

# Etching, An Artists' Guide

Jon Mayers, Independent Artist

Printmaking is an exciting art field, continually evolving and assimilating new technologies. Etching conversely (if defined as scratching and corroding with acid into a metal plate an image from which an edition of multiples can be made) can seem curiously static and old fashioned, especially to emerging artists and younger printmakers who usually enter a university etching department confronted with huge black Victorian machinery and a rigid lists of timings, pressures, measurements and rules. As an etcher myself, and having spent hours selling teenage Art Foundation students on a process dependent on an apparently unchanging technology, I read with genuine interest to see what could be written about etching that was refreshing and new.

With some obvious love, Ann Norfield takes on the unenviable task in this substantial and well-illustrated tome. Beginning with a brief history of the medium, we learn that the embryonic origins of etching: armourers impressing materials into decorative designs to preserve and record the patterns for future posterity (the actual suits of armour themselves presumably squashed and mashed during combat) and its subsequent evolution as a means of disseminating information to illiterate Europeans in the 15th century, through its adoption by artists looking for a way to flog a cheaper product to a larger audience; naturally touching on etching heroes like Rembrandt and Goya.

The main body of the writing is in a step by step 'how to' style, with chapters around materials and equipment, hard and soft grounds, aquatints, the various photo etching techniques and of course the absolute basics, like polishing, degreasing and grounding of plates. In perhaps the book's most intriguing segment, Ann details a guide to setting up a studio collective/community, essential to printmakers who leave the comfort of a university print department and encounter a discouraging dose of reality when they tally up how much it might cost to assemble even the most rudimentary approximation of the facilities they've become

accustomed to, and are unlucky enough to have found themselves in a town or city where nobody else has had the drive or inclination to set up a studio for them already.

Essentially this is a book that is designed to be used for reference purposes as opposed to being read from cover to cover. But the text does occasionally break from the format for an interview where, in informal conversational style, Ann probes etching practitioners on how they learned to work inside and outside of etching's inherent confines. If there should be any criticism, although accompanied by some great images of the discussed work, it is that for some reason these conversations feel curiously flat. There are recollections of attacking



Figure 1

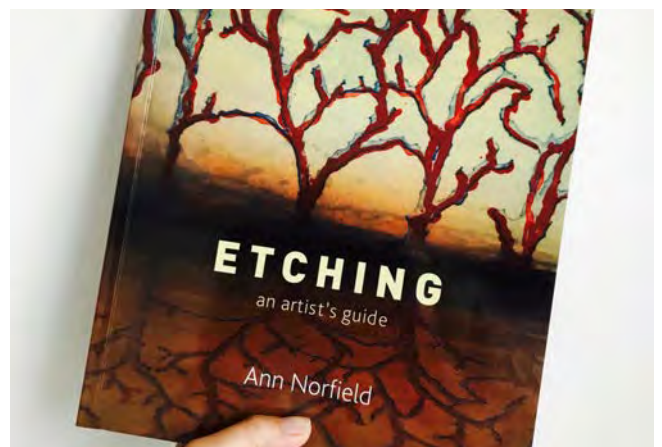


Figure 2

plates with electric sanders, Black and Decker grinders, and other unconventional non-precious approaches to etching that remind you that it can be as dynamic, emotional and instinctive an art form as painting or sculpture, but is too often relegated to a sort of 'arts and craft' dungeon. Whenever the book, in its instructional main body, emphasises neatness and proper technique and health and safety in the form of goggles and gloves and delicately filed edges, one cannot help but remember that old footage of Norman Ackroyd smoking cigs while rubbing his bare hands into nitric acid, and feel that in order for etching to remain relevant in the contemporary arts, the rule book should not necessarily be rewritten, but ignored altogether. One often has to remind oneself that the fundamentals should be mastered before we can move beyond them, but maybe the book would be stronger for delving deeper into the less conventional approaches as well? As it happens, it merely touches upon them.

Perhaps the most important part of the book is the final few pages where contact details for printmaking studios offering open access print from around the world are listed, from Australia to the United States. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and is naturally heavily biased towards print studios in the UK. Still an invaluable resource that one would hope will more comprehensive with successive editions.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Etching, An Artists' Guide, by Anne Norfield

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The book is available from printmaking supplier Intaglio Printmaker, publishers Crowood Press and Amazon

Intaglio Printmaker <https://intaglioprintmaker.com/shop/etching-artists-guide>

Crowood Press <http://www.crowood.com/details.asp?isbn=9781785006159&t=Etching—An-Artist>



Figure 3



Figure 4

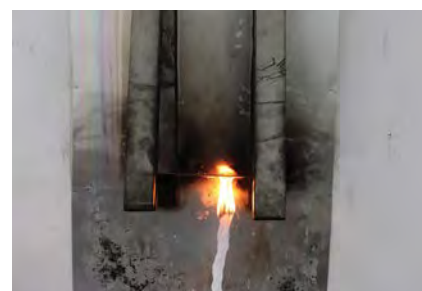


Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

Figure 3: Mixing ink. From Etching, by Ann Norfield  
 Figure 4: Process photos from Etching, by Ann Norfield  
 Figure 5: Smoking a plate. Photo by Cora James. From Etching, by Ann Norfield  
 Figure 6: Etching in ferric chloride. From Etching, by Ann Norfield  
 Figure 7: Photos of spread focussing on etchings by Katherine Jones. From Etching, by Ann Norfield



Figure 1: Two colour print registration technique. From Etching, by Ann Norfield

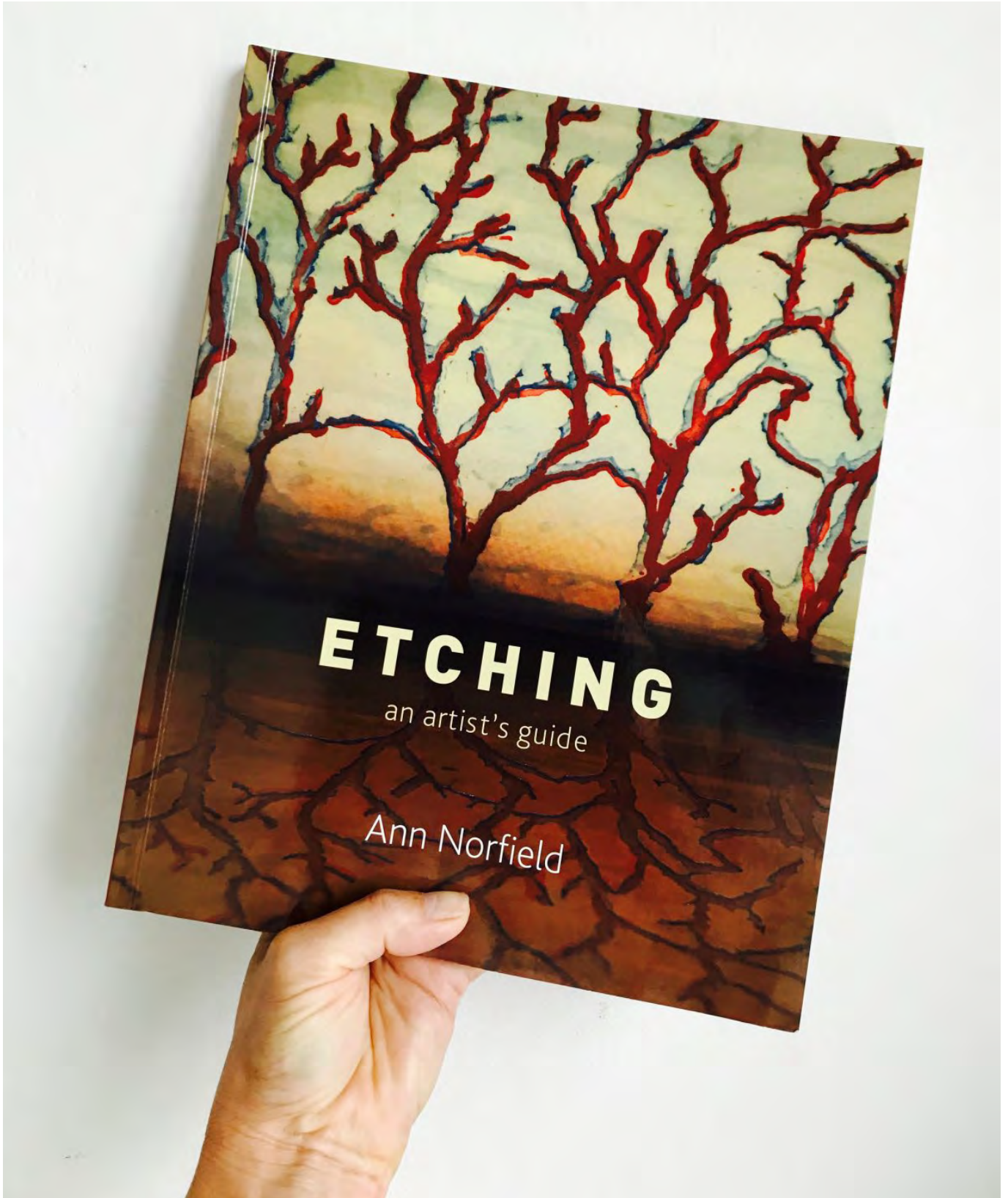


Figure 2: Etching, by Ann Norfield. Front cover



Figure 3: Mixing ink. From Etching, by Ann Norfield

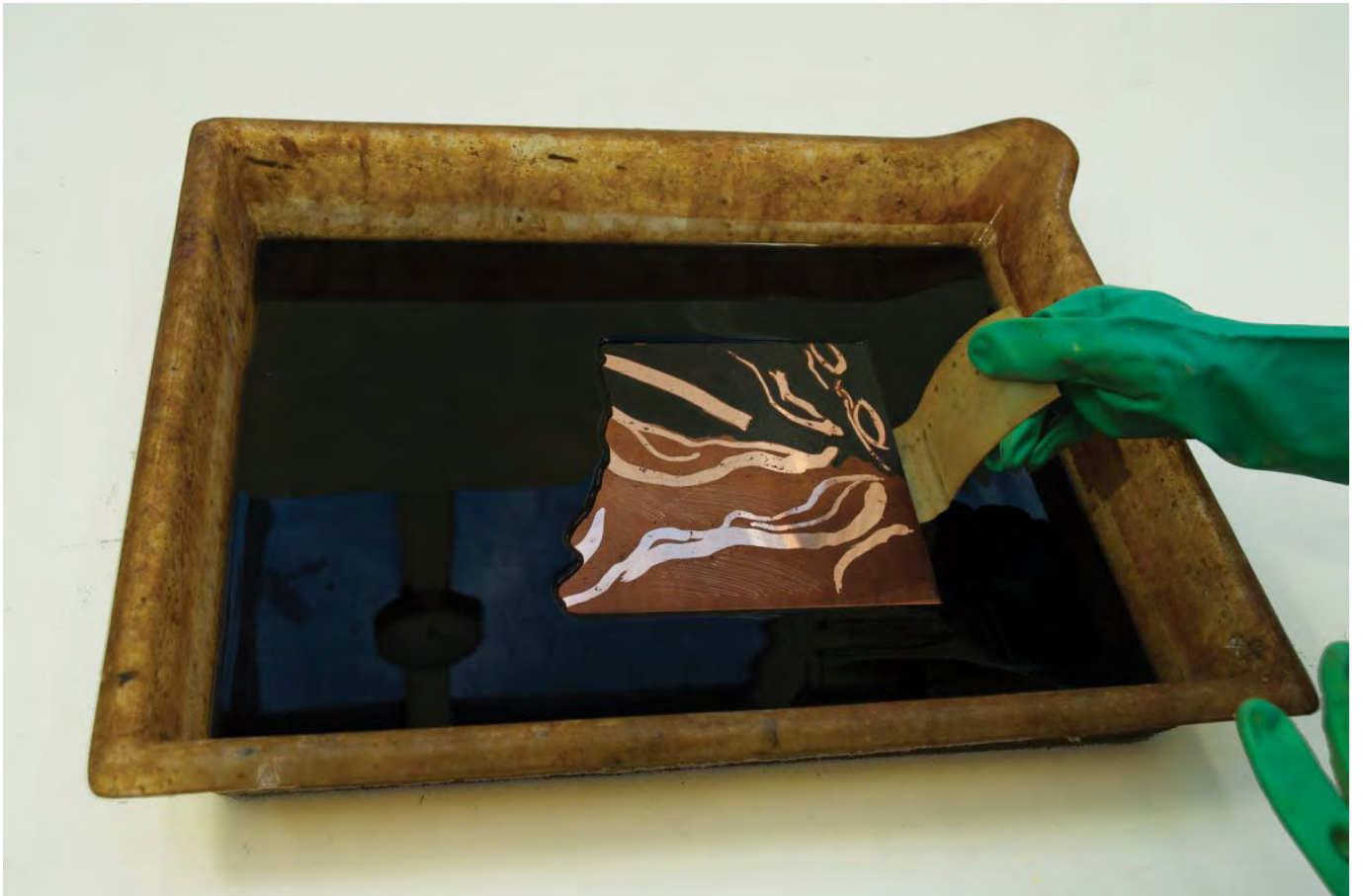


Figure 4: Process photos from Etching, by Ann Norfield



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Figure 5: Smoking a plate. Photo by Cora James. From Etching, by Ann Norfield



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Figure 6: Etching in ferric chloride. From Etching, by Ann Norfield



IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 7: Photos of spread focussing on etchings by Katherine Jones. From Etching, by Ann Norfield