

*Miner for a Heart*ⁱ

The exhibition, *Miner for a Heart*, brings together ten artists whose work and histories have intertwined with the print community at Open Studio in Toronto, Canada. Each artist parses the immigrant narrative; they have crossed borders, from rural towns into the big city, from other provinces, from other countries. Formally, their energetic, inventive and ambitious artistic visions explore the use of materiality and the cross-disciplinary possibilities of print media. Conceptually, as seen in the work selected for this exhibition, the artists' focus is framed by a concern with the here and now. They observe and question the details of life in their new home and the constructs of human endeavour, cultural identities, and communities.

As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, a new focus for the international artistic conversation is taking shape. The emerging model seems to be one that is more inclusive and that values empathetic connectivityⁱⁱ. Just as art movements historically have been reactive and have taken an oppositional stance to the one that came before, this new zeitgeist of collaboration and sociability is a response to the twentieth century romantic notion of the isolated and critical angry young artist.

The concept of inclusivity and respectful interaction of artistic practices is refreshing and welcome. However, while 21st century printmakers are forging new communities, we acknowledge that the medium itself could not exist without its history of collaboration. From the start, print shops have been centres of clash and fermentation of ideas, where artists create works on paper that attempt to engage, enlighten, or enrage the public toward action and new thought. Printmaking has at its core communal and political implications, because it is an artmaking of creative people coming together.

Established in 1970 by American emigres Richard Sewell, Barbara Hall, and Don Holman, Open Studio draws a unique, cross-national and international group of artists into its community. Rejecting the staid, smug colonial monoculture of mid-20th century Toronto, Open Studio has from its inception anticipated the larger social experience of immigration to Canada, and the lively, ethnically diverse city of today.

Immigrants arriving in the 1950s were primarily European, seeking refuge from the wars, poverty, and religious persecution devastating their countries of origin. Upon settling in Toronto (as well as in other major cities in Canada), these immigrant groups focused inwardly on re-creating families and homes, and finding a psychic balance to the horrors that had caused their dislocation.

In the late 1960s, a new group was added to the growing mix of adoptive Canadians: young, educated, and spirited Americans protesting the Vietnam War. With different privileges and expectations, they began to fill cultural gaps in the cities where they settled, astutely perceiving a lack of alternative voices and modes of expression in contemporary theatre, dance, publishing,

and visual and performance art.

Into this charged atmosphere of change and hope within the cultural community, Sewell, Hall and Holman established Open Studio. The Studio's early agenda was one of experimentation and innovation on the production side, cushioned by pragmatism and an American entrepreneurial spirit on the administrative side. Canadian artists arriving from across the country joined the Studio as working members, adding their own qualities of tolerance, attention to detail, and patience in application. The studio evolved into a productive community for serious-minded, highly energetic printmakers. The aesthetic, established early on, paralleled the tolerant pluralism of the Chicago school, with its stylistic patterning, muscularity and hyper chromatic intensity, alongside a delicate figuration and a salvage paradigm. Successive waves of artists immigrating to Open Studio have embraced this openness, burnishing new aesthetic qualities with rich and varied cultural and multi-dimensional approaches.

The oeuvres of the artists included in *Miner for a Heart*, are broad-based and cross disciplines. None of the work is simply 'pure printmaking.' Each artist mixes modes in some aspect of their work, print being just one tool in their media toolboxes. They explore scale, support material, matrices, repetition, gestural line, narrative, and the impact of technology, in their push to test the boundaries of the definition and identity of a print. As well, they are all aware of and engaged in the international conversation extant within contemporary visual art practice, that is, immersive and immediate sensory experiences that reach out to the art viewing community to connect it with the artwork.

Out of the multi-layered connectivity that exists among the artists and their work, a distinct narrative begins to form. As is the case with anyone newly arrived in the city, the artists' sensory antennae become hyper-alert to new stimuli.

Artists Christopher Hutsul, Jeannie Thib and Janet Cardiff are particularly attuned to the immersive experiences of a dense urban environment. Hutsul's large, highly detailed, labour-intensive lino block print, captures the vibrancy of living at the edgy crossroads, both metaphorically and literally, of urban transformation. With its wry humour and graphic sensibility, Hutsul's piece, *Looking eastbound at the corner of king st. west, queen st. west, roncesvalles avenue, and the queensway*, captures the information overload of downtown life in a rapidly-gentrifying immigrant enclave. Hutsul revels in the visual chaos of streetcars, coffee shops, apartment buildings, office towers, the distant Island Airport, and the urban fauna, that contrast the softer pace of the small city in British Columbia where he grew up.

The denizens of the city provide the starting point for Jeannie Thib's meditation on the diverse cultural and historical sources of design and body decoration. *Archive*, Thib's screen print on frosted mylar installation, reads as a series of inscribed glyphs and body fragments. The organic design alludes to illuminated letters in historical manuscripts and to traditional European textile design. This signals Canada's colonial past and its continued connection to the Commonwealth (a source of sporadic national debate). Thib comments on the socio-political underpinnings of design in general - the imagery also regards the individual, suggesting tattoos and other

markings of pride or shame that members of immigrating communities might arrive with. Tellingly, tattoos in the 80s and 90s indicated a badge of self-identification for street kids who migrated to the city and formed an alternative yet closely-knit community.

While Hutsul explores the sights of city landmarks and Thib's design on skin suggests touch, Janet Cardiff's work foregrounds sound. Foreshadowing her famous audio walks and sound installations (created with partner George Bures Miller), Cardiff's black and white silkscreen print, *Obscure Sense of Possible Sublimity*, comprised of four panels, makes reference to hearing. Humour, quirky juxtaposition, and comic book conventions of composition and storyboard aesthetic characterize this example of early Cardiff print work: in the top two panels the "world's largest turkey" sits next to a giant vortex. At the bottom of the picture plane two people looking into the distance have energetic cartoon lines emanating from their ears. They hear a person eating potato chips behind a screen to their right; then the click of a woman running in high heels at the end of the lane, followed by a plane flying overhead – all sounds that capture an urban moment two and a half decades ago.

Sound is an aspect that also informs Richard Sewell's work. His "printstallation" (a term he coined), *La diversité menacée*, is a blend of process and attitude. For Sewell, art making parallels the process of audio recording, where dubbing, over-dubbing, fade-outs and other manner of recording, leave their mark and are only revealed in playback. Similarly in his assemblage of visual elements, evidence of the artistic process provides a map about decisions made and ignored. The accompanying sound component to the piece enhances the poetic exchange about migration (bird and human), freedom, entrapment and containment. Recently Sewell decided to re-configure *La diversité menacée*. The piece, originally one large rectangular birdcage, has been transformed into three shapes connected by long black hooks and suspended off the ground. Like a musician revisiting a song written early in his career, this new iteration of the piece taps into the history and communal memory that the audience brings to it.

Through her iconic use of the subway, Nadine Bariteau investigates the sense of anxiety and uncertainty that immigrant communities often experience. Bariteau, a young artist from Montréal, considers Toronto's underground system a transitional road where individuals from around the world can make contact with each other and can be observed. The darker aspects of this observation are alluded to in the title of her print sculpture, *Every Move You Make*, as well as in the formal features of the piece: the blurry images, the shape of the curved wood upon which the images are printed, and the high corners/ceiling intersection in which the piece is installed all invoke surveillance. The indiscriminate detached nature of surveillance is paralleled in Bariteau's process where she videotapes subway platforms randomly. The viewer is reminded that he/she has dual status as an observed observer.

Fine China, Ho Tam's print on architectural blueprint paper with an accompanying video, offer a similar vehicle for both contemplation and criticality. Tam, originally from Hong Kong, comments on the friction between China's past and present as well as on the search for identity in the diaspora. The traditional blue/white porcelain ware presented in the artwork references the old silk routes and the influence on European ceramic design. By inserting contemporary imagery that is both iconic and ironic – the MacDonald's logo, portraits of Mao and Jackie Chan - Tam explores the concept of re-invention in the private realm and on the socio-political global scale. His work speaks both to the personal and universal experience of actualization in the new life, while at the same time keeping a keen eye focused on the specific development of China's

aging civilization emerging as a superpower on the world stage.

The personal and the political are also intertwined in the works of Brotman, Stewart, Pien and Hague. Individual dreams and a collective desire for home in a re-constituted community particularly inform Yael Brotman's work. Her installation, *Mnemonic Stoop*, explores aspects of the immigrant narrative that include aspiration, acquisition, memory and hope. Born on an Israeli kibbutz, Brotman has directly experienced the negotiation of politics in private and communal existential environments. *Mnemonic Stoop* consists of a street of three-dimensional model-sized houses she has inhabited, where walls, stairs, roofs and planters are made of pieces of etching on translucent Japanese paper that embody both fragility and resilience. It is a metaphoric cobbling of salvaged bits into a fresh environment where personal history comes in contact and overlaps with public space, and where the idea of home may contain political hazards and roadblocks.

Penelope Stewart's piece, *La Grande Ruche*, explores the relationship of private to communal in society by referencing a highly sophisticated, tightly organized social structure greatly admired by humans. *La Grande Ruche* is a meticulous rendering of an historical cloche-shaped beehive that considers the elasticity and accommodation of a socio-political superstructure, and the implications regarding absorption of individuals and smaller groups into the larger entity. Her drawing process mimics the worker bees in a hive, where pace, repetition, and unwavering consistency are significant, sometimes critical features that determine survival. These behavioral markers also reference the print process, wherein the artist prepares a drawing for the silkscreen mesh that will be transformed into the printing matrix. Stewart's broad-based practice of photography, installation, drawing and printmaking is informed by her aesthetic concern with the juxtaposition of monumentality and ephemerality; In *La Grande Ruche* she brings these two aspects together in the oversized scale of the drawing executed on a handmade Japanese tissue paper support.

Ed Pien's series of large-scale drawings also subscribe to Stewart's approach of melding the vocabularies of drawing and printmaking. Pien incorporates characteristics of printmaking such as repetition and superimposition to create works that celebrate process and the imagination. Born in Taiwan, Pien draws on Chinese myth and literature, in particular the strange and fantastic creatures that inhabit *Journey to the West* and *The Classics of Mountains and Seas*. Pien uses his unique cultural position to transform images of monsters and grotesques into a contemporary meditation on time and place, on history and personal politics. This philosophical site embodies the collision of past and present and infuses Pien's multi-disciplinary practice of drawing, printmaking, video, sculpture and experiential immersive paper-based installations. Pien's current series of drawings that include *Angels of Mercy* and *Lost Souls*, are archeological in nature, as they re-configure drawings created and collected over the past ten years; images are split and recombined, pushing the already otherworldly figures to mutate further.

The cultural riches that new communities bring to an evolving societal silhouette, considered by all of the artists in this exhibition, is celebrated most joyously by Libby Hague. In her new print installation, *My one and only life – so far*, she examines both her own life and psyche, the opportunities, hurdles and moments of intensity that she has experienced, and the parallel macrocosmic universal experiences of newly arrived individuals surprised by the accidents and adventures of life. Arriving from Montréal during the 1970s when the Separatist movement in

Quebec was at its peak, Hague's print-based work has over time explored themes of risk and luck, disaster and rescue. In *My one and only life – so far* she focuses on the break from the everyday: the parade. On a broader cultural level the parade calls attention to the beliefs, rituals and celebrations of a community. It also marks time and the rhythm of a year. On a personal level, Hague perceives the parade as a schematic diagram on an invisible graph charting her life and also marking time. It is a colourful occasion yet there exists an undercurrent of wariness about simultaneously anticipating and not wanting the last float to arrive.

In this show, printmakers mine their own particular history to find spaces where they and their audience can create a dialogue between the tropes, stories and cultures that influence us. Canadian identity is slippery, constantly re-defined and debated; a new world flexible enough to give artists and citizens space to parse multiple identities and examine who or what they want to express. This culture of participation has enriched both Open Studio and Canadian society as a whole, promoting the sense of collaboration and community needed to move forward to embrace the energized experimentation seen from these artists.

Yael Brotman

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- ⁱ Young, Neil. (Feb. 14, 1972). *Heart of Gold*. On *Harvest* [record]. Nashville: Reprise Records. (Feb. 6 & 7, 1971)
- ⁱⁱ de Zegher, Catherine and McMaster, Gerald. "Exhibition Concept announced for 18th Biennale of Sydney 2012". Biennial Foundation. June 9, 2011. <<http://www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/sydney-biennial/>>