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Celestial Art: An Interview with Geoff MacEwan

Nicholas Campion

September 2015 sees the next exhibition at the Joan Oliver 'Maneu' Galeria d'Art in Palma, Mallorca, of work by Geoff MacEwan, one of the most important British artists working in Spain. The exhibition will coincide with the annual 'Nit de l'Art', a major event in the Spanish artistic calendar. MacEwan has lived on the island of Mallorca since 1991, and shuttles back and forth between the UK and his Mediterranean home. He originally settled on the island when a fellowship from the Miró Foundation enabled him to work with Joan Barbera, Joan Miró's printmaker.

MacEwan's work is held in many public and private collections including The National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh, the Fundació Joan Miro in Palma de Mallorca and the Contemporary Prints Department in The Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

I interviewed MacEwan in 2014 in his home in Soller, Mallorca, following the exhibition of his work at the Christ Church Picture Gallery in Oxford from 12 March to 5 May 2014. The exhibition was timed to coincide with the city's annual Times Literary Festival, and featured twenty-seven out of a total of forty-four prints inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy*. As the exhibition notes told us, 'Dante's Divine Comedy has inspired artists for centuries; among them the British artist Geoff MacEwan, whose abstract visual interpretation of the text invites us to look and read again'.¹

Dante's *Divine Comedy* occupies a midway point in western thought between the soul's ascent to the stars poetically described in Plato's *Republic*, and modern celestial journey literature from Jules Verne to Arthur C. Clarke. All share the proposition that wisdom is to be found in

¹ 'Inferno – Purgatory – Paradise: Geoff MacEwan interprets Dante's Divine Comedy', Christchurch Picture Gallery, Oxford, 12 March - 5 May 2014, at <http://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/gallery/exhibitions/current> [accessed 4 June 2014].

a journey to the stars. There have been several significant visual interpretations of the *Divine Comedy*, perhaps the most well known being Gustave Doré's. Over the past thirty years MacEwan has given Dante's its most radical, imaginative and impressionistic treatment.

NC: Geoff, where did you train to be an artist?

GM: First of all at Goldsmiths and then for two years at the Slade as a postgraduate. I was very lucky to have had my early training at Goldsmiths when Andrew Forge was principal. His approach was very open and not over controlling. We had Basil Beattie and Bert Irving as painting tutors and I also got valuable input from the sculpture department. At the Slade it was different.

NC: In what way?

GM: It was 1967 and respect for painting itself was being challenged. The Vietnam War had polluted all things American, the critic Clement Greenberg who had championed *avant garde* American Painting lost his authoritative hold, and a new critique started to emerge based more on philosophical and sociological investigation than pictorial innovation.

The concept of illustration was very much looked down on. We were painters and not illustrators! The painting was a thing in itself. This was a totally modernist conception, of course, and the people that were held up as exemplars were artists such as Mondrian, Pollock, Rothko and the abstract expressionists. Illustration was looked down on because anything that had a literary reference was regarded as second-rate. Yet because I was always interested in literature, there was always in me a desire to find a way to bring words and images together. When I went through a political phase, a lot of the texts I used were rousing passages from Marx, which I wouldn't use now. The student riots of '68 in Paris accelerated this process of critical fermentation. Boundaries between disciplines were being broken down. I'd been accepted by the college on the basis of my paintings, but in the two years I was there I didn't produce a single one.

NC: So what did you do?

GM: I worked with two other students—Maggi Hambling and Harry Biggin—on a multi media project called *A Space of Five Times*.² We showed it at the Grabowski Gallery in South Kensington in 1969.

NC: *And after that?*

GM: I had to get a job. By this time I was married with a small son. I took all sorts of work, but none of it paid enough. Then I got taken back by the Slade as a technical assistant and a year later went to work as a part-time lecturer at Falmouth School of Art. At the end of that year they didn't renew my contract. Once more I was out of work but meantime my marriage had folded. I decided to reinvent myself, so for the next five years I worked in the electronics industry, first as an illustrator and then as a writer. I had given up on Art and its Objects.

I was very confused and angry. I had thoroughly lost my way and everything I touched was tainted by bitterness. My work as a technical writer kept me occupied and in the end paid me very well, but it was a hollowed out existence. Finally I had to deal with my personal demons and only after that did I return to painting. I don't in the least regret this absence, it was a very important prelude to the next stage in my life. I came back to painting very committed and inspired.

NC: *When did you decide to work from the Divine Comedy?*

GM: When I gave up my job as a writer I was living in a remote village twenty miles outside Edinburgh. My first exhibition was with a small but progressive gallery called the 369 Gallery. My work for that show consisted of large paintings on paper which also included text. Their imagery was drawn from the very wild landscape in which I was living and the texts were either homemade or else quotations from whatever I was reading at the time.

NC: *OK. So now you were working with words as well as images.*

GM: Yes and I was very happy with this combination. The largest piece in that show was called *O clouds unfold*, from William Blake's words in 'Jerusalem', and was inspired by the Polish revolution and the movement of Russian troops up to the border in 1981—a moment of very high tension. I managed to combine a map of Europe with a merged

² Hilary Whitney, 'theartsdesk Q&A: Artist Maggi Hambling' at <http://www.theartsdesk.com/visual-arts/theartsdesk-qa-artist-maggi-hambling> [accessed 4 Jun 2014].

Landscape/Sunset, with Blake's words over-stenciled. The piece was 2 metres by 4 and flanked by 2 side panels containing quotations from Engels and Thoreau.

NC: Do you have any photographs of this work?

GM: Nowadays I could have taken plenty, but in those days it was problematic and I was strangely careless about these pieces. They were meant to be transitory, like wall posters in China. I was still in thrall to a politicized art, but without knowing how to achieve it. My decision to work from Dante was actually an attempt to resolve this dilemma.

NC: There are different readings of Dante, obviously, but one is that he was working in a tradition in which the celestial journey brought the soul closer to God. How do you interpret that in your work and motivation?

GM: Well, in this lies an irony because, by choosing to work from Dante, I was moving away from any direct social-political critique and was engaged instead with the conflicts within my own psyche. In fact I'd embarked on a spiritual journey.

NC: You started with the Inferno. How did you go about it?

GM: Page by page, just as if I was experiencing the poem as a journey in real time. These were paintings—oil on paper—and I worked quite quickly. I had a problem with choosing a translation. I found Henry Cary's translation unreadable so instead I chose a prose text by John Sinclair. There were 25 images in the series. I didn't impose meanings outside the text. Instead I allowed the poem to dictate the imagery and its treatment.

I dealt with it in a very sort of straightforward way. I simply read the poem and whenever I felt an image rise I painted. It was programmatic, and I didn't search for anything beyond what the text stimulated or gave rise to an image.

NC: I hate labels but that's in the tradition of surrealism, in the sense of allowing the image to arise spontaneously.

GM: I have always tried to avoid interfering with spontaneous images as they emerge during a painting. The biggest influence from my Art School days was Anton Ehrensweig with whom I only exchanged a handful of words. His 1953 book *The Hidden Order of Art* made a great impression on me and other artists of my generation. It taught me to accept confusion

as a necessary stage in the process of arriving at an image and its completion. In other words, it taught me not to be fearful.

NC: So, if you're reading the words and an image arises inside you, does that image come from just you as an individual? I'm asking because there's a school of thought that claims that the image arises from the collective unconscious. Have you ever thought about that? Do you think the image is yours and you are able as an individual to create a meaningful image which then speaks to other people? Or, if an image arises, does it arise from something universal.

GM: There are obviously collective archetypes, symbols that recur time and again throughout art history. I arrive at my images through the process of painting. They come into being as a result of attempting to resolve the technical problems of composition because, for me, painting is structured dialogue. I am continuously sensitive to what is happening on the canvas; watchful for those footprints which will carry the painting forward. Hunting and tracking are good metaphors for my way of working. As for whether I think of my images as specifically mine: they have come into being as a result of my actions but once they are visible and have been given a context, they belong to the collective of images.

Over the years certain images have made a regular appearance in my work, and it isn't because they have very precise meanings for me but because at some point in the process they add symbolic weight to a painting, a weight by association.

My painting at the time was quite expressionistic, and at the same time linked with natural forms. I was very straightforward in the sense that I tried to make each image cope if possible: cope symbolically but also cope in a particular way, carrying the weight of the ambience as if we would go down into the inferno, itself.

For example, the pomegranate is a very beautiful fruit, and has associations for me with autumn in London and a first love affair. I know the story of Persephone and four seeds—pomegranate seeds—that she was tricked into eating by Hades, and how that explains the seasons. But, above all, I love the fruit for its beauty, the acid yellow pith, the delicate colours of the tightly packed seeds and the russet peel. It stands for life and plenty.

So when I produced the paper work *Night Flight*, based on Bush's bombing of Afghanistan, I included a pomegranate as a contradictory presence and later, in a series of etchings called *Cascaras* I drew the twisted husk of the empty fruit as a symbol of our mortality.

NC: The pomegranate already had an archetypal identity but, as you pointed out, it had intimate associations for you. So when you inserted it into your drawing it was loaded with a whole range of meanings, and not just private ones.

GM: The whole business is complicated in the sense that if you've been an artist for any length of time you will have looked at a lot of art and absorbed a great deal of it. When I'm working I'll often be reminded of another person's work in a chance coincidence of brushwork. So I have memories of what I've seen before and may even use them. For instance, the image of Beatrice at the end of the *Purgatorio* is based very loosely on Blake's *Beatrice Addressing Dante from the Car*, which was part of the Tate's collection that I've known since I was a student.

The process produces the shadow of something and I guide it into being. Some artists say that they feel they are a channel through which something flows from outside themselves into their work. The pieces that succeed are those in which this transubstantiation isn't blocked.

But what is interesting and was something that I did not determine but came about quite naturally, was that the first illustration in the *Purgatorio* (Canto 1) (Fig. 1) was very structured. It's a very structured linear piece and in black and blue.

And then the final image (Fig. 2, *The Earthly Paradise*) is totally loose and dynamic and all the constraint has gone, and because it's an earthly paradise, it's in a vegetable form, and it's also like a dance. So you can see that, as the *Purgatorio* unfolds, the structures become progressively looser. Gradually there is a moving away from the initial and oppressive structure.

NC: Your first work based on Dante was a series of paintings that you exhibited at the 369 Gallery in Edinburgh. What year was that?

GM: 1982. Andrew Brown, the Gallery's Director, was very supportive. He produced a fine Letter-press catalogue with an introduction by Jonathan Usher from the University's Italian Department. I sold the whole set of paintings privately several years later.

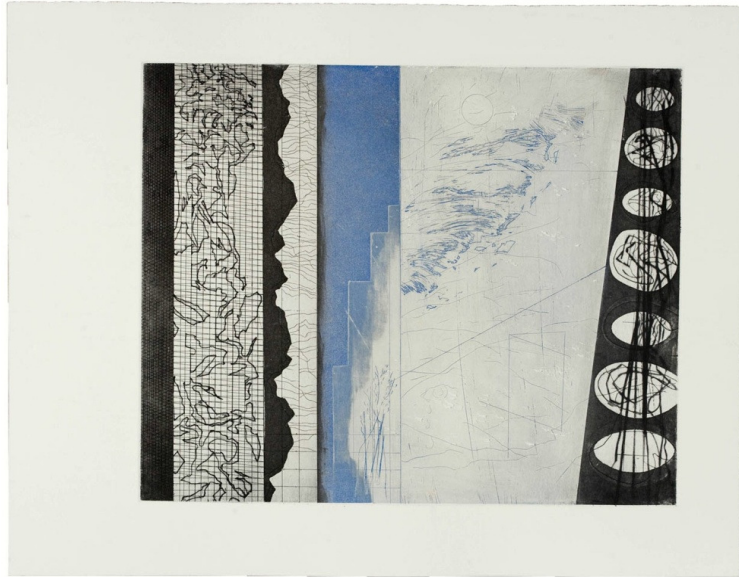


Fig. 1: *Purgatorio* Canto 1 (*The Reed Bed*).



Fig. 2: *Purgatorio* plate 15 (*The Earthly Paradise*).

NC: When did you start the printed editions of the Divine Comedy?

GM: In 1990 I was commissioned by Edinburgh University Library to create a limited edition of 21 etchings based on the Inferno. Just after that project ended I left Scotland and then there was a gap of twenty years before Joan Oliver Maneu in Mallorca supported my production of the *Purgatorio*. The plates based on the *Paradiso* followed three years later.

NC: Twenty years is a long time. You obviously worked on many other pieces.

GM: Yes. I was very productive. A series of paintings, works on paper and latterly several folios of prints. Four one man shows.

NC: Did you have access to a print studio?

GM: I didn't have a press in Mallorca until eight years ago, so I had to go to Madrid and work with a very accomplished printer there. I did four projects with Dan Benveniste; all of them turned out really well. His technical ability is phenomenal and he has the sensitivity and intellectual rigour of an artist.

I produced *El Proceso de Ramon Lull* in Madrid. It's the finest piece that I've ever produced and the perfect example of what I was talking about earlier. It simply flowed into being—not without a lot of effort of course. And there was a serious moment that confirmed Anton Ehrensweig's psycho-analytical approach to creativity.

NC: When was this?

GM: 1994. I was introduced to Dan Benveniste by the then curator of Prints at La Reina Sofia. I wanted to work on a very large plate and Dan's studio had a huge press. My idea was to etch a plate and print the edition; then add more to the plate and print again. We would take the plate through six stages and end up with six complete sets. There was the danger of messing up half way through, but that was exciting

Along the way we ran into a Resistance. By the fourth stage I was so worn out - I'd been in Madrid for six weeks - that I wanted to end the project on the fifth stage. The fourth print was very dark indeed and I wanted to conclude the series by physically scraping the whole plate clean. Dan disagreed. Five in a series was awkward. Two-one-two is not ideal. Also, with very little work on the plate the overall blackness could be subtly scraped away to reveal its hidden structure. I held out all afternoon. And come the evening we were back on track.

But why had I stood in the way of the complete unfolding of the image at its most crucial stage? Because the progress of this work demanded that the darkness should be analyzed and clarified—only then could the final print have its redemptive meaning. In this incident I recognized a deep-rooted carelessness that had either spoilt or distorted many of my actions, artistic or otherwise.



Fig. 3: Ramon Lull 1.



Fig. 4: Ramon Lull 4.

NC: So the artist himself often stands in his own light?

GM: It's often the case. That particular instance was very dramatic. Even now, years later, I feel a little like someone who almost deserted and had to be persuaded to stay.

NC: Coming back to Dante, the first image that really struck me was that of The Penitents from your version of the Purgatorio, with the faces stitched together.

GM: The eyes sewn up. Horrible, but at least they have the consolation of an eventual release and their suffering is an act of reconstruction. And as well as reparation for their Envy. In the previous plate the painter Oderisi da Gubbio is being purged of Pride and Dante uses him as a justifier of his own poetic work.³

Oderisi, the medieval illuminator, has felt the sting of injured pride but he now realizes that there is a natural progression in Art and gives a little homily on the subject mentioning Giotto and Dante as those who are in forefront of the new style. Oderisi is a sort of alter ego for me. I've felt a little like him from time to time.

Dante placed Oderisi in the Circle of Pride. It's interesting because it's a little bit of art history. Oderisi was what would be called a Paris illuminator. In other words, he would be considered old-fashioned by someone, say, like Giotto, who Dante mentions in the same passage. Oderisi was still essentially medieval and feels he hasn't been given due credit for this work. But, as a result of being in purgatory, he explains to Dante that art is a moveable feast. It moves on and, as a result, some people get left behind. First one person is holding the torch, then another. Then he too will fall back and someone else will take his place. Of course, Dante uses this passage as an opportunity to push his new style of writing, using Oderisi as an example of the person who is left behind. And so Oderisi has always been quite an important figure for me, left behind as he is, in the *Purgatorio*.

In the *Purgatorio* I tried to bring lightness to the judgmental structure. Unlike the *Inferno*, where there is no repentance but only the claustrophobia of repeated anguish, the penitents are rising through proscribed punishments towards their release.

In the first Plate of the series—*The Reed Bed*—the image of an angel's wing is hemmed in by vertical columns representing the Hell that Dante has left behind, and the mountain of Purgatory that he will have to climb. It's a tightly disciplined composition. Only the blue gives it any lightness. The final plate—*The Earthly Paradise*—shares the same blue; this was a deliberate linkage, otherwise the image is the exact opposite; a free-flowing and floral celebration of release.

³ The thirteenth century painter Oderisi da Gubbio. Dante, *Purgatorio*, XI, pp. 79-123.

NC: From what?

GM: Guilt.



Fig. 5: *Pride* (*Purgatorio* plate 9).



Fig. 6: *Envy* (*Purgatorio* plate 8).

NC: How deeply did you become involved in the religious philosophy of the poem?

GM: As I said earlier, I came to the poem hoping to resolve the problem of art's relation to politics; after all, the *Comedia* is full of political theory and invective, so I could have taken a contemporary fix and found present day equivalents; but instead I became involved in the dramas of the various individuals that haunt the circles of hell and the terraces of purgatory.

You'll perhaps think it strange when I tell you that I believed everything that I read, that I was convinced by Dante's grand design and believed in its redemptive power. This is something that art can do. It can break through the carapace of ennui and intellectual cynicism. What do you feel when you listen to the final chorus of Bach's St. Matthew Passion? I think awe gets close to what I feel.

NC: Is this what art is for you? A means whereby you can approach the unsayable—the awesome?

GM: A few years ago I was in Madrid working on a project with Dan and went as usual to the Prado to revisit my favourite paintings. They have an altar piece there by Van Weyden which depicts Christ being taken down from the cross. It's a powerful and acknowledged masterpiece which draws you into a drama of grief and disappointment. Like all great works it holds you in thrall. Later on the same day I went to an exhibition of videos by Bill Viola and watched a piece called *Emergence 2002*.⁴ This 12-minute video, involving 3 actors, was a dramatization of a deposition and an enactment of grief that was inspired by a 15th Century fresco by Masolino da Panicelli. Both the painting and the video, through their extreme precision of construction, provide the stage for emotion to unfold.

In fact, the more I gazed at Van Weyden's painting, the more I was drawn into an emotional composition where every detail supported the sad ceremony. Nothing was surplus to the pure intention of the piece and there could be no distraction from my involvement in their grief.

In the case of Bill Viola's video, which was a projected experience, every second of the unfolding drama was intensified by the slow orchestration of the actors. The emergence of the Christ figure from the font, the spilled water and the movements of his mother and the other Mary are so filled with the dignity of love that once again nothing is

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FagLc3rOV88> [accessed 4 June 2014].

wasted or stands in the way of catharsis. One of the problems of contemporary art is how, in an atmosphere of irony and knowingness, to create the opportunity for deep emotional involvement.

NC: In terms of the literary background to Dante, there are literal ideas of the soul's ascent as a journey through the spheres of the planets to salvation, or to the divine, or self-realization. In Dante's time there was a pronounced idea that that journey is not a literal one, but takes place inside.

GM: For me the journey itself was crucial, as were Dante's portraits of the damned and the penitents. When you talk about salvation I would interpret that as the resolution of all inner contradictions. *Statius Redeemed*—Canto 25—deals with the poet's release from Purgatory. The conflicting portions of his personality have been finally resolved, but the equilibrium reached is still an earthly one. The eight *Paradise Plates* deal with what happens after. It's essentially a post-mortem process.

NC: I feel that you have a special interest in this section, over and above what has gone before. Am I right?

GM: When I first showed the Dante prints at Ca'n Prunera in Soler I was very pleased to see how well all three sections interacted. I realized that I had been right to etch the *Paradise* plates in the way that I had, and that they'd ended my journey on exactly the right note.

The *Inferno* was executed in dry-point, totally consistent with the dramas of that section. The *Purgatorio* required a measure of restraint so the etches were never very deep or extensive and were softened by colour; but the *Paradise Plates* were heavily worked on from the beginning, not just with acid and aquatint but also with extensive scraping away and burnishing. The text for this section was unwritten. There was no effort to translate; everything evolved from moment to moment, from day to day, week to week. Don't ask for meanings, I told myself, just do it.

NC: How long did it take you?

GM: A long time. Almost six months. But I was so absorbed in their genesis that I hardly noticed, even when there were setbacks. For me it was like working on a large painting. Very intense. I would stand for hours looking at a plate, running my finger over its surface, feeling the lines and textures as if I was a blind man in search of a landscape.

NC: Did you find one?

GM: In the end I found an archetypal sequence and something I hadn't expected, but which was consistent with everything that had gone before. I always felt this last section had to reflect the didactic tone of the *Paradiso*. That's why I chose Canto 2, where Beatrice explains the distribution of Divine energy and why the Moon is stained in the way that it is as the subject matter for the first plate. After that the rest of the series followed on very easily and naturally.

NC: These prints have a very cosmic feel to them.

GM: I know and it really feels as though immense forces are at play here that are barely describable. It reminds me of the passage from Joseph Glanville that Poe quotes as a heading for his story 'A Descent into the Maelstrom', and which sums up my attitude to all things metaphysical. My idea was that the end result of the *Purgatorio* was that paradise was reached, and to that extent the internal contradictions had finally been resolved. And so now, the *Paradiso* begins after the resolution of the contradictions. My idea is that in the *Paradiso*, we are talking about what death might actually mean, what might come after death.

NC: And what did you get to with that thought?

GM: Well, I got to the *Paradiso* plates, which are meditations on that process. The interesting thing is that, when seen as a whole, they actually are very consistent—a consistent unfolding which leads to a final image (*Paradiso* Plate 8, Fig. 7), which is a form of rebirth. But I wanted to give them a cosmic feel, and I think they are very powerful from that point of view.

If you take the penultimate image (*Paradiso* Plate 7, Fig. 8), we have here, for me, the lighthouse, which for me is to search the truth and meaning. But it's also the thing that guides you home—guides the sailor home.

But the point about the seas is that the form within which the lighthouse sits is transferred to the final plate (*Paradiso* Plate 8), and it becomes the body of a woman in cross-section. What lies at the centre is something that is embryonic in all its beginnings of a new life, which ties in with the first illustration (*Paradiso* Plate 1), which looks very much like the fertilisation of the egg.

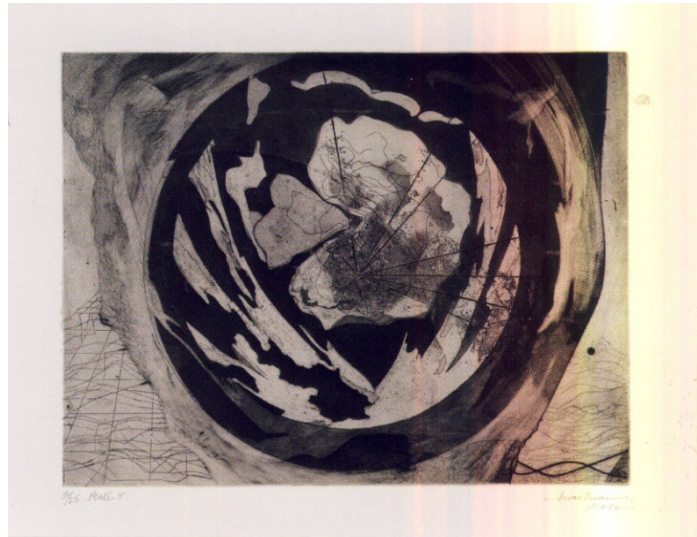


Fig. 7: *Paradiso* Plate 8.



Fig. 8: *Paradiso* Plate 7.

NC: With my assumptions I saw Plate 1 as a planet or a comet.

GM: Well, it can be whatever you want it to be! The first plate was an attempt to deal with Beatrice's very complicated description of how

God's grace flows downwards through the heavenly spheres, and it's about the moon. Dante comes up with this optical experiment. But when you look at it, you've got these little things moving towards it, so there is a penis and some sperm. I didn't conceive it like that but one can see it like that. And so, where we had one, now the one has become two. This was not consciously thought of at all. It was merely a consequence of my attempt to be cosmic, and to portray energy flowing through the universe.

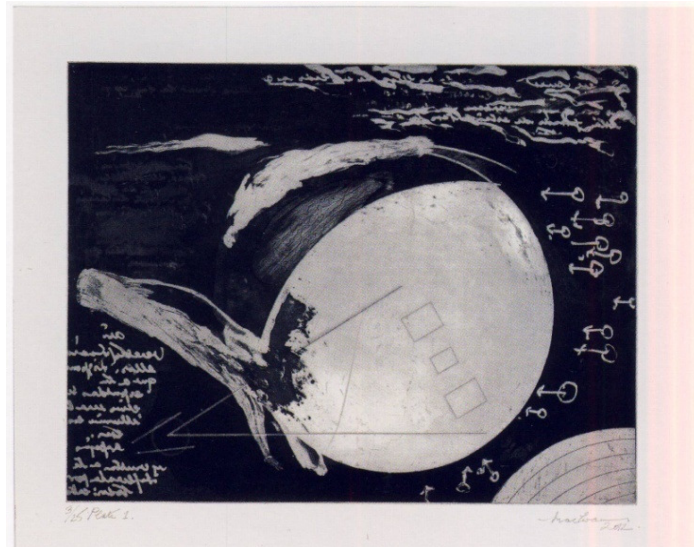


Fig. 9: *Paradiso* Plate 1.

NC: We haven't had time to discuss your other pieces, some of which deal with existential themes such as identity and the nature of consciousness. What are you working on now?

GM: I want to work from nature again, that's the best way to enter a new phase. But right now I am preparing new paintings for my exhibition in Palma in September.

NC: Thank you.

For Geoff MacEwan's work online see:

<http://geoffmacewan.blogspot.com.es/>

and

<http://www.sinclairspress.com/geoffmacewan>