

## Chuck Webster: The Pilgrim

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Interviewed by Kate McQuillen

*What is great about printmaking is that I can see the whole process by looking at the proofs. I can see when the picture rejects what it does not need. --Chuck Webster*

**KM: When I look at your work, there is a sense of an image being built through process. Yet the images retain a sensibility that is both raw and natural, and filled with energy. Tell me about how you develop your images... Broadly speaking, what is your process when you come into your studio?**

CW: I always putter for a bit, there are inevitably things to be swept, put away, mixed etc. I make my own paint, so I need to stir the paint. I work on a lot of paintings at once, so I move paintings around, do maintenance, arrange paints, etc. I like to clean when I get in, then sit with a coffee and look. A lot of work is done in the chair. Then, with some trepidation, I'll start painting.

It is often the case that I'll be surprised and jolted by what I see when I come in: that's a very desired state. Guston said that he would walk in the next day and think, "I did THAT?!" I love it when that happens, when work makes me uncomfortable and nervous, and although it is demanding, I accept it. I will often turn the painting around and work on something else.



Chuck Webster, *The Pilgrim*, 16"x13.875", aquatint, water bite aquatint, scraping, and dry point, 2014  
edition of 15  
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**KM: Interesting; it sounds like there is a sense of removal from your everyday self when you're working. I like to learn about tactics that artists use to get themselves to push their work forward. How do you make leaps or connections to new images?**

CW: I am always looking at things in the world. I see a lot of historical and museum shows, probably more than things in galleries. I mine the images of the great masters, from Piero to Beckmann. Quite often, things I see in the world find me and attach themselves to the work. Once, I visited the Rothko Chapel in Houston and made a whole series of work that contained an image of its floor plan. I did not anticipate making those works when I came to Houston. They came to me. My method is to remain open, and to be drawing all the time.

**KM: How does your specific way of working differ when you are making prints? Are there certain printmaking tools or processes that you find are a fit with your work? When these materials meet your content, does it affect your work in a specific way?**

CW: My challenges in printmaking are to understand the energy that can be released by using each process properly. In that sense, my way of working does not really change when making prints. It is often a matter of reduction. I will do one thing, add more elements, and let them fight it out until a new thing emerges. I work and wait until the new thing appears—that is the content portrayed by the image. So the materials do not meet a prearranged content, they are the source. What is great about printmaking is that I can see the whole process by looking at the proofs. I can see when the picture rejects what it does not need.

**KM: When I was at your studio, we talked about your etching *The Pilgrim*, produced in 2014 at Wingate studios. This piece uses aquatint, water bite aquatint, scraping, and drypoint. I love**

**the figure-ground relationship in this work. Can you tell us more about the development of this image, both technical and thematic?**

CW: When I work at Wingate Studios with Peter Pettengill, we like to have some old plates around to work on when Peter is proofing. I find that the energy generated in that studio leads to marvelous new ideas. This water-bite plate was there, leftover from another project. We happened to have another plate with that image that was built through several rounds of proofing and talking with Peter about different ways of approaching it. There were a few spontaneous marks, like the diagonal lines coming from the top, which gave it a kind of spiritual aura.

It has hints of many different implications, both technical and narrative; I left a few imperfections in it. I give Peter a lot of credit for small details in this and many other prints. He knows when not to mess with things too much. Working with him has made me more aware of what copper etching can do. He is also a genius with color, seeing how different colors will react to each other when printed. The Pilgrim is an example where we did just enough to make it come off, and removed elements to make it better. It rests completely on a delicate place, much like the faith of the actor-like character in the image.

**KM: In your recent show at Betty Cunningham in NYC, Chuck Webster: Look Around, one painting in particular stood out as a move in a different direction for you: “Liberty or Death,” produced 2013-2016. I have always loved the instinctual/alien/brut sensibility of your work. Here, you have somehow merged that with a sense of epic history painting. Your forms seem to have taken on another sense of purpose. How did this painting develop, and do you see yourself continuing in this vein?**

CW: Liberty or Death does reflect an interest in a larger sense of history in the pictures, while at the same time a visionary yet disciplined painting process and releasing the alchemical magic in the materials I am using. As I continued to work on it, there were entire areas painted out, layers painted over and over with thin paint, polishing with knives, rubbing down the piece with denatured alcohol, sanding areas really smooth, and painting thick, impasto areas. I wanted to push the piece until the sense of history in the process mirrored what I was doing with image and narrative.

It has been a long time coming, I've been working with more real space and more narrative, “situational” pictures for some time. I compare it to Philip Guston's “pure” drawings and those of objects. Things gradually felt more like places where things acted, having episodes or stories. I have been fascinated with paintings like Masaccio's Tribute Money, where an entire story happens within a picture. I am interested in a sense of history and awe, much like Bierstadt did when painting the American West. I want that wonder in the paintings. The viewer will not know what he is looking at, but will accept it over time without the need for understanding.

I'm working on a series of small panels, and a few very large paintings. They will get more place-oriented. I'm looking at artists like Hercules Segers, Uccello and Peter Blume. I think there will be more occurrences of events and places, with actors doing things. The audience will find themselves both an observer and a participant – a kind of Pilgrim.



Chuck Webster, *Liberty or Death*, 84 × 120 in, Oil on Panel, 2013-2016