

# Brian Rice as Printmaker: Beyond Finality

by Tessa Sidey





*Rare Breed, 1953 (P001)*



*Head of Christ (P018)*

Brian Rice's prints span over 60 years. His engagement in the printed image reflects many of the issues that have shaped post-war British printmaking: the compromises and dynamics of working to commission, the creative exchange between printer and artist, the relationship between the abstract and realism, the tactile and the surface impression. National acclaim has been followed by periods of self-doubt and retreat from public attention, prior to a return to the print medium that has found new energy and possibilities. The idea of an editioned print representing some kind of finality has been a concept that he has and continues to challenge with a push-and-pull relationship to enduring themes and interests.

Rice was fortunate in at least two aspects of his early career. The son of a farm labourer who became a glove cutter and then ran his own business, he was part of the first working-class generation to benefit from going to college and university after the Second World War and in the process transform these institutions. The choice of Yeovil School of Art (1952-56) was to prove equally significant, providing him with a National Diploma in Illustration and Printed Textiles rather than painting which was, in effect, un-hierarchical and firmly practical in its approach and, in his own words, "equipped me to do almost anything the world of art might throw at me."<sup>1</sup>

"YSA was a very small art school, the intake in my year was eight students, and there were twenty full-time students in total. The facilities were limited but the staffing was extraordinary ... I did quite a bit of lithography ... [and] relief printing, lino-printing was used as part of the textile printing process, blocks with pattern motifs were cut in lino, covered with an ink absorbing surface called 'flocking' and the ink-soaked block hammered into the fabric. I was also taught wood-engraving by Ken Parratt, ... he took me under his wing and passed on his considerable skills as a wood engraver, for which I am eternally grateful."<sup>2</sup>

Today only a few small pieces of these block-printed patterns on textile material survive in Rice's personal archive. Their importance however as an indicator of an alternative to traditional representation

needs to be recognised. Even when portraying a Thomas Bewick-inspired cockerel in the early wood engraving, *Rare Breed*, 1953 (P001), it is a clear patterning of marks that defines the main form and landscape. Significantly Rice also recalls the heraldry classes with the formidable Elsie Kohler at Yeovil, which introduced him to a language of simplified symbols and graphic placement that has remained a powerful influence on his painting and prints.

An orthodox fine art route again appears to have been side-stepped in the taking up of an Art Teacher's Certificate at London's Goldsmiths College in 1958. This hectic ten-month period sustained the hunger for learning skills with a new level of teaching that encompassed lithography with Bernard Cheese, relief printing with Paul Drury, and textile printing with Robert Brazil. Ceramics under Gordon Baldwin saw the promotion of "textural feelings for earth and soil", while there was access to typography, book binding, and time for "quite a bit of painting". Rice took advantage of the lack of pressure to conform to a particular style, preferring to explore interests that variously embraced representational subject matter: nostalgic paintings and prints of Montacute in his native Somerset, bold motionless mask-heads for two religious linocuts of *Head of Christ* (P018) and *The Three Kings* (P019), and in the linocut *Ashanti* (P015) an arrangement of geometric forms that brings to mind African textiles.

The search for a distinctive voice coalesced around a period of travel in Europe and Morocco in the summer of 1960 and a revelatory experience that finally cemented the decision to become a painter.<sup>3</sup> A series of colour lithographs, based on drawings done in Spain, marked this new sense of liberation, while also showing an awareness of the modernism of Nicholas de Staël and the American Abstract Expressionists that was re-orientating the London art world at the end of the 1950s. *Red Landscape* (P029) can be read as an aerial map of flattened shapes with less-than-precise edges that acknowledges the existence of irregular spaces.



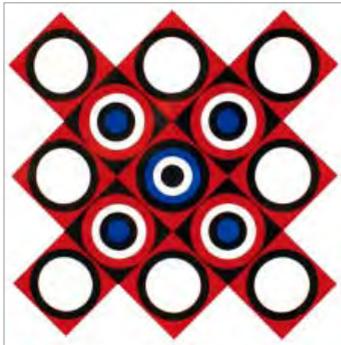
*Ashanti* (P015)



*Spanish Landscape No.2* (P028)



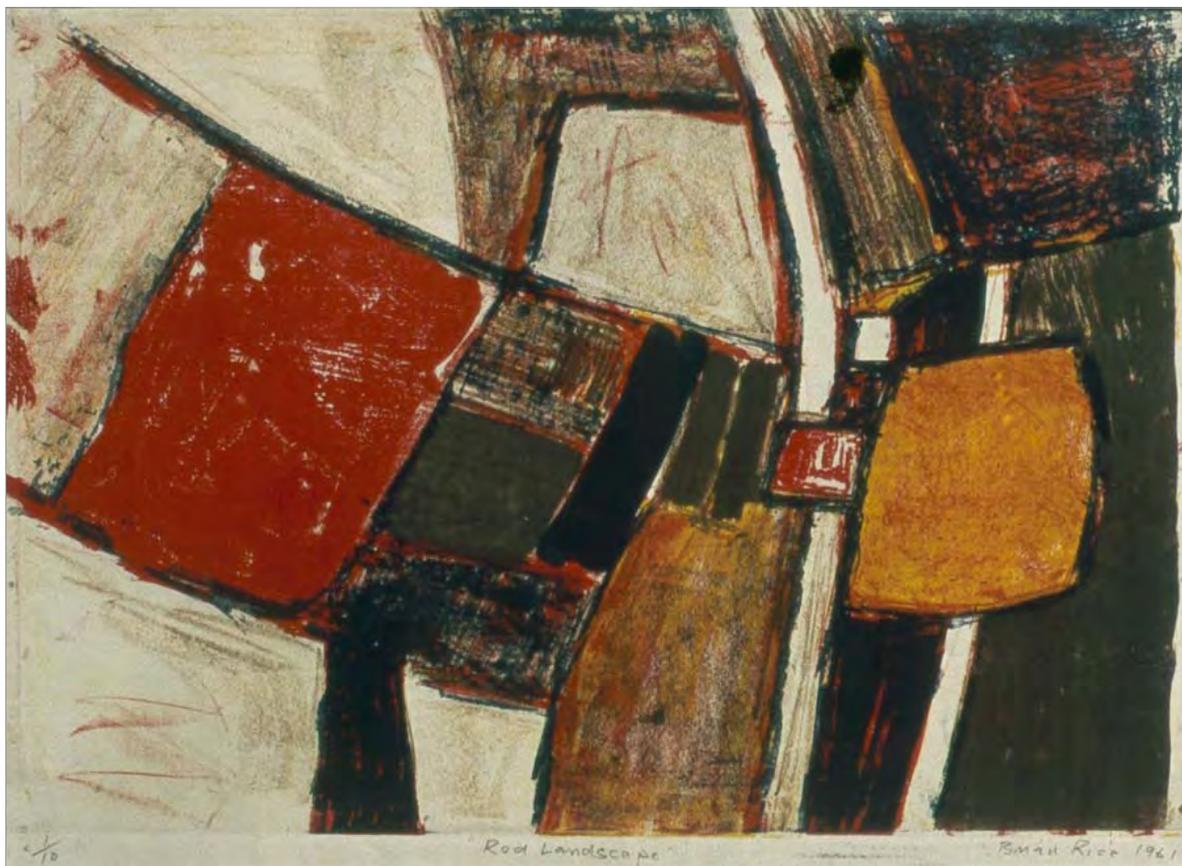
*Kuroi (P036)*



*Red Assembly (P047)*

Even when embarking on his most urban phase of living and working in London from January 1962, it was simplicity and directness that initially took precedence over the hard-edged in a series of abstract relief prints. Using three or four simple heraldic shapes and minimal colours (usually red and black), no attempt was made to hide the slight movement of the hand-cut lino edges. Different combinations of a chevron, bar and a U-shape printed on Japanese paper, drew upon photographs of Japanese flags and banners for images appropriately entitled *Kuroi* (P036) and *Goran nasai* (P038), *Kamui* (P039) and *Daijobu* (P035). These powerful calligraphic symbols also made a contemporary connection with the new Bauhaus-inspired signs for the underground and road, and the experiments and designs with lettering that other abstract artists, such as Robyn Denny and Gordon House, were embracing at this time.

Rice's ingratiation into the London art scene revolved around his association with the painter and gallery director Denis Bowen. Bowen owned the New Vision Centre (NVC), one of the few galleries dedicated to international abstract art and inclusive about the print media when it came to exhibiting Rice's work. Bowen himself had produced and exhibited notable screenprints in the later 1950s and so appropriately recognised the medium as ideally suited to the precise geometry and flat colouring that Rice was seeking. The new screenprint, *Red Assembly* (P047) secured its place alongside multi-canvas constructions in oil for his first NVC show in 1964. Printed by two Yeovil School of Art friends, John Burnand and Jolyon Ward, this banded arrangement of circle and square attracted both media and commercial success to become "almost an icon of my early sixties". The impersonal intensity of the target theme continued in four new prints for the second NVC show in 1965. *Cross* (P048), *Lozenge* (P049), *November* (P051) and *Structure* (P050) were taken up as the financially-accessible images to have on the walls of a modern living space. Such recognition bears comparison with the media reportage that the print publishers, Editions Alecto (EA), were securing for Paolozzi, Hamilton and Hockney.



Red Landscape (P029)



*Structure (P050)*

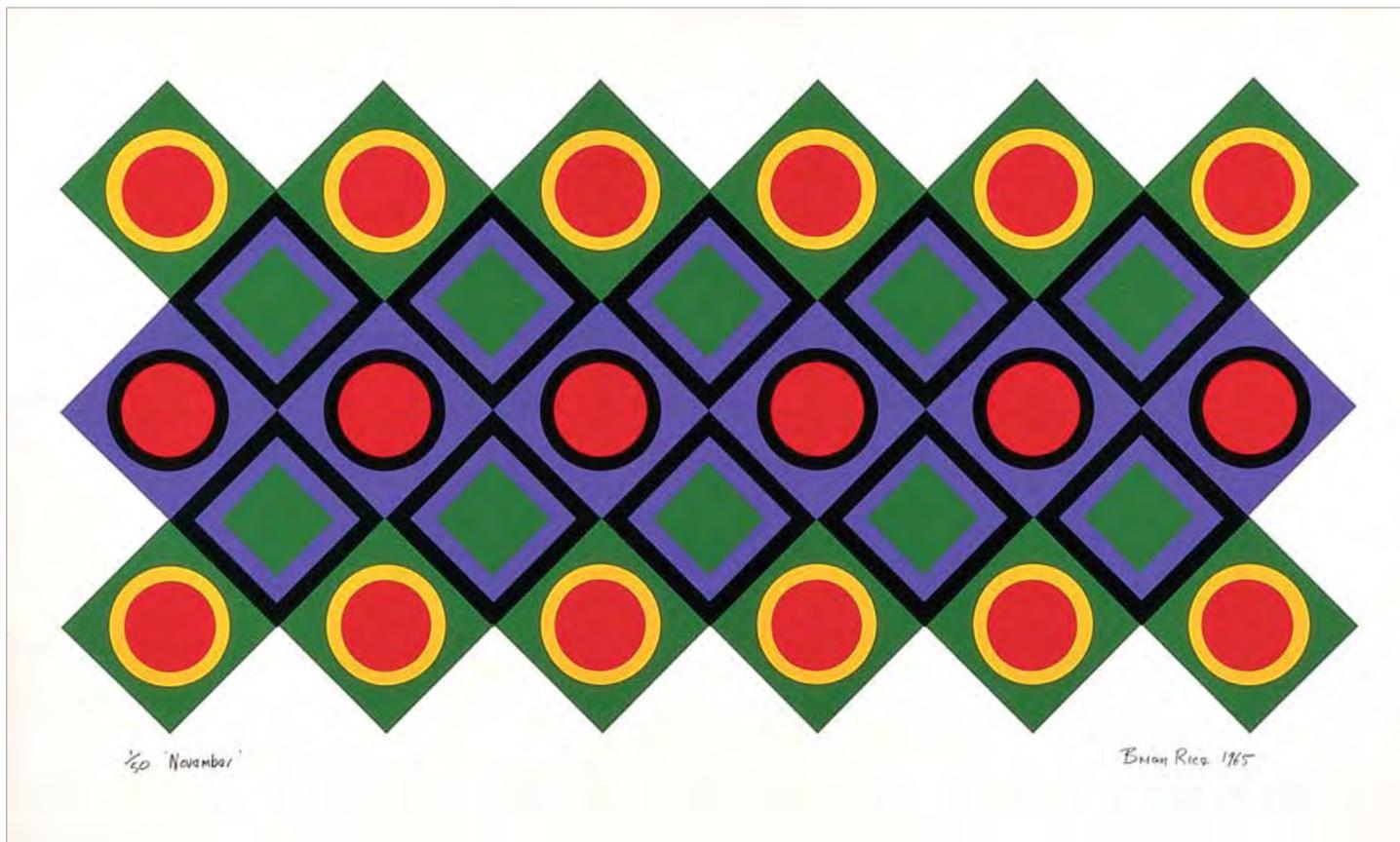


*Odeon (P078)*

Figurative and abstract, pop, architectural and op graphics were all published by EA at the height of their success in the mid-sixties.<sup>4</sup> Rice never became one of their official artists but his work was sold through the celebrated Print Centre in Kensington as one of a number of increasing selling outlets for his prints. It was one of EA's younger competitors, Eugene Shuster, however who made the lucrative offer of a regular contract in 1966, becoming the single most important influence on Rice as a printmaker over the next four years.

Shuster, an American from Detroit, was still studying for his PhD in art history, when he began to deal in artists' graphics. His brand of salesmanship took the idea of the original print as a popular and accessible commodity to a new level of commercialism. A highly egotistical approach ensured that he remained something of an outsider within the close networks of the art establishment. A 1967 interview described his strategy, "I see no reason why art cannot be marketed in the same way as other consumer items. Many people outside London would like the opportunity of buying original works of art at modest prices ... I believe in the whistle-stop tour of art exhibitions: [one] week in Sheffield, then five days in Glasgow and the following week in Cambridge and so on. I have similar exhibitions running in the US."<sup>5</sup>

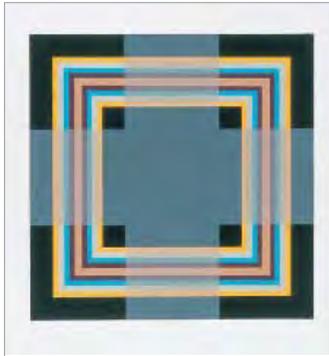
Such overt opportunism worked for a time as a seductive antidote to the London art scene. The securing of a contract provided a much-desired regular salary in exchange for an annual quota of new prints. Rice's desire to work in screenprint was supported by an introduction to one of the leading young printers of the day, Chris Betambeau, formerly of Kelpra Studio and by 1967 running his own screen studio, Advanced Graphics. Shuster's London Graphic Arts Gallery provided high visibility in the capitol, initially at 84 Grosvenor and then at 22 New Bond Street. This saw solo and mixed exhibitions in the company of Picasso, Renoir, Beckmann and fellow British-independents Birgit Skiöld, Norman Ackroyd and Bartolomeu dos Santos, and in 1969 with Alexander Calder, Karel Appel, Pierre Alechinsky and René Magritte, alongside international outlets in New York, Michigan and Detroit.



November (P051)



Radio (P068)



Change (P082)

Chris Betambeau's inherent desire to do a good job and never to impose his own views on the artist appears to be in marked contrast to the control that Shuster exerted over process and content. Prints had to be produced in three specified sizes that were perceived to be commercially viable. Rice produced a gouache on card intended to withstand the studio environment and which needed approval before it went to the printers as essentially a finalised image. "Quite often the printers would work to a complete proofing stage before I turned up for half a day to mix a few new colours and then bring the proof back home for a few days."<sup>6</sup> The pressure to produce reached its height in 1969 when, Rice estimates, close to 2000 of his prints were published and distributed by London Graphic Arts.

This intense period nevertheless still allowed for the development of sequential ideas, notably in the segments of radiating colour and line for *For Studio* (P064), *Odeon* (P078), *Radio* (P068) and *Colossal* (P080), 1967-69. The extended sources that lay behind these art-deco images were later collated into the award-winning collaboration *The English Sunrise*<sup>7</sup> with photographer Tony Evans (1972). From Rice's original concept, this visual travelogue brought together a wealth of guises for a most English piece of formal design that linked suburban front doors, car doors, radios, gates of various shapes and locations, with the backs of chairs and domestic stained glass. Rice was clearly at home with connections that looked beyond traditional boundaries of function and classification, and this photographic book remains the most complete expression of his particular form of abstraction with its roots in the signs and symbols of the real world.<sup>7</sup>

While most closely associated with screenprint, it is also the print medium that has continued to challenge Rice, as evoked in the jokey homage with shirt and coffin to Op Art in *Death of Op Art* (P054) (*overleaf*), 1967 that sold as a print for £1.00. A full-expression of hard-edged flatness seemed insufficient when the veiled idea was introduced. Acting like a layer of tissue paper, these sections of translucent printing unified the four edges of the image.



*Kerbstone Variation (P118)*



*Blue Square, Grey Square (P081)*



*Nine in One (P084)*

Prints such as *Change* (P082) and *Blue Square, Grey Square* (P081) directly informed the canvases *Doubleway* and *Midnight Rainbow* of 1968, the use of opaque white in screen proving much easier to use than the equivalent acrylic colour that demanded subtle mixing to achieve the correct optical effect. “It was the prints feeding into the paintings at this stage rather than the other way round.”<sup>8</sup>

Publishing decisions had now taken a degree of control away from the artist and by the late 1960s was seeing the start of an unprecedented expansion in British contemporary prints. The conflicts of interest that Rice experienced in many ways represent the downside of this boom period. Another American dealer, Edward Newman, whose Consolidated Fine Art Corporation company ran a US postal print club, commissioned a series of lithographs with Stanley Jones at the Curwen Studio. In the end only four of the intended six images were editioned – “I had a row with Mr Newman because he had gone into Curwen when I was not there, and changed one colour in a band of six colours ‘because the Interior Decorators Guild of America say that pink is not an *in* colour this year’. When I remonstrated with him about this he simply said that as he was paying for the prints, he could have whatever colours he wanted. I disagreed and declined his money for those two prints.”<sup>9</sup>

In the following year, Rice persuaded John Morrish, Shuster’s delegated assistant, to produce a seven-foot print made up of nine triangular sections each measuring 30 inches. “I was paid £1000 for this (*Nine in One* (P084)), but the problem was that it didn’t sell as it was triangular and, with a modest form of boxing, got bashed around as it wouldn’t fit into the cars of the US salesmen.”<sup>10</sup> This turned out to be the last print that Rice produced for Shuster. In late 1970, another approach by Howard Capponi, who had worked for Shuster, resulted in further screenprints printed at Advanced Graphics that “Mr Capponi took off to the USA and never paid me or the printer”<sup>11</sup>, an experience later found out to have been shared by 23 other artists. The politics of selling and buying prints was duly taken up by Rice as Chairman of the Printmaker’s Council (1974-77) and saw him promoting the greater protection and assistance for artists with the instigation of a prototype contract for members when dealing with galleries.

The division of Rice's work into two halves has been perceptively described elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> This writer would like to stress the points of continuity that lay behind the periods of re-assessment. The absence of a print dealer certainly contributed to the fall in print production in the early 1970s and the 1980s, and was synonymous with the feelings of doubt now shaping content and process in both paintings and prints. In a rare excursion into intaglio, a series of a triangular photo-etchings paralleling colour system paintings, conceptualised the importance of colour with numbers and letters. At the same time these small editions also challenged the principle of a finite selection of colours. *Colour* (P089), *Random Chance Aquatinting* (P087) and *Arrangement of Colour Areas by Random Chance Selection* (P088) received public exposure in exhibitions at the Serpentine Gallery and in Cumbria but, revealingly, subsequent experiments with colour relief printing in 1976 proved of greater interest. As seen in *Colour System Chart No II* (P090), this involved the somewhat lengthy process of individually inking and printing pieces of card onto an embossed etched grid. The results had a tactile quality and greater sense of saturated colour, which extended the idea of layering already proposed in the veiled prints. The struggle to work intuitively also figured as a key element of the teaching that Rice was now undertaking in various London art schools and, most notably, at Brighton School of Art (latterly University of Brighton) between 1966-2001.

Rice pays tribute to Jennifer Dickson as the energising Head of Printmaking at Brighton when he arrived in 1966. With three technicians and eleven teaching staff, the students gained a grounding in all of the print techniques, which they bound into portfolio books that acted as a kind of bible resource. Dickson “persuaded the leading names of the day – Anthony Gross, Michael Rothenstein and Bridget Riley – to come and visit. ...I began by teaching screen to foundation students before moving to the BA Department to teach etching and relief”. Finally Rice took over the post-graduate Specialist Printmaking Course in September 1972, with colleagues that included Harvey Daniels, Terry Gravett, Peter Hawes, Sue Gollifer and Elaine Johnson, Brighton established a national reputation in the 1970s for its outward



*Colour System Chart No II* (P090)



*Random Chance Aquatinting* (P087)



*Ballinvally (P125)*



*Heelstone (P133)*

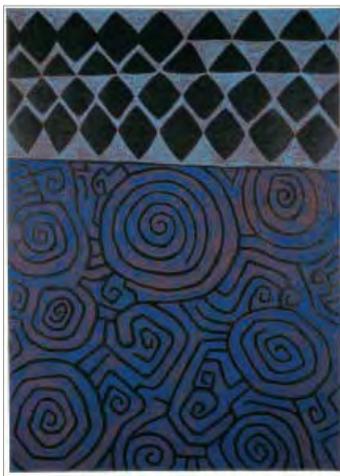
vision and standards of equipment. “Staff directly involved themselves in post-graduate projects and in exhibitions. ...There was no Brighton style. The expansion of creative potential, with printmaking as a base not a confining channel, was the aim of the (printmaking) course.”<sup>13</sup>

Rice not only used the workshop facilities at Brighton to print his own work and to contribute to staff and student projects but allowed his teaching experience and preference for intuitive working to feed into his reflections on the best practice and future developments for an artist in a print studio. He felt free to return to representation, as in a series on T. E. Lawrence stimulated by extensive reading and then the finding of suitable pieces of text, and in wood engravings of familiar landscape subjects that drew upon increased time spent in Dorset. This included *Four Hills, Wessex* (1976) (P094); *Four Lock Ups* (1976) (P105) and *Two Views of Lyme Regis* (1977) (P099). The distinction between representation and abstraction was of little concern rather it was the search for the most appropriate symbolic form for subject matter that carried a personal resonance.

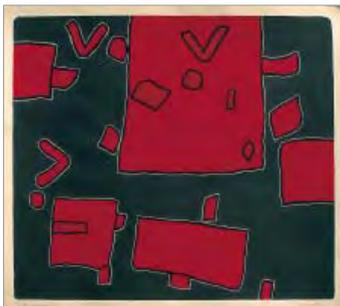
The wealth of archaeological finds discovered when moving to Nallers Farm in west Dorset, and then to a new home in Hewood on the Dorset-Somerset borders in 1984, makes an informing parallel with the appropriation of existing imagery that Rice has made such a strong and recurring feature of his prints over the last twenty years. The results of this excavation and reassessment process has now been given the title of *restrikes*, in each instance the present resonating with the past. The early linocuts *Daijobu* (P035) and *Kamui* (P039) from the Japanese series (not editioned at the time) were re-struck as screenprints on textured Khadi paper as an experiment in retaining a quality of opaque depth. Somewhat the reluctant screenprinter, who has always liked the look of the hand-cut block, *Kerbstone*, 1997 (P116), began initially as a woodblock before being enlarged onto film and printed as a screen *Queensway* (P120) which in turn became *Kingstone*, 1997/98 (P121). For more pedestrian commercial reasons, the multiple-woodblock *Four Hills, Wessex* (P094) was configured into four new individual prints: *Panborough Hill, Somerset* (P095);



*Pennant Series XX (H64)*



*Mizz-Maze VIII (H08)*



*Kuba Variation No. 1 (H25)*

*Boarsbarrow Hill, Lodders (P096); Colmer's Hill, Symondsburry (P097) and Balham Hill, Chiselborough (P98).* In the most sustained development, print has entered into a symbiotic relationship with painting in a group of 'Hybrids' (see H01-73).

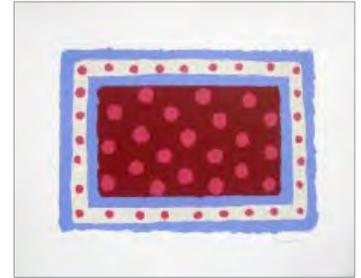
For an artist who sees himself as a painter who produces prints, the move towards a singular dialogue between these respective media has brought together a number of preoccupations. Rice's preference for editioning as an open rather than fixed activity which allows for significant and subtle changes in colour is one such activity. There is also the distaste towards wasting any kind of found material, promoted by Michael Rothenstein in his teaching and influential books as well as in his own acclaimed mixed media work, and which in the 1960s saw Rice salvaging and re-painting 1930s furniture from junkshops. Thirty years later the collation of misprints and errors made during printing provided the starting point for the hybrid idea. Back in the Hewood studio, these spoils are worked on by hand, often with additional carborundum grit and pumice powder mixed with inks to develop unpredictable possibilities where "nice things happen like they crack."<sup>14</sup> A heightened resonance of colour is now the carrier of complexity behind simplified combinations of pattern, as in the lozenge and spiral forms of the *Mizz-maze* (P115) linocut series (from 1996) and the heraldic configurations in acrylic and then gouache on screen for *Kuba Variations* (H25-40) (from 2004).

Since 2005 the dimensional mark has secured a new level of technical facilitation in periods of printing at Artizan Editions in Hove, run by Sally Gimson with the printer Angus Wade. Most recently this has seen a series of screen monotypes continue the investigation into the inherent problem of an easily skimmed surface image. These small images, entitled the *Pavilion Series* (P157-197), explore an infinite number of colour formats that might be applied to a basic rectangle visibly textured with squares and different-sized dots. "We make up some stencils, draw some shapes onto acetate and then put onto screen; two screens on the go at the same time. Colours are mixed up, nice purple, print five [proofs] of these. I go through

old tins of colour. We print a lot of basic colours and then put the squares in and different dot-size stencils. We print for two days and then I take a break for a couple of weeks, the prints are brought home, and then I return for another two days [to Artizan].”<sup>15</sup>

Rice refers to ‘the accidents of fate’ that have made his prints better known than his paintings.<sup>16</sup> He has sustained a multi-faceted association with print: as committed teacher, organiser and political activist for the medium and above all as practitioner. In spite of the significant interruptions in his career, printmaking has continued to be approached as an exploratory venture, operating in an expansive realm that is questioning and looks beyond the final statement. Standing outside fashionable movements and convenient labels, Rice has pursued his own understanding of colour and abstract iconography, informed by the legacy of ancient signs and shapes in a modern world. He has and continues to demonstrate the unique ability of printmaking to re-appraise and re-new imagery.

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*Pavilion XVI (P172)*



*Pennant Series VI (H50)*

## Notes

1 Brian Rice, *Brian Rice, A History of Printmaking*, unpublished, 2006

2 *ibid.*

3 See Sara Hudson, 'The Return to the Native' in *Brian Rice. Retrospective Exhibition*, University of Brighton 2001

4 See Tessa Sidey, *Editions Alecto Original Graphics, Multiple Originals 1960-1981*, Lund Humphries, London 2003

5 Brian Rice archive, unidentified newspaper article.

6 Interview between Tessa Sidey and Brian Rice, Hewood, Somerset; 13 November 2009

7 Brian Rice and Tony Evans, *The English Sunrise*, Mathews Miller Dunbar, London 1977

8 Interview, *Op.cit.*

9-11 Brian Rice, *Op.cit.*

12 See essays by Michael Tucker and Sara Hudson in *Brian Rice. Retrospective Exhibition*, University of Brighton 2001

13-15 Interview, *Op.cit.*

16 Brian Rice, *Op.cit.*