frames and lamp shades will change color as the light changes, Caulfield has rather brazenly chosen the color that in his view best complements the color of the light in question. Nature having cracked the door open, the artist rushes through.

But there is also an implication here that the viewer need not be satisfied with Caulfield’s choices. Red, blue and yellow are the colors out of which all others are made – when it comes to painting. The same goes for red, blue and green with respect to electronics – the depiction of color on a TV screen. Note that Caulfield has provided all four and thereby seems to be saying: “here, I’ve given you the tools to make it anything you want. What color combinations please you?”

That invitation to substitute one’s own choices could be considered humorous as well as intellectually stimulating and aesthetically provocative. And, indeed, a rather sly, intellectual form of humor runs through many of these prints.

Consider *Cream Glazed Pot* (1979-80), *Lamp and Pines* (1975), *Still Life Ingredients* (1976) and, perhaps, *Big Sausage* (1978).

Note the flecks on the portion of the image representing the background paper in *Cream Glazed Pot*. A one point, it became fashionable for artists to make their prints on hand-made paper with visible variations in color and texture. Caulfield humorously mocked the trend by simply printing his own “imperfections.”



Likewise, when prints were attacked as a lesser form of art because they hadn’t experienced the “hand of the artist” (the printer intervened), some artists responded by adding distinctive, hand-colored elements to each print in a particular edition. Caulfield’s response was to hand-smear the inks used to depict a silk lampshade – once fashionable, now perhaps evocatively garish -- in *Lamp and Pines*, making each print different, but not obviously so. To turn Andy Warhol on his head, different, but the same.



What about *Still Life Ingredients*, a print like **White Pot** (of the same 1976 series) that represents the phase of greater complexity in Caulfield's work on paper? What one has here are the *ingredients* of a meal comprising as well the *elements* of a still life – objects simultaneously fulfilling two roles. Conflating the title amusingly brings this out.



Sausages and the like have long been part of “serious” still lifes – one thinks of dark, but lustrous work in oil by the old masters hung in museums – dead fowl, cuts of meat, vegetables, perhaps some flowers, all arrayed on a plain wooden table in a dark room, light falling perfectly from a window, or maybe a lamp or candles, on the scene. What is one to make of *Big Sausage*, all alone on a splashy backdrop? Surely amusement as well as an appreciation of the esthetic qualities of ordinary objects is the order of the day.



I am sometimes asked to identify my own favorites among these prints. Before answering, let me point to my wife's favorites: **Brown Jug** (1981-82) and **Dressed Lobster** (1986).



The latter is interesting in that it was issued in an unusually large edition, un-numbered and initially unsigned. It, along with three prints by other artists issued in similar fashion, were put on sale during a related exhibition at London's Tate Gallery for roughly \$10 apiece. This was in response to criticism that print artists were artificially limiting the size of their editions in order to keep prices high. So here was a chance to have a genuine work of art by one of four very well known artists in Britain for next to nothing.

Hardly any of these prints sold. Sometime later, learning that I had purchased one, Alan Cristea asked me to bring it in and Caulfield signed it. Of course it is worth more that way, but it is exactly the same image in either case.

The whole episode raises provocative questions as to just why people buy art.

I agree with my wife that *Brown Jug* is a very satisfying image – one that we have always displayed prominently in our home. A curved line that at one point transitions into a shadow. A couple of fields of color on a blue background. That’s all it takes to evoke the timeless appeal of earthenware – one of mankind’s first and most enduring endeavors.

This image contains purity, sensuality and a certain pregnancy. And while we know exactly what it is, or at least we think we do, close examination shows it isn’t strictly representational. There are puzzling aspects to this depiction – elements that make the image less of what our brain tells us such a jug would *actually* look like, but more pleasing from an aesthetic point of view.

My single personal favorite is *Black and White Café* (1973). That one, even with the yellow ceiling, and *Pipe and Jug* (1973) bring me full circle to my first Caulfield purchase. Cool and serene yet evocative of so many experiences, moods and emotions. Art that is part of one’s life.



A few final comments: the human figure appears in only three of Caulfield’s prints, two of which appeared in the Seattle University show: *The Hermit* (1967) and *Portrait of a Frenchman* (1971). The latter is a thoroughly compelling yet almost cartoon-like image that seems to go exceptionally well with *Black and White Café*. The color of light in the window represents the Pernot or Ricard the man has been drinking – evidently for some time as the rather alarming color of his face suggests. The black beret and the Gaulic nose – he’s French without a doubt; no one need tell us. The cut of the coat and that shirt buttoned up under his chin – clearly a workman. And that hint of a little railing behind the seat, a tiny touch that is so classically French. A simple image yet one absolutely packed with information.



The Hermit one the other hand, is a puzzle. A salient feature Caulfield’s prints is that he could, and likely did, directly observe the subject matter. But could this be true of the hermit? It doesn’t seem likely, particularly given the perspective the artist has chosen. This was the second print Caulfield made – about three years after his first -- and it launched a period of fairly intense output. Yet except for the flat color fields and black outlines, it seems unconnected with everything that followed. Go figure.

Why did I buy *The Hermit*? I liked the colors. I was decorating a playroom/family room mainly in primary colors – as sort of a tribute to Piet Mondrian and the utopian hopes of the de Stijl school. To me, it seemed to fit right in, although I’m not sure anyone else ever agreed.