

John Walker: Passing Bells 1998

A portfolio of twenty-seven signed and numbered original John Walker intaglios with preface by Jack Flam. Collaboration on the project at Tyler Graphics Ltd. from June 1996 to October 1998 under the supervision of Kenneth Tyler. Twelve of the twenty-seven copper plates were made at the artist's studio and reworked at the workshop. Fourteen of the plates have

aquatint, two have aquatint and drypoint, and one has aquatint and engraving. Preparation and processing of intaglio plates by Anthony Kirk. Proofing by Yasuyuki Shibata, Kimberley Bursic,

Christopher Creyts, Brian Maxwell, and Kirk. Editioning by Kirk, Shibata, Bursic, and Maxwell.

Each intaglio is in an edition of twenty

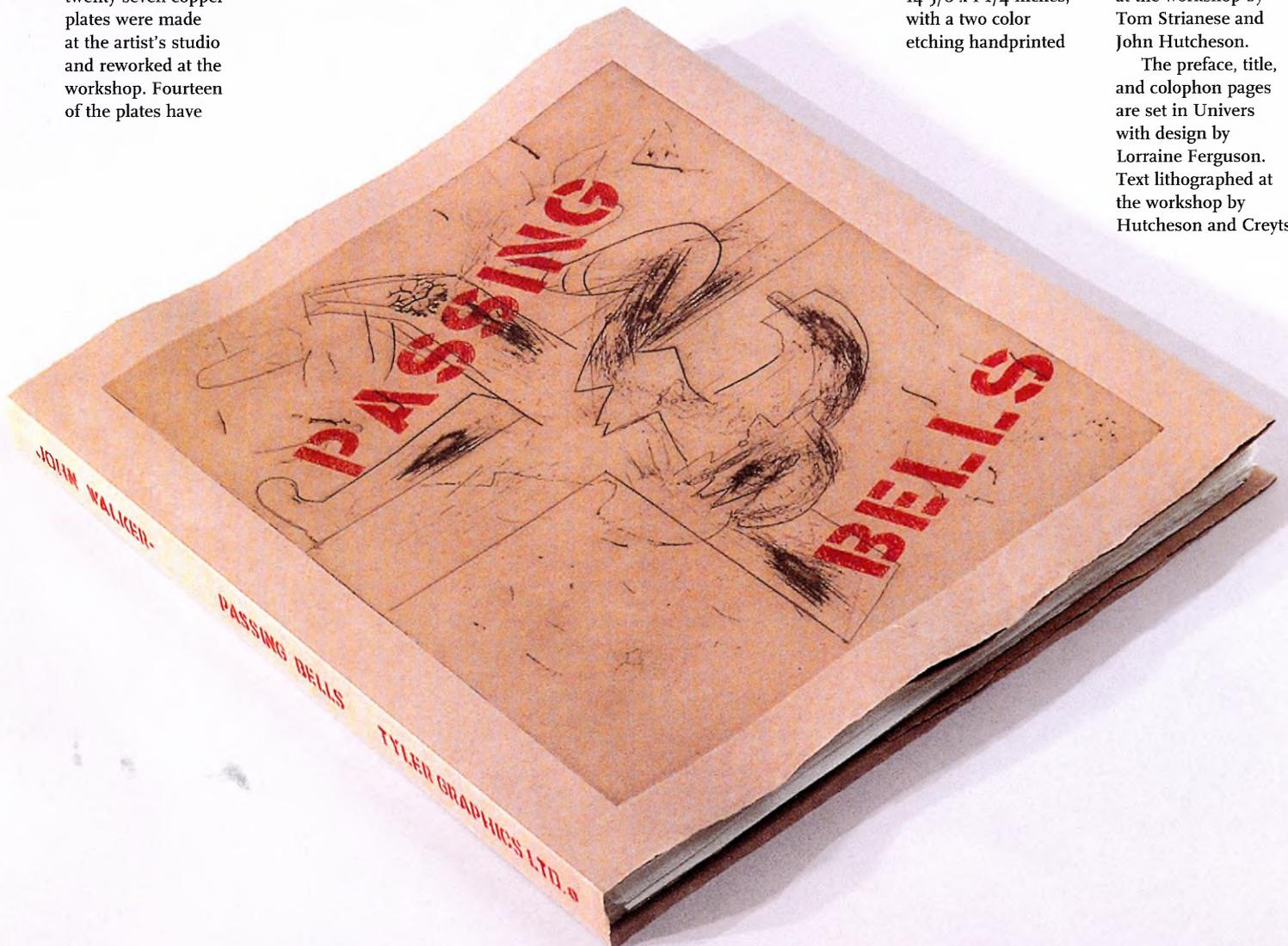
plus eight Artist's Proofs, one Right to Print, one Archive Impression, one TGL Impression, and two Printer's Proofs. Some of the editions have Trial Proofs and State Proofs which are listed in the individual

print documentation sheets available from the workshop on request. All prints are signed and numbered by the artist, with workshop chop mark lower right margin and print number on verso.

The intaglios are encased in a tan paper folio measuring 19 x 14 5/8 x 1 1/4 inches, with a two color etching handprinted

on the front of the folio. Preparation and processing of the two copper plates by Kirk, proofing and editioning printing by Kirk and Bursic. Edition papers measure 18 1/4 x 14 1/4 inches. The white edition papers and colored folio papers were handmade at the workshop by Tom Strianese and John Hutcheson.

The preface, title, and colophon pages are set in Univers with design by Lorraine Ferguson. Text lithographed at the workshop by Hutcheson and Creyts.



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John Walker: Passing Bells 1998

Jack Flam

John Walker is not only one of the best painters of his generation but also one of the most independent and unpredictable. During the 1960s, he first came to prominence as an abstract painter working in a flat, planar style. This was a time when for many people flatness and pure abstraction were synonymous with artistic seriousness. So when Walker began to introduce illusionistic and even figurative elements into his work, he was seen as something of an apostate. But within a few years, partly because of Walker's willingness to break the rules, the rules themselves had changed and abstract painting was revitalized by a new strain of exactly the kind of "impurity" that Walker had pioneered.

The elements of figuration in Walker's paintings of the late 1970s and early 1980s were often charged with art-historical references, most notably in a recurrent, hourglass-like form that was derived from Goya's standing, pinch-waisted portrait of the Duchess of Alba. Walker's paintings also made references to famously ambiguous works such as Manet's *The Balcony* and *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*; and in doing so they confronted the touchy question of how modern painting had challenged, at times even demolished, the very idea of cogent narrative subjects.

Having reached an extremely fine balance between abstract and quasi-figurative elements in these paintings, Walker could have stopped there and simply rung

variations on a pictorial format that was widely admired for its combination of emotional intensity and pictorial equipoise. But instead he pushed his commitment to subject matter further. During the mid-1980s, inspired by Oceanic art, Walker's paintings became increasingly descriptive. Indirect references to real things gave way to fairly straightforward representations of them—including skulls and other symbolically weighted objects—rendered in an emotionally charged, expressionistic manner. During this time, as he worked with motifs that were surrounded with an aura of taboo, Walker also seemed to raise the emotional stakes of his painting. The unexpected combination of elements had the exhilarating effect of intensifying both the subject matter and the pictorial means of his work. The things he painted throbbed and reverberated against the energized forms of their surroundings.

During the past few years Walker has done something even riskier and more unexpected. He has dared to deal with literary and historical subjects that are inherently fraught with powerful emotion. And he has done so with such wholeness and such intensity as to make the longstanding dichotomy between abstraction and figuration seem surprisingly irrelevant.

* * *

The etchings in *Passing Bells* take their title from the opening line of

Wilfred Owen's poem, "Anthem for Doomed Youth," and their subject is the carnage of the First World War: "What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?"

These are unsettling, at times harrowing images. Their violence lies not only in their themes of mutilation, shell shock, and mental anguish, but also in the way they are rendered. In them, the expressive means of etching and aquatint are exploited with electrifying intensity. This is evident in the rawness of the drawn lines, which at times are like exposed nerves, and in the way the corrosive action of the acid on the plate is made to eat away at our sensibilities just as they did the metal. Seen one at a time, these are powerful and moving works. Seen together in sequence, they become overwhelming.

The emotional rawness of these etchings is conveyed by powerfully drawn imagery, as in the way the soldier's torn body in Image # 9 seems to melt into the blasted tree stump. It is also communicated by dynamic interactions between figures and backgrounds. In Image # 7, for example, vaporous pitted tones fill the air around the ghostly cry of the soldier on the left and seep across the form of his companion. The corrosive texture that hovers around the figures is like a mist of grief, an expression of emotion so palpable that it seems to coalesce out of the surrounding emptiness and assume tangible form. Set against this, the curved lines that punctuate the space around the

figures become a rhythmic accompaniment to their dance of death.

These are etchings, then, with powerful subjects that are done full justice by equally powerful renderings. The maimed and helpless soldier in Image # 6, for example, is heartrending not only because of the moving way that his stumpy body is drawn, but also because of the way the background is scored with staccato lines and sharp accents of carefully controlled foul bite. These abstract markings have their own poetry and create their own system of rhymes, echoing as they do the pleats of the soldier's chest pockets and the legs of the bench on which the legless man sits.

Walker has said that he was inspired to create these images by his memory of his father's recollections of the First World War. In that war, entire neighborhoods were sent into battle together, so terrible losses were often concentrated locally. Walker's own family, for example, lost eleven men just at the Battle of the Somme. The artist's father, John Henry Walker, saw action in two of the war's most brutal engagements: the Battle of the Somme, on the first day of July 1916, and at Passchendaele in the summer of 1917. Wounded at the Somme, his father was sent back to England to recover. While he was there, his mother dressed her wounded son in his uniform and settled him in a chair in front of their house, where the neighbors could come and ask him about their loved ones. He remembered for the rest of his life the turbulent emotions he experi-

enced as he sat in familiar surroundings, back in the peace and tranquility of home, trying to make sense of what he had lived through and at the same time to offer some consolation to the loved ones of his comrades in arms. His situation calls to mind Marlow's encounter with Kurtz's fiancé at the end of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, when she asks him about her beloved's last words and he does not have the heart to repeat the full reality of what both men had experienced as they struggled with unimaginable suffering in a distant place: "The horror! the horror!"

The iconography of *Passing Bells* is deeply personal. Walker has said, for example, that the figure in uniform with the sheep's-skull head is specifically meant to evoke his father. The image of the sheep's skull, in fact, runs through the whole suite of etchings and takes on several different meanings. Some relate specifically to war imagery, as in Image #8, where the skull reminds us of a gas-mask; or in Image # 23, where it is set in contrast to another recurrent image: that of the wounded soldier whose head is covered in bandages, making him at once pathetic and grotesque. Other images of the sheep's skull are loaded with religious and historical connotations, ranging from the sacrificial lambs of the Old Testament to the image of Christ, as well as to the flock He shepherds. The sacrificial animal reminds us also of one of the most harrowing of all of Wilfred Owen's war poems, which retells the story of

Abraham and Isaac, but in which the father does not stay his hand:

*But the old man would not so,
and slew his son,—and half the
seed of Europe, one by one.*

And of course, within the specific history of the First World War, one of the most haunting of all the stories that have come down to us is that of soldiers wandering through villages on the eastern front bleating like sheep in helpless protest at the way they were being led to slaughter.

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The etchings in this portfolio raise a number of questions about what works of high art can and ought to do. The modernist tradition in which John Walker developed and continues to work has been marked throughout most of its history by a progressive annihilation of subject matter. Given the bloody history of our century, there is a bitter irony behind this flight from the subject. In fact, among the visual images that have been generated by our culture during the past hundred years, there has been a distinct split between high art and mass imagery. While the former has mostly avoided the direct depiction of deeply emotional themes of violence and suffering, the latter has been positively obsessed by them.

In the *Passing Bells* etchings, John Walker offers contemporary art an implicit prod and rebuke, and reclaims for high art an unembarrassed depth of emotion. By starting from an historical experience rather

than from a body of previous pictures, Walker seems to be turning his own head, and forcing us to turn ours, to a different reality—almost like one of the fiercely contorted images in the etchings. For in these etchings he has not only reintroduced a deeply committed subject matter, but he has done so with a vengeance. And in so doing, he has crossed over a line that artists of his generation were not supposed to cross. He has confronted the raw subject matter of journalists, photojournalists, and historians and transformed it into something that retains all of the immediacy of those media that are rooted in the flow of daily events, while at the same time attaining the transcendent nobility of high art. Part of what is so extraordinary about these images is the degree to which they give themselves over to strong emotion without becoming in any way sentimental. And part of what is so pictorially daring about these images is the degree to which they operate in an arena that we associate with Goya and Picasso, to whom they make numerous allusions, while at the same time remaining independent and original works.

I find myself hesitating here to invoke the names of the Spanish masters, not because these images are not fully worthy of them, but because it has become such a cliché in recent critical writing to make reckless and irrelevant references to past masters in trying to establish the bona fides of a contemporary artist. And yet, it is virtually impossible to look at these etchings without

thinking of Goya and Picasso, not only because of the medium and the subject matter, but because in these works John Walker has miraculously managed to convey an authenticity of emotional response and an engagement with the human tragedy that have no parallel in contemporary art. These etchings seem, moreover, to occupy a kind of forbidden territory, in two senses. They engage an aspect of human experience that high art is supposed to stay away from unless it be polemical; and they occupy terrain that after Picasso is supposed to have become a kind of art-historical wasteland into which no artist can wander without being blown to bits. And yet here is John Walker, smack in the middle of it, positively unpolemical and absolutely whole.

* * *

Walker has said that these etchings are meant to express his love for his father. I do not doubt this, but I daresay they are also meant, whether consciously or not, to express his sense of love and solidarity with his artistic fathers, including Goya, Picasso, and Otto Dix—who are among the few modern artists who have done justice to the horrors of war.

Similarly, in his choice of World War I as his subject, Walker is dealing both with personal issues and much broader ones. For the First World War is the epic war of our century, one of its defining events. It was technologically sophisticated enough

for the full horror that could be created by human ingenuity to make itself felt; but it was not yet so high-tech that the gruelling, grinding physical suffering of the individual soldier could easily be masked or dispersed or muted. It was also, perhaps, the last war that was fought primarily between soldiers, and whose casualties were mostly military—so that the men who fought and died on the battlefield could be seen as epitomizing or symbolizing human suffering generally. In later wars the civilian population often suffered at least as much as the military, and the symbolic significance of the soldier did not have quite the same resonance. In choosing World War I, Walker is not only addressing a war experience with which he had contact through his own family, but also one that has had a determining effect on our whole century. It is, I believe, no mere coincidence that Benjamin Britten's great War Requiem also uses Wilfred Owen's poetry and evokes the First World War, even though it was written as a dirge for the Second.

But something deeper and more universal is also involved here. For what John Walker has accomplished in these etchings is not limited only to the First World War, or just to the horrors of war in general. In these images of deformation, mutilation, and despair we also recognize human suffering in a larger sense. And in the tenderness with which these images have been rendered, we also recognize the odd link that such suffering has with love. For these are

images, ultimately, that are filled with love—in all its mute and helpless tenderness and all its fury.

The theme is first stated overtly in Image # 3, where the wounded soldier hungrily contemplates the apparition of the woman, who appears to him under the sign of the Heart. But love here goes beyond sexual longing. It runs throughout the entire suite, within the imagery itself and in the empathy that we ourselves feel for the suffering of the soldiers who are depicted. We sense it in Image # 14, in the solitary figure who stands watch over the faceless dead, and in the tender regard of the men who struggle to carry wounded comrades on their shoulders, as in Images # 20 and # 21. These images, which allude to Renaissance depictions of Aeneas carrying his helpless father from the smoldering ruins of Troy, evoke the succor given by sons to fathers, and by fathers to sons.

We sense this love, too, in Image # 23, where the two wounded soldiers are set side by side in their shared misery, the one monstrously stoic and the other yawping uncontrollably. Although they seem able to offer each other only the most bitter kind of solace—and although, despite all our own best instincts of sympathy and commiseration, they nonetheless appear grotesque in our eyes—somehow we see them as joined in a love as deep as the despair that has brought it forth.

There is something both forlorn and hopeful in these images. And this mixture of opposing emotions, I believe, is somehow related to the

way in which we understand even the deepest love always to be surrounded ultimately by silence; and conversely, the way that we also understand that silence can carry its own kind of eloquence. The force of these etchings makes us realize that it is in the recognition of the linkages between our silences—and in the images that can be forged from them—that we may find the closest thing to consolation that this life can offer us. Not for nothing does the image of the artist himself finally appear in the last print in the sequence. He is drawn in bold black line, brush in hand, surrounded by shadows and specters. His head is in the form of a sheep's skull, like that of his father before him. And like his father before him, his solitude is inhabited by ghosts. Working in silence, drawing lines against the darkness, he also conjures an image of us, joined with him in suffering and hope—our bodies also bearing sheep's skulls, our solitude also inhabited by ghosts.

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These powerful etchings remind us, among other things, that not all wars are fought on battlefields.



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