



Art Preview: Craig McPherson's drawings capture soot, sweat and might of the mills

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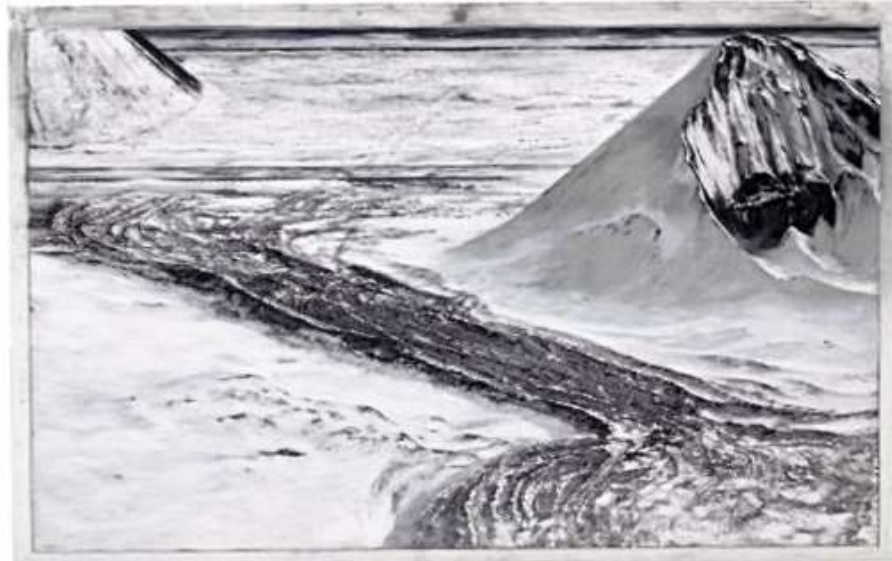


Thursday, March 06, 2008

By Mary Thomas, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Images

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Detail of "Coal Piles," a pastel on mezzotint ground by Craig McPherson in an exhibition of his work at The Frick Art & Historical Center.

Steel. Say the word in most places and people think metal or product. Say it in Pittsburgh and they're likely to think might, wealth, labor, soot and dislocation. It's personal here. And because of that, the word has an emotional edge that cuts through conversational air like a finely honed blade.



While the physical presence of the giant mills has greatly diminished, their legacy continues to inform this city and region, having been the catalyst for fortunes that remain robust, if evolved, as well as for communities that persist only as eviscerated shadows of their previous selves.

It is not so unlikely, then, that when discussing how to participate in the celebration of Pittsburgh's 250th anniversary this year, one of the subjects The Frick Art & Historical Center considered was steel.

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Craig McPherson has also given a lot of consideration to steel. A native of Wichita, Kan., he was a struggling New York artist when he first traveled to Pittsburgh with his future wife, May Miculis, to visit her mother. He was so moved by the visual drama of the fiery steel mills that he began painting them, and for more than two decades has returned once or twice a year to do so.


"Steel: Pittsburgh Drawings By Craig McPherson"

- **Where:** The Frick Art & Historical Center, 7227 Reynolds St., Point Breeze.
- **When:** Opening reception Friday evening, continuing through June 8.
- **Hours:** 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday.
- **Admission:** Free.
- **Tickets:** 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

About the Author

Mary
Thomas

 [Email Author](#)

 Call 412-263-1925

Mary Thomas, art critic since 2000, began her association with the Post-Gazette as a freelancer after moving to

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Tom Smart, former director of exhibitions and collections at The Frick, knew of McPherson's interests, dedication -- and considerable talent (he is represented in major museum and corporate collections) -- and invited the artist to prepare a solo exhibition for this celebratory year.

The result is "Steel: Pittsburgh Drawings by Craig McPherson," an exhibition of more than 30 works at The Frick Art Museum that opens Friday night.

While the subject matter is formally the mills and the style apparently realist, one notices upon moving through the show that McPherson, rather than simply a documentarian of edifices, reflects in his vision the visceral complexities of steel Pittsburgh-style.

That breadth of exploration is also characteristic of the work exhibited, some of which press the definition of "drawings," and all of which explode preconceived expectations.

The exhibition's three rooms address, generally, mill exteriors, mill interiors and, lastly, a mix of subject matter that suggests the culturally altering impact of the Industrial Age. A majority of the works were created in the past couple of years specifically for this exhibition.

The mills McPherson visits (and revisits) -- the Edgar Thomson Plant and Clairton (coke) Works -- are viable entities as well as being factories that Henry Clay Frick was involved with, the latter making them especially pertinent to display at The Frick.

One senses that the structures themselves are a take-off point, the base line for a variety of exploration -- of light, of technique, of medium, of change and, tellingly, of psyche.

"E.T.," for example, a large (66 by 120 inches) oil pastel on linen, is not so much an end in itself but a manifestation of presence, into which is incorporated a past and a future. With its implicit narrative of change, it reflects McPherson's interest in cinema. The artist points out that this view of the plant in essence no longer exists, the foliage having grown sufficiently to block it. The sprawling mill, presented in black, white and tones of deep blue, appears like a mythical city with a life of its own, independent of anything -- or one -- beyond. (It's telling that the artist has titled it "E.T.," which calls to mind extra-terrestrial as much as Edgar Thomson.)

McPherson compares his approach here to that of Monet in series such as "Haystacks" or "Rouen Cathedral," which reflect the variances of different times of day or year. "This is kind of my Haystack series. Each is a variation, technically, coloristically or whatever. They're about texture, about atmosphere, and about light."

Tuesday through Sunday.

- **Catalog:** Includes full-color reproductions of all exhibition works and a conversation between McPherson and Sarah Hall, Frick Director of Curatorial Affairs (\$14.95, members \$13.50).

- **More information:** 412-371-0600 or www.TheFrickPittsburgh.org.

Where "E.T." is loose and expressive in its application of the tactile pastel, graphite drawings such as "Clairton, From the Hill" are breathtakingly precise. McPherson's range of tone -- articulating snow and steam, shadow and smoke, with equal dexterity and definition -- comes from a mastery of technique, a respect for craftsmanship, and, mostly, an act of will. They are, upon close examination, unbelievably exquisite.

It is from this commitment to excellence that the artist chose to work in mezzotint, a somewhat archaic printmaking method that he is resurrecting. It is itself excruciatingly demanding but provides the closest match to the aesthetic he strives for in his drawings.

An example is the black and white rendering of a street in "Braddock," its collapsing homes and desolation revealed under the dim glow of street lights.

At other times, McPherson builds upon a painstakingly prepared mezzotint ground with pastels that hover above the surface with saturated intensity, as with two renditions of an "Oven" that is reduced to rugged metal surfaces and a glowing red hole. "These I think of as kind of my Rothkos," McPherson says of them, underscoring both the abstract and the metaphysical aspects of his work.

He credits an exhibition of work by Japanese artist Hokusai at the Sackler Gallery in Washington, D.C., as inspiration for the vertical composition of the graphite drawing "Clairton, River." Adding a blank white sheet to the bottom was a brilliant decision, the space allowing the viewer to drop off into contemplation.

Frequently, McPherson's huge factory complexes appear capable of vanishing within the flowing gaseous matter and steam they exude, a representation that for some will seem a romantic allusion to their gradual fade into history, for others a chilling reminder of the period during which the mills began to shut down.

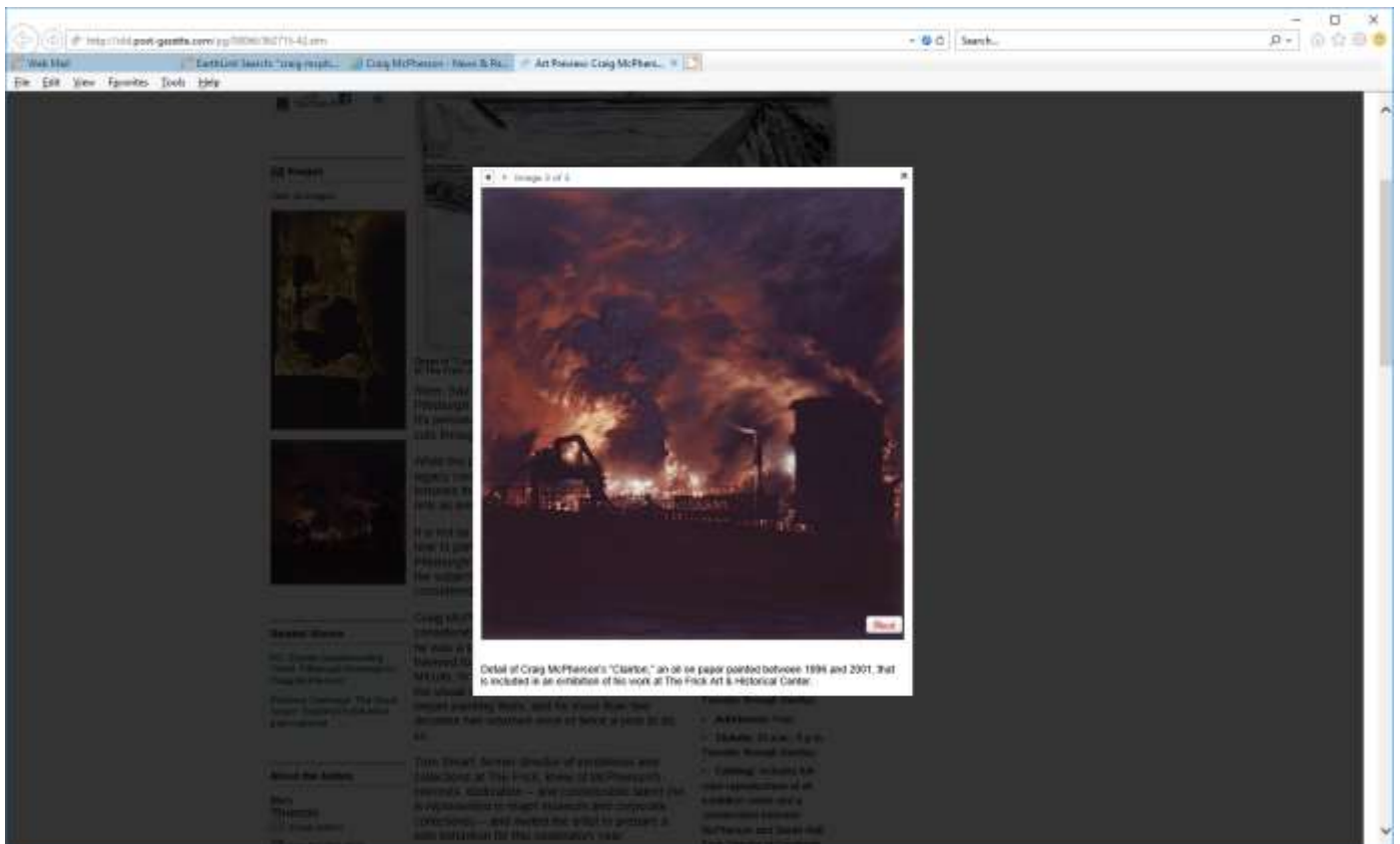
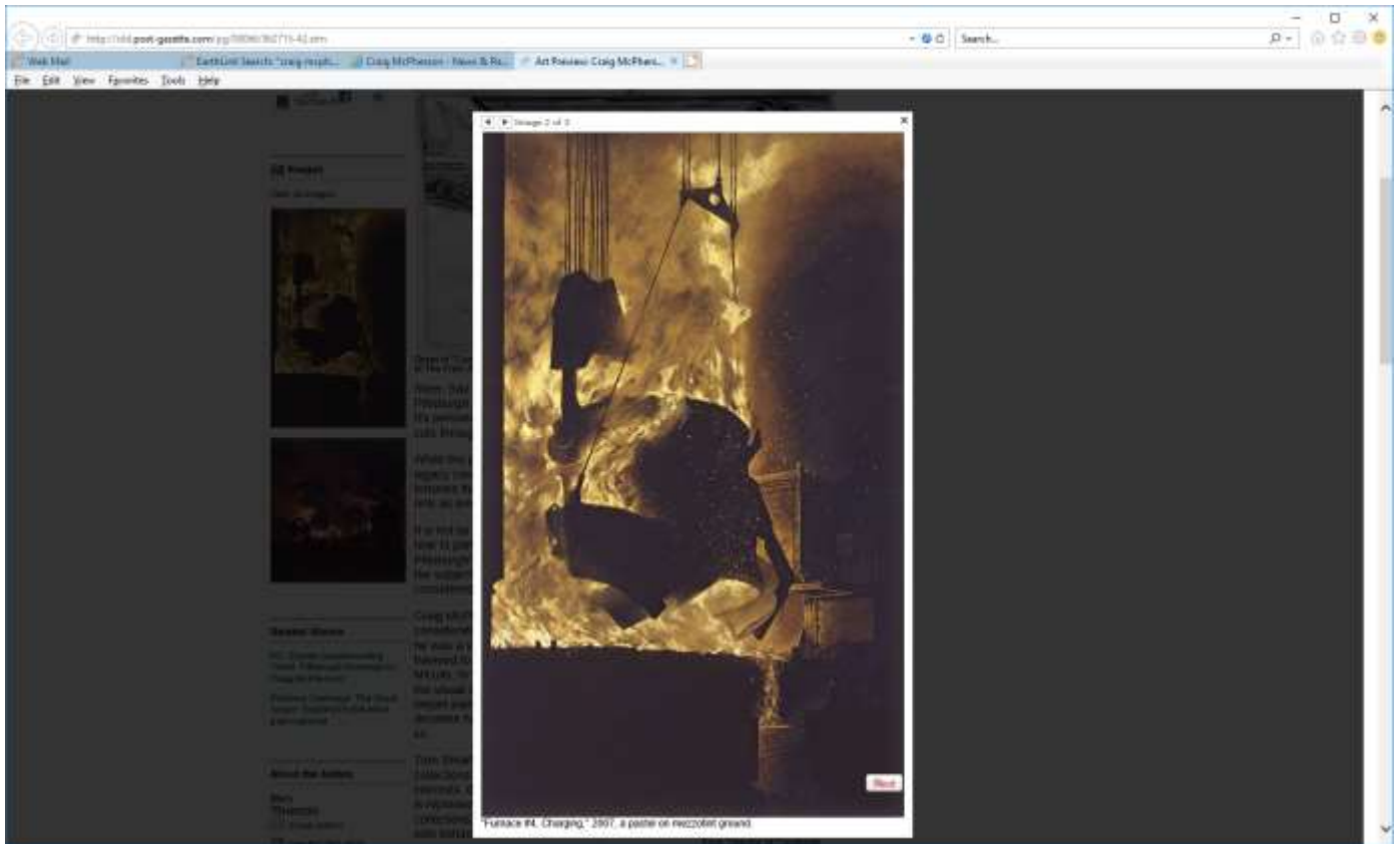
At each turn, McPherson astounds. "Strip Mine," amazing for its size as well as its workmanship (a 33¹/₂-by-54¹/₂-inch pastel on mezzotint ground), references the expansiveness of the land as well as its desecration in a scape as lean as a Giacometti. The artist sees Caspar David Friedrich, while Frick director of curatorial affairs Sarah Hall sees the burned fields of Anselm Kiefer. They are all present.

Perhaps most evocative is the image of a "Stripped Car," abandoned and covered with snow, that McPherson says, "for me [is] kind of a memento mori." Behind the car, itself half-buried in the white drifts, is an oil drum with flames leaping out of it into the icy air. But there are no hands to warm. The car lies, skeletal, like the carcasses of cattle stranded in a deadly blizzard, perhaps on the plains of the artist's native Kansas. Symbol of American expansion, power and freedom, the scene presages the decline of the automobile and suggests a resultant impact upon American culture that would parallel that of the mill closings upon Pittsburgh.

If a mill at full operation exudes almost transcendental grandeur, this is surely the antithesis. And it's a valid part of the expansive look that McPherson has brought to his subject.

Post-Gazette art critic Mary Thomas may be reached at mthomas@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1925.

First published on March 6, 2008 at 12:00 am



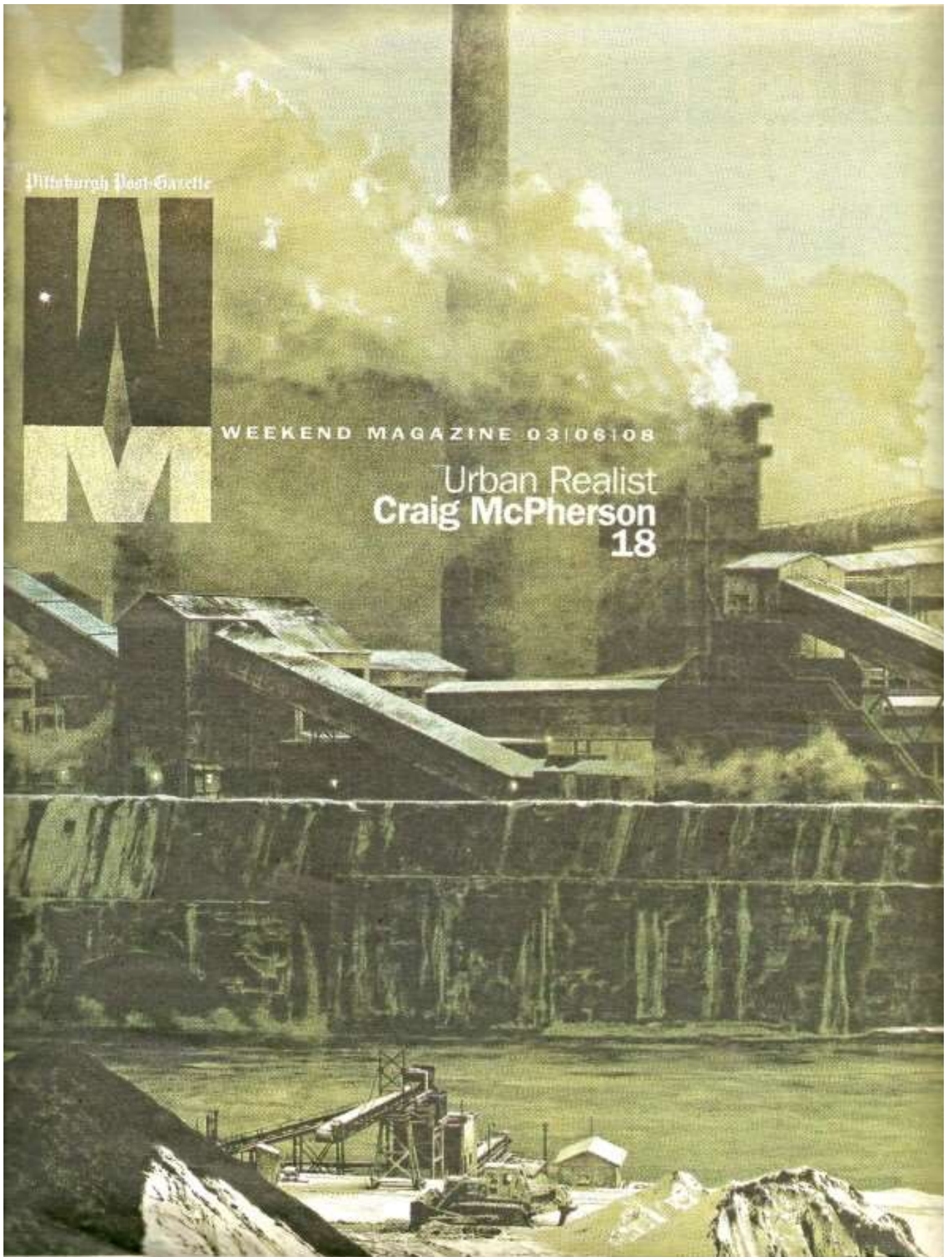
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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



WEEKEND MAGAZINE 03/06/08

Urban Realist
Craig McPherson
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COVER STORY



SHADOWS
of STEEL

OF THE MILLS

PREVIEW

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Admission: Free.

Catalog: Includes full-color reproductions of all exhibition works and a conversation between McPherson and Sarah Hall, Frick Director of Curatorial Affairs (\$34.95, members \$13.50).

Information: 412-371-0600 or www.TheFrickPittsburgh.org.

The following events have been planned to complement "Steel: Pittsburgh Drawings By Craig McPherson" at The Frick Art & Historical Center:

Friday — 6-8 p.m., opening reception with wine and hors d'oeuvres (\$25; students/members \$20; reservations recommended).

Saturday through June 8 — 2 p.m., Wednesday, Saturday, Sunday, admission tours (free).

Tuesday — 7 p.m., lecture, "Road Work — From Pittsburgh to Istanbul," by Craig McPherson. The artist will speak about painting large public murals of harbor cities around the world, as well as creating the Pittsburgh work in the exhibition. A catalog signing will follow (\$10; teachers/students/members \$8; advance registration recommended).

April 9 — 11:11-45 a.m., "Artists' Cityscapes," for kids ages 4-8 (free).

April 9 — 10 a.m.-3 p.m., "Day Trip: Urban Landscapes," at The Frick Art Museum and the Westmoreland Museum of American Art, Greensburg. Travel from the Frick by luxury motor coach to the Westmoreland where curator Barbara Jones will conduct a tour of "Seeing the City: Sloan's New York," paintings and etchings by Ashcan School artist John Sloan. Following lunch, return to the Frick for a gallery walk-through of "Steel: Pittsburgh Drawings by Craig McPherson" with Sarah Hall, director of curatorial affairs (\$50-\$40 teachers/students/members; includes boxed lunch; advance registration required).

April 22 — 7:30 p.m., "Music for Exhibitions: Bridge City Winds — Bridging Music and Art," reflections on McPherson's work through such pieces as Samuel Barber's Summer Music, Handel's Water Music and excerpts from Ravel's Tombeau de Couperin.

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STEEL

PITTSBURGH DRAWINGS BY
CRAIG MCPHERSON

MARCH 8 – JUNE 8

This exhibition is organized by the Frick Art & Historical Center and made possible by a generous grant from The Pittsburgh Foundation.

Opening Celebration

The Frick Art Museum

Friday, March 7

6:00 – 8:00 pm

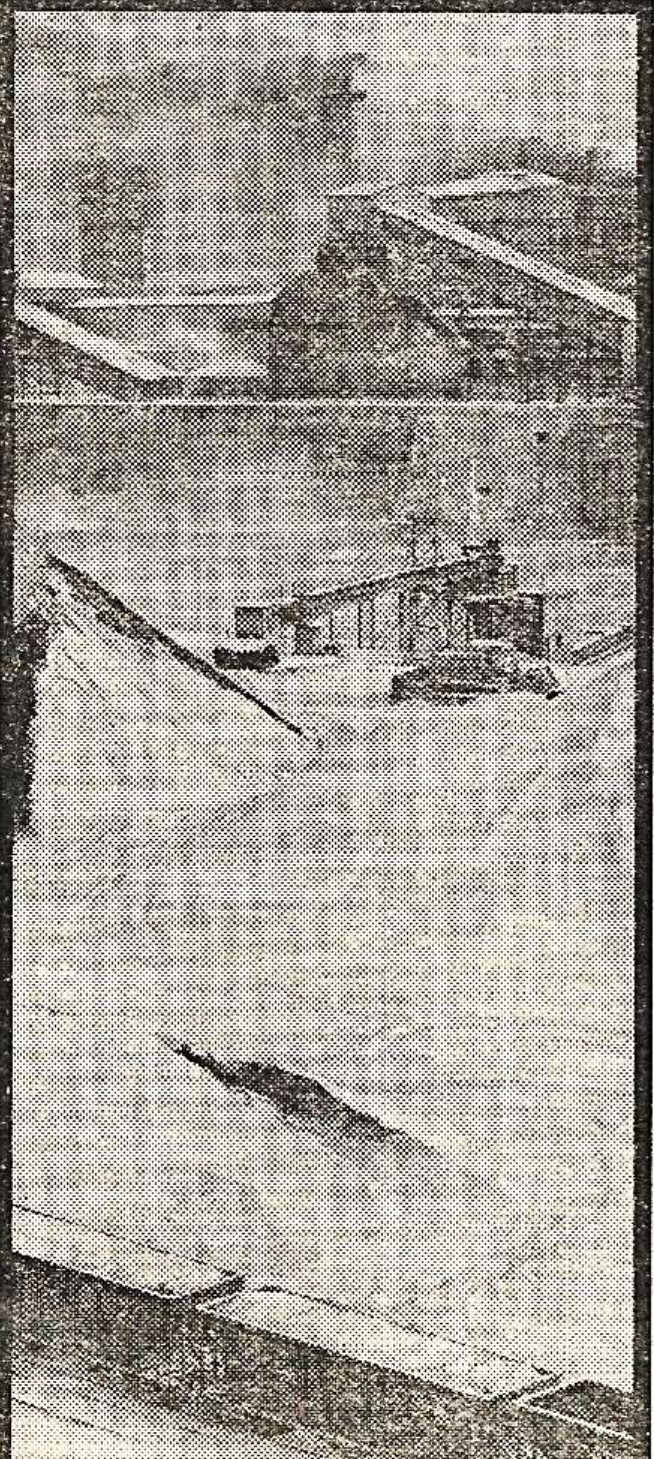
\$20 members; \$25 non-members & guests

Reservations recommended

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Image: Craig McPherson, *Clairton, River* (detail) 2006.
Graphite on paper, 77 x 21 1/2 in. Collection of the artist.



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The great 'scape: Braddock's industrial past is captured using a dying art

Sunday, May 22, 2005

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Steve Mellon, Post-Gazette

Artist Craig McPherson in front of his pastel on linen work depicting the Edgar Thomson steel mill in Braddock.

**By Lillian Thomas
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette**

NEW YORK -- Craig McPherson chose a nearly lost art to depict a dying one after his first time through the Fort Pitt Tunnel, into the night of Pittsburgh.



Steve Mellon, Post-Gazette

Reviving a lost art, Craig McPherson made some of his own tools to work in mezzotint, a

It was 1982, and his Braddock-born fiancée, May Miculis, was driving.

"It was an overcast winter night, and, looking up the river as we emerged from the tunnel, you could see two sprawling steel mills in the distance," wrote McPherson, a New York artist. "Just then, the sky flared from a pour [of molten steel], orange through gray clouds of smoke, which was reflected the length of the river."

tools to work in mezzotint, a painstaking process that requires long hours of roughening a copper plate before ink can be applied. This work shows a street in Braddock and, beyond, the Edgar Thomson Works.

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

If you go ...

• **Where:** A number of Craig McPherson's steel works, as well as works inspired by theater, are on display through May 27 at the Forum Gallery, 745 Fifth Ave. at 57th Street, New York.

• **Information:** 212-355-4545.

Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C.; the Whitney Museum of Art in New York; and the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh.

His gigantic mural cycle of world harbors, commissioned by the American Express Co. for its corporate headquarters, stretches 400 feet around the lobby of the building.

To render the steel images that came from his visits here, McPherson chose mezzotint, a print-making process used in the 17th through 19th centuries to reproduce portraits and other paintings and made obsolete by photography more than a century ago.

Few artists produce mezzotints today, and here's why:

McPherson, 56, spends three hours a day, seven days a week -- for up to a year or more on a large work -- preparing the copper plate by roughening the surface with a hand tool called a rocker.

That process, called "rocking the plate," allows the copper to hold the ink across its entire surface. If run through a press, the plate would produce a solid black print.

McPherson then traces a mirror-image schematic for the work onto the plate with a ballpoint pen and carbon paper.

Next, he uses two types of tools, a scraper and a burnisher, to smooth the roughened surface of the plate in varying degrees -- a little for darker grays, more for lighter grays and perfectly smooth for white.

He was drawn to the mills and visited them on annual trips to Pittsburgh to visit May's family, making drawings from perches near the mills in Braddock and Clairton.

The works that evolved from those visits, as well as others of a range of subjects from chop shops to Yankee Stadium to world harbors, have made McPherson a significant artist.

His work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the British Museum in London; the Art Institute in Chicago, the Cleveland Museum; the Library of Congress; the National



Steve Mellon. Post-Gazette

Works depicting Pittsburgh's steel industry are part of New York artist Craig McPherson's show at the Forum Gallery in New York City.

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When the plate is ready, he applies ink that he makes himself and wipes it with his bare hand in rhythmic motions. He periodically daubs his inky right hand on a folded-up paper towel in his left hand. The wiping clears the ink from the burnished areas so that they print lighter -- white in the completely smooth areas, shades of gray in other burnished areas.

He then pulls prints (called proofs) on a press, often making many adjustments before he's satisfied; some differences in tone, texture or detail from one proof to another are easily discernible, others are so subtle they're only apparent to a practiced eye.

"It takes 20, 25 proofs to get to know the plate," he said in his New York studio this month. He might throw away as much as 40 percent of the images he prints.

The plate, with its tiny fragile burrs, is very delicate and wears down quickly, so that only a limited number of prints can be made from it.

McPherson uses tools that range from replicas of those used in the 17th century to folded credit cards for grasping plates and prints so that his ink-stained hands won't smudge them

McPherson has done works of mills in operation as well as depictions of dilapidated streets of former steel towns. The melancholy beauty of the dying landscape of the mills and mill towns is suited to the evocation of light coming from darkness in mezzotints.

He said he chose a nearly obsolete, labor-intensive technique because it produced images close to his own realistic drawing style, not because he saw it as relating to his subject matter.

The process itself draws him, though.

"When you do the rocking three hours a day for 12 months, it's like you're embedding energy. When you burnish it, you release it."

He said that the layers and layers of work -- the repetitive rocking, the painstaking burnishing, the process of redoing details over and over -- adds to the art.

"To reach a certain density takes time. I think in terms of weight, of air and weight. You have to wait until [the work] reaches a certain weight. You have to be able to feel the air in it." He pointed to a depiction of the Clairton works, with a snow-covered coal pile in the foreground. It hangs in his current show at the Forum Gallery in Midtown Manhattan.

"You can feel the air in it. Before you couldn't."

McPherson, who grew up in Wichita, Kan., said he knew he wanted to pursue art at 15. He graduated from the University of Kansas before moving in 1975 to a heatless, hot-waterless, leaking studio in the Washington Heights neighborhood at the northern end of Manhattan, then a crime-ridden area.

He lived on \$15 a week and observed the life outside his window, which included a nearby chop shop and a bird's-eye view of Yankee Stadium. He observed the process of stripping down stolen cars in detail. He remembers the man who was an expert at loading the carcasses of the stripped cars onto a flatbed truck.

"It was this little guy with no neck, a bald head. He was a genius at getting those crab shells of cars onto that truck. He would winch the first one onto the bed, then the second one, then he'd get into the truck, go 5 mph, then jam on the brakes to slam the second car into place," wedged on top of the first. Finally he'd balance a third on top.

In the winter, McPherson hung drop cloths in the missing windows of his studio to block the freezing air. He watched a homeless man who wore a military coat with a built-in cape year-round stomp back and forth in the light of a trash can fire, fueled by burning pallets.

The endurance of that man, as well that of the brutally hardworking steelworkers he later learned about when he began working on his milltown prints, made a lasting impression.

He made the things he saw from his Washington Heights window his subjects: that burning trash can, the chop shop, and finally, Yankee Stadium. His mezzotint of the stadium brought him out of obscurity and bad living quarters.

A 1985 commission to do a gigantic set of murals of world harbor cities for the American Express Building (once a neighbor to the World Trade Center towers, now perched at the edge of the pit of Ground Zero) paved the way to other commissions, freedom to pursue long-planned projects, quarters on the Lower East Side, and a new home for May's mother, who was finally forced out of her Braddock home when the back door was smashed by an intruder.

The mills have come in and out of his work over the past two decades. He always has several projects going, putting things away when he gets stuck, pulling them back out when he's ready to try again. He still has Pittsburgh area subjects in the works, and also has visited Timken Co.'s specialized steelmaking plant in Canton, Ohio. Its ovens appear in works in his current show.

First published on May 22, 2005 at 12:00 am

Lillian Thomas can be reached at lthomas@post-gazette.com or 412-263-3566.



Steve Mellon, Post-Gazette

McPherson became inspired by industrial Pittsburgh when he began visiting his wife May's family. During a 1982 trip to Pittsburgh with May, a native of Braddock, McPherson first saw the city's steel mills and was drawn to them.

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