

# OKTP



## MARTIN PURYEAR

03.01.2007

Paulson Press is proud to announce the release of two new prints by sculptor Martin Puryear. Both prints were created during his many visits to the studio beginning in 2001. Puryear uses the flexibility of the printmaking process to consider variations of his sculptural forms, and he often explores ideas by reworking plates from existing editions. In 2002, for example, he created a second state of *Untitled*

*III* by adding subtle stippling to a portion of a vessel shape.

In this new release, Puryear dramatically reworked the soft-ground plate from *Shoulders*, 2002, by adding carefully crafted, rich drypoint areas to the form. *Shoulders (State 2)*, 2005, is the striking result. *Untitled V* is also the outcome of the deliberate reworking of plates Puryear made during earlier visits to the press. The clean simplicity of the arced white line

against the negative space of the dark background makes *Untitled V* a counterpoint to the dense, assertive black lines of *Shoulders (State 2)*.

The Museum of Modern Art in New York will feature a major retrospective of Puryear's work from November 4, 2007, through January 14, 2008. The show will travel to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art later in 2008.

For this issue of *OKTP*, we interviewed a curator and a collector who have both worked closely with Martin Puryear.

—Kenneth Caldwell

STEVE OLIVER is a well-known Bay Area collector who has commissioned several contemporary artists to build sculptures at his ranch in Sonoma. In 1994, Puryear completed an untitled piece for the site.

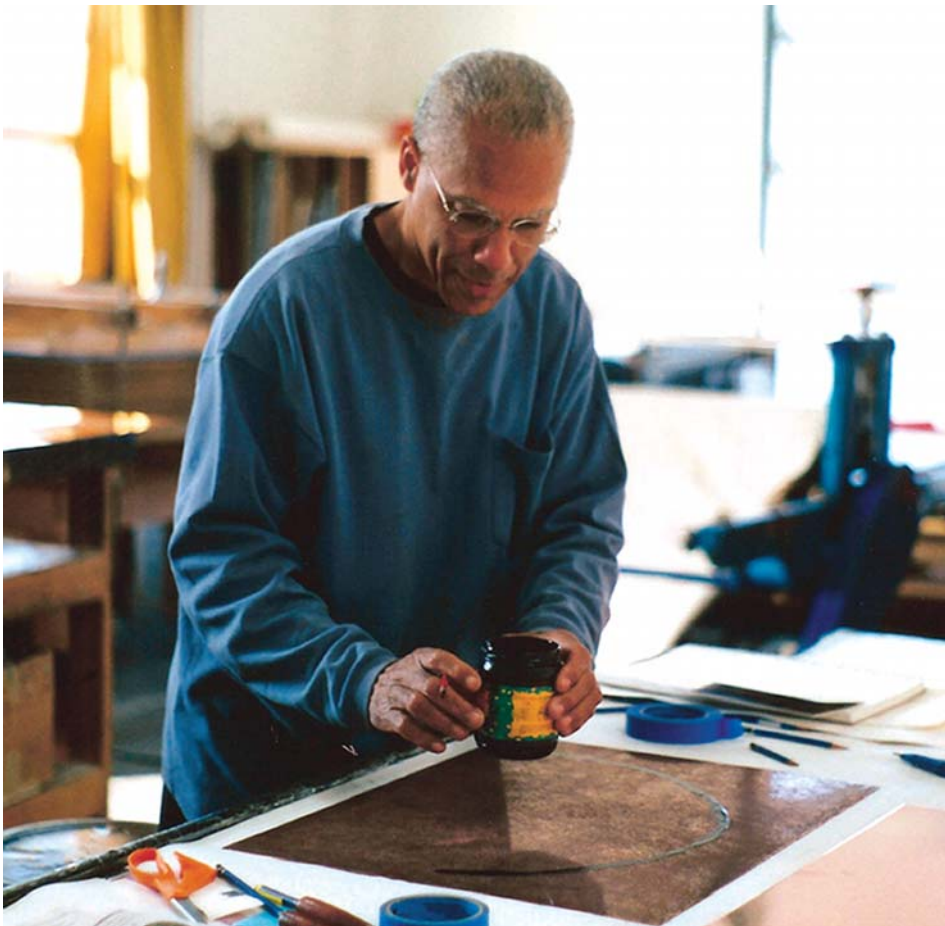
**Q:** How did you meet Martin Puryear?

**A:** At an opening for the Walker Museum Sculpture Park. Judith Shea, who completed a piece here at the ranch, introduced us.

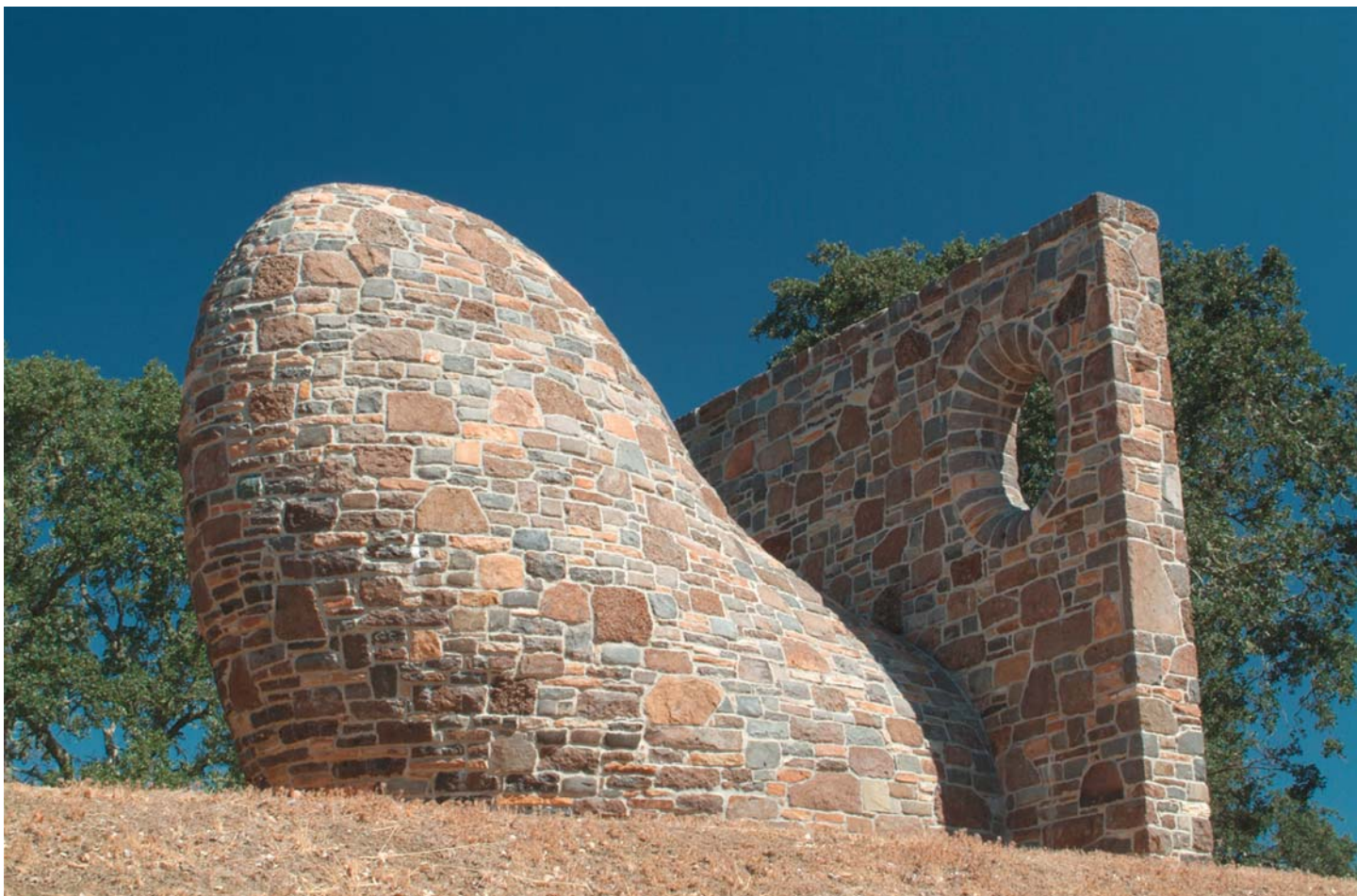
**Q:** What drew you to his work?

**A:** His work has a very sensuous character. You could see the hand of the artist. We like to fall in love with the work before we meet the artist.

**Q:** Does his work fit in your pattern of collection, or perhaps I should call it commissioning?



Martin Puryear working in the studio.



**Untitled**, 1994-95  
Stone, 18 x 14 ft.  
Courtesy Steve Oliver

**A:** We collect these great experiences. But you can't really consume the art; it has an independent existence outside of our having commissioned the work. Working with Martin reinforces those two ideas.

**Q:** Tell me about the process of commissioning the sculpture at the Ranch.

**A:** We remarked to his dealer, Donald Young in Chicago, that we would be interested in a large-scale piece and would like Martin to come and visit. He came out in 1992 when Richard Serra was here working on his project. We all had lunch together and then Martin and Richard took a walk to see Richard's work. Soon after that visit Martin started looking for a site. In the beginning he chose the bottom of a canyon. This was going on in 1992, the same time as Martin's traveling retrospective exhibit organized by the Art Institute of Chicago. It seemed like after each stop

on that tour, he would move the site further and further up the hill until finally it was at the top. Of course, then he hid it in a grove of trees.

**Q:** Can you tell me a little about the development and character of the piece?

**A:** I think he became intrigued by the main house at the ranch which is built out of stone — although it is seismically safe. So, we used the same structural system in the sculpture. Martin wanted to use stone from across the country, one third of it was from here at the ranch, one third from Colorado, and one third from the east coast.

The shape and anthropomorphic form show up in Martin's work repeatedly. Just before we broke ground, Martin added the wall with the window. His work is hollow inside; it's a cave with twelve roman arches holding up the dome. For one week, the cave was open, and then Martin put the

door on. My wife Nancy and I dined in there for that entire week. Now only the little critters get to see the inside. You can look up from the archway but you can't quite see the arches. This is a constant in Martin's work, you can see a lot, but you can't quite see it all.

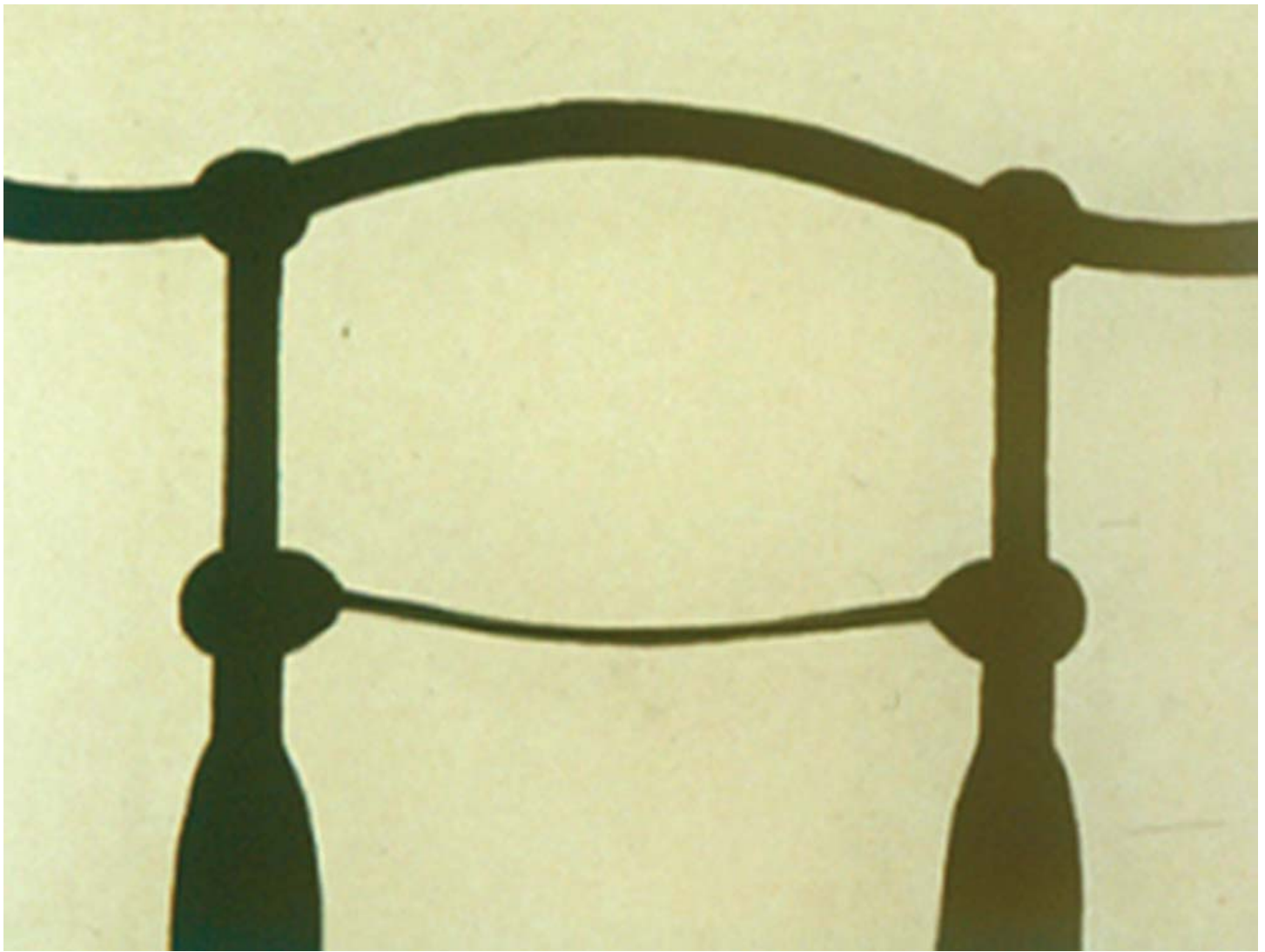
**Q:** Did you see sketches?

**A:** Very few. He did some wonderful maquettes. The window had a full-size mock-up. Martin was here a lot.

**Q:** His work seems so experiential. A photograph doesn't come close to approximating the experience. For example, on the web, the blackness in the prints looks unvaried. The nuance is lost. Can you comment on that?

**A:** One of the issues with Martin's sculpture is that it is truly three dimensional. Every view is different. It changes constantly as you move around it. When





you approach the work you come to the wall first—it's just a wall. Then you walk through the open doorway and see this fantastic bulbous form. Through this passage is a place between architecture and sculpture. The great thing about the prints is that when you see them in person, the same thing is true. There is the nuance of line, form, even color, as you move your eye across them. With a print, you don't have the ability to literally get behind it, but you see it from different angles and while it changes, it always has the same depth of character.

**Q:** Are you still collecting prints?

**A:** We started collecting with prints. Often we buy prints of the artists who have worked here at the ranch. It gives a depth to the archive we are building. We get seduced by them. With Martin, print is a medium he seems comfortable with. You have a sense of the making.

**Q:** The work seems rooted in contradiction. While abstract, it hovers near the representational.

**A:** Because there are forms that you recognize. At first they look familiar and make you feel comfortable, but then how he puts those forms and shapes together is what makes him unique. That is the magic.

**CONSTANCE LEWALLEN is the senior curator for exhibitions at the Berkeley Art Museum, where she worked with Martin Puryear on shows in 1985 and 2001.**

**Q:** What draws you to Martin Puryear's work?

**A:** The beauty. This is not a word often used in contemporary art. I appreciate the formal quality and the craft. Part of the beauty comes from the way he treats his materials and the care that goes into the making of the work. He is extraordinarily sensitive to materials and the way

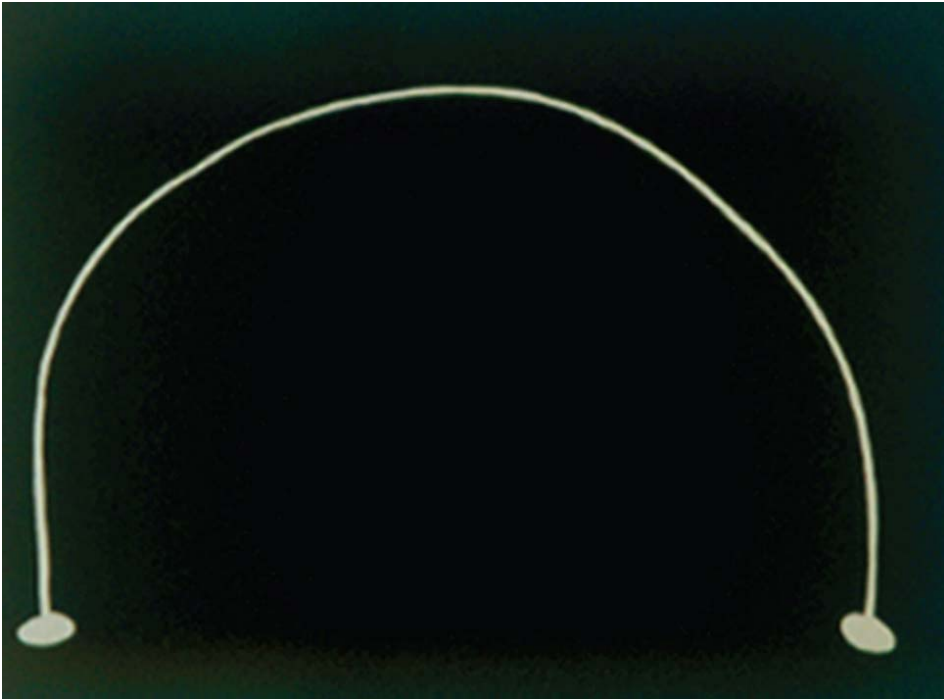
he chooses them for each particular piece. I would also emphasize the evocative nature. While his work is not representational, there are all kinds of rich associations with the forms.

**Q:** Can you elaborate on the evocative?

**A:** His work comes from several influences. One of them is the experience of living in Africa and working with local craftsmen learning their techniques. Another is his study of furniture making in Scandinavia, which gave him an awareness of utilitarian objects, like baskets, for example. Yet his forms are evocative because he raises them to a different level of formal invention.

**Q:** Can you talk about working with him?

**A:** We did a show in 1985, as part of the museum's Matrix Program. It consisted of small works, a kind of working out of his vocabulary. He was not as well known then. In 2001, we did a larger show that



(Middle) **Shoulders (State 2)**, 2005  
Softground and drypoint etching with chine collé; Paper size: 29" x 34"; Edition of 40

**Untitled V**, 2005

Color softground and aquatint etching with chine collé; Paper size: 29" x 34"; Edition of 40

was installed in the museum's large atrium gallery. His famous sculpture, *Ladder for Booker T*, stretched up towards the skylight. The title, of course, gives you a way into the work metaphorically. It was breathtaking.

In those years between the two exhibits, he had become very well known. However, I didn't perceive any difference in terms of working with him. He was quiet, calm, and modest. He didn't want to give a prepared talk, but was fine with a conversation. I asked him a few basic questions and he was off. He was very eloquent and moving.

**Q:** What did he share?

**A:** One thing I remember is that he talked about growing up in Washington DC before the civil rights period. He didn't speak with any rancor, but told us about how the museum was one of the few places a young African American male could go and how important that was to him. And he described his studies in Africa and Sweden.

**Q:** There seems to be a blurring of the line between art and craft in his work.

**A:** For a long time, art avoided any association with craft, but that doesn't have any meaning to Martin. He is not afraid to craft his works in a masterful way. That is not to say that they don't have purposefully rough edges.

**Q:** Do you feel that the handmade quality of his work translates into his prints?

**A:** It's different, but yes. I think Martin's major quality is his sensitivity to whatever he is working with, a brush, a carving instrument, or a plate. He has a natural affinity for whatever material he engages.

Working with paper in the context of prints allows him a lot of freedom — fluidity and speed. He can probably explore ideas in a very direct way. Maybe it gives us a look into his working process.

**Q:** Can you comment on the relationship between the prints and sculptures?

**A:** The process of making a print allows you to explore several ideas relatively quickly. Undertaking a monumental sculpture is a huge commitment of time. You know, he doesn't show his drawings very much. Getting to see these prints is a pleasure. The forms manifest themselves in the sculptures. They are very rich. Martin pays attention to all the subtleties. Look at *Jug*. The background is so beautiful. He could have just left off with the shape, but he didn't. Also in *Untitled II*, the background is mottled. The drawing sits on it so beautifully. It's that kind of subtlety that distinguishes him.

**Q:** The work feels rooted in contradiction.

**A:** I think there is another word. You could say the main dichotomy is between simplicity and complexity. You have to pay attention whether it is a three-dimensional sculpture or a two-dimensional paper piece. That is what makes them so compelling. You can appreciate a work on a very direct level responding to the overall form and then you get drawn into the weaving, for example, or you see how a work on the floor leans ever so slightly. There are a hundred different qualities in the work that become more apparent as you study it. His work demands much of the viewer to really appreciate it.

**Q:** When the scale goes up to the larger public work, do you think the "making" is harder to experience?

**A:** I don't think so. I think that is always part of the work no matter what the scale is. ✎

(Top)

**Untitled III (State 1), 2002**

Color spitbite aquatint with softground and chine collé; Paper size: 35" x 28";  
Edition of 25



(Bottom)

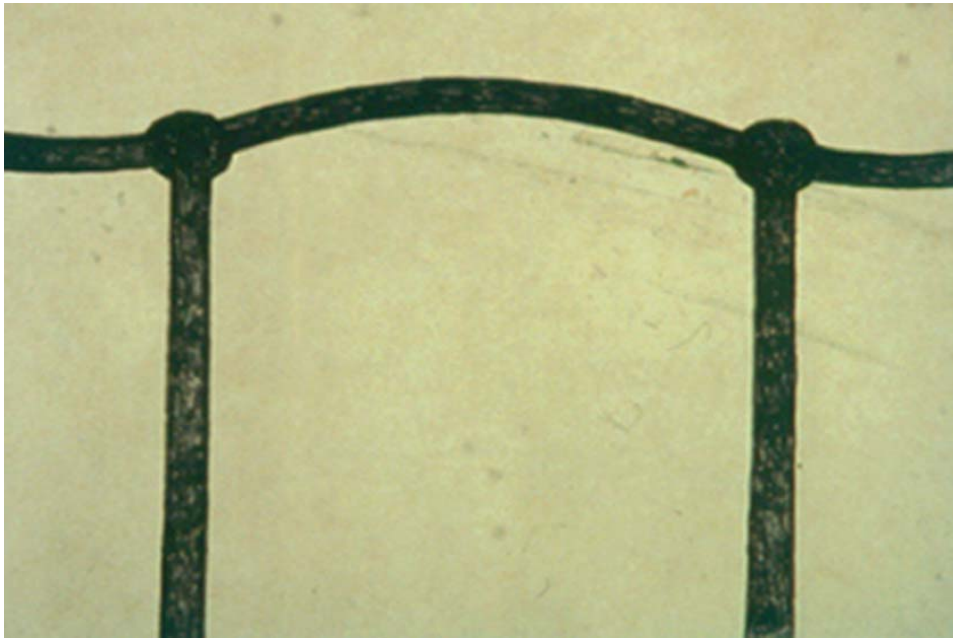
**Untitled III (State 2), 2002**

Softground and spitbite aquatint with chine collé; Paper size: 35" x 28";  
Edition of 25



**“I think Martin’s major quality is his sensitivity to whatever he is working with, a brush, a carving instrument, or a plate. He has a natural affinity for whatever material he engages.”**

**CONSTANCE LEWALLEN**



**Shoulders, 2002**

Softground etching with chine collé;  
Paper size: 29" x 34"; Edition of 25

DESIGN: MICHAEL OSBORNE DESIGN

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