

ARTIST PRESENTATION

Dr. Irena Keckes, University of Guam

ABSTRACT

This paper will elaborate on the topic of displacement / migration and printmaking, and how environments informed the conceptual engagement of my art. It will reflect on woodcut printmaking methodologies, concepts, and display strategies inherent to my woodcut print practice. This includes contemporary woodcut printmaking, non-toxic, experimental and expanded print such as print installations and performative aspects in woodcut printmaking, as well as aspects of phenomenology, eco-Buddhism, art-craft relationship, and cross-cultural and critical theory. The presentation will examine ways in which my praxis embodies aspects of cultures through which it has been migrated and exposed to: from my final MFA Tokyo University of the Arts *mokuhanga* prints to my University of Auckland, New Zealand, Ph.D woodcut prints that were exhibited as print installation with elements of performativity, to my newest cycle of large-scale woodcut prints created while teaching printmaking at the University Guam.

INTRODUCTION

This presentation discusses some aspects of my practice and its many transformations over the past fifteen years of living and working in diverse environments. The paper encompasses major moments since my studies of *mokuhanga* at Tokyo University of the Arts where I graduated from masters of fine arts in printmaking (2005). It further deliberates on main works produced during my Ph.D in fine arts in printmaking at University of Auckland in New Zealand (2016).

My practice at Tokyo University of the Arts was focused on learning a traditional Japanese woodcut printmaking and creating smaller scale, multicolor prints. This became more experimental, innovative, and it in particular grew in scale as well as in concept over the course of my doctoral studies (2011-2015), which concluded with Ph.D thesis titled *Mindful Repetitions: Contemporary Printmaking and Ecologically Informed Buddhism* and created large monochrome woodcuts, re-shaping and molding my knowledge of *mokuhanga* previously gained at Tokyo Geidai. I combined this approach with Western styles of printmaking that I have that learnt and practiced in Europe, in 1990s. My research attempted to find out if and how such spiritual teaching as Buddhism may inspire the ‘greening’ of print practices, and how contemporary printmaking has become a progressive artistic form, through its extended forms. My practice often dealt with something arbitrary, unpredictable within the creative process and some challenges related to creating large-scale print installations.

DISCUSSION

Using one of the oldest print methods, my prints explore if and how printmaking practice has power to transmit ideas of how mindfulness may contribute to ecological approaches within both Eastern and Western environments. The process I have used to create my work in my print installations is as follows: I place several sheets of plywood on the floor of the studio and work simultaneously carve them, treating them as a single artwork. The rhythmic, reflective action of carving the wood brings a nuance of rituality to the process. In so doing I have gradually shifted the main focus from controlling the final outlook of the print to the process of carving itself.

To more profoundly examine perception and the meditative qualities of the process, I carve the plywood sheets without a predetermined image. This approach greatly intensifies the mind-body connection in the act of making the work. I see the bodily part of the activity as the most direct way of transforming mind into outer, material expression; in this way, attitude becomes form and process becomes concept.¹ My practice concentrates on the repetitive actions of carving, focusing on the tangible act of making and how carving the wood *becomes* the substantial conception of the work. I underpin this notion with Robert Morris' seminal 1968 essays *Anti-Form* and *Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated*, which radically nominated the creative process itself as the central aspect of any artwork.

My current methods grew over many years of my involvement with printmaking, dating from my undergraduate studies at the Academy of Fine Arts at the University of Zagreb, in 1990s.² My interest in Asian arts and philosophy, however, began in 2000 with my participation in a three-month project in Japan as the Mino Washi Artist in Residence. The project was situated in Gifu Prefecture, well known for the production of high quality paper for printmaking and painting, and for numerous paper-crafted objects. *Snake* (2000), a mokuhanga installation presented at Mino Washi Museum, is one of my first installations of prints into a free space of the gallery without walls to support them. This was a critical show for the further moving of my practice in the direction of print installation.

Continuing to create woodcuts and using handmade papers to print paved the way for my master's study at the Tokyo University of the Arts (2002-2005).³ Tokyo Geidai, where I learnt methods of woodcut printing, ukiyo-e techniques. This school fosters the study of traditional methods *alongside* contemporary ones. Studying there deepened my appreciation for crafts and extended my perception of the limitless ways in which we may engage with art. For me, the processes involved in woodcut printmaking have a contemplative quality. A tacit philosophy underlines the ethics of teaching / learning processes in Japan, with roots in Buddhism.

¹ This phrase "attitude becomes form" is consciously taken from Harald Szeemann's influential 1969 exhibition of Arte Povera. The phrase is relevant here as it is the emphasis away from product towards nexus of process and thought. The show included: Mario Merz, Robert Morris, Barry Flanagan, Bruce Nauman, Carl Andre, Gilberto Zorio, Joseph Beuys, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long, Jannis Kounellis and Lawrence Weiner.

² Although my studies included nearly all printmaking techniques, linocut was the method in which I produced my graduation work, a cycle of 10 prints named the "Undersea World." Because they were larger than the press, I printed them by rubbing the back of the paper with a spoon, itself a longstanding practice in printmaking.

³ Tokyo University of the Arts formerly was called Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. In Japanese it is called Tokyo Geidai and is largely known as such.

Importance is placed on mindfulness involved in every part of the process whether it is related to the concept or to the technological skill of sharpening chisels, preparing the paper, carving or printing. This pedagogical approach, where the emphasis is on the processes of creating, as much if not more than the results, has had a profound impact on my art practice. It democratise all parts of the process of making: concept, technique, time spent with tools, maintenance and so on. In this context, separating art from craft has been unnecessary. As part of my masters research I created a cycle of prints title *Time*. The installation consisted of twenty-four prints, each 50cm x 50 cm. Twelve prints were monochrome and twelve were multicolor prints, all executed in *mokuhanga* method, printed with *sumi* inks and pigments on Tosa washi.

A key constituent of printmaking that remains present in both its traditional and innovative forms rests in the fundamental uncertainty of results. Even when methods are well mastered, each iteration of a repeated process has the potential – irrespective of method chosen – to be quite different in each instance. This extends to the idea of making prints while remaining open towards differences and uncertainties liberated processes of printmaking. During my doctoral research, I abandoned editioning and immersed in such an exploration through creating my large carvings and printing them by hand and press.

The nontoxic practice I have used is Japanese woodcut (*mokuhanga*), is a method that traditionally does not employ chemicals. Carving was navigated by calligraphic painting directly on the wood – a reverse image of an actual drawing. The image was first freely applied by brush and black *sumi* ink, created in one brush stroke as in Zen calligraphy. This was the method used to create print installations *Unlimited Resonance of Repetition* (2012). Later, methodology changed in producing artworks for print installations *Presence of Absence* (2014), and *Mindful Repetitions* (2015), which have examined from different perspective my research question if and how a Buddhist-informed ecological thinking may influence the practice of nontoxic printmaking. To create my prints I used plywood of 120 cm x 240 cm, and then combined two sheets of these dimensions, thereby extending the size of print, abandoning the image preparation. I printed the plates by hand, rubbing the back of the papers by *baren* and later on by press. All these works consolidated and extended my previous knowledge especially through the dramatic shift in scale, but also in the conscious shift of emphasis around process. One of questions that interested me when starting to use traditional Japanese printmaking methods alongside Western print methods was how to challenge and/or redefine printmaking by detaching it from the wall, while remaining mindful of technical aspects of each process.

Unlimited Resonance of Repetition (2012) installation consisted of ten 300 cm long and 140 cm wide prints. One objective of this exhibition was to emphasize the spontaneity of repetitive actions embedded in printmaking as a process-driven form of expression. Another aim of this exhibition was to extend the conceptual boundaries of printmaking by using sculptural and installation methods. Some of the wooden matrices were placed on the floor of the gallery, in juxtaposition with prints, and some were installed to lean against the walls, also using diagonal corners of the gallery. I investigated the notion of repetition not as a reproduction of one object,

but as process embodied in nearly all steps of woodcut printmaking. Carving blocks and printing was approached as ritual and a potentially spiritual, meditative process. This approach aimed to coalesce Japanese and Western traditions around making and displaying methods, as well as to investigate its phenomenological aspects.

Expanding the scale of work to be larger than my own body, created a platform for a more intense exploration of more physically-informed ways of knowing. What for me connects mind and body is a set of repetitive actions within rather complex process of printmaking that contain something of rituality as well as meditative values. Mary Caroline Richards coined the term creation-centred spirituality to describe a notion of interconnectedness between creativity and compassion.⁴ To bring compassion in relation to creativity is a brave idea because like wisdom, *karuna* or compassion is also one of the central Buddhist conceptions that signify a spiritual path towards enlightenment. In Buddhism, compassion and wisdom are not separated, just as mind and heart are one.

For me, each part of the printmaking process, not only its final end, represents thinking through making as a key concept within contemporary art practices. This was a critical idea for *Presence of Absence* installation (2013), in which carved wooden plates were hung asymmetrically in proximity to wood shavings carved from them, and installed on the floor. The installation entwined art and craft not as a dual, but conjoined concept. The display stimulated the audience to explore the process of making as a concept idea of transitive artwork as a network with tenacity to engage with the audience. By creating a “carpet” of shavings *Presence of Absence* pointed towards the idea of impermanence: the wooden shavings had once been the plates. One could ask – why not carve until the plate was completely transformed into shavings? But showing transition rather than representing only void better emphasises the status of change, of being in-between, subject to flux. Prints were taken from all the displayed plates in the exhibition, but were deliberately left out of the exhibition. The idea was to contribute towards the understanding of printmaking, where print itself was absent yet present.

The creative practice of my doctoral research culminated in my final presentation titled *Mindful Repetitions* (2014). This exhibition presented two large woodcuts that summed up my entire practice-led doctoral study; a 14.5m long print consisting of eighteen woodcuts installed on the wall, and 240 cm x 320 cm long print installed on the floor of the gallery. Prints embodied all the information about the processes of making. Rich, black ink (that, due to the embossing element, came in sharp contrast with the whiteness of the paper), was absorbed by the prints, together with the colour of the wood and, in some parts, the wooden chips. The prints were result of the countless actions of my hand on the block, and engaging whole my body/mind in creating this artwork. The connections in the final eighteen prints are not hidden; there was no intention to be pedantic in carving. I made a decision to print the work in black only, to carve plates directly – which liberated my practice.

⁴ Mary Caroline Richards, *Centring in Pottery, Poetry and the Person* (Connecticut Wesleyan University Press, 1989: xiv). Richards (1916-1999) was best known for her teaching at the Black Mountain College and for writing.

Since 2015, even though I continued with creating large scale woodcuts, my practice took another shift. I use Caligo Safe Wash non-toxic printing inks, and I print all block by hand, rubbing the back of the paper using *barens* or a wooden spoon. I started with the cycle of prints I continue calling *Black Prints*, a work that connects to the notions and themes previously explored through my carvings. Over the past year, however, I again include color in my prints, mixing and combining relief with intaglio printmaking methods. These prints, involving color, survey a topic I have long been interested in, in particular now when again living in yet another and different part of the world. Through these works I explore migratory notions of a contemporary lifestyle, notions that often grow into a travel with no return to the starting point. To travel implies a point of departure, arrival and then return to the starting point – home. My work is expressing such traveling through which the ‘homecoming’ has perhaps become less possible, and maybe even not necessary. By utilizing hybridity of methods, my prints echo a life that is unfolding through an existence and a world where home is but a transitory place. Relocation, migration, dislocation brings multiple, transformative aspects to my art practice.

CONCLUSION

Larger part of research so far was focused on examining if and how key Buddhist concepts such as interconnectedness and emptiness may extend to the realms of print media of 21st century. I was carving wooden plates directly, without preconceived image, concentrating on repetitive actions of movement of my hand and on being with the whole body in that process of carving. This brought meditative aspects of mindfulness to my woodcutting and printing, as well as performativity, underlying its increasingly hybridised and process-based character. My newer prints mainly survey migratory notions of a contemporary lifestyle; notions that often grow into a travel with no return to the starting point.

This presentation concludes with a Luis Camnitzer’s thought that informed my thinking around the practice, “Making prints is the task. Art seems to be a miraculous by-product.”⁵ He emphasized a way of thinking through processes of making while using printmaking techniques to realize conceptual objectives. “How to reclaim printmaking as means and not as a goal in itself,” he asked in 2010, “and, more importantly, how to make visible the various forms of print that are at the core of contemporary artistic practice?”⁶ How to make *mokuhanga* visible, as part of contemporary art in 21st century?

⁵ Luis Camnitzer, “Printmaking as a Colony,” *Philagraphica*, 2006, accessed November 11, 2012, <http://www.philagrafika.org/pdf/WS/Printmakingacolony.pdf>.

⁶ Sabine Trieloff, “Interview with conceptual artist Luis Camnitzer,” *Daros Exhibitions*, 2010, Zürich, Switzerland. accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOp9CcuQXo8>. Camnitzer discusses the value of art and artworks in his exhibition, and his ways of staying independent as an artist.