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Venereal fabrications| Sexuality, gender, and society

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INTRODUCTION

My thesis work utilizes individual prints collaged to create large images which concern themselves with prostitution, sexuality and religion, puberty, and the stereotyping of women in American society. To introduce these topics I have presented highly emotional or active figures in a fantastic background. The emotionally charged figures generate interest while the lack of clear explanation or context for these emotional states is designed to engage the thinking capacities of the viewer. In this way, it is hoped, I am able to call upon the visceral and intellectual potential of viewer reaction. I have intentionally avoided making simple moral judgements about prostitution, sexuality and religion, puberty, or the nature of women. Instead, I have collaged together provocative elements that force the viewer to ask questions about these topics. In attempting to uncover the meaning of my work, it is my hope that the viewers discover how they themselves feel. By allowing the viewer the opportunity to arrive at their own judgements about the meaning of the work, they will contribute to the completion of the work and both the work and the message the viewers uncover for themselves will mean more to them than if some didactic pronouncement confronted them without a sense of self-investment and self-discovery.

THE SERIAL DEFINED IN RELATION TO TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF PRINTMAKING:

In 1961, The Print Council of America defined an original print as a work of art that fulfilled three requirements:

1) The artist alone has created the master image in or upon the plate, stone, wood block, or other material for the purpose of creating the print.
2) The print has been made from the said material by the artist or pursuant to his directions.
3) The finished print is approved by the artist.¹

Note that the definition does not specify that prints made from such plates be identical to one another, yet traditional printmaking is often associated with a process yielding an edition of identical prints.² The print matrix has also been used to make a series of prints related, but not
identical to one another in many respects. It is not surprising that the use of serial imagery came about, as Peter Frank notes, this tendency towards serial imagery is inherent in the printmaking process:

The print media by their very nature encourage sequential thinking. Artists working with print media automatically produce multiple renditions of a single image. As significantly, these renditions taken from a single source of impression can vary from one another by accident or deliberation. Traditionally, print suites are assembled from images pulled from different plates, stones, or blocks. Nowadays, suites can be realized as well just by altering the ordering of elements from a single source.²

The serial format has been used by artists like Edvard Munch and Rolf Nesch in the early part of this century and yet still remains a controversial aspect of printmaking development as Riva Castleman explains:

The subject of uniform versus variable editions of prints becomes an important part of the history of twentieth-century printmaking. As more purely mechanical procedures have been introduced into the various techniques, an argument has developed that has created two persevering points of view. The technological revolution that has characterized this century has been accepted as beneficial and exploited by one camp. Personal gesture and “feel” for materials, however, continue to represent significant factors to those who see prints in the same creative arena as paintings and drawings. The two essentially diverging points of view continue to co-exist in the last half of this century... In both cases, however, neither manual or exact mechanical manufacture can destroy a good concept or redeem a poor one. It is the compatibility of technique and concept that has characterized quality in creative works, whatever the medium.³

I have chosen to work with the serial format rather than strict editioning for a variety of reasons. The primary reason is that this technique is most compatible with my concept and intentions. I like to view the extreme number of variables operating in my process as opportunities for new creative acts rather than difficult details requiring expensive and time-consuming steps to control. The collage aspect of my process is a primary example of the compatibility of this approach and my intentions for my work because each individual print becomes a building block in the completion of a final image. As Luis Camnitzer of the Pratt Center for Contemporary Printmaking points out:
The editional approach assumes that the technical process will yield identical end-products. Traditionally, these end-products have an individual and isolated life. However, the edition problem encompasses not only the technical facet, (in some work,) but must also include a "creational" ingredient. A technical definition of an edition of bricks stops with the manufacture of the object; it does not include the possibility of interchange or the relationship of the bricks among themselves. These latter conditions, a second plane of interpretation, constitute the "creational" ingredient.  

The collage aspect of my process allows me the option of interchanging or rearranging component parts from each piece into entirely new pieces arrived at by using printmaking as a tool for generating imagery. Because I want to exercise this option, the serial format adequately describes my intentions for engaging in the printmaking process -- to create new work, as well as variations, from a bank of individual images.

Additionally, the scale of my work (ranging 6'x8', 6'x11") already requires a great deal of plate material to construct and work with. To reduce the numbers of plates to a bare minimum (already numbering over 125 for five pieces) I have mixed several colors in general areas on the same plate, or painted in specific areas for a monotype effect, or rolled ink over relief areas in a manner that could not be exactly duplicated. Exact duplication would be impossible with employing a great many more plates to isolate specific color and relief areas to provide exact reproducibility for the many colors I use in a single completed image. My decision to use the serial format has greatly reduced the need for what I feel are unnecessary technical procedures and plate constructions. In this way, the technical procedures are streamlined so that more creative options can be exercised in both the construction and printing of the images.

MATERIALS

I have chosen to work with the printmaking medium because in methodology and technical approach it most closely relates to my previous work in mechanized art-making processes, photography and film. Like the cinematic and photographic negative, the printmaking plate is a template from which a large number of images can be constructed, manipulated and combined with one another. By engaging in this body of work, it was my intention to produce work that had potential which extended beyond the thesis project. Considering the scale of my work, (see above) it might be
thought that painting these images would be more expedient, but painting would not provide a template to quickly reproduce individual images in the intricate detail and textural properties the printmaking medium affords for future work, generated by new combinations of these images.

I work with the collagraph because it affords, of all the print media, the best way of working quickly and inexpensively on a large scale, attributes particularly useful in my work because of its large size and its employment of multiple plates to produce full color images. Additionally, the intaglio process produces an image on fabric that would be difficult to obtain in any other media, painting, silkscreen etc., because the impression the plate makes on the fabric penetrates into the various fabric layers producing imagery on both the flexible strands of the textile and the surface to which these strands are attached (see illustration #A). The final effect lends a very three-dimensional character to the image in which the print is impressed on the strands of the fabric and the backing material which holds the material together. When using multi-layered fabric or tissue-paper, the print matrix provides templates that enable me to make color separations of an image on separate pieces of material that can be overlaid in exact registration to create a final image with a sense of increased depth, or an image that changes hue and value dependent on viewer perspective. (See illustration #B).

I have chosen to work with the collagraph on a large scale and present the work without framing or glass to effect the impact of large size coupled with the possibility for intimate inspection, despite the laborious hours of plate construction and printing, because I agree with Joshua Taylor's assessment of the traditional perspective on printmaking as he recounts recent developments in the print collection of the Museum of Modern Art:

If prints were to hold their own with painting, they could hardly be confined the meticulous etchings and expert drypoints that formed the backbone of exhibitions presented by numerous societies of etchers throughout the country (United States) and symbolized printmaking for most collectors until the late 1950's.

I chose to work in rhoplexed fabric to eliminate the need for glass or framing to allow the viewer access to the surprising detail the collagraph affords. As Rony Cohen writes of Julian Schnabel's large velvet prints:
The quality of interaction of ink and fabric with the texture and light reflective surfaces dramatizes the effects of the rendering. Framed without glass, the big prints invite close inspection of details.

From my previous work in film and photography I was drawn to capture the effects optical apparatus has on its translation of visual experience. To achieve this, I employed photographic negatives with wide angles and telephoto lenses which distort the images in ways particular to optical devices. Further optical distortion was introduced and controlled by projecting these negatives directly onto the floor with a slide projector and a mirror. Manipulation of the mirror provided an elegant tool to foreshorten or elongate the projected image to imbue the final print with the mediation of an optical device. This manipulation of materials is important to the work in two respects: the reference to photography and cinema reinforce a characteristic inherent to all narrative visual art: that the viewer is looking at a frozen moment (photography) of an ongoing narrative (cinema) which engages the thinking faculties of the viewer to complete and contextualize the narrative; the ability to project the image to be translated into print on the floor allows me to construct the plate directly under the projection in an expedient and spontaneous manner that gives the work a fresh gestural quality otherwise difficult to obtain when working from a preconceived drawing. In this way my strategy for use of materials mirrors the form in which the prints are produced as multiples --variation within structure. Just as the multiple is a variation on the structure of a series of related printmaking plates, the rationale of plate production is a variation on the structure of the photographic negative.

The use of photographic sources easily resolves the problem of color registration in plate-making by providing a single template from which multiple plate can be constructed from the same image. Care is taken to stabilize the projector and mirror angle with the positioning of each plate on the floor. With this process, spontaneous gestural plate-making is possible even when producing multiple plates in color registration.

Employing fabric for the image vehicle adds an extra dimension to the presentation of the final print. It provides a new vocabulary of texture to the collagraph. The collagraph by nature already exploits this visual and tactile facet. In certain instances, fabric allows for the introduction of an additional color into the print matrix, when a commercially dyed fabric is used and the opacity or
transparency of the ink is manipulated for certain effects. The color enhancement of fabric can be further exploited when transparent fabric is used in a design that creates interaction between layers of transparent printed fabric.

The printed fabric elements are resolved into a collages state by rhoplexing them directly onto canvas. The canvas provides a resilient vehicle for the separate prints but is flexible enough to roll-up the large collages for storage or shipping. I have attempted to integrate the collage vehicle into the aesthetic of the finished piece. Dependent on the character of the image, the canvas is stretched and gessoed to produce a flat neutral quality, or rhoplexed untreated to create buckles and undulation that emphasis the violence or confusion of the scene it supports. In one piece, canvas is not used as the vehicle at all, instead a curtain is employed in a manner that suggests assemblage because this fabric is used in an artifactual way to support the impact of the completed work.

CONTENT

I have devoted this body of work consideration of issues of gender, sexuality and society. As I have said in the introduction, it is my hope that the work will provide a series of visually interesting questions, rather than didactic statements about these issues. Yet I do not intend these questions to be so vague as to be unstimulating or impossibly unfocused. Each piece is structured to have an area of consideration and in this section I will attempt to detail what those areas are for each piece.

"New Age Coming," (see illustration #1) presents the viewer with two women reaching excitedly for the base of a nuclear blast which begins its upward movement as a shaft and gathers into a cloud. The figure on the left appears to cup a round crenelated ball while the figure on the right gestures strongly, arching her body forward to engage the ball as well. Their expressions vacillate between laughter and horror. The suggestion of this juxtaposition is that the women are clutching a testicle that fulminates into an explosion of a type that is a contemporary totem of global annihilation. The questions I seek to pose with this image stem directly from notions of femininity as defined by popular culture in which women are seen as having no role in international affairs, or in violence of any kind. By juxtaposing these women with this symbol of international violence I seek to question
that traditional isolation of feminine attributes. Do women have a fundamental sexual influence over the violence that men express? Is masculine violence a form of ejaculation somehow applauded by women? Is violence itself a form of sexual expression? These are the specific types of questions I hope the piece will generate.

In “Playthings”, (see illustration #2) a woman with an ambivalent expression regards a young teenage boy about to carry a large bunch of balloons across a tunnel. The juxtaposition of balloons and tunnel strongly suggest a sperm-vaginal relationship, while the age of the boy suggests the onset of puberty. The woman’s expression of fear and interest indicate strong mixed emotions about her view of the young boy as a sexualized person. The extreme close-up of her face emphasis this interest and anxiety. The piece is intended to call up a resonant host of questions about the onset of puberty, questions which are dependent on the identification of the figures in the collage and the relationship of the background.

For instance, the large figure of the woman can be seen as the boy’s mother, which calls to mind questions and worries about the loss of childhood, the passing of time and the maturation of the child. Or, because the face is so large and distorted, the figure could be read as a little girl of the same age as the little boy perhaps regarding her own burgeoning sexuality and what will mean in her relationship to the young boy. The figure could also be seen as the boy’s sister considering what her little brother’s changes mean.

The background is designed to play a role in consideration of the work in more than just its capacity to identify the balloon as a metaphor for sperm and the attendant puberty stage of the young boy. It functions as both a biomorphic metaphor and inorganic architectural. The issues the background raises have to do with a connection of sexuality and the machine. It prompts the viewer to question what the boy’s new sexuality will mean, whether the boy will see sexuality as a mechanical process for self-satisfaction. The background also changes the status of the balloons from playthings that are pretty to look at to mysterious life-giving entities that have function and consequence.

“Trick or Treat,” (see illustration #3) is a reference to boy prostitution in the service of older
males. While the traditional power roles such a relationship suggests are present: the older man drops coins while the boy stoops to pick them up; the coins are gold-covered candy and the traditional symbols of power expressed by clothing is reversed: the boy is fully clothed, only his face and hand is uncovered, while the man is completely naked. The implication is to raise the question of who is using whom and with what awareness. Presenting the reward as candy rather than money allows the viewer the option of seeing the boy as cruelly tricked or getting exactly what he wants. The background employed is a red velvet curtain which I have employed to make reference to porno shops and movie theaters. To further this reference to film or video peep shows and the vicarious experience they entail I have placed these figures in a space relationship that does not exist. The relationship of the boy’s figure to the man would make impossible for the boy to pick-up what the man is dropping.

"Commentary on Unattended Woman," (see illustration #3) is about the precarious position woman without men find themselves in in society. In the bottom left corner of the image a large man clutching a woman close to his side fends off the viewers’ observation with an outstretched hand. Ironically, he thinks he is important to the image whereas the focus of the activity is a fallen, reclining woman being approached on either side by two males, as a policeman looks on leaning against a post that contains within it, a giant penis, The woman clutched by the gesticulating man in the foreground seems protected by his defensive gesture and his secure, if not overly firm grip on her waist. The situation is more ambivalent for the unattended woman lying on the ground. It is not clearly known whether the men approaching her are there to help or harm her, if they have not somehow had a role in her incapacitation. The policeman looking on suggests that law and order will be maintained, or will it? The piece brings up issues of police intervention in domestic situations that are the perogative of the male, and the vulnerability of women when not firmly attached to a male.

In "The Next Best Thing," (see illustration #4) a large male is on the telephone, his body covering the entire left side of the image, while his phone card trails off into the sky behind him,
supported in air by two crucifixes. A woman lies floating on fiery grass in front of a house with the roof suspended in space above it. On the porch of this house a christ-like figure in traditional crucifixion loin-cloth gestures in a stereotypically resurrection manner as the loin-cloth bulges obscenely at the crotch. When the relationship of the three figures involved in this scene are considered, a number of suppositions about context and meaning can be entertained. If the resurrection figure is seen as a sexualized christ, then it is possible to conclude that an overly involved relationship with Jesus, possibly constituting a fanaticism that crosses a sexual boundary has brought dramatic strife to this couple. The implication of this relationship extend involvement with either the man or the woman. Or the religious aspect of the christ figure, if it is not seen as sexualized, could be read a asceticism, in which case that ascetic consideration has precluded any sexual relationship between the man and the woman on the grounds of religious purity. The implication of the telephone, with is wire trailing off to the heavens may suggest that the man is "on the line with god," in order to correct the situation, or call upon his true love Jesus Christ. This piece questions the nature of sexuality and Christianity, how strong the relationship between the two can become.

Given the open-ended character of these constructions, it is possible that despite my attempts to create a specific arena of consideration, that interpretations not in my initial intentions are arrived and seem quite fitting and valid, that being a possibility which every artist must anticipate.

SUMMARY:

In this paper I have attempted to explicate the strategy and intention of my work in the printed multiple callaged into large scenarios, cinematic in reference, having to do with prostitution, sexuality and religion, puberty, and the stereotyping of women in American society. I have learned a great deal about the possibilities and limitations of the printmaking medium and exploring the creative options afforded by the collagraph and the printed multiple, particularly in applying the print matrix to fabric. I have left myself a legacy of over one hundred collagraphic plates with which to recombine into new forms and collages while maintaining the templates for this body of work. In this way, my printmaking study has given me physical as well as intellectual capacities for artistic exploration.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


FOOTNOTES

1 Rothman, Joseph “What is an Original Print?” American Artist. 40:34-35 October, 1976, p. 34.


illustration 1