

## **BROOKLYN RAIL**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

### MICHAEL MAZUR (1935-2009)

by John Yau

The first poetry reading I gave after graduating from Bard College in 1972 was because of Gail Mazur. Although she didn't know my poetry or me, she graciously invited me to give a reading at the Blacksmith House in Cambridge, Mass. It must have been in 1973 or '74, as Gail founded the series in 1973 and ran it for many years. I remember being very anxious about making the most of this opportunity.

Gail had paired me with another young poet, David Cloutier, who various people told me had published poems in national magazines and even had a chapbook out, or was about to have one out. He was Edwin Honig's best student. Some of the poems that David read were based on what he said were Eskimo or shaman songs. For not altogether the right reason, before I read my poems, I said that while I looked like an Eskimo, I wasn't going to read any Eskimo poems.

I still remember Honig lecturing me after the reading about what an insensitive jerk I was, and that it was clear to him that I wasn't going anywhere, and then storming off. Gail, however, never criticized me. She never acted as if I behaved badly, which no doubt I did. It was that generosity that I will always remember, because it helped me to find my own way into this world.

I don't remember when I first met Michael, but I remember hearing about him, most likely from Bill Corbett. I moved to New York from Cambridge in 1975, and I don't think that I met him before then, though I must have. And so I first got to know Michael through his work. This is as it should be.

I began looking at Michael's work in the late 70s, going to his shows at Robert Miller, Barbara Mathes, Joe Fawbush, and finally Mary Ryan. But it wasn't until I started teaching at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown in the summer of 2001 that I got to know him. He would have lunch with me and Eve at least once during the summer at Clem and Ursie's, which is no longer there, and I would also go to his studio. The first time I went, he pointed out a large wood sculpture by Paul Bowen that was on the outside wall of his studio, and told me a little about him. Later, Eve and I went to Paul's studio, and we bought a small drawing. This was who Michael was—generous and caring. In his studio, we would talk about his work, about art, about where he grew up, the artists he knew and those he studied with. I particularly remember Michael talking enthusiastically about particular aspects of the work of Edwin Dickinson and Ralph Blakelock while we were standing in his dining room in Cambridge, surrounded by art.

Michael loved art and artists—and that passion and enthusiasm spread throughout every conversation that we ever had. He looked at lots of art, and wasn't afraid of it, and what others did. There are very few artists who can sit inside themselves and not feel threatened or envious. Among the artists he invited up to Provincetown to make monotypes to help the Fine Arts Work Center raise money were Yvonne Jacquette and Sylvia Plimack-Mangold. In a subsequent project, which was a spin-off of what he started, Mary Heilmann and Rudy Burckhardt did lithographs. Michael and I talked about what a terrific painter Rudy was, and how most people knew his photographs, but not his touching, highly detailed paintings.



Michael Mazur, *Night Rain* (2008). Oil on canvas. 20" x 20". Image courtesy The Estate of Michael Mazur and Mary Ryan Gallery, NYC.



By Jan Gardner  
Globe Correspondent / November 29, 2009

## Mazur's passion



An illustration by Michael Mazur from "I'll Tell What I Saw: Images from Dante's Divine Comedy."

Michael Mazur was a painter and printmaker whose life was entwined with the literary world.

His paintings graced the covers of poetry books by his wife, Gail Mazur, and he contributed works to Agni and Ploughshares literary journals.

Mazur's fascination with the works of Dante Alighieri dated back to his college days when he lived in Dante's native city of Florence and read "The Divine Comedy" in Italian. He considered illustrating Dante's "Inferno" for his senior thesis at Amherst College, but his adviser thought the project too ambitious.

Mazur, who lived in Cambridge and Provincetown, collaborated on a number of Dante projects with poet and translator Robert Pinsky, starting with "Inferno."

Before Mazur died this summer at the age of 73, he had created a fourth series of images inspired by Dante, this one for "I'll Tell What I Saw: Select Translations and Illustrations from 'The Divine Comedy'" published this month by Sarabande.

In the introduction, Pinsky pays tribute to his collaborator: "Entering Dante's creation entirely, not standing outside it, nor in a modern world apart from it, enables Mazur to imagine the poetry's images with a tremendous, radical freshness, stemming from a lifelong passion."

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**Michael Mazur**, Mary Ryan Gallery,  
527 West 26th to Nov 24

This retrospective of multi-dimensional prints presents a rich expression of natural imagery in a variety of mediums that are seamlessly integrated. For example, Pond Edge IV from

2005 utilizes nearly every printmaking technique. The combination of approach serves to create an opulent tapestry that is harmonious, mysterious and moody. Now contrast this with an earlier piece from 1997, Pond Edge II. In this case the

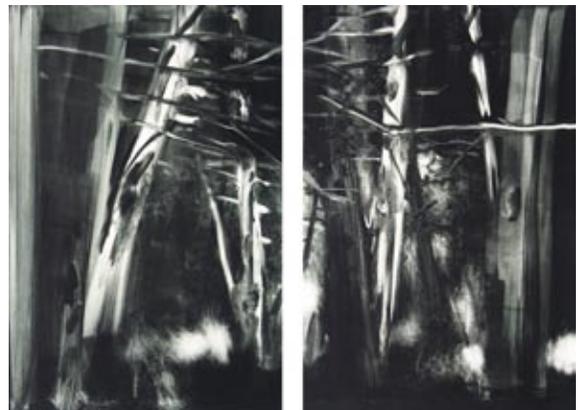


medium is a monotype but both pieces are tightly united by a strong sense of style and the difference of 8 years is irrelevant based on the imagery. In this Mazur remains faithful to style, subject matter and approach in presenting a particular view of nature imbued with a quiet intensity.

The images vary between abstract and figurative imagery but the differences hardly matter. Mazur captures a very real sense of the abstraction that is part of all natural forms. Water in a pond or a collection of trees and plants are all recognizable enough. But more importantly it is the essence of these forms that is expressed. It is this subjective reality as presented in the images that feels more real than the actual thing. Certainly the color, as

blended earth tones and subtle contrasts, contribute to the atmospheric effect. In the end Mazur presents a very well articulated somewhat gothic view of nature that is deeply felt and even sublimely frightening at times.

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## At the Danforth: 'Images from a Locked Ward'

By Chris Bergeron/DAILY NEWS STAFF

GHS

Posted Mar 13, 2011 @ 06:00 PM

Photos

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Contributed

"The Occupant," from "Images from a Locked Ward," by Michael Mazur



world.

Drawing with a lithocrayon, Mazur depicted patients with the bony angularity of anatomical diagrams. Many are partially dressed or naked, sleeping or slumped in postures of resignation and despair.

In some images, like "Bound Hands Swing," Mazur conveys patients' inner torment through their physical contortions. In others, like "The Bench," he suggests their despair and hopelessness through slack or slumping postures.

Some of the most touching images, such as "Companions," depict two figures who seem to be tending to one another but in ways unrecognizable to most "healthy" people.

By displaying 11 of 14 of the prints in the smallish Library Gallery, French has conveyed the claustrophobia of what life must have been like in a locked ward.

FRAMINGHAM —A man twists in his straitjacket like a spastic ballet dancer.

A robed figure runs down a corridor of locked doors.

Knees drawn up, a naked man lies on a wooden bench, his arm flung forward as if swimming.

They are occupants of a "locked ward" in a Northampton mental hospital portrayed by artist Michael Mazur in a series of powerful prints on display at the Danforth Museum of Art.

Mazur made a series of lithographs from memory while volunteering in the mid-1960s as an art therapist at a Northampton hospital.

The current show, "Images from a Locked Ward," represents the first time the Danforth's complete series of 14 lithographs has been exhibited since Mazur donated the whole series to the museum, said executive director Katherine French.

"These are really expressive, really heart-rending images. Michael is peering into their torment," she said. "He's not keeping them at a distance. I found them very loving, not cynical."

French said Mazur came of age artistically in a time that regarded insanity as the "only sane response to an insane society."

Mazur published his "Locked Ward" prints in 1965, a decade after Allen Ginsberg dedicated his groundbreaking poem "Howl" to a friend, Carl Solomon, who'd been institutionalized. Just three years before in 1962, Ken Kesey had published "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," about a group of men driven to insanity by the excesses of an insane

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Mazur's "Images" provides just another reason to see the Danforth's extensive Boston Printmakers 2011 North American Print Biennial.

Considered one of the most important print exhibits in North America, this show, which was juried by acclaimed sculptor and printmaker Jim Dine, offers 149 works by 120 artists. Both exhibits run through May 1.

Mazur, who died in August 2009, became, said French, "very well known and influential in the Boston art scene."

Married to poet Gail Mazur, he nurtured a strong interest in literature and created print images for Robert Pinsky's translation of Dante's "Inferno," Richard Howard's translation of Baudelaire's "Fleurs du Mal" and Robert Alter's translation of "Genesis."

French said over the decades Mazur's style evolved significantly beyond starkness of the "Locked Ward" to a "more painterly" approach.

She said she had grown to know Mazur after working with him on several shows. Several years ago, while visiting him in his studio, he "gifted" the entire "Locked Ward" series to the Danforth.

French said, as she prepared to help organize the Print Biennial and accompanying student print show on the Danforth's second floor, she decided to have the "Locked Ward" series framed and exhibited to memorialize Mazur's contributions and achievements.

She noted Mazur's strong connections to the Boston Expressionist painters the museum has been collecting and showing.

And rather than stereotype his mentally ill subjects, French said Mazur portrayed them with a compassion and willingness to take them on their own terms that was ahead of their time.

"Michael made a really sensitive interpretation of peoples' feelings and emotions," she said. "He engaged them emotionally and said to us, 'We should not be afraid to look directly into their feelings.'"

#### **THE ESSENTIALS:**

WHAT: Michael Mazur, "Images from a Locked Ward"

WHEN: Through May 1

WHERE: Danforth Museum of Art, 123 Union Ave., Framingham

HOURS: Noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday and Saturday

ADMISSION: Adults \$11, seniors \$9, students \$8, free for children under 17 and members

INFO: 508-620-0050, [www.danforthmuseum.org](http://www.danforthmuseum.org)

Read more: <http://www.metrowestdailynews.com/archive/x617854496/At-the-Danforth-Images-from-a-Locked-Ward#ixzz1HjfAIUHy>

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## Arts

### Mazur returns to woodblock prints in Provincetown

By Staff reports  
Thu Jul 02, 2009, 12:07 PM EDT

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PROVINCETOWN - The Albert Merola Gallery is holding an exhibition of recent woodblock prints by Michael Mazur, one of the foremost printmakers working today. There is a reception from 8 to 10 p.m. on Friday, July 3, and the show continues through July 16.

Some of Mazur's earliest prints were wood engravings, so it seems fitting to have a show of these new works in woodcut. The woodcut allows for bold, graphic, layered images as well as incorporating the fine grains of the woodblocks used. One example of this is "Rain on Water," a woodcut that with economical means gives a complex and moody depiction of this natural event. Although most of the prints in this show are straightforward woodcuts, Mazur also has incorporated etching and monoprints with his blocks, resulting in a varied and rich outcome.

Mazur has been instrumental in re-introducing the monotype and monoprint as accepted art forms in their own right. He started the Provincetown Print Project Portfolio, which over five years raised money for the Fine Arts Work Center as well as the Provincetown AIDS Support Group. He has published many editions with master printer Robert Townsend. Among these were his suites of etching and monotypes illustrating Dante's "Inferno." In 2000 he was honored at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston with a major traveling retrospective and catalogue raisonné of his prints.

His work is in most major museum collections. He has had over 150 solo exhibitions. He lives in Cambridge and Provincetown with his wife, the poet Gail Mazur.



"Rain on Water," woodblock print by Michael Mazur.

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