When looking at Ben Gooding’s collection of aluminium drawings, from a distance, they resemble a sound wave, or a sweep of light, one unified movement over the surface. A strong imposing metal and a definite motion. Abandoning colour, dimension and expression, each piece is systemic and striking. Look closely however and you will see that each is built of hundreds of lines etched into the surface of aluminium sheets. Carving a profile tool in melamine prior to each construct and, not deviating from his process, Ben repeats the etch into the metal surface, building up the homogenous lines one by one until they become one single flow across the aluminium.

‘Aluminium, not steel, as steel is quite strong and would start to hurt after a while’ he kindly laughs at my opening faux pas, when we meet one evening near the Royal Festival Hall. It’s a process that the artist admits, over a few drinks, can be a little ‘boring.’ An obsessive repeat of the same drawn line, the production must have a meditative quality, but what else is it that fascinates him? He explains ‘The simplicity. It’s almost like an equation, you’re not adding anything, or subtracting anything, just affecting the surface slightly.’

‘I like the moment of epiphany when what appears to be simple sweep of light is revealed to be very labour intensive ...one throws the other into relief, the immediacy and instance of the viewing experience and realisation of intensity of time gone into creating the piece.’

Educated at Byam Shaw, St Martin’s with a background in Fine Art, Ben sees his work as drawings, enjoying the location of them in the grey area between sculpture and drawing that the material and method affords. If he hadn’t have been an artist, he would have been a scientist, or at least that was the dream of his childhood self, and he continues to absorb science books and is fascinated by the natural world. This duality between art and science, soft and hard, created and existing, and the acceptance that opposites coexist side by side very nicely, and thus have a connection, resonates throughout the work.

A hand crafted process on industrial materials, the result is a piece that looks machined, and very much of the age, despite its creation being ‘so incredibly basic...just a needle scratching a surface...it’s almost primal really.’ Inspired by the postwar Zero group, who worked with the ambition to reject methods of art production that had gone previously, and whose kinectic art very much encapsulates the process perception through light and motion, and a fan of minimalism, Ben’s work straddles a hazy area between. Unlike Richard Serra and Donald Judd, whose large scale works are very industrially produced, the hand made element to Ben’s work is something of a reaction to the high tech photo shop mentality that pervades much of the art world. ‘Art today is an office job. People sit there tap tap tapping on Apple Macs and the idea of life drawing and working with clay has been almost replaced.’

Much lamented and lauded has been the change of location of St Martins, and potentially with it the change of focus. We discuss the now academic nature of art education which has moved from being an artisanal trade or craft ‘literally grinding the paints, stretching the clay’ to a much more philosophical and scholastic mode of education – one in which Photoshop features heavily. The technical education he himself had is held in great regard. ‘I believe that it is so important to learn how to draw and how to see, and I am immensely grateful that I have that craft. Just as a musician learns scales, and builds those neuroconnections in the brain, the artist can practice and refine.’

The more recent pieces in this collection have seen the process alter slightly. Whereas to start with the undulating melamine tool was crafted from a freehand sweep of the pencil, now Ben uses mathematical rules and protacters to produce very measured and precise soundwaves. ‘It’s one step away from the artist again. In that conscious gesture and freeform movement, every curve, every line, the artist is present in. Although I’m still making decisions, the measurements mean that certain parameters are kept, the art is kept within certain boundaries.’ Surely I ask that is contrary to the point and purpose of art as a completely expressive mode, a pouring out of emotion. ‘There was this idea that somehow through art and art making a sublime truth is expressed, which I think really reached its zenith with abstract expression. The whole concept that by being handmade a piece of art must convey an existential truth...this is a step away from that. I don’t want to talk too much about Buddhism, but there exists the eastern idea of the self being indulgent, which lately is in vogue in the west.’ Although this is a central tenet of the modernist agenda, the methods and results Ben employs again moves it into the grey area in which the most interesting artwork sits.

Honesty from an artist is refreshing. Ben likes his work to look nice. Along with intelligence, provocation, expression and commentary one of the points of art is how it looks, what we see, and often we desire that sight to be aesthetically pleasing. We discuss at length the capacity for human beings to appreciate beauty, that defining characteristic that sets us apart. With that comes the capacity to create, and note, the ugly.

There’s a story about Oscar Wilde, on a trip to America, being asked why he believed the crime rate is so high. Fans of Stephen Fry may have heard this one before. In true deadpan Wilde style he replied ‘America is such a violent country because your wallpaper is so ugly.’ From city planners to prisons, schools and living rooms, it has been scientifically proven to have a beneficial impact. We have the desire to fill our world with thing that look nice and please the eye, and why should artists be any different. A pretty world is a better designed world.

But this isn’t always apparent, and one of the reasons I find interviewing artists always tough. I like art, I go to galleries, but always with me is the underlying niggle – do I really get it? Am I intelligent enough to really appreciate art. ‘I hate that. There seems to be a desire to obscure it, coat the art in a difficult language, which I think really reached its zenith with the Parisian intelligentsia sixties post structuralist discourse. People feel need the at art school to produce something ungettable, dropping in quotes from some French academic who died in the sixties that only three people have heard of...they’ve got to meet you half way. It’s got to be interesting and make you do something. Not so obscurest and revelling in how opaque it is and enjoying the fact the masses can’t get it. It’s certainly been very prevalent but I think, and hope the trend is filtering out a bit.’

Of course it’s not just the creators of art that enjoy raising it on to another plane, but critics. Ben believes that most art writing is ‘very bad’, seeing it the belief that it must be inaccessibly intellectual as a real ‘insecurity’ of art criticism. Very in vogue amongst the art intelligentsia is to drop a very obscuring fake way of writing, arguably one that is unnecessary, especially after reading the lucid and simple terms employed by such fiercely intelligent critics like Ellsworth Kelly or Patrick Heron. He concludes ‘Art is sublime and interesting and so shouldn’t be posted away. Everyone can make some kind of sense.’

‘There does exist this myth of the artist...’ Ben starts, as though he is telling me something new. We rattle off the characteristics: eccentric, oversensitive, hyperaware, pretentious, detached from the world. ‘Any artist that tries to play up to that stereotype...they just need to get over themselves. My only response to that is ‘get in the studio and make some work.’’

Although the global art market is suffering (something about a recession) the most interesting points in culture do often occur when adversity strikes, and as such this could be exciting times for creativity. Now oming to the end of his period of producing these aluminium drawings, creativity and the next phase of work for Ben involves screen printing, and he is currently refining his method to be something new and expressive – and fun. Continuing to unite different methods and influences, he admits that it’s all a process of discovery. ‘The more you know, the more you discover you don’t know.’