

PROFILE



The LAKES, BAYS, and VISIONS of

ALAN STEIN

by Tom Smart

PAINTER, PRINTMAKER, BOOK ARTIST, Alan Stein is a master of many different expressive modes and means. His vibrant, dynamically composed paintings explore how landscapes and lakescapes can be traces of memories. His wood engravings display the elegant lyricism of a well-turned line, bracketed by shapes of deeply saturated tones. Always, pictorial poetry emerges from Stein's form and image.

These stylistic signatures are combined to great expressive advantage in the limited edition pamphlets and books of poetry that he has produced from his Parry Sound-based Church Street Press for well over two decades. Print-based interpretations of verses, and the poetry of materials themselves, all blend in his book art practice. Poems and prose, prints and painting, material, paper and binding: these all conspire to elevate and intensify the reading experience by activating more than just a visual sensation.

In Stein's hands, the marriage of word, material, and image is directed to making beautiful books that give voice to the poetry of objects as much as they do to the poets' words and the artist's prints. This fact is never more evident than it is in his newly published, limited-edition artist book *On Spirit Lake: Georgian Bay Stories*.

This publication comprises specially commissioned stories by twelve authors, poets and artists reflecting a diverse range of experiences related to lives lived on and around Georgian Bay—Spirit Lake—in the present and in the past. In selecting the stories, Stein has interpreted their authors' words as near-mystical, visually poetic wood engravings that have been tipped into the hand-set, hand-printed volume.

Stein's engravings all riff off the idea of an island in a lake standing in as a moment in memory's continuum. As a portfolio, the stories and prints show his extraordinary capacity for suggesting entire worlds through delicate, emotionally evocative compositions which speak to being absorbed in the beauty of a place, afloat in time and space.



As Stein goes about creating his limited edition books, the methodical steps of setting type and printing image, interpreting verses as engravings or lithographs, come to mind almost as emanations from a deep place: islands from the unconscious. His process dictates his form.

The process of typesetting stimulating vision—a kind of sequential automatism—has been the backbone of his book-making method since the beginning. Sketches, often just an array of lines, turn into images. They can be literal or allusive, directly linked to verses, have a personal connotation, or exist on the margins of direct reference. These accumulated sketches form a visual portfolio specific to a collection of poems or stories. They gradually define the basis for a book project.

There is a simple beauty to Stein's graphic style always on display in his books. Gestural energy animates Stein's personal signature in his engraved works. His is an expressive vibrancy that renders natural and figurative motifs into patterns of sinuous waves that animate his subjects. Landscapes and shorelines, islands and lakes, windswept clouds, and arrangements of fields and trees that caress the land as if it were a living, breathing thing; these are the essential devices

Photos provided
by Alan Stein

of his art and are all evident from his very earliest engravings, among them his 1990 cover illustration of a Northern Ontario island for *The Devil's Artisan*. This image of an island in Georgian Bay foreshadows much that would follow—especially the way he brings to life whole worlds in single, allusive engravings depicting lakes and their spirits.

Take, for instance his 1993 *Islands*, which explores this central personal metaphor, announcing him as much more than just a printer, printmaker, or book publisher. In the way he approaches his subject matter, and in his use of all the materials comprising the publication, Stein brought together all of the various elements of his practice into a kind of visual allegory. *Islands* is a poetic meditation on the idea of isolation—personal and geographical.

Its visual elements comprise a series of Stein's wood engravings that are more interpretive in nature than they are illustrative, a quality that sets them apart from what came before in his practice. The images—symbolic and stylized islands—are abstracted forms reduced to their essentials. The islands are basic shapes floating on animated fields made by engravers' tools scratching woodblocks. Similarly, the text is set down in a very simple format, as a list.

As image and concept, "island" (and the "lake" surrounding it) provided Stein with a signature device to which he returned repeatedly in his subsequent work up to the present day with *Spirit Lake*. His statement, published in the earlier book, that *Islands* was "one of a series of projects in which I am exploring the landscape of islands," served to foreshadow much that came to pass in his artistic development, particularly in his engravings and book designs, and it directly served as a statement of artistic intent.

Isolated, self-contained, whole worlds cut off from others, the island motif and metaphor give much to Stein, not the least of which was a way to explore the concept of home. In addition to living in the town of Parry Sound, he and his wife purchased an island in Georgian Bay at Bayfield Inlet north of Pointe au Baril that provides him and his family refuge and solace, as well as a second studio space in which he can explore his unusual muse: a striated rocky outcrop, surrounded by water.

Stein's fascination with islands led him to release 1994's *Islands*, a longer meditation on the subject. It comprises textual passages from a number of diverse historical and contemporary authors treating the subject, and includes nineteen wood engravings, fifteen of which are hand-coloured. The engravings, providing a parallel text to the written passages, interpret views of lakeshores, islands and other landscape motifs, depicted in a way to emphasize linear striations of mineral veins in rocks, as well as to heighten the visual rhythms set up by the landscapes, built structures and water. This publication served as a template for *On Spirit Lake*.



Overall, the effect of the marriage of image and text is a complexly constructed visual statement in which the pictures seem to emerge from an array of parallel and overlapping marks. Although Stein labels his engravings “illustrations”, they are not merely direct translations of motifs and descriptions found in the corresponding text, but images that “riff off” the poetry or feeling embodied in words, often conjuring metaphysical transformations of subjects being subsumed into the magic of place, space, memory, and history.

The island figure is also referenced in his 1995 *The Asia: a firsthand account of that last fateful voyage of 1882*, also published as a chapbook in that year’s

Wayzgoose Anthology. A story of the historical shipwreck of “The Asia” on Georgian Bay, Stein interprets the tragedy in wood engravings of a boat being tossed on roiling waters delineated in high contrast black and white engraving. The images are set down in an elegant, fluid line through which energy is easily conveyed by the dynamic compositions. In particular, Stein’s print accompanying the second page of “the account from September 17th 1882” is a dynamic composition involving the boat’s consumption by massive waves. The vessel, still afloat, appears as a doomed island of humanity adrift and at the mercy of the awesome power of the storm-tossed waters.



Pictured: Illustration for Waubgeshig Rice’s “Manido-gaming”. 5x7 wood engraving

By the late 1990s, Stein was collaborating with poets and authors in the making of beautiful books. In 1996 he worked with Al Purdy on *In Mexico*. By 1998, he and Canadian poet Douglas LePan were producing the sensually rich *Towards the Open: Georgian Bay Poems*. A meditation on memory, myth, loss and landscape, *Towards the Open* gave Stein the opportunity to return to his exploration of the island metaphor more fully than before. That LePan's poems similarly explore this idea propelled Stein into a fertile creative territory in which his images could take on the responsibility of being visual emblems of LePan's verses, allowing both device and text to resonate and amplify each other's significance.

Indeed, the creative territory opened up by LePan's meditations allowed Stein to deepen his own interpretations of the island and lake motifs. This expansiveness is shown to stunning effect in the volume's frontispiece—a colourful and dazzling hand-coloured and gilded engraving of a Georgian Bay Island near Bayfield Inlet at sunset. The effect of Stein's unique linear style moves the imagery away from naturalism to a kind of abstraction based in an impulse to simplify the elements of rock, water, and vegetable motifs into radiant devices. While acknowledging their roots in a recognizable subject, they are much more referential than imitative.

In the succeeding poems, Stein delves into the mythic and spirit-based references of the poems that he interprets with great imagination and energy. His Leviathan about to consume a lighthouse (accompanying "Red Rock Light") is rendered in a spare and decorative line-based style that allows the negative spaces to become positive forms. "Canoe Trip's" engraving has a mannered quality that suggests a narrative told through successive episodes along a water journey. Stein's engraving preceding "Swimming at Night, Bayfield Inlet" blurs the distinctions between land, water and sky by a very light, thin series of strokes which tease the sparsely described pictorial elements from their dark grounds. More a series of scratches than engraved marks, a figure can be discerned in the image field whose crescent-like pose is echoed in the curved striations of veins in rocks, the constellations, and the arcs traced by shooting stars.

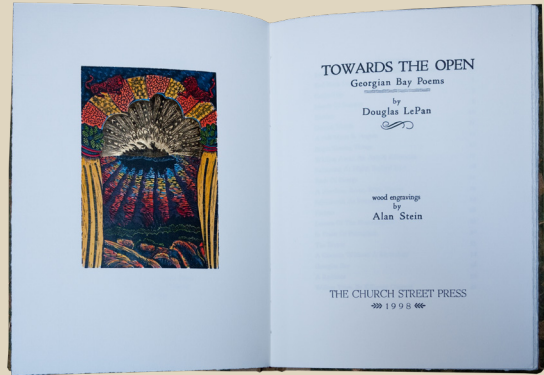
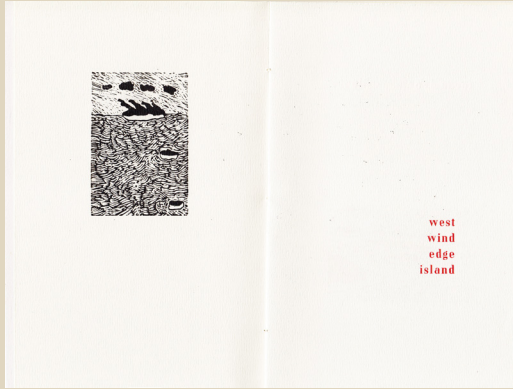
There is an elegiac tone to the volume, while counterpoints of transfiguration, metamorphosis and transformation engender an overwhelming feeling that comes from the communion of elements with the landscape and its animating spirits.

The selection of "stories" in *On Spirit Lake: Georgian Bay Stories* encapsulates the inscrutable qualities of Georgian Bay and its many thousands of islands. The authors' deep connections to the Bay are expressed as prose poems, fictional narratives, autobiographical episodes, sketches, and dramatized historical records.

In all these stories, Georgian Bay rises as the central figure. Its legendary winds transfigure uncharted terrains. They set the water's direction and force, and determine the currents of personal and shared histories.

Looking back over the corpus of Stein's Church Street Press is to see the manner in which he and his collaborators work in concert to find the rich congruencies between word and image, poetic metaphor and multivalent emblem; to find the right manner in which material and texture are able to reflect, echo, and amplify mood and emotion; to find the perfect blending of line and cadence.

Stein is visual interpreter, conjurer and guide to how artist and author can point to the concord between today and deep history, legend and the fluidity of memory, and to the seemingly unfathomable lengths of geological time that can be grasped in an instant. For Stein, the island and the water surrounding it stand for constancy in calm and tumult. His work is an apt reflection. ■



Pictured (clockwise from above):

¹ page spread from Islands, 1993

² title-spread for Towards the Open, 1998

³ Illustration for Andrea Curtis's "The Stories we Tell", 5x7 wood engraving

⁴ page spread from On Spirit Lake, 2019

