

# Exhibition Reviews



**Black Ice: David Blackwood Prints of Newfoundland.** THE ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO, TORONTO. Mounted at the Art Gallery of Ontario, 5 February–12 June 2011.

Entering the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) from the bustle of Toronto's streets and the clanging of its streetcars, viewers encountered an entirely different world revealed through an exhibition of artworks by David Blackwood. The prints, characterized by deep contrasts of black and white, interrupted at times by blazing reds, contain memories of Newfoundland that are grounded in both history and the master printmaker's sense of place. Standing in the security of the gallery, viewers experienced the severity of the island's landscape, the looming dangers of the sea, and an overwhelming sense of isolation within the images. Throughout his career, Blackwood has documented the outport communities that defined his youth and shaped the culture of the province. *Black Ice: David Blackwood Prints of Newfoundland* was the first retrospective of his work at a major museum and was curated by Katharine Lochnan, the AGO's Senior Curator and the R. Fraser Elliott Curator of Prints and Drawings. Her selection of seventy prints spanning forty years of work, was taken from a larger gift of 242 archival prints given to the AGO by David and Anita Blackwood in 1999. This notable donation established the Toronto institution as a research centre for Blackwood's work. Given this role, the exhibition had a significant educational purpose and included artifacts from the artist's personal collection, documents, records, memorabilia, and a selection of videos.

The exhibition was arranged in seven interconnected galleries on the fourth floor of the AGO's contemporary tower. The main space featured artworks from Blackwood's career; an inner gallery focused on prints depicting Bragg's Island, an outport where the artist grew up. (The village was later moved under Premier Joey Smallwood's resettlement strategy and integrated with the town of Wesleyville on Bonavista Bay.) Artifacts were scattered throughout the primary gallery spaces, such as the nameplate for the *Flora S. Nickerson*, the schooner that Blackwood's forefathers had captained (Figure 1); a scale model of the

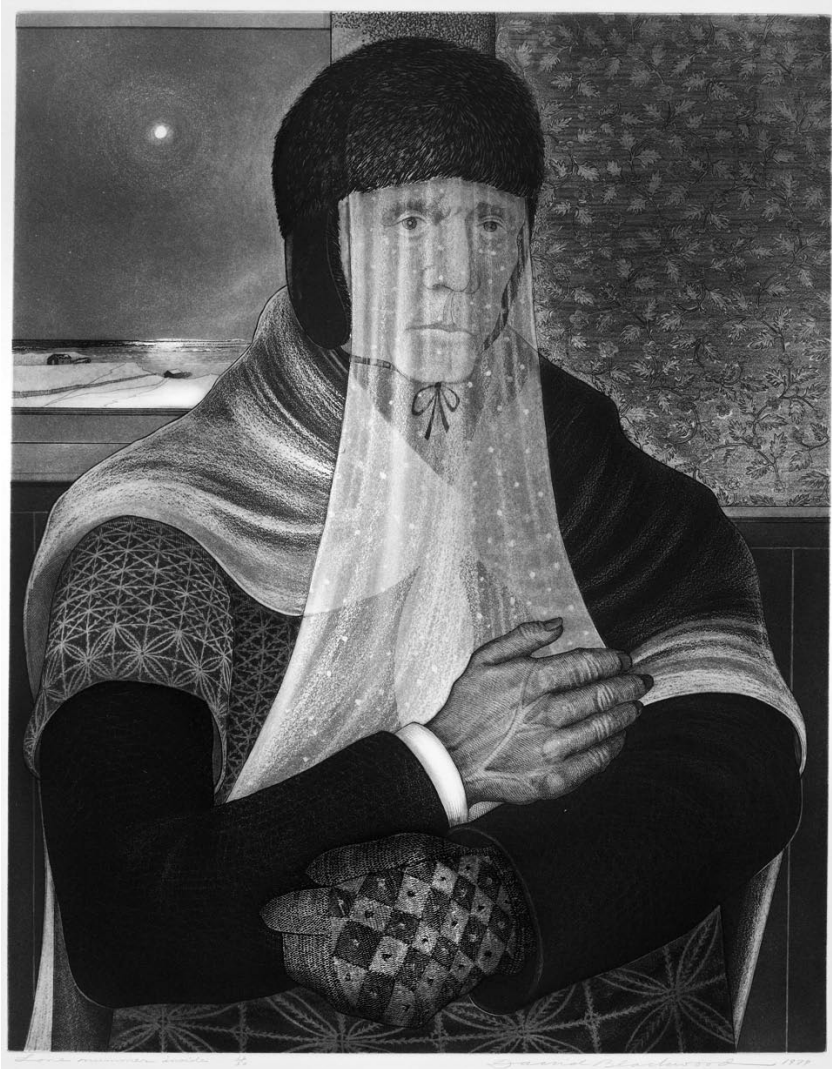
*SS Imogene*, the sinking of which he depicted numerous times; and a gun that hung on the wall above a series of prints. A separate room was reserved to highlight the printmaking process and included several preparatory sketches, a series of working proofs, an artist proof, and a small collection of etching and inking tools alongside the original copper plate. A larger, adjacent gallery contained more artifacts and an assortment of archival records. The assembled documents ranged from personal correspondence and sketchbooks to Ontario College of Art transcripts and newspaper clippings. In a final, darkened room, three videos looped: the National Film Board's Academy Award nominated documentary *Blackwood*, Rex Murphy's interview with the artist for the CBC's "The National," and *David Blackwood in Newfoundland* produced by the AGO. Aside from the obligatory title wall and a few short text panels, minimal information was provided to contextualize the artworks, objects, records, and videos. The curator's voice, then, was primarily articulated through the placement of non-art objects, thereby opening the exhibition to a variety of approaches and interpretations.

The consequence of such an open-ended approach was a disparate exhibition with both obvious and obscure connections between the records, objects, and artworks on display. Blackwood himself is an avid collector, amassing items from his island home that recall its past. It is from his collection that the gun, cod-splitting knife, fisherman's mittens, and a weathered door were borrowed for display. The connections between these objects and the prints were obvious as the artifacts were placed in the immediate vicinity of the artworks in which they are depicted by Blackwood. The door, which Blackwood bought for twenty-five dollars from a Wesleyville resident, was immediately recognizable in a number of prints created over the course of the artist's career. Similarly, the same gloves, oil lamp, and knife present in *For Edgar Glover: The Splitting Table* (1999) stood next to the print in an enclosed pedestal. One of the gloves appears again on the left hand of a mummer in *Lone Mummer Inside* (1979) (Figure 2). The act of collecting is more than a hobby for Blackwood; he recognizes it as a vital task. When the artist was interviewed by Toronto art writer Gary Michael Dault and asked if he himself was really an "archive," Blackwood responded: "Yes. The culture of the Newfoundland I knew is all gone now – except as documentary record." Dault then extended the affirmation: "And so you're constantly working with equal amounts of archival material, and you're harvesting of your own memories."<sup>1</sup> Blackwood's objects serve as more than mere still life models; rather, they become a part of the documentary record, collected by the artist to remember the past, and are ascribed a context by the images into which they are incorporated. Through the artworks, bonds

1 Gary Michael Dault, "Ice and Fire: An Interview with David Blackwood," in *Black Ice: David Blackwood Prints of Newfoundland*, ed. Katharine Lochnan (Vancouver, 2011), p. 42.



**Figure 1:** David Blackwood, *Flora S. Nickerson Down on the Labrador, 1978*. Etching and aquatint on wove paper, 59.5 x 47.5 cm. Credit: Gift of David and Anita Blackwood, Port Hope, Ontario, 1999. ©2011 David Blackwood



**Figure 2:** David Blackwood, *Lone Mummer Inside*, 1979. Etching and aquatint on wove paper, 61.0 x 91.4 cm. Credit: Given by friends in memory of Norman Bruce Walford, chief of administration and corporate secretary, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1981–1989, in appreciation of his devotion to the arts, 1994. ©2011 David Blackwood

are formed between object, memory, and place. Blackwood, then, becomes intentionally involved in an archival act by articulating memories and creating meaning around these non-traditional records.

Less obvious was the connection between the more standard archival records and Blackwood's prints. Enclosed in glass cases around the perimeter of a gallery that also contained a number of artifacts – including the previously-noted door and a pair of tattered flags – the records represented a broad array of activities from the artist's life and work: family letters documenting the purchase and renovation of a Wesleyville home; autobiographical notes describing the artist's first studio; correspondence from the National Gallery of Canada recording the sale of an artwork to the National Gallery of South Australia; a convocation program revealing Blackwood's education; newspaper clippings, fan mail, and gallery labels (with "sold" stickers still affixed) describing his career successes; typed poems suggesting a broad artistic interest; and correspondence highlighting the importance of Newfoundland's heritage and environmental issues marking the artist's activism. Alongside these records stood a small Joey Smallwood campaign button, rock and mineral samples, and a number of sketchbooks simply labelled as "Selected Images from David Blackwood's Sketchbook."

It is by now a common criticism that when archival records are included in art, history, or science exhibitions, archival bonds are broken, context is lost, and not enough information is supplied to reestablish meaning.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this remained true in *Black Ice: David Blackwood Prints of Newfoundland*. Within an exhibition characterized by clear connections between artifacts and artworks, the records felt lost. Lacking context, they were relegated to mere objects of interest used to explore Blackwood's character and animate his personality; the vital purpose they served in Blackwood's process was not made evident. Though the inclusion of a letter from Farley Mowat – written in Mowat's typically flamboyant style – was of great interest, its purpose in the exhibition was suspect. The fact that the two were friends, one-time neighbours, and collaborators, was disclosed only in the exhibition catalogue; the letters that preceded and followed this particularly colourful one were not included in the exhibition itself.<sup>3</sup> The letter stood alone as a pleasant surprise for those viewers who chose to dig into the display of records, but it remained there, out of context, separated from its associated artworks and records. Additionally, archival references were not provided with the records. No accession numbers were included, nor information on the source of the records. This exclusion

2 Rodney G.S. Carter, for example, has noted this criticism in two reviews published in *Archivaria*. See "Exhibition Review: Betty Goodwin: Work Notes," *Archivaria* 71 (Spring 2011), p. 164 and "Exhibition Review: Isabel McLaughlin (1903–2002): Painter, Patron, Philanthropist," *Archivaria* 65 (Spring 2008), pp. 197–98.

3 Katharine Lochnan, "Black Ice: David Blackwood Prints of Newfoundland," in *Black Ice*, pp. 6–9.

further blurred issues of provenance in an already murky environment where objects and artworks were present from both the artist's personal collection and the AGO's collection.

Within the exhibition as a whole, the assembled records appeared as discrete items: where the connections between objects and artworks were clear, the relationships between records and prints remained obscure. Though interesting, viewers were left to wonder: What do these records have to do with the artist's practice? How do these letters, notes, and clippings relate to the artworks around them? Such questions were left largely unanswered within the exhibition space. The labour of interpretation was left to the catalogue, forcing it to work hard to tie the ends together into a cohesive whole. Fortunately, the lavishly illustrated and well-produced publication succeeds entirely. Lochnan's essay effectively frames the exhibition and presents the diverse collection of texts that follow. Dault's interview of Blackwood is accessible and explores the personal details of the artist's past. An essay on the topography and geology of Newfoundland describes the land that is so essential to Blackwood's imagery. Additional texts provide historical and cultural context, including an account of the mummering tradition. Finally, the eloquent prose of Michael Crummey, a novelist and fellow Newfoundlander, trace the subtle intertwining of his and Blackwood's lives and suggests the power of the island on creative work. The cumulative effect of these texts connects the elements that defined Blackwood's career and establishes a broad context for the exhibition, which, more than just objects and records, includes the environment, landscape, history, and traditions of Newfoundland.

Cast as objects of interest within the exhibition, the archival records seem to have been relegated to a lesser status alongside the prints and artifacts. Regardless of this disservice, the merits of the exhibition rested within the strength of the prints and the strategic placement of the objects collected by the artist. The point of archival interest here, it then seems, was less in the inclusion of the records themselves, which was fraught with the usual problems, and more in the artist's own collecting practices and efforts to imbue objects with meaning by creating a context around them. In this ongoing process, Blackwood becomes an active agent in documenting and recording the outpost communities of Newfoundland and specifically of his Wesleyville home. His practice itself is an archival act.

**Robert VanderBerg**  
**Faculty of Information, University of Toronto**