

In this way it is all dispersed within me—the rooms, the stairways that descended with such ceremonious deliberation, and other narrow spiral stairs in the obscurity of which one moved as blood does in the veins...

—Rainer Maria Rilke

The Space Between is a unique collaboration of printmaker Dan Steeves with composer Kevin Morse and the Tesla String Quartet that allows viewers a multi-dimensional engagement with image and sound. This collaboration emerged out of Steeves' meditation on the ways music and visual art can intersect and be similarly "read": "The idea of movement in the work," he recalls, "reminded me of musical notation up and down the staff and how I visually read music in learning how to sing. It seemed like a natural thing to collaborate with Kevin to create this piece." In response to Steeves' twelve etchings, Morse composed a twelve-movement score, capturing the works' peculiar lyricism; as Tom Smart has noted of Steeves' art, "The poetry of objects and light, the juxtaposition of interval, object and space, these established a kind of musical cadence in his compositions" (25). Morse's music tonally deepens the work, darkens those already blackened blacks, and highlights those already light whites. The music, particularly the intervals, resonates with each image spatially in Steeves' representations of architectural staircases and landings.

In much of Steeves' work we are moved to a place of metaphor, the place, perhaps, where all poetry begins. Aristotle argues in his *Poetics* that "metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else"; metaphor bridges the gap between the known and unknown, looking beyond the literal, transforming the ordinary into art. Metaphor, then, is about making connections or associations that go beyond a first reading. Steeves' visual metaphors similarly suggest that one thing is like another: they open up and unhinge the work to multiple interpretations. The poet Andrew Steeves describes the etchings as often fulfilling the "unruliness of pure metaphor" and references Northrop Frye's concept of "counterlogic"

which “introduces us to a world where the inevitable movement from cause to effect, the inevitable separation of one thing from another thing, no longer exists in the same way.” Such is the unruly, imaginary world of Dan Steeves.

I began this essay with a quotation from Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, whose protagonist describes a house he once visited as a child. Malte describes the house as being “all broken up inside me” and physically existing as “all that is still in me” (30). There is a dreamlike quality to this childhood recollection; it is as fragmentary as memory. For Gaston Bachelard, whose book *The Poetics of Space* first introduced me to these passages from Rilke, “the houses that were lost forever continue to live on in us...” (56). This dreamlike aspect of Rilke’s house connects to the work of Steeves, who shares many of Bachelard’s ideologies. Steeves recalls that in 1993, when he created *Sleep in Storm* (an image of a house floating on waves), he was responding to a passage in *The Poetics of Space* in which Bachelard realizes that, despite the noise and chaos of Paris, he was safe in his bed where he could “sleep in the storm” (28). For Steeves, that image has its roots in almost drowning on PEI when he was twelve years old. He continues, “As profound as Bachelard is, these words spoke simply to me.” Steeves’ knowledge of the book is intimate: he quotes from memory: “...all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home” (5). But it is Steeves’ translation of some of Bachelard’s philosophy into imagery that is perhaps the most relevant here. When the Frenchman writes, “The old house, for those who know how to listen, is a sort of geometry of echoes” (60), he could be speaking directly of Steeves, who as an artist has learned how to listen to old houses. When Morse’s opening Prelude is paired with Steeves’ representation of an old house, *the maintenance of life*, a heightened listening is set into motion. Both music and image suggest upheaval, the ups and downs of life. In the etching we are presented with a beautiful Victorian house raised on wooden cribbing, in preparation for moving (a familiar tradition in the Maritimes). As Steeves clearly has noted in conversation, this house has a name – Cuthbertson House – and describes in uncanny detail the house’s shingled siding, the multiple gables, the elegant verandah and gingerbread scrollwork, but

imaginatively adds a staircase connecting the house to the ground. This apparent whimsy is typical of how Steeves goes beyond representation to eke out another level of interpretation. These invented stairs act as a space for the viewer to enter both the house and the work itself.

For Steeves, stairs are representative of transitions in life, as the title of the series, *The Space Between*, suggests: “I learned to understand the stairs as achievements and the landings as places to stop and look back and reflect.” There are many staircases in this series: spiral staircases in steel, stone steps marked with the imprints of many footsteps over time, street stairways, escalators, wooden stairs and landings. The artist observes, “I think the idea of ascending and descending is very important in this work. That action does imply movement. This seemed like a natural progression for my work to go to.” The stillness that has predominated in much of Steeves’ previous work is now replaced by the zeitgeist of the age, the sense that we are in perpetual motion, not only as a sign of modernity but, more currently, that movement has been thrust upon us with migration, dislocation and relocation, things that have become part of how we now define ourselves. Steeves feels that this work also marks a new stage of personal development where, he reflects, “I am standing on a landing reflecting back on where I have come from and I am not alone nor was I ever alone. That is where my faith comes into play in my life. I feel I have the ability to move beyond all of that. It’s not perfect but a work in progress.”

This metaphoric interpretation of his own life is deeply spiritual but also significantly grounded in his chosen medium. Reflecting on the title of the series *The Space Between*, Steeves sees printmaking as an “in-between medium” involving painting, drawing and the intaglio process. Printmaker Mark Bovey has similarly described printmaking as the in-between medium, being both manual and mechanical in its process. In this sense, it shares its mechanical physicality with photography, which involves working from negative to positive in the printing process. Photography is also part of Steeves’ methodology for building his images, working initially from photographs to evolve then juxtapose various motifs. Another

metaphoric reading of the title *The Space Between* is realized in the collaborative process of printmaker and composer. Collaboration continues to be an important aspect of Steeves' process in which he offers his collaborators full creative licence. The "space between," then can also suggest the creative space between two minds or even two different mediums. This sense of collaboration is also found in his longstanding relationship with the writer Mark Harris, who provides the evocative titles for Steeves' work. The two exchange letters, Harris's full of philosophical and religious ideas around the everyday and life events. From these letters Steeves selects his titles, lending another layer of narrative to the work. Perhaps the most meaningful collaboration for Steeves is with his wife Lisa, a pianist and music teacher, who features in many of his prints. In his previous series *The Memory of Pain* he worked through the painful reality of Lisa's diagnosis of breast cancer as they travelled together in Europe. But the series was also about the concentration camps they visited together in Germany and Austria, and this more universal suffering is, like the immediately personal pain that informs it, manifest in the work.

In this new series there is a greater sense of levity than in his earlier work, a more transitional quality of having moved on, as Lisa's healing has helped Steeves realize his new series. Lisa still features in two poignant works: *in the deep recesses of our hearts*, she ascends a dark staircase, and in *this deepening trust*, she passes through an ancient threshold into daylight. Such scenes present a sense of hopefulness into these densely articulated spaces. Steeves comments on the presence of humour and humanity in his work: "The dog with the newspaper (or perhaps a stick), the nuns (whom I have a deep respect for) with cell phones and ice-cream – simple pleasures that are commonplace to them as well. The man on the stepstool gesturing, and perhaps speaking to the side of the wall. All dichotomies, and somewhat humorous to me." In the print *I can't let it distract me*, we see at a crosswalk a distracted man carrying a briefcase who overlooks the scrawny dog doggedly carrying a newspaper. We, however, notice. Or, on a spiral staircase, we sense the spiral of an argument, how it can circle back on itself. We observe, too, how the circular pattern on a pavement

echoes the circular pattern in an underground station; the differences between interior and exterior worlds. We witness nuns eating ice cream, nuns with cell phones glowing. We see a dog chasing its tail, old men who argue. Life goes on. In these prints, there is a sense that what lies beneath the ground and what lies above it are somehow intricately and mysteriously connected, and that ascension can also be about descent. Where you are going, such scenes suggest, is also where you are from. There is a cyclical pattern throughout his work, an inherent sense of movement. This is true not only in the use of staircases that take you to another level, to another space, but also to the space in between those spaces, invoking memory. These transitions are suggestively accompanied by the music that both deepens and transitions between these spaces. During Morse's Chant, for example, the solo violin enters slowly. Viewers contemplating the print, *cultivating a sense of being settled is always dangerous* encounter simultaneously the back of a man and the incongruity of an abrupt staircase that intercepts the space. In Steeves' *a huge part of the journey right now*, nuns promenade along a stony beach, some, licking ice cream. There is a sense here that the journey continues beyond sound and image. In Morse's final movement, Chorale, the music's crepuscular mood suggests day moving towards twilight. In this liminal moment we too, may sense an approaching journey; we complete the metaphor.

Anne Koval
Associate Professor (Art History), Mount Allison University
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In memory of my parents.

*The spiral of staircase – an opening of wings –
ascending/descending.*

–'Tobias and the Angel'

Sources

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