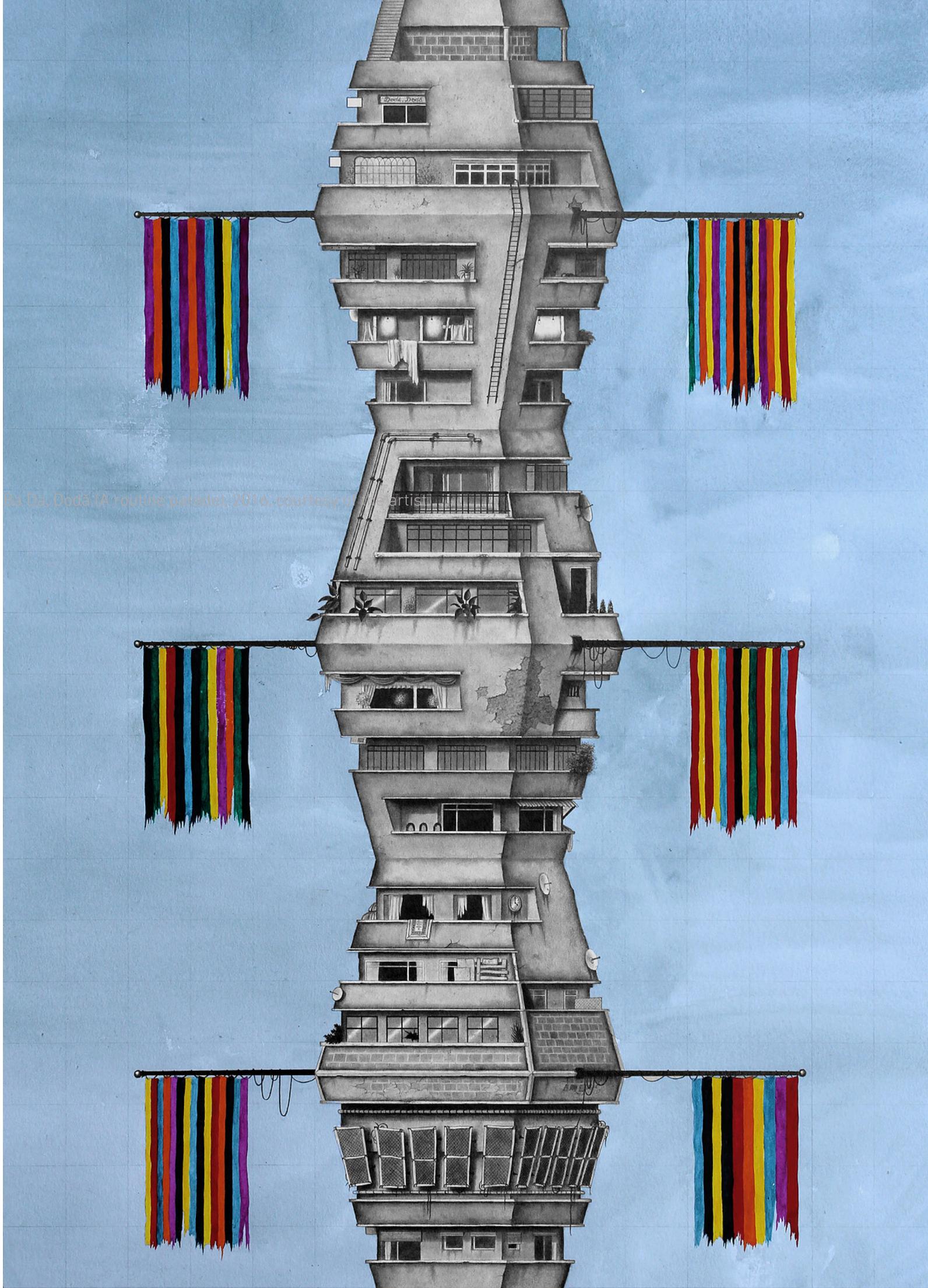


Chris Agnew

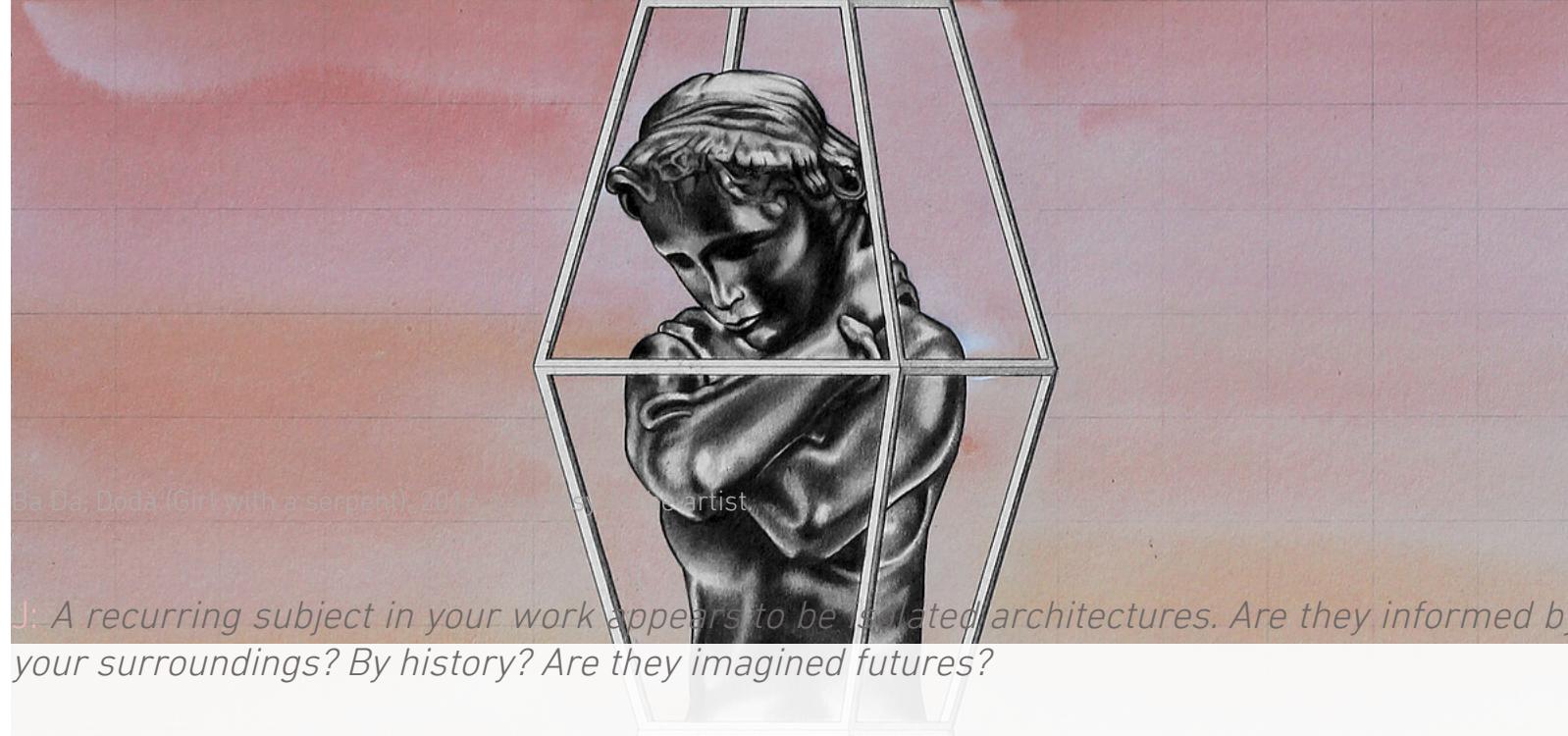
"So much of a society's history, ideologies and beliefs are reflected in their cityscapes: civilisations inevitably pour their beliefs and culture into the forms and buildings they create."

Artist Chris Agnew is becoming widely acknowledged for his highly detailed drawings and signature technique of icon panel etching. His deeply considered work, referencing art history, social ideologies, political disharmony and how cultural beliefs shape our cityscapes, has earned him a place in some of the greatest public and private collections, including the Victoria & Albert Museum. This month he debuts a solo booth at the London Art Fair with [Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery](#). We take time to find out about his new work and get under the skin of what makes the artist tick.



Ra Da, *Dodā* (A routine parade), 2016, courtesy of the artist.

light that are present in religious iconography. Rather than having a clearly defined source (and therefore being emitted as a form of 'illumination'), my shards are scattered across a plane, crashing into each other.



Ba Da, Dodā (Girl with a serpent), 2016, Etching, 30 x 22 cm, © artist

J: A recurring subject in your work appears to be isolated architectures. Are they informed by your surroundings? By history? Are they imagined futures?

C: The first isolated architectural piece that I completed was a 2009 drawing, 'Thus Spake Progress', which was shortlisted for the Jerwood Drawing Prize. It imagines the Houses of Parliament clock tower, which houses Big Ben, as an ouroboros, a snake eating its own tail. This was just after the financial crash when it started to become apparent that the UK government was never going to target those responsible for financial crimes, and would instead point the finger elsewhere. There was a simple idea that I wanted to capture, that of history repeating itself – the title is a play on Nietzsche's 'Thus Spake Zarathustra' and Hogarth's etching series 'The Rake's Progress'. It was from then on that it became a main string to my bow.

Although the drawings are architectural in nature, they are less concerned with architecture itself, and more with how ideology operates through a series of symbols and structures, and how our interaction with them shapes society. So much of a society's history, ideologies and beliefs are reflected in their cityscapes: civilisations inevitably pour their beliefs and culture into the forms and buildings they create.

I think that all time is imagined – the past, present and future. Proof of that was provided by 2016, as voters fantasised about a return to an imagined golden age in the UK and America, which concurrently led them to imagine a future that isn't possible. The 'Ba da, Dodā' series asks us exactly that: how would a society function if it existed in the vacuum of an abstract form?

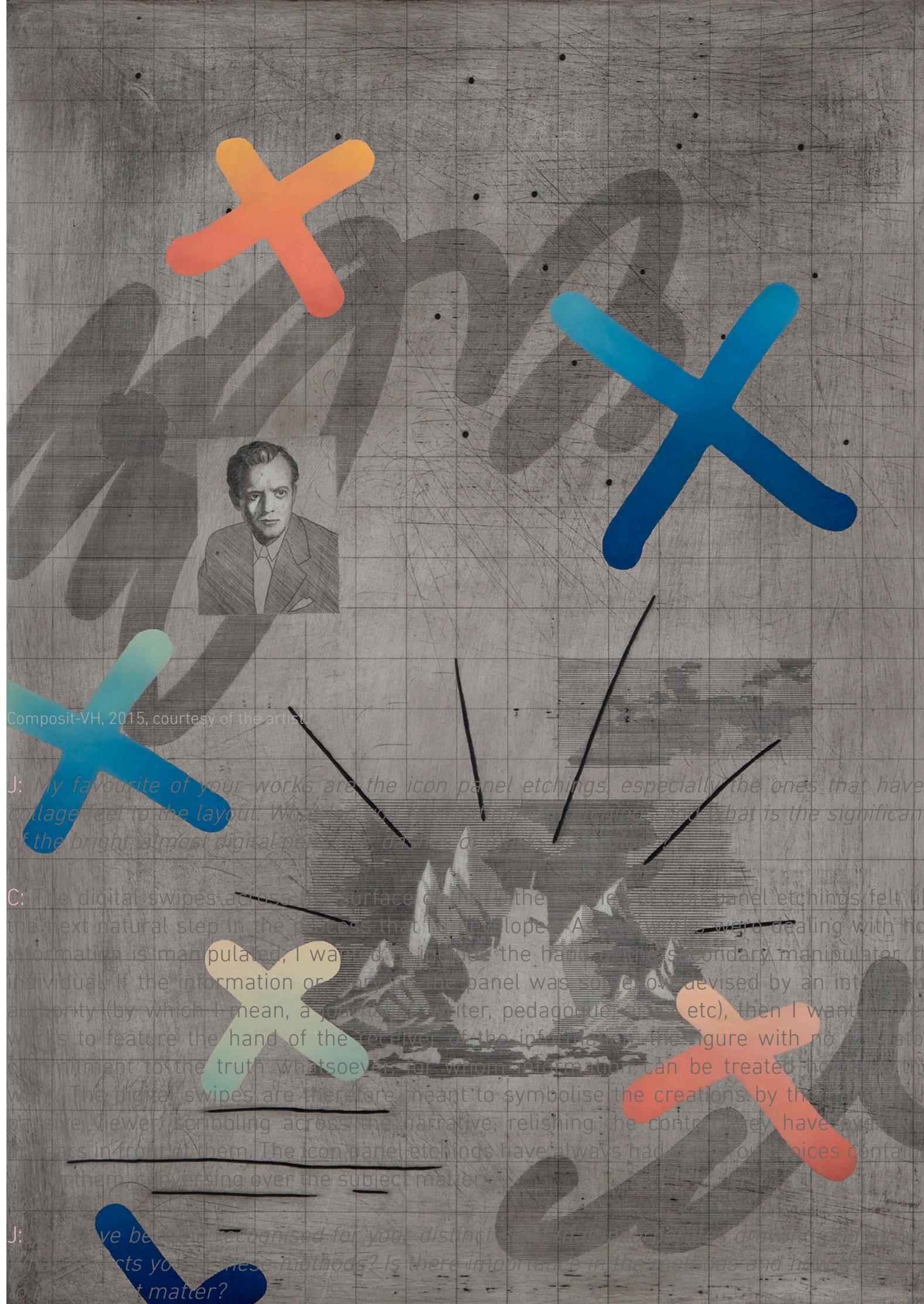
J: You spent some years living and working in Bucharest, did this affect your practice, whether that be influences of subject matter, aesthetic sensibilities or process? Do you find working in different environments assists or challenges your work in different ways?

C: There was a moment after the MA when I was taking part in so many shows and competitions that I didn't feel that my work was being given the breathing room to develop naturally.

In Bucharest, I found that I could really strip down my practice to the bones, and build it up again without the pressures of the London art scene. New environments challenge my work, and that is exactly what it needs. I think if it's not challenged constantly then it exists in an echo chamber where it is only speaking to itself.

Living in Bucharest shaped major elements of my work without a doubt, but does not define it in any way. However, there are many features of life there that really put fuel in my tank: its geopolitical position, the architecture, the proximity of such a tumultuous period in its history.

My old studio used to look out over a little square in the centre of the city, and I would see this 80-odd year old man walking through, hunched over on his walking stick most days. One day I looked out to see him being screamed at by another middle-aged guy, the police pulled up and had to restrain him. I asked a friend if they knew what was going on, and they told me that that the old man was about to be put on trial again for his role as the chief torturer in one of the notorious Communist prisons. That is what I mean by the proximity of history, and you can't fail to be fascinated by something like that.



J: My favorite of your works are the icon panel etchings, especially the ones that have a collage feel to the layout. What does the icon panel technique mean to you? What is the significance of the bright, almost digital palette, used alongside the dark, monochromatic tones?

C: The digital swipes across the surface of the plate in the icon panel etchings felt like the next natural step in the process that I developed. As I was moving forward dealing with how information is manipulated, I wanted to involve the hand as the secondary manipulator. The individual in the information or story the icon panel was supposed to be devised by an individual (by which I mean, a young writer, pedagogue etc), then I wanted to see this to feature the hand of the receiver of the information, the figure with no narrative commitment to the truth whatsoever, for whom information can be treated however they want. The digital swipes are therefore meant to symbolise the creations by the viewer, the viewer scribbling across the narrative, relishing the control they have over what others in front of them. The icon panel etchings have always had multiple voices contained within them, overruling over the subject matter.

J: You have been well recognised for your distinct style. How do you approach your work? What affects your choice of method? Is there importance in the methods and how they relate to the subject matter?

C: My interest in the etching process developed on my BA at Leeds University. I felt a natural affinity with the drypoint process, scribing directly into the plate rather than using a wax resist, and concentrated on that.

Whilst working through the printing process, I realised that the plate with the ink on resonated more with me and my subject matter, than the final print. It was the genuine article, whereas the print felt like a mere representation, a ghost, of the plate.

I took this idea with me to my MA at Wimbledon, and began etching on wax, then on resin, which brought some attention to my work. It was only when I moved to Romania that I developed the Icon Panel Etching technique by studying the traditional preparation of Orthodox icon panels, and adapting the process to accommodate the etching process.

I love the versatility of the medium, the works have been included in drawing, painting and printmaking shows, and in fact have a quite a sculptural presence when you experience them, so they are sort of like shapeshifters that can put on many different masks.

I always describe the relationship between the process and the subject matter as a symbiotic co-existence, in that they evolved together, and feed off each other. In a nutshell, I'm interested in how information is captured, manipulated and disseminated to an audience. The etching process was arguably the first medium to disseminate information to large audiences. Historically, paintings were reproduced as etchings for the mass market, and current affairs were illustrated using the etching medium in order to reach large illiterate audiences (just Google the London Illustrated News). The icon panel etching process toys with the idea of the 'unique' truth, in that once the moment in which 'truth' occurs, it is forever lost, and all that exists after are just iterations of that.



Composit-MR, 2015, courtesy of the artist.

J: What plans do you have in store for your practice in 2017?

C: In January I will be returning to Bucharest to start a residency with Casa Jurnalistică, a house of investigative journalists that focuses on social interest stories in East Europe. I will be starting work on a project that I have been preparing for some time now.

A few years ago I bought a writing desk at a flea market in Bucharest, the vendor explained that the central drawer was locked, with the key snapped off in the lock, and that the contents of the drawer were mine to do with as I wished. When the drawer was prised open back at the studio, it revealed a cache of various documents and objects. Personal letters, photographs, identity cards, spectacles, and the velvet case for a lady's pistol, all from the same family, dating between 1919 and 1985. The period spans and documents a tumultuous period in European history, which saw Romania during the golden age, through to five years before the bloody revolution that brought an end to Communism.

I am currently translating my way through the material, tracing members of the family, and unearthing the surprising twists and turns of their personal lives in the face of such political upheaval. The project will yield some form of film, and associated text and drawings. The first drawing from the series 'No word of a lie' won the Derwent Art People's Choice Award at the end of last year so that was a great start.

To see more of Chris Agnew's work check his website: www.chrisagnew.co.uk

The London Art Fair preview evening is Tuesday 17th Jan and open from the 18th to 22nd.
For information on visiting the London Art Fair, in Islington, head to: www.londonartfair.co.uk

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Written by Amy Moffat
Jan 15th 2017

