

Engramme, centre de production en estampe / diffusion en art actuel

History and Moment: Printmaking in Western Canada

By Walter Jule

In the context of my solo exhibition at Engramme, I would like to comment on some of the historical cultural conditions that led to the expansion of printmaking in western Canada in the 1970's beginning with a watershed period in Canadian art education which started in 1969.

1. Canada's first studio masters' programs were established beginning with the University of Alberta in 1969 and quickly followed by York University and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1970 and 1971 respectively. An agreement was struck between the three schools where in Nova Scotia would concentrate on training university teachers, clearly anticipating the cultural and economic boom of the 1970's. York would emphasize interdisciplinary connections pairing visual artists with dancers for instance, in a conscious nod to performance art and the "happenings" of the New York art scene. The University of Alberta agreed to offer specialist programs in traditional studio areas and graphic and industrial design in effect, promulgating historical studio divisions in the new and 'wilder' west. These schools still adhere to the original model while other universities were quick to introduce hybrid programs they felt would best suit their student's needs while reflecting the philosophical proclivities of faculty. By 1975, there were more than a dozen universities offering masters' courses across the country.

2. The large numbers of teachers needed to staff this rapid expansion far exceeded the pool of qualified artists and recruitment from outside Canada became an urgent necessity. In the 18th and 19th centuries immigrants often entered Canada in waves (some times invited) from the Ukraine for instance to farm the prairies and later from China to build the railways. This pattern now extended to the cultural sphere when artists from England, Scotland, Australia, Poland, Argentina, Chile, South Africa, Switzerland, the United States, Hong-Kong and Japan were brought to Canada to fill these new posts. The printmakers that were part of this influx (myself included) brought with them not only a broad range of technical expertise, from workshops like Tamarind and Gemini in the United States and art schools like the Royal College of Art in London, but perhaps more importantly, and for better or worse, an appalling lack of knowledge of Canadian history or appreciation of the depth of the French/English dynamic which had shaped its culture. Instead, they came distracted by a plethora of ideas from their homelands, a general excitement about the British and American pop movements, photography - as technique and language and theoretical spill-over from conceptual art, documentation, socio-political movements, all having the effect of concentrating the artistic ferment of 60's and 70's global culture into one country over a short period of time. This diversity of views, sometimes openly antagonistic to the colloquial tone of much western Canadian printmaking, shared an ambitious optimism and renewed belief that the inherent portability of prints could offer artists an advantage in reaching audiences in Canada and abroad and a position within studio practice where it might be possible to gain a unique perspective on the shifting, even disappearing, boundaries between traditional forms.

3. Finally, the impact of the international print biennales in Cracow, Ljubljana, New Delhi and Tokyo which all began in the 1960's gave printmaking new credibility and western Canadian print artists like Pat Martin Bates and John Eiler were winning awards giving a measure of celebrity to individual artists at home. The cumulative effect of these factors served to disconnect western Canadian printmaking from its historical roots in France and England. In Alberta and British Columbia revenue from the forestry and petro-chemical industries was helping build state of the art print workshops. These disruptions seemed to some, intent on preserving a more circumscribed notion of Canadian culture, to wrench at the very fabric of our national identity. Generally, though the internationalism championed by the first wave of expatriate teacher has continued and the ongoing mutation or hybridization of western Canadian print culture is now accepted as a fact, even welcomed, as a protection against the specter of absorption into American culture and even worse, culture as entertainment and spectacle. Today, Vancouver has the third largest Chinese population outside China after New York and San Francisco and boasts over sixty nationalities in an urban population of two million. In Toronto, Canada's largest city at nearly four million - 47% are minorities whose first language is neither French or English! Canadian poets, novelists, dancers, film makers and visual artists, speak compellingly of the immigrant experience as well as the shared ones which quickly define Canada and Canadians whatever their origin. In western Canada multiculturalism is our cultural identity marked by diversity, accommodation and a release

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from some of the burdens of European North American history. And for all of us there is the land, the heart breaking distances, the weather (Canada - despite global warming is a northern country), and a sense of geographical isolation. A fact that has heightened meaning in a wired world. Now, long after the economic bubble of the 1970's has burst, there is dwindling support for the arts and the commercial market for prints has all but collapsed. Young artists are particularly vulnerable.

While Japan is possibly the most visually loaded culture in the world whether projected, real, virtual or back-lit, images seem to invade almost every possible space from the public jumbotrons in Ginza to the personal full body tattoo. Canadians still prefer to watch television at home, films in theaters and tolerate only modest exposure of graphic images in public space. The Japanese artist Tadayoshi Nakabayashi, reporting on a recent visit to Edmonton, said 'the city is marked by a complete absence of all but the most essential graphic information'. How much of this is due to our natural reserve - or our general suspicion of what Japanese critic Hirashi Minami calls the deep structured schemes of ad agencies I cannot say. But since Canada does not yet produce the kind of art forms (like manga for example), that can become a force in mediating between high and low art, art and business. Canadian artists have little opportunity to explore lateral career moves. Instead, they either teach, work in galleries or arts administration or in unrelated occupations, and continue to make prints in artist run workshops. It is the communication provided by the conduits of over 40 ongoing international print bienniales along with cultural exchange initiatives that must be relied upon to provide benchmarks for achievement as well as encouragement to experimentation and risk.

The aspect of theory which has remained problematic to printmaking in western Canada comes, not surprisingly, from the early 1970's, as a residual effect of certain aspects of conceptual art. Often called the phenomenological critique, it challenged the then prevalent notion that meaning in art was to be found in personal experience - deep in the artist's psyche and attempted to reposition meaning in a kind of shared or public space. It had the effect of shifting the focus away from the artist as holder of a personal or privileged vision, and by extension, away from craft and technical virtuosity. This view continues to shape cultural policy or at least the rhetoric of justification advanced as policy by many of our major museums. Printmaking in western Canada has, as it has everywhere, abandoned the legacy of Dada and Surrealism, pictorial illusion or the influences of expressionism. What is arguably the strength of printmaking as a global movement (ie. its ability to reflect shifts in critical thought without resorting to extreme or reactionary positions and its ability to overlook certain logical contradictions in favour of deeper or conciliatory units has unfortunately marginalized printmaking practice somewhat in. ?????). Studio teaching in some universities is being restructured to reflect this conceptual attitude moving from media or craft centered practice to what is sometimes euphemistically called "knowledge-based practice". Unfortunately this approach often overemphasizes critical theory at the expense of first hand experience which can leave students with a wealth of mostly received ideas but without the "medium" literacy to articulate these notions in form and space. Today's younger generation is showing some dissatisfaction with this approach and seems to prefer to produce art which is an experience as well as an argument. At the University of Alberta, each division; painting, printmaking and so on operates as a semi-autonomous unit expected to navigate its particular course through those troubled shoals while keeping the best interests of the students at heart.

My own experience in teaching has led me to believe that extreme pedagogical positions, whether conceptual or technical, will only serve those student well who are predisposed by temperament or conditioning to function within narrow boundaries. Since theory always points away from the subject, it can serve as a roadmap but sooner or later it is bound to let them down. Prepared for accusations of new-age indulgence and self-actualizing therapy we continue to invite our students to explore inner feeling and follow instinct using whatever forms and theories might open experience and reveal new questions. They are also encouraged to take advantage of the courses offered at a university of over 35,000 students and explore psychology, music, literature and religion to broaden their understanding. This teaching approach in the context of our new culture should lead us naturally to pursue cross-cultural dialogue precisely focused on creative practice. Engaged and grounded in fundamental questions. I think it should guard against any ideology or orthodoxy, which could lead to the dissolution of conceptual dissimilarities. Still, some critics, citing the troubled legacy of imperialism, caution against distorting or even damaging misinterpretations. Some propose that contact with other cultures only be made with the proviso that judgment be somehow magically suspended. Hoping, I guess, that experience might move through consciousness as trackless as the reflections of the flying birds on water.

I'm reminded of the old Zen poem which reads, "The bamboo shadows sweep the stairs but raise no dust". The poem is meant to remind us of our natural or original mind but most of the time our shadow thoughts do raise dust - and plenty of it! The dust of opinion - agreement, and or wonder as our minds leap to embrace whatever assumptions might soothe the strangely intoxicating vertigo we feel when we sense that grasping a new insight often means letting go of something, probably a part of our own self definition. Working together with artists from other countries, we have the opportunity to find in each others work merely a phony projection of our own romantic fantasies or by speaking and discussing together, see beyond the encrustation's of culture and history and detect by a mutual seduction, the shared values and questions that lie at the base of our work and lives. ♦

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