

PRAWAT LAUCHAROEN
**METAMORPHOSIS
ON THE THEME OF MORANDI**

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation

PRINT INSTALLATION

INTRODUCTION BY RONNY COHEN.

Rama IX Art Museum Foundation



Metamorphosis on the Theme of Morandi III, installation of 9 copper plates, 6'x8', 1986.

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When I look back over the twenty-odd years that I have been selling prints, I am always amazed at the large number of major artists whose prints I have sold: Matisse, Cezanne, Picasso, Beckman, Johns, Kelly, Motherwell... The list is endless. But as I am not a scholar, or a curator, or a collector, I bring my own perspective, my own sensibility, to the prints I've lived with on a day to day basis.

What makes a print work? I am never certain. To a large degree it is surely the living union of technique and feeling, of hand and imagery. But what I respond to most, what I admire most, is a sense of weight, a density, a complex poetry that I recognize instantly, yet am always at a loss to describe. Of the twentieth century artists who have made prints, perhaps no one has focused as much print into as little space as did Morandi. The soulfulness is awesome: these stationary, mundane little objects which conjure such a vast, still cosmos.

It's not surprising to me then to find an artist from Thailand, who has collaborated with many other artists in producing prints of considerable technical beauty, to be drawn again to collabor-

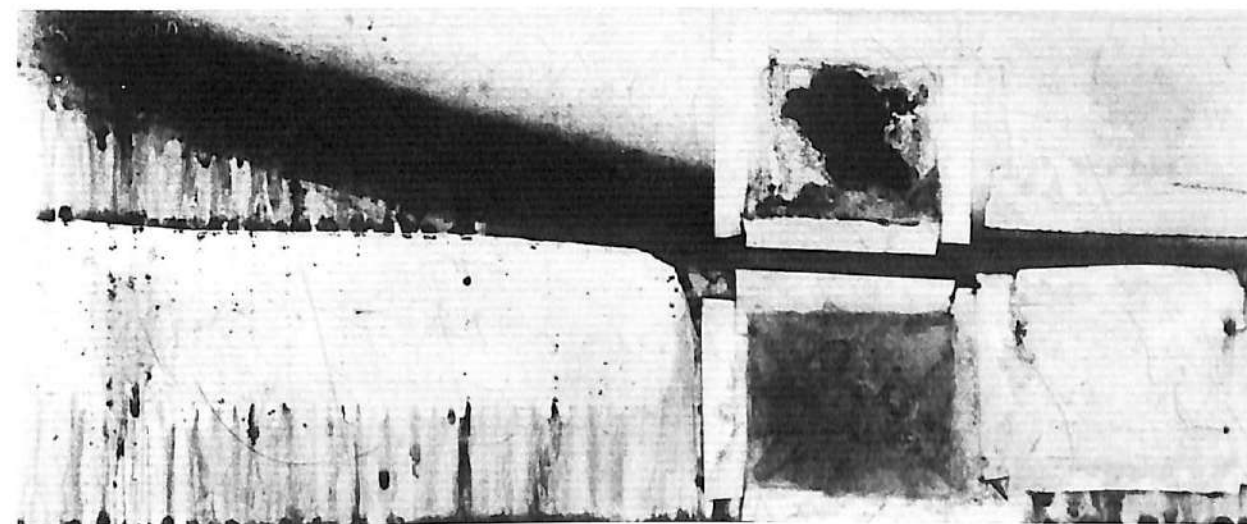
ate with another artist, but this time in his own creative process. With his ancient heritage of Asian ideas about presence and time, he was drawn to these tiny emblems, these crystals of scratched lines, and expanded that stillness into a new idea about printmaking, about the process of printmaking itself, and at that, into one of the largest etchings ever made!

Prawat's earlier prints and drawings often made reference to Buddhist ritual books from which ancient chanting was sung, and in the installations there is a reference—in the numerical scores, in the titles themselves—to this musical part of his work. And I sense also in the intallations another Eastern source, the religious ritual and rich mythological theater of Southeast Asia, where *art*, whatever that might mean to them, is totally subsumed into a more complex and infinite whole.

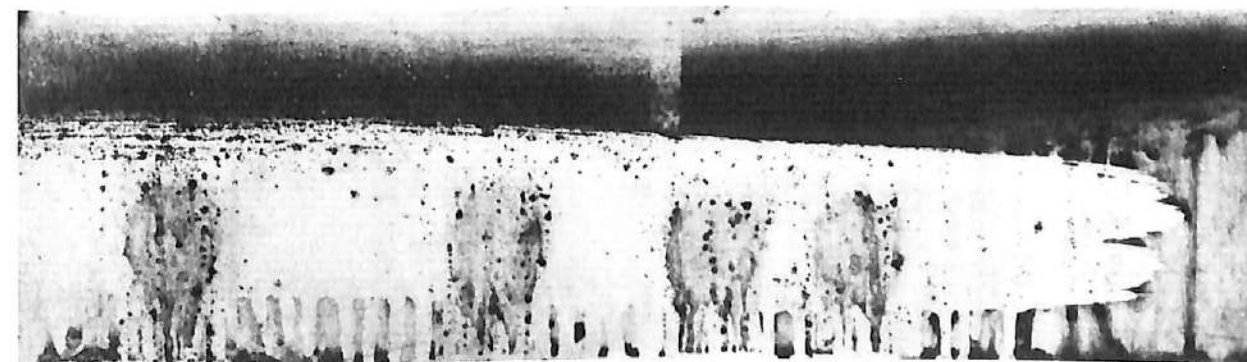
I am delighted that Prawat asked me to show the works in this exhibition. Prints have been so much a part of my life for so long, and this seems to be one of those occasional "peaks" that makes this life in prints so rewarding.

Fred Deitzel,

Orion Editions, October, 1986



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Two studies on German etching paper, 24"×11", 26"×14", 1980.

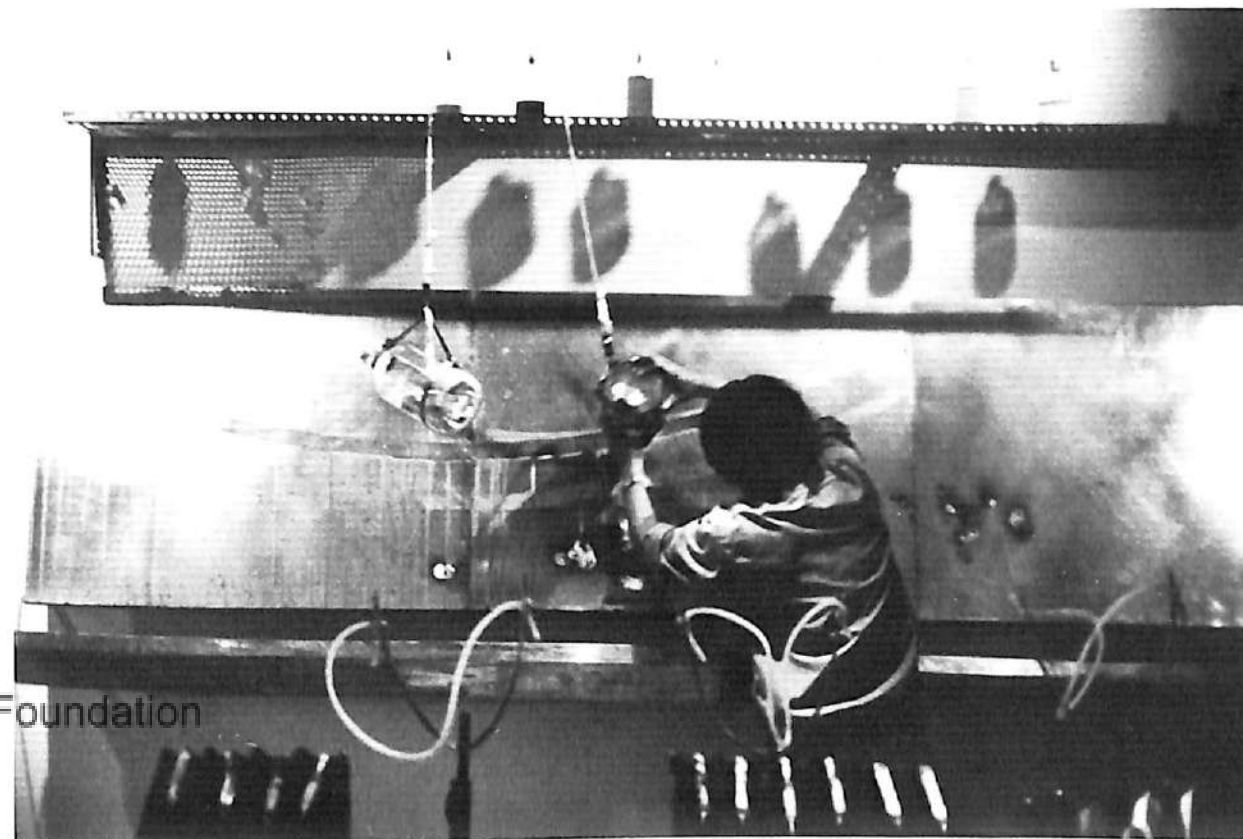
One would be hard pressed indeed to find another artist so ready, willing, and most importantly, so able to take on the most difficult task there is for an artist: challenging the usual array of commonplace notions that go into defining the status quo for all artistic endeavours, even those in our contemporary period. With regard to the field of printmaking, in particular, these notions can be said to hang over it like a comfortable veil giving cozy support to some aspects of the medium while suffocating others to the point of obscuring them, for most practical purposes, from the sight of the majority of people. And in the field of printmaking no one better succeeds at the aforementioned task than Prawat Laucharoen. For this printmaker the situation that attends his chosen medium is clear. There seems to be but one possible option for him: to thrust aside the veil and rip away its many layers and all they stand for in order to bring printmaking's true creative potentials to light.

In the incredibly rich body of work he has done since the early 1970s, Laucharoen has continued to cut wide swatches out of this veil as he set about uncovering the magical side of printmaking. Very much a rebel, though one admittedly with a very definite cause, he approaches both his subject and audience in ways that can be described as poetic. And, therein, in the singular provocativeness of his approach lie the sources of the endless fascination exerted on us by the visionary talent he seems to possess in such abundance. In the field of printmaking, Prawat Laucharoen is opening up new frontiers filled with exciting

encounters at every turn.

Vivid instances of true revelation highlight the experience of viewing Laucharoen's recent works in this exhibition. They occur as the complexity of the artist's intentions make themselves known to you. And this happens as soon as the audience enters into the special realm created for it. Most people attending a print show expect it to be a certain way, that is, a showcase for the presentation of prints, nothing more or less. Here the exhibition just on the basis of sheer appearance alone is different. The featured examples, *Subject to Change Without Notice II* (1986) and *Metamorphosis on the Theme of Morandi III* (1986), are both 3-dimensional installations, each of which carries within its multipart structure a kind of aesthetic bill of rights aimed at the entire field of printmaking. In both examples, one of the primary declarations of independence being made has to do with what Laucharoen himself has termed "the seduction of technique which draws many people in the printmaking field in so deeply, they can't get out very easily."

Commonplace notions of printmaking technique are boldly shaken with one's first look at *Subject to Change Without Notice II*. In this installation, the basics of intaglio technique seem to have provided the artist with the main point of departure for his imaginative reconstitution of them. Freed by him from the strictures of their traditional formats—and also forms—and removed from the confines of the printing shop, the material and processes of intaglio technique have been transformed into a sculptural ensemble, one that nevertheless retains

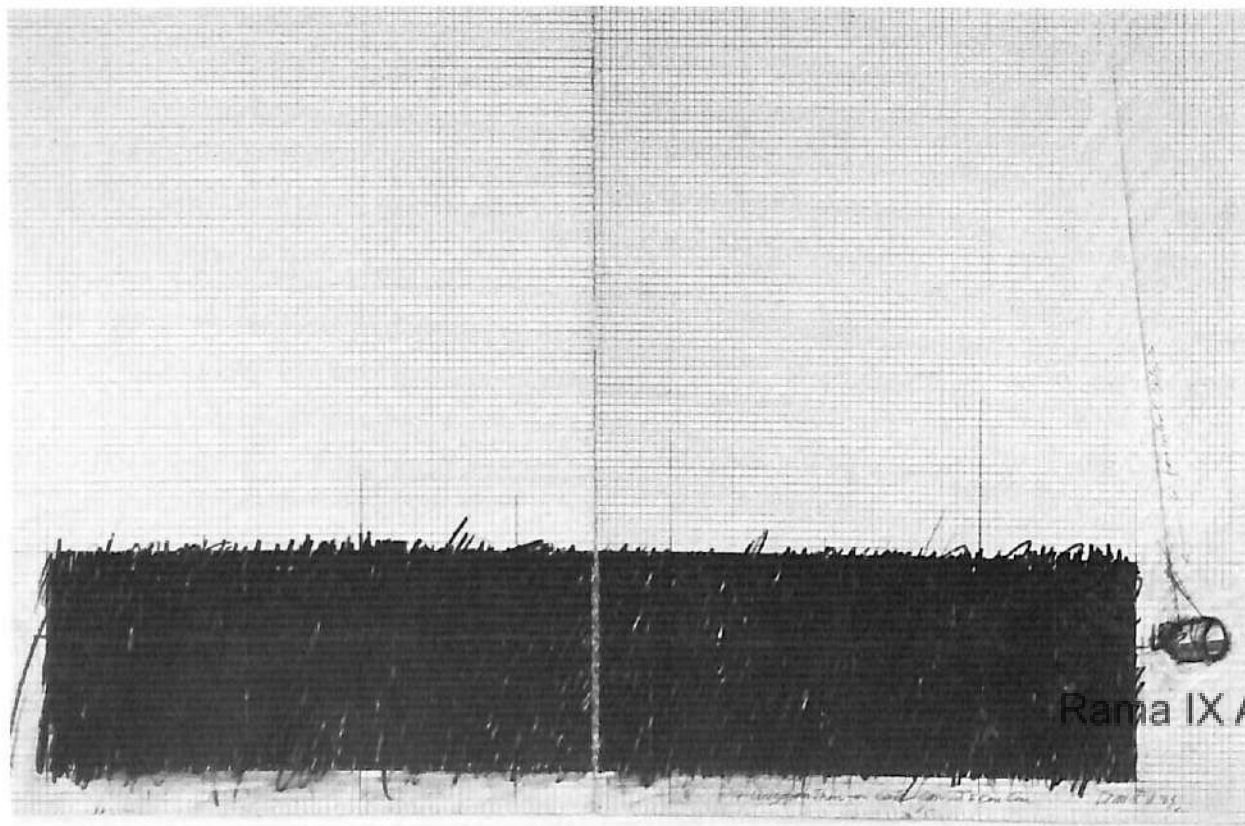


Launching Station, installation of 3 copper plates with mechanical devices, 7'x10'x7', 1981.

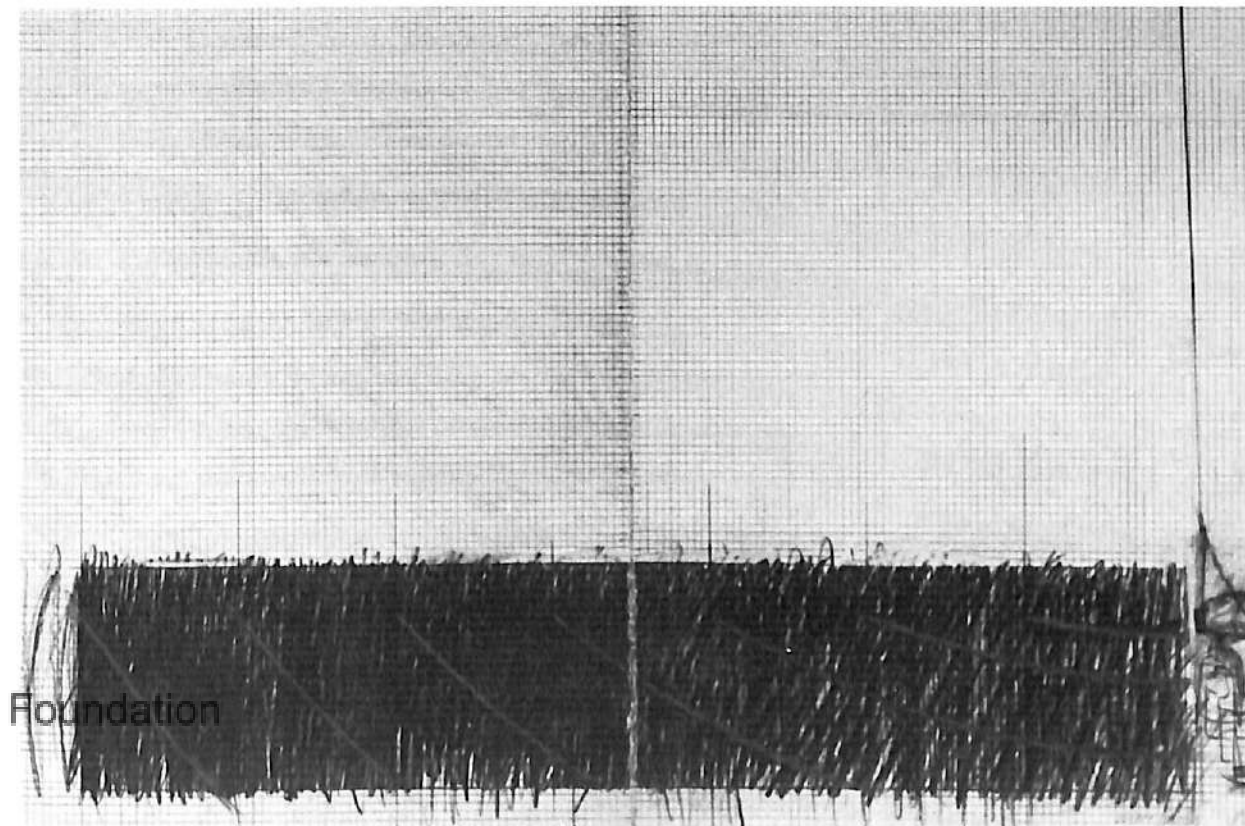
the customary usages of them. In *Subject to Change Without Notice II*, a group of copper plates are placed next to each other on the floor. Leaning on top of the rectangle they make are various 3-dimensional forms constructed from found objects, which, when they come into contact with the copper surfaces produce impressions on them in much the

same manner of such classic intaglio tools as the burin, etching needle and roulette. Aside from their sharp edges however, there seems to be nothing classic about these mechanical forms, which, by contrast, are endowed with expressively eccentric shapes which can be moved, as the artist notes, "at will."

Every pressure and gesture, then, will yield



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Two studies; *Distance and Direction*, pencil on Arches cover paper, 30" x 47", 1983.

a different mark on the surfaces and impression in the print pulled from the plates. The situation set by the installation is one that brings out certain aspects of printmaking technique eminently worth serious thought but which, with the tendency to focus attention on the print per se as a kind of venerated object of desire and depository of aesthetic values,

have been neglected. Most prominent are the variable elements of chance and time integrated into the installation which reveal printmaking technique to be a framework of action, but one also fraught with infinite possibilities. It remains the domain of the artist to determine which of the possibilities are of interest. In the context of the installation, all the actions pre-

cipitated by the artist, all the moves made by him, are documented in the surface of the print pulled from these plates. The print itself is stunning proof of the force of knowledge and instinct that empower the artist's approach with such authority.

Laucharoen's concerns with technique can be discerned in his earlier works. The "heat

stamp" prints of the 1970s are prints made, as he notes, "without a press," from a technique he invented in 1973 based on the principle that metal heated to a certain degree will brand its shape on paper. The artist himself considered the "heat stamp" to be "a very direct method of creating an impression." He adds: "It seemed a way of coming into maximum contact with

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the idea behind making a print. For me, it unveiled the fundamentals of the process."

Using a single "heat stamp" for each print, he made various repetitive patterns from its shape. In the prints, then, he was among other things exploring different issues of limitations in printmaking, such as repetition. Toward the late 1970s, he considered the issues of limitations from another side, with the prints he did on palm leaves, in which a number of techniques, including traditional ones like sugar-lift and aquatint, are combined.

It was in 1980, however, that the idea of doing installations began to make sense to him. It emerged after a process of personal reassessment which the artist has likened to "emptying" and described as "erasing what I know about printmaking."

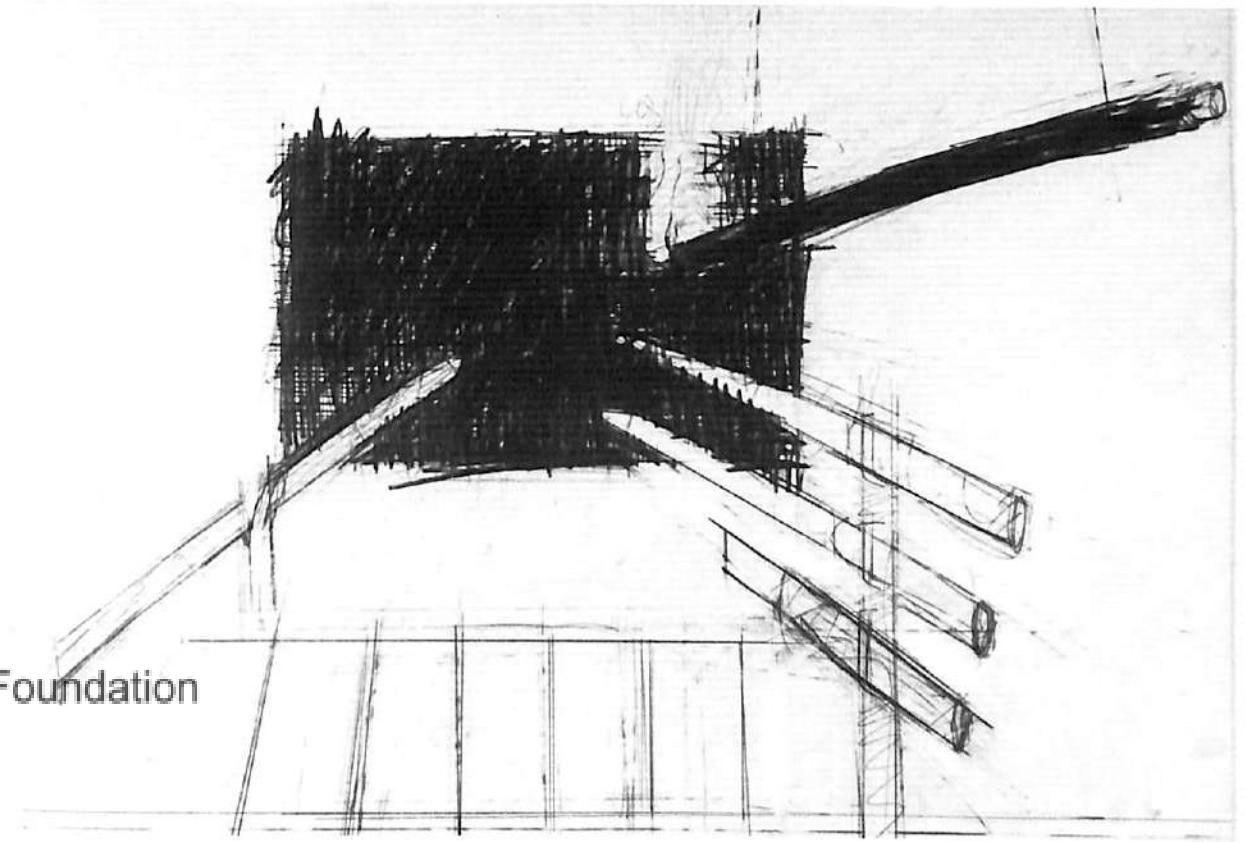
In the first installation he did, called appropriately enough *Launching Station* (1981), the major materials entering into the process are laid bare, but they are exposed in a manner that is astonishingly expansive, so much so that the installation comes across as a statement of boldly operative tone. The installation consisted of several sections of supporting shelves and surfaces, on which copper plates and tools were arranged. The copper plates which had been prepared with aquatint were placed just about parallel to the wall and provided a kind of canvas upon which the act of etching could be done in such ways as to bring to mind drawing and painting. First, Lacharoen marked the surfaces by swinging bottles suspended from strings, each filled with a different chemical typically used in printmaking for

biting, across them.

While the special felt tips on the bottles helped to gauge the flow of the chemicals which included Dutch Mordant, ferric chloride and nitric acid—each of which acts on the surface with varying degrees of strength—the device hardly provided for exacting control. Drips were part of the process and in some instances some bottles broke while being used. Then, according to the description in the "Table of Events" accompanying the installation, different metal intaglio tools assailed the surface. Afterwards, the plates were "cleaned," "inked," and "impressions taken," and the events ended with the pulling of the prints.

The display of the installation and print together brought the audience closer to printmaking technique by the method of isolating and exploring it as process both in and as a sequence of events. Also, the stress on the dynamic aspects of printmaking were made clear here in a unique way by the dramatic situation introduced: its activation was by a performance-directed presentation which brought this side of printmaking into closer contact with the audience.

Lacharoen has developed the issue of performance in the examples that followed, making it an integral part of each installation. These examples include *Subject to Change Without Notice I* (1984) in which the basic situation discussed with regard to *Subject to Change Without Notice II* (1986) was substantially the same but with one variation the metal tools that cut into the surface of the plates hung suspended over them; they, too, could be moved and ma-



Study, pencil on Arches cover paper, 23½" x 30", 1983.

nipulated but with greater limitations than in the recent version. The other group of works in which the issue of process as performance figures prominently is *Metamorphosis on the Theme of Morandi*.

Three versions of this installation have been done. The fullest statement of the series to date is provided by *Metamorphosis on the Theme*

of Morandi III (1986). Behind the entire series lies the artist's deep-seated admiration for the prints of Giorgio Morandi, whose method of building cross-hatch has been a source of keen fascination to him. The installations' aim is the systemization of Morandi's cross-hatch, or as Lacharoen states, "putting Morandi in a grid." This aim is motivated as well by an equally deep

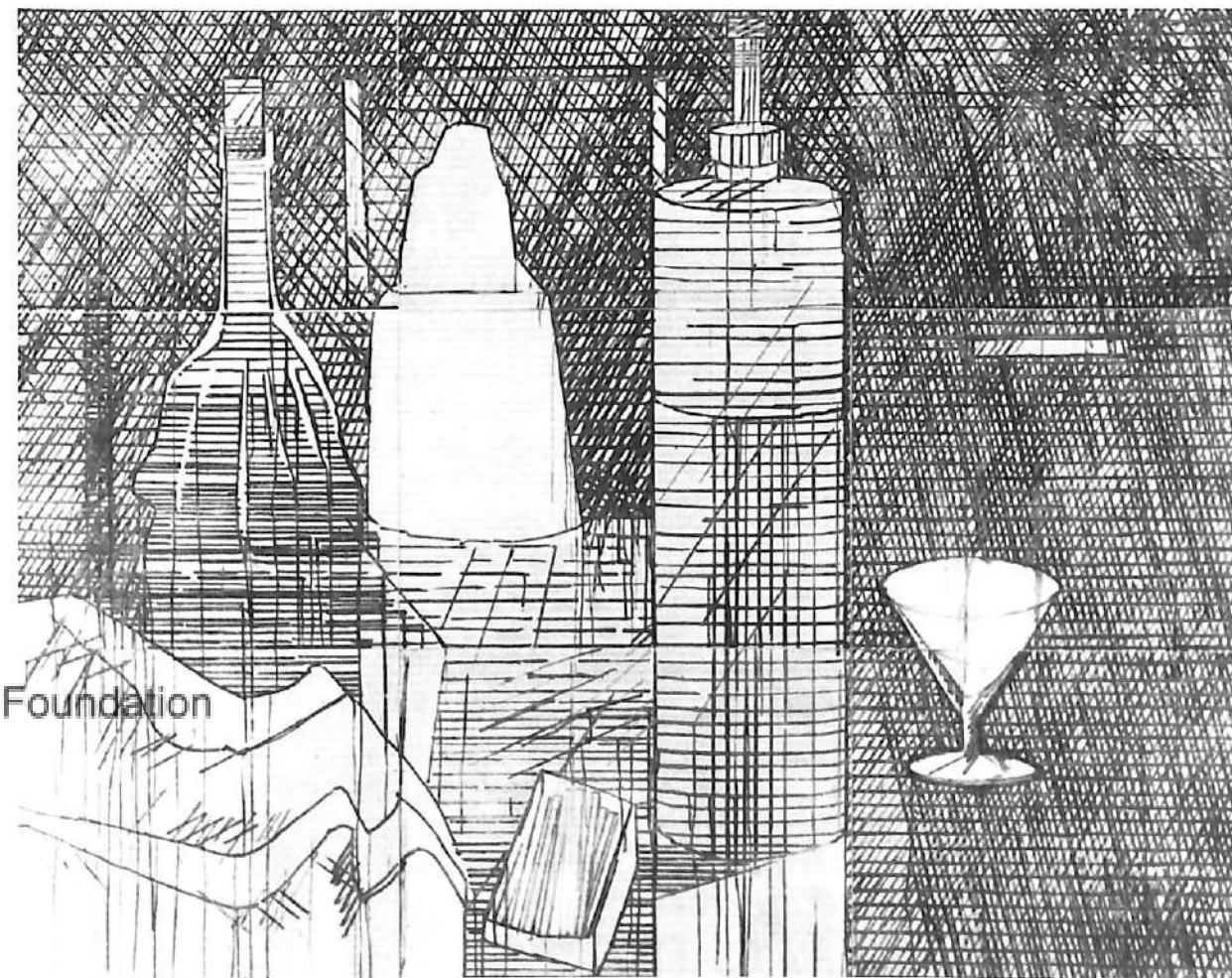
feeling about the times and how the mechanized process implied by the grid system used in these installations, represents for the artist a way of addressing, of speaking to, in, and about the basic tenor of late-twentieth century culture.

The major section of the installation consists of a rectangular frame made from grid-boards placed on the wall. Inside the rectangular frame are nine copper plates arranged in three rows of three. The grid-boards, named for the network of grids they contain, have many sections. Each section has been divided into four parallel lines, each a different color, and the lines in turn are divided into points. Each point is designated then by its color and by a different letter taken from the English and artist's native Thai alphabet. All the divisions are done at consistent intervals. The cross-hatch lines are marked on the copper plates connecting two points, each one a different section of the grid-boards. Pegs are placed in the points and a stick set up between them in order to create a guide along which the artist moves a bottle with a felt-tip filled with Dutch Mordant, rendering a particular line. The lines, that is, the points determining the lines, are determined in advance by the artist in a written score, where the points (called by their colors and numbers) are used like musical notes. And

the basic technique is employed much like a musical instrument.

The score itself is a response to the drawing of the still-life objects, the prototypical Morandi image, that will be embraced into the cross-hatch system. A truly awesome work to consider, *Metamorphosis on the Theme of Morandi III* demands the audience to come to terms with the exciting art aspect of printmaking. Laucharoen's notion of the print as an extension of process is forcefully expressed here. For example, the marked-up plates shown in the installation have a powerful presence in and of themselves, rivaling that of the print pulled from them. And which is the more beautiful image? No easy answers are offered about this or the issues of repetition and originality also embodied by the installation. The process is one which anyone can use, as the artist notes, since all it takes is employing the grid-boards and the other materials in specific ways mapped out in the structure and following the score, much like hardware and software computer programs. Unlike computers, however, this process depends on the human element for execution. Each time it is activated, the installation will be different. Art like life thrives on the unpredictable. And, as Prawat Laucharoen in so many ways shows, that goes for printmaking, too.

Ronny Cohen 1986



Metamorphosis on the Theme of Morandi III, 6'8" x 8'8", 1986.

By nature, printmaking is a medium which has many aspects. For instance, the technique of scrubbing and painting onto a sheet of glass or a metal plate and printing the image, constitutes the method of a monoprint. A second example, where the image is built up and raised higher than the surface or further exaggerated by casting a form into paper as high relief, is called an embossed print. The first approach carries the characteristic of painting, while the second leans more toward sculpture in quality.

With its tendency toward achieving a wide variety of effects, printmaking has largely come to be understood as a craft, or moreover, as a super-craft. In executing a print, printmakers have been admired for their sense of detail and precision more so than for their intuition as potential artists.

In considering the somewhat obvious definitions of printmaking and in understanding the role of the printmaker as a kind of technician, a much more important element, inherent in the print itself, is easily overlooked. This concept stems from the principle governing the actual making of the print, or how the image comes to be through the process of printmaking.

The reciprocation of elements in nature creates certain effects. A living organism, packed in earth for a million years, can produce a fossil and by the same token, the action of wind can draw a groove in the hardest of stones over a period of time. In each situation, natural conditions act as the designers of very different and unique qualities.

The use of tools and the chemistry involved in printmaking dictate a similar situation to those aroused by the powers of nature. In nature, however, a structured pattern is predetermined. Unlike nature, the result of what ultimately appears on the plate has been mediated by the experience and decisions of the printmaker. A sprinkling of mordant on the metal will cause a multitude of dots to appear, whereas the high temperature applied by the heat of a torch will melt through the plate and make a hole. Vastly different results are made possible. The presence and knowledge of the printmaker is a factor which is as much a tool as any one of the applied techniques manifested through the craft. The process, therefore, is not a mechanical one but rather one where the potential is unlimited. The printmaker has at hand the possibility of exploring all variables. When he goes beyond the technical decisions required by his craft, he is likely to discover its art aspect.

In the printmaking medium, one is confronted with the raw state of certain materials. To be able to draw upon what is fundamental to those materials and initiate a process based upon that creates a new form. Call it art, if you will. The new form which results is not concerned with image, although an image may literally be what emerges. Image, here, is more a component of the creative process, a phenomenon which occurs as part of it. The process is continuous, alive and institutes an irrevocable situation of cause and effect.

Prawat Laucharoen

Born in Thailand and graduated from Silpakorn University. Prawat Laucharoen has been living in New York City since 1969. In 1971 he was awarded a Fellowship from Pratt Institute in New York, where he then obtained his MFA in Painting and Printmaking in 1972. He has been the recipient of grants from the John D. Rockefeller Fund, and the governments of Great Britain, Morocco and Thailand.

Laucharoen teaches printmaking at Hunter College, the Horace Mann-Barnard School in Riverdale, and at New Rochelle's Webster Magnet School. He has also taught at Teachers College-Columbia University, the Blackburn Printmaking Workshop and at Pratt Graphics Center. As a lithographer, he worked with Irwin Hollander at the Hollander Workshop and at Chiron Press in New York City.

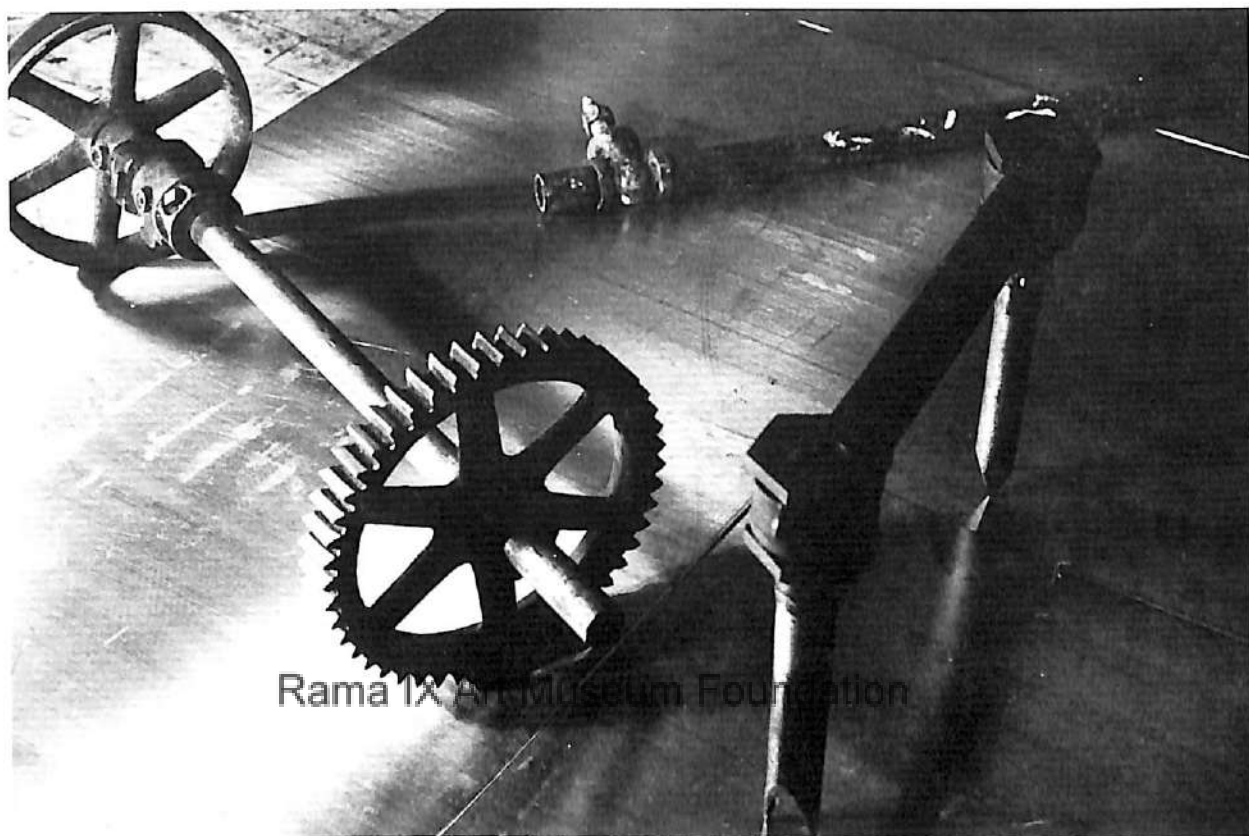
In 1974, Laucharoen established his own printmaking workshop, and has been an independent printmaker since. Collaborative projects have been with Adolph Gottlieb, David Hockney, Alex Katz, Larry Rivers and Philip Pearlstein.

Laucharoen has exhibited in Thailand and in various museums and galleries throughout the United States, as well as in China, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and Australia. Among publications which have critiqued his work are: *The New York Times*, *Art News*, and *Print Collector's Newsletter*.

The following is a partial list of exhibitions:

Valdosta State College of Art, Georgia, 1978. Nobe Gallery, New York, 1978. Alpha Gallery, Singapore, 1976. Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, Bangkok, Thailand, 1976. Trio Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand, 1969. Alliance-Francaise Institute, Bangkok, Thailand, 1968. *Group Shows*: Asian American Institute, New York, 1986. Hunter College, New York, 1986. International Print Exhibition, Republic of China, 1983. Guild Hall Museum, New York, 1982. Twenty-second National Print Exhibition, The Brooklyn Museum, 1981. Pratt Graphic Center's Traveling Exhibit of Prints, 1971-1974. Eighth International Exhibit of Prints, Japan, 1972-1973. Herbert Benevy Gallery, New York, 1972. First International Biennial Exhibit of Prints, Seoul, Korea, 1970. Touring Exhibit, Malaysia, 1966. Sydney Arts Festival, Sydney, Australia, 1965.

Special thanks to Janice De Marino and Fred Deitzel.



Subject to Change Without Notice II, installation of 6 copper plates with mechanical devices, 7'6" x 5'4", 1986.