



60 YEARS OF  
NORTH AMERICAN  
PRINTS

1947 – 2007

DAVID ACTON

THE BOSTON PRINTMAKERS



## DEBORAH CORNELL

1947–

## BLOOD AND WATER: TRANSPOSITION, 1997

Aquatint on white Rives BFK wove paper, 6/9

35.4 x 45.0 cm (plate)

38.1 x 45.7 cm (sheet)

Collection of the artist

As co-founder and director of the Experimental Etching Studio, Deborah Cornell became a potent force in Boston printmaking in the 1970s. She headed a professional shop that provided an invigorating momentum for the city's graphic arts; its influence reverberated through generations of artists and students. Her teaching activities, and work in other media—particularly drawing, installation and computer art—defines an artist of impressive versatility. Deborah Anne Darling was born on March 31, 1947, in Natick, Massachusetts, where her mother was a nurse and her father worked for the railroad.<sup>1</sup> Darling attended the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), where Lawrence Heyman introduced her to printmaking. She was entranced by the amber glow of the grounded etching plate and its glinting metallic lines, later producing images of inky richness.

In 1967 Darling married the musician and composer Richard Cornell.<sup>2</sup> They moved to Boston in 1969, following her graduation from RISD with a BFA in painting. In 1970, Cornell and Jeanette Silverio rented a studio at 27–29 Stanhope Street, and founded the Experimental Etching Studio (EES).<sup>3</sup> Cornell directed the EES through decades of rapid achievement and change. During this time she became acquainted with a number of print processes. Her prints of the 1970s combined media in an exploratory way. They represented semiabstract visions inspired by landscape and the natural world, encountered on her travels in the Southwest and Maine. The first solo exhibition of Cornell's prints and drawings was presented by Jess-Patterson Gallery in Providence, Rhode Island in 1980.

During the 1980s, Cornell's work used geological imagery, combining different printmaking media layered, like the sedimentary strata of the earth. The artist merged topographical imagery with the visual language of cartography, inventing personal symbols that suggest map-making systems. Soon the work broke away from canvas and sheet, as Cornell began casting hydrocal reliefs onto wooden panels, then treating their dimensional surfaces with painted and printed imagery. In 1987, she was awarded a fellowship at the Bunting Institute, now the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard; this multidisciplinary project with scientists, writers, and other researchers affected her deeply. In 1991, an Earthwatch Artist's Fellowship enabled her to journey to Australia. She was captivated by the magnificent geography of the continent, and by its ancient Aboriginal culture. The experience ignited a new interest in archaeology. With characteristic enthusiasm, Cornell taught herself the protocols of archeological illustration. With the support of a grant from the Deya Foundation, she joined an archaeological expedition to Majorca, Spain, in 1993. There, she assisted in the excavation and documentation of a Celtic temple site from the first millennium BCE. Cornell's constructions, paintings and prints reflect not only the experiences of archaeological methodology and excavation, but also her contemplation of time and cultural evolution. In the mid-1990s Cornell was awarded an MFA degree in multi-media from Vermont College. In 1996 she was artist in residence at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, and in 1997 she became chair of the Printmaking Department of Boston University. Her insatiable curiosity and its exciting rewards made her a remarkable teacher.

*Transposition* is one of four prints from Cornell's *Blood and Water* suite, which compares human perception of the natural world with its objective reality. The series reflects her experiments with biological imagery, on a technical level parallel to her use of the academic languages of geography, cartography, and archeology. Each intaglio is printed in varied hues of red and blue, providing a reference to the chemical compounds that make human life possible. In *Transposition* one square and three rectangular plates are printed in a range of blue-

gray and rusty brown, as a compound image on one sheet of paper. The component images provide dramatic shifts of scale and time. Each was initially observed and recorded photographically with a specific kind of optical lens. The central importance of the lens in human perception and understanding is a leitmotif of the *Blood and Water* series. Since a photograph records a brief moment, Cornell purposely degraded her images to call up the passage of time and the erosion caused by natural forces.

The large vertical plate on the left in *Transposition* presents a cluster of diatoms, the common phytoplankton that inhabit waters the world over. Visible to us only through microscopic lenses, diatoms are ubiquitous and ancient, for fossil evidence reveals diatoms from the early Jurassic Period. To the right of these silica forms, a square plate printed in black carries a satellite image of the ocean as seen from space. The digital image was captured telescopically from a spacecraft some 240 miles above the earth, and relayed electronically with such accuracy that waves on the ocean surface are discernible. These two photographic images contrast the infinitesimal and the colossal natural forms on earth.

In the lower right quadrant of *Transposition*, two smaller plates in similar hues represent analogous forms of ancient lineage, one natural and one manmade. In the corner is the image of a fossilized bat. With wings and legs folded against its body, and every tail vertebra legible, its elegant form evokes the inexorable processes of evolution. Head to head with the creature is an artifact of the ancient Peruvian Moche culture, lying on its side. This large gold relief represents a deity with human head and the carapace, legs, and claws of a crab, recovered from the tomb of a shamanic priest in a pyramid at Sipán, on the northern coast of Peru.<sup>4</sup> Cornell purposely corrupted its photographic image, increasing its contrast to create shadow reminiscent of the stippled modeling of traditional archaeological drawing. In the bat and the crab-god, she chose two objects that were buried for centuries. Once revealed to their scholarly excavators, each revealed volumes of long-hidden knowledge.

Indeed, all four images in *Transposition* echo each other. The superimposed diatom cells visually paraphrase the segmented legs of the crab god, or the tiny bones that make up the bat's limbs. Similarly the parallel action of the ocean waves, seen from a distance as they react to wind, weather, and undersea topography, create repeated parallel curves. Cornell created an essay on transposed form, from the microscopic to the monumental, from the geological to the biological, with its echoes translated as myth and cosmology. Thus she provokes the viewer to consider the interconnectedness of earth, and its inconceivable limits in terms of time, scale, and fact.

Cornell prepared the plates for *Transposition* as aquatints with xerographic transfer. Using a roller, she applied a film of ink to the dampened photocopy which had been previously treated with gum arabic. To transfer each image she ran it through the press against a copper plate prepared with rosin. When the plate was exposed to etching acid, the ink acted as a weak stopout. It disintegrated gradually in the mordant, producing the worn look that the artist desired. Cornell printed her *Blood and Water* series of intaglios at EES Arts in Boston. *Transposition* was included in the exhibition *Photolmage: Printmaking 60s to 90s* at the Museum of Fine Arts in 1998.<sup>5</sup> When the print was included in the Boston Printmakers Forty-Seventh North American Exhibition in the following year, *Transposition* won a materials award.

In 1999 the artist joined the executive board of the Boston Printmakers.<sup>6</sup> At about that time Deborah and Richard Cornell began to collaborate in multimedia works incorporating soundworks with large-scale digital prints, paintings, and sculpture, and eventually with computer-generated virtual reality.<sup>7</sup> The language of printmaking informs these works which comprise layers of imagery and technology. In 2002 Cornell resigned from the directorship of EES Arts to devote herself to work in multimedia and virtual reality and to teaching. In recent years Cornell's work has focused on digital prints and has incorporated the technologies of scientific analysis with sociology and the relationship of cultures with the natural environment.



