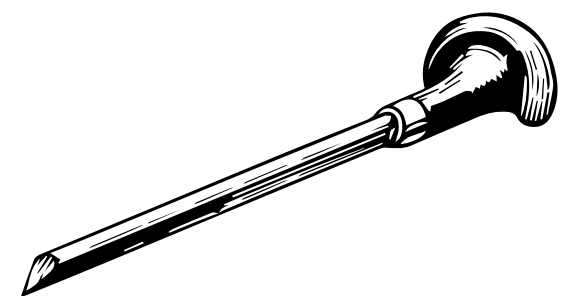




KWABENA

pressing matters

CELEBRATING MODERN PRINTMAKING



ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

Ben Goodman



THIS ARTICLE WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN ISSUE 1 (MAY 2017), WHICH IS NOW OUT OF PRINT.
THE DIGITAL VERSION (PDF) OF ISSUE 1 IS AVAILABLE FROM WWW.PRESSINGMATTERSMAG.COM/BUY-MAG

A mix of free-flowing creativity and good old-fashioned obsession give *Ben Goodman's* engravings a sense of meticulous precision warmed by

Something Deeply Human



Words by Mike White
Photos by Kitty Wheeler Shaw

Ben Goodman's school was a small one in a low-income, working class area of Coventry, "a place where printmaking wasn't high on the agenda." It wasn't until he moved to Bristol to enrol on an Art Foundation course that he found himself "exposed to the wonderful world of printmaking."

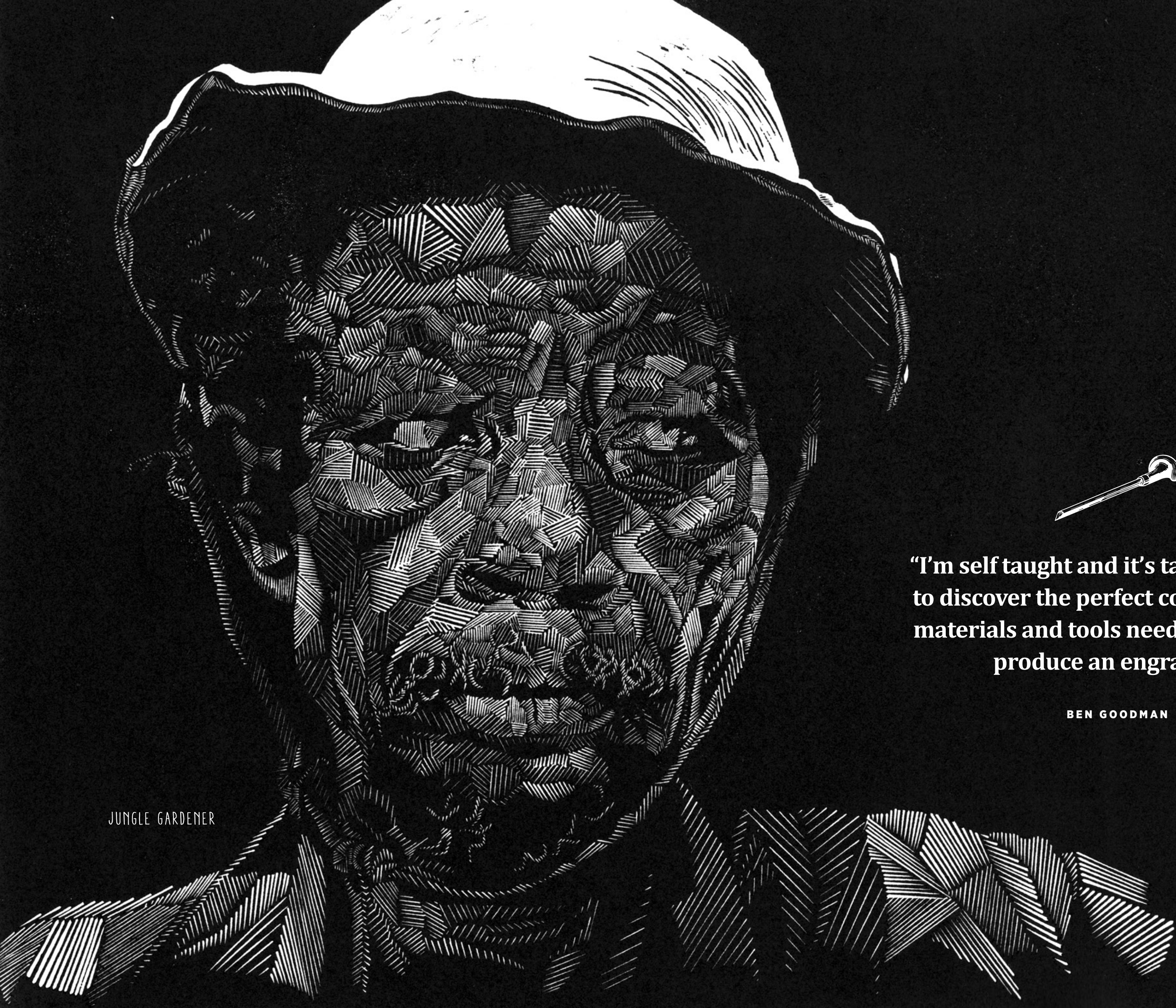
He enjoyed workshops in several techniques, but it was etching (under the expert supervision of Dave Sully) that first drew him in. Then three years later, in 2009, Ben's dad took him to an exhibition of the work of the pioneering late 18th century wood engraver Thomas Bewick at Birmingham's Ikon Gallery. His dad was a strong influence in his growing art awareness – dragging him along, often reluctantly, to dozens of exhibitions. The Bewick show was just another of these, but its effect was immediate. "Instantly I was taken by the detail of his work and the intrigue created by such miniature worlds." There and then, Ben resolved to get his own set of tools and give it a go. Seven years later, "after a huge amount of trial-and-error" he became a member of The Society of Wood Engravers, and feels he's "at the beginning of a lifetime of perfecting my approach to engraving."

Although Thomas Bewick was the catalyst for Ben's first move into engraving, he says Bewick's artistic style never particularly inspired him - "it's very much of its time". Stylistically, he's more drawn to contemporary Chinese artists such as Chen Xuhai. "I also love the power of Käthe Kollwitz's work" he says, "and the prints of Christopher Nevinson and Sydney Lee have been a constant inspiration, particularly their use of chiaroscuro

and perspective to create dramatic effect." More recently, he's been thinking about William Blake, focussing not on his work ("which isn't my thing") but on the theories informing the processes Blake used. Driven by this, Ben's most recent work uses the reduction printing technique to create detailed, layered engravings which explore his ideas around ageing, life and memory – more on that over the page.

Ben's engraving technique is extremely precise, suggesting meticulous planning from the outset. But only the outline of the image and its key shapes are mapped out in advance - everything else is improvised. "I've tried planning the engravings in more detail, but it spoils the surprise and ultimately takes the fun out of the engraving stage." So his approach is now much more ad hoc, experimenting as he goes along, working into the block in an open-minded, organic way – a process he feels is more akin to painting than engraving. "Even with the engraving 'Margit', that has 11 layers, I just worked it out as I went and only stopped when I thought it was done."

One place where Ben's meticulousness is in full evidence is his devotion to his tools. "Every item needs caring for," he says. The tips of the engraving tools have to be protected or they won't cut properly, if at all. Rollers need storing safely because any surface damage means they'll ink up badly. "Wood blocks are very picky about their living conditions - they're obviously susceptible to woodworm and damp, and will split if kept in a room with central heating. So my studio without any heating works a treat, despite being able to see my breath for half the year!"



“I’m self taught and it’s taken me years to discover the perfect combination of materials and tools needed to reliably produce an engraving.”

BEN GOODMAN

JUNGLE GARDENER



“One of the nicest things with engraving is its portability. All you need is few tools and a spoon, so you can take your kit anywhere in the world.”

BEN GOODMAN



Reflecting on the relationship between types of wood and different paper stocks, Ben says that some printing processes “are very democratic” and don’t need specific materials in order to work effectively. “Woodcut is a great example of a printing process that is accessible to all - easily produced with cheap tools on any old piece of wood with any ink or paper.” But engraving is “a very pedantic technique. I’m self taught and it’s taken me years to discover the perfect combination of materials and tools needed to reliably produce an engraving.”

The wood has to be extremely hard and polished to an unnaturally high standard. The paper has to be thin, strong and smooth, and the ink needs to have a very high viscosity. Every printer is different, he says, but his own perfect combination is as follows:

Engraving surface: *boxwood, maplewood or lemonwood*

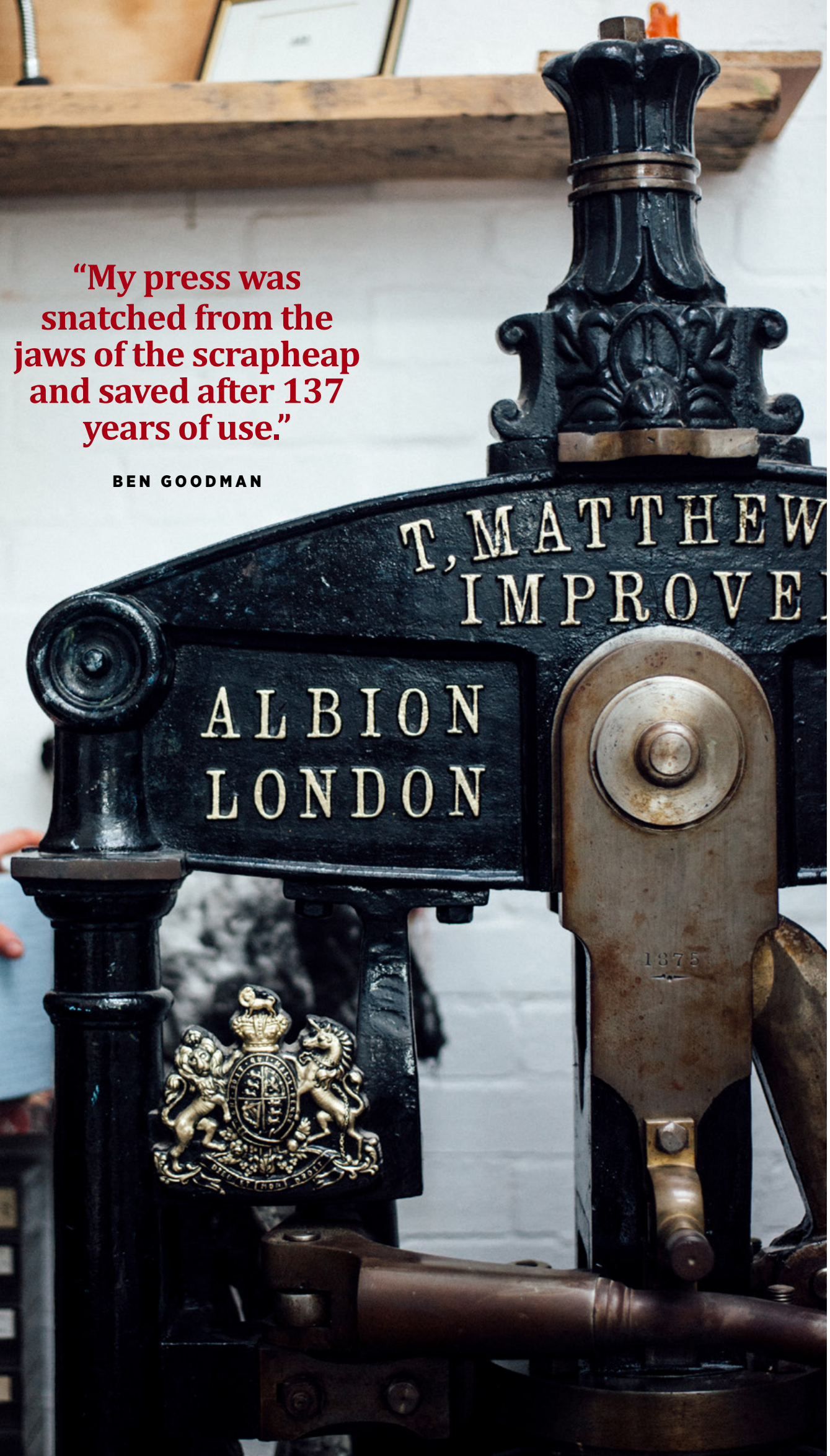
Paper: *Zerkall 7625C;*

Ink: *a 50/50 mix of Lawrence Linseed Relief ink and Graphic Chemical Senefelders Crayon Black*

Despite this potential for perfectionism and materials-obsession, Ben says it’s easy to give engraving a go without a huge press or a stack of top-end hardwood. “When I teach engraving, I show my students how to print by hand before we use a press. A spoon or a bone folder work just as well as a £4,000 printing press, it’ll just be slower”. He also recommend using a material called engraving plastic, which is cheaper and larger than traditional woodblocks.

**“My press was
snatched from the
jaws of the scrapheap
and saved after 137
years of use.”**

BEN GOODMAN





“One of the nicest things with engraving is its portability. All you need is few tools and a spoon, so you can take your kit anywhere in the world. There’s no need for an exposure unit or acid baths or any other large, expensive equipment. Good tools will also last for generations, so they’re well worth the investment.”

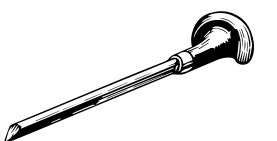
Speaking of tools that last for generations... proudly taking up a significant chunk of Ben’s small workspace is an beautiful Albion Press, which he bought from a school a few days before it was due for demolition (press and all). “My press has a special significance for me,” says Ben “snatched from the jaws of the scrapheap and saved after 137 years of use. It’s now 141 years old and still going like new - it prints all of my work beautifully and its simplicity is wonderful, especially in a world where it is surrounded by technology specifically designed to last only a few years.”

As well as engraving, Ben works with wood type in letterpress. And, in common with most people involved with the world of letterpress, it’s become something of an obsession: he now collects type “and basically anything else associated with it. I often complain that letterpress kit all needs so much sorting and looking after, but secretly I love the process of organising it all.”

He’s also been looking into creating his own wood type – using a laser-cutter to turn new digital typefaces into printable wooden type, and helping the students design their own typefaces. “There are some hurdles to overcome”, he says, “but watch this space...”

In tandem with his personal output, Ben works as a technician in the print rooms at the University of the West of England (UWE). “I tried briefly to make a living from my artwork but quickly discovered that the pressure to make it sell was a detriment to the artistic process. So getting the technician job at UWE was a dream come true.” Paid work lifted the pressure on his art to be financially sufficient, and proved an enriching experience in its own right, helping others to realise their creative potential. “It’s inspiring to be around so many people who are themselves inspired and excited to be creating and learning. As the old cliché goes, ‘every day’s a school day’ and obviously this couldn’t be more true when you work at a school – I love discovering new things from the students and then passing them on to the others. I’m always learning. **T**

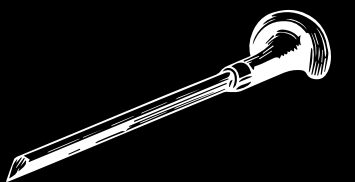
www.bengoodman.co.uk





BEN GOODMAN

My Process



Ben Goodman reflects on the poignant parallels between his engraving techniques and the shifting nature of human existence.

Infinite reduction



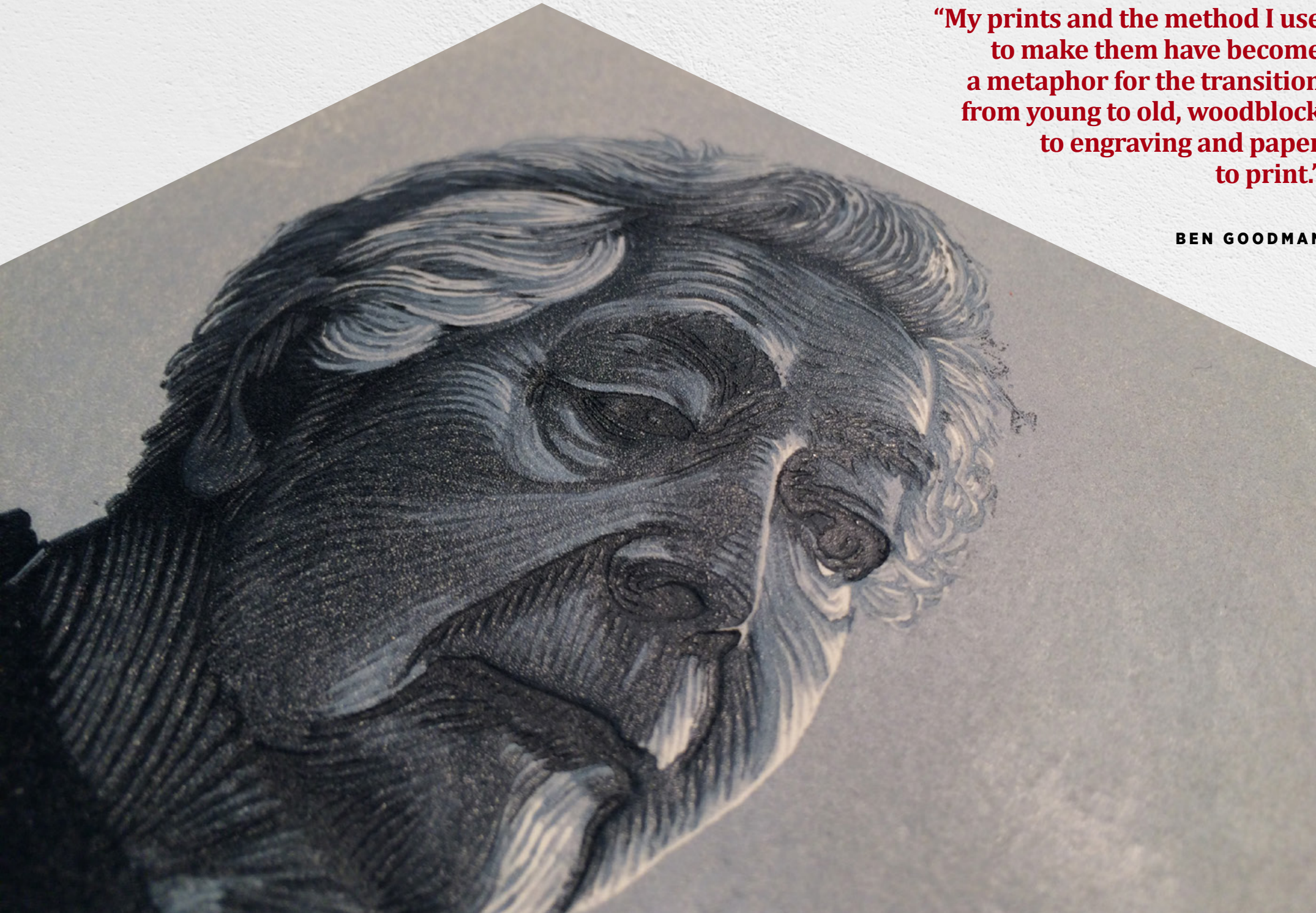
For or most of his creative life, Ben Goodman's art has focused "almost exclusively on visual style and/or technical experimentation", he says. More recently though, he's allowed a more conceptual element to guide his approach.

"In the last few years I've come up against the reality of family members ageing, deteriorating and passing away," says Ben. "But I've also witnessed the magic of new life being brought into the world - all part of the inevitable process of life and something we all experience." This experience has given Ben a strong sense of time as a physical thing - the movement from A to B and from young to old. "As my work has developed during this period it has naturally merged with my thoughts surrounding these subjects," he says.

Ben's "early, unformed ideas" were brought into focus during a visit to an exhibition of William Blake's work at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Blake, working in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, developed a method of printing which involved etching away the surface of a copper plate and then printing in relief rather than intaglio. "The printing process became a metaphor and a reflection of his belief that humans are born with innate ideas," says Ben. In Blake's own words:

"My prints and the method I use to make them have become a metaphor for the transition from young to old, woodblock to engraving and paper to print."

BEN GOODMAN



"But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged; this I shall do by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid. If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite."

Ben's thoughts concerning nature and nurture are not particularly aligned with Blake's, but the idea that the printing process can reinforce one's theories of life really struck a chord. In his most recent work, Ben has employed the reduction engraving method, drawing parallels between the way the block of wood evolves and the body ages, and also "how the print develops like our memories of a person are created through our lives."

"In recent years, I've seen the ageing process in more detail as family members have experienced the consequences of growing older," he says. "I've also seen the transformation that happens to a person's reputation and the collective memory of them once their life has ended. The thoughts that developed in my mind were somehow easier to understand when looked at through the printing process - this has become part research project and part therapeutic exercise."

When he begins working on a reduction print, the first layer of the engraving is just the rough outline of the image it will become. The print taken from it is made with the lightest of inks (often pure white), representing the beginnings of life. "We are born as a pure, unrefined creature that contains all its potential - just as the pure block of wood hides its potential beneath the surface," says Ben.

The first print is vague and indistinct, and once it has been covered with subsequent layers it is difficult to distinguish. Similarly, our early memories of a person fade and disappear as time goes on. As the engraving develops with each layer, the figure emerges from the wood, just as one's personality does with the experiences of life. Simultaneously, the print is built up with successive layers of ink, creating parallels with the way our impression of a person grows more nuanced over time, as we build up a picture of them through our life.

Eventually the wood engraving reaches its final stages. The surface of the block contains just a faint suggestion of the previous image, but surrounding it are the shadowy outlines of the previous layers. "I see this as mirroring the reality of ageing," says Ben, "when health and mobility limit a person and on the surface they are an outline of their former selves. They are surrounded by their life's experiences and yet restricted to a reduced form." At this stage the print of the engraving contains every layer of ink, piled up into a two-dimensional version of the engraving. "This echoes my own feelings towards the memories one is left with when someone is no longer with you," Ben says. "The images of them in your mind can seem almost real yet will never have the depth of life incarnate.

This is reduction wood engraving. A printing process that mirrors life itself." As with Ben's ink, we build up our experiences and they layer up throughout our lives. But ultimately we are declining and diminishing from the moment we are born. Until all that is left is a shadow of our former selves - and then just a memory. "I'm under no illusion that these ideas are any more than my own musings on a subject that I myself have struggled to grasp," Ben admits.

"The progression of life and death is simple, yet our memories of a person when they are gone are complex and distorted. The closing moments of life, like the final layers of a print, are the most visible and those memories can seemingly obscure earlier ones, for better and for worse." **T**

Watch.

CLICK IMAGE TO LAUNCH >



'MAXWELL' WOOD ENGRAVING



'MOON' WOOD ENGRAVING



**BROOKS SADDLE ENGRAVING
AND PRINTING**

Update.

APRIL 2020

WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN UP TO SINCE WE FEATURED YOU IN ISSUE 1?

I've been concentrating on the reduction method that I talked about in my previous article, but I've developed a way of speeding it up by combining it with oil painting. Usually I wait for each layer to dry, so with a 10 layer print this can cause the whole process to last months. But recently I've been teaching myself oil painting and specifically the Alla Prima technique where you paint wet on wet. I've taken the technique into printmaking and have had some great results, both in terms of speed and visual effects. The development has allowed me to produce engravings in just one day which would normally have taken months. There's also a better range of colours in the painting world, so I've been able to study the colour pallets of Lucien Freud or Jenny Saville and bring their colours directly into my work.

HAVE YOU BEEN DOING DEMOS, TEACHING OR HOLDING WORKSHOPS?

I've continued to run my engraving class as part of the Contemporary Relief Print course at Spike Island Print Studio in Bristol, where the students have produced some amazing results. I also work two days per week for UWE (University of the West of England) at their art school, Bower Ashton Studios, where I teach engraving to the BA Illustration and MA Printmaking students. This is now a bit tricky to teach from quarantine! But I'm trying my best to support them remotely.

HOW WOULD YOU RECOMMEND PEOPLE GET STARTED WITH WOOD ENGRAVING?

Doing a course is the quickest way to learn the basics – I had to teach myself and it took a year or two. But like any skill it's 99% practice so whether you've done a course or you're self taught the best thing to do is practice as much as you can. I always recommend beginners buy a set of practice blocks from Chris Daunt and just play/experiment with them. There's no right or wrong way to make an image and it's only through hours of practice and making mistakes that you'll discover your style, method and interest.

CAN YOU LIST OUT SOME GOOD ONLINE RESOURCES FOR THE TECHNIQUE?

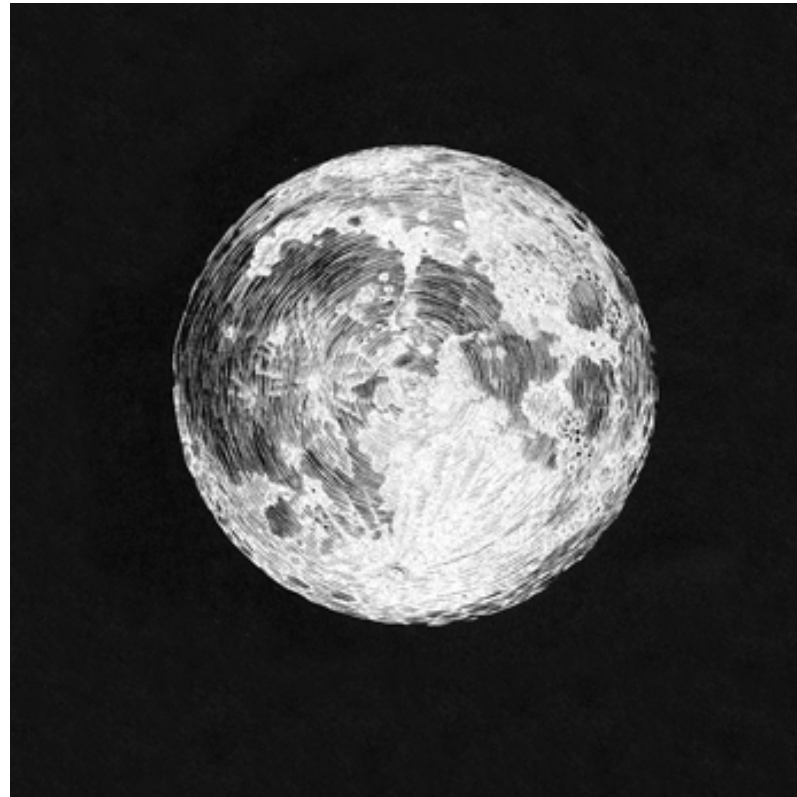
Engraving is such a niche discipline that there isn't much to choose from online, especially when compared to linocut, etching, screenprint, etc. If it's inspiration you're after then the Society of Wood Engravers' website is full of hundreds of contemporary engravings. But if it's technical advice you're after then I would recommend Simon Brett's book *Wood Engraving: How To Do It*. It's well laid out, concise and comprehensive.

CAN YOU SHARE SOME INSTAGRAM PROFILES FOR ARTISTS THAT YOU LIKE THAT PEOPLE CAN CHECK OUT?

Well the top one has to be @SocietyOfWoodEngravers, but some other good ones that I always enjoy seeing a new post from are: @takehironikai, @9_chis, @WoodEngraversNetwork & @InkOnBlock – there's so much amazing work out there!



Recent Work.



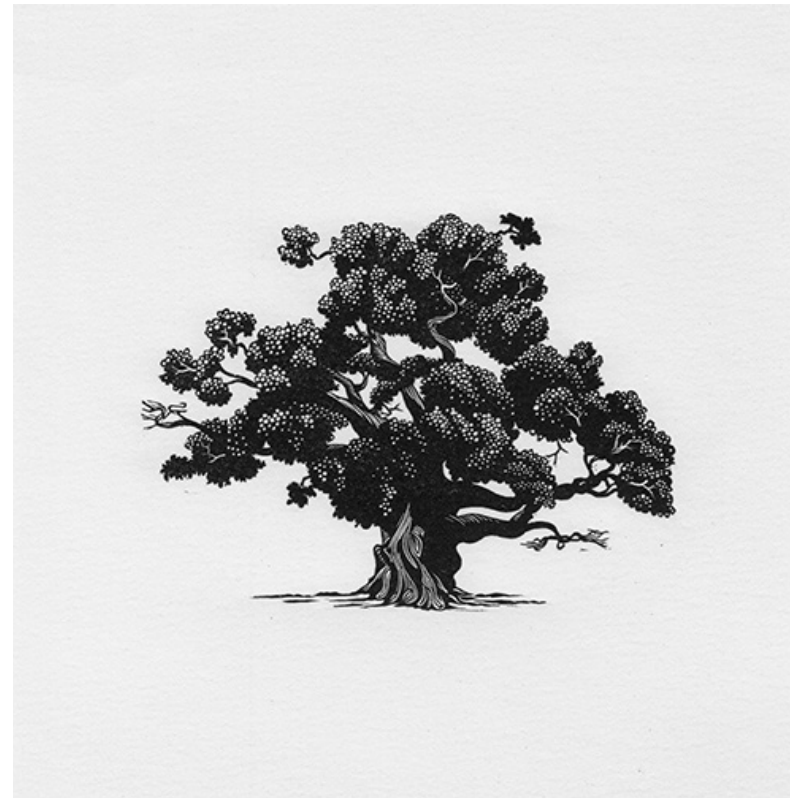
MOON
BOXWOOD ENGRAVING • EDITION OF 100



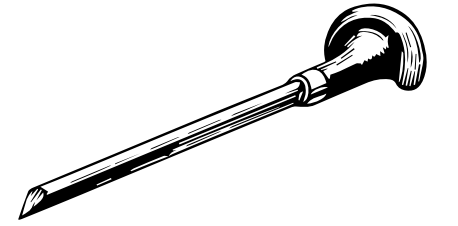
ROSETTA
17 LAYER REDUCTION WOOD ENGRAVING
EDITION OF 7



LAURIE
10 LAYER REDUCTION WOOD ENGRAVING
EDITION OF 20



DOMESDAY OAK
WOOD ENGRAVING • EDITION OF 50



Useful links.

 WWW.BENGOODMAN.CO.UK

 [BENGOODMAN](https://www.youtube.com/BENGOODMAN)

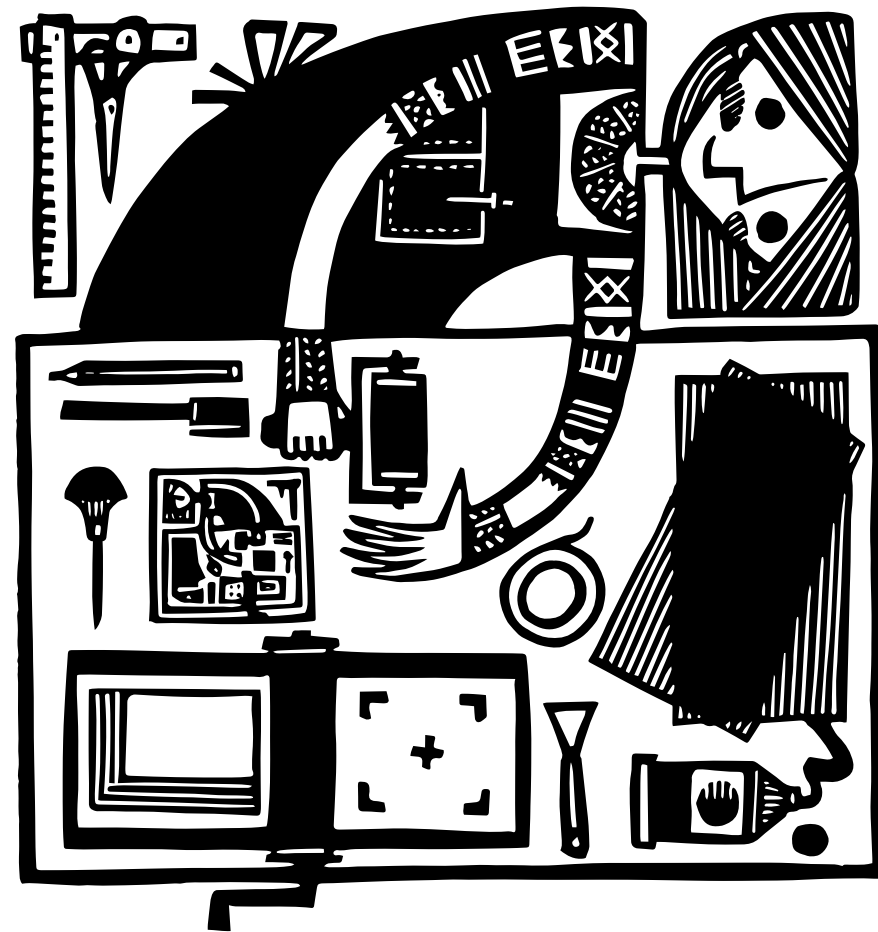
 [BENGOODMAN87](https://www.instagram.com/BENGOODMAN87)

 [BENGOODMANARTIST](https://www.facebook.com/BENGOODMANARTIST)

 [BENGOODMAN_UK](https://twitter.com/BENGOODMAN_UK)

pressing matters

CELEBRATING MODERN PRINTMAKING



WWW.KATFLINT.COM

HELLO@PRESSINGMATTERSMAG.COM

WWW.PRESSINGMATTERSMAG.COM

 PRESSINGMATTERSMAG