



## Michael Brown – Image and Sound

Michael Brown has been a resident of Fermanagh for twenty years, recording documentary films and interpreting landscape through paintings, photography and print making, working from his studio near Ballinamallard.

Enniskillen Castle recently had an exhibition of his work, a catalogue of which can be seen at <http://michaelbrownlandscapes.org>, and he has also exhibited in Dublin, Belfast, and the West of Ireland.



Farm Track up Cuilcagh

His landscapes are sparse and often barren, but even his black and white

photographs of the wilder parts of Fermanagh in winter are never bleak. There are no humans in his landscapes, and little evidence of their work, except in the snowy untrodden blankness of *Farm Track up Cuilcagh*, with a wire fence silhouetted against it. The elements are carefully composed, like rocks in a Zen garden, and their textures exquisitely detailed. Michael gives the same love and attention to marginal land as he does to marginal people. This can be seen at once in his photo etchings of more domestic landscapes – *Charlie's Field* and *Willie's House* – you feel at once you know the men who work this land.

He uses several different printmaking techniques:

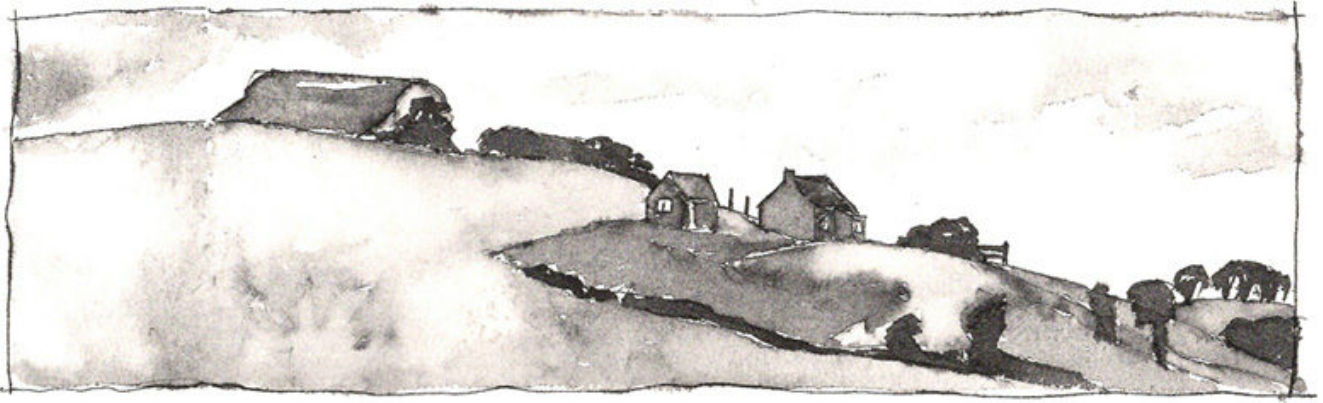
In **Monotype** he lays ink freehand on a zinc plate, creating expanses of peatland in black and umber, the white stalks of bog cotton picked out in negative by the flick of a palette knife – their frothy blooms, scattering of French chalk to absorb the ink. Only one print can be pulled from each inking – hence the name *monotype* – and you can never entirely control the effects. Sometimes you are rewarded by happy accidents, as in the subtle shading of *Cuilcagh in Mist*.



Bog Cotton III

**Photo Etching** is done by drawing onto transparent material, then laying photosensitive film onto zinc plate, covering it with the image and exposing it to ultraviolet light. The areas exposed to light harden, and remain when the plate is washed, protecting those parts from being etched out by acid. The etched plate is then inked and printed in the normal way. There is still for opportunity for variation in inking, but this allows runs of near-

identical copies. Michael limits each print to a run of five.



Willie's House

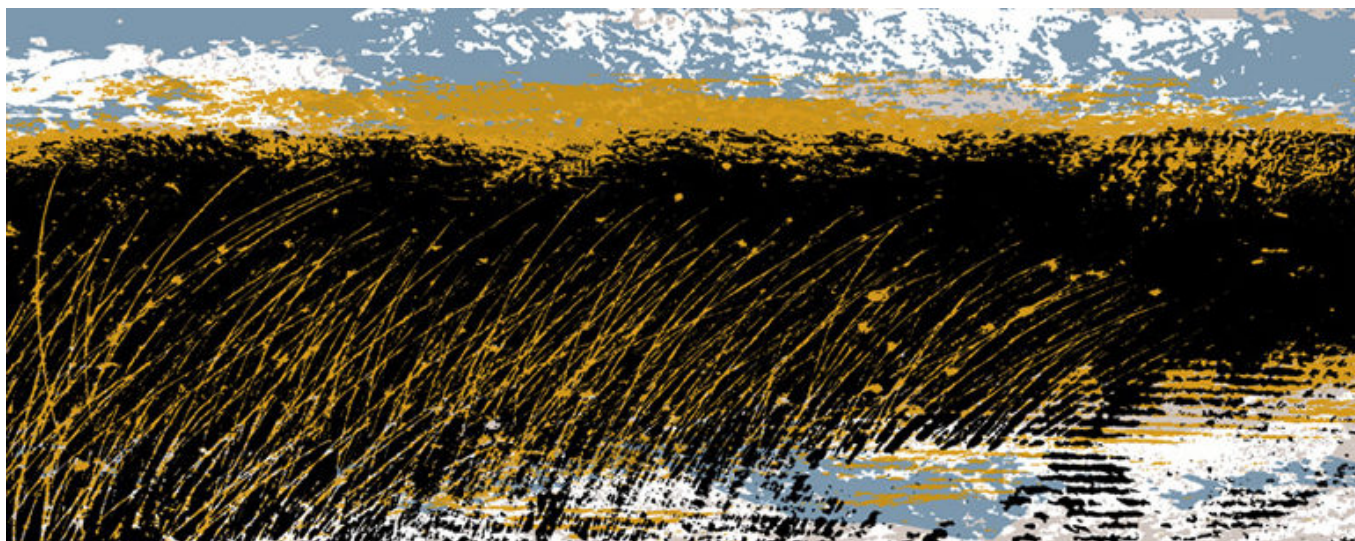
The dark outlines and smudgy shadows of his photo etchings are echoed in some of his earlier paintings. Later paintings have a simplicity and monumental quality reminiscent of the work of Paul Nash.

In **Screen Printing** the photosensitive resist is applied to a fine mesh screen through which ink is squeezed onto the paper. A separate screen is used for each colour. This makes the tone more consistent throughout – the colour is either there or it is not – but less subtle blending is possible. The fine hatching and spattering on *Cuilcagh Mountain* shows what can be done in that respect.



Cuilcagh Mountain

In **Digital Collage** the separate masks are produced much as for screen printing, but instead of being applied to a screen they are digitised and used to produce a composite image with the help of an inkjet printer. Some artists produce detailed collages of photographic images in this way, but Michael uses the technique to good effect with solid colour.



Reed Bed III Lough Erne

Michael is regularly seen locally in his role as a film-maker recording cultural events, but his work and his concern for social and environmental issues has taken him around the world. He has this advice for anyone just starting out in that field:

- It is not well paid. You may even make a loss on the projects that you really want to do, but it is important to do them anyway.
- You do not need a large camera or lots of equipment to get started. Use what you have, and you will discover what you need with experience.
- Sound is even more important than pictures. People would sooner watch a film with poor quality visuals than one with poor sound (and it may always perhaps be suitable for radio). You don't need an old-fashioned boom microphone (you can even get by with just the microphone built-in to your camera) but you will need a fluffy hood to reduce wind noise if working outdoors. A good hand-held mike is useful for face-to-face interviews, as is a radio mike to pick up sound from people being filmed at a distance.
- Remember you are telling a story. Get the shots that tell that story, and you will find editing a lot easier.
- In documentary work you may find that your idea of what the story should be may not correspond with the facts that you discover. Be prepared to change the story.

*By the time this article is published Michael will be in Nepal, documenting the conditions under which children and donkeys are taken from India to work in heavy industry.*

**Jenny Brien**