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Linocut 67cm x 48cm

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REMINDER

The next issue of Imprint in mid-September, will feature the 1995
Print Council Member Prints.

A selection form will be enclosed for print subscribers to fill out and
returned on 20th October, so make a diary note now.

It's a fantastic year with ten attractive prints specially
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EUAN HENG and the archaeology of the modern

A case study in the poles of paint and print

by Robert Nelson

Printmaking is Euan Heng's laboratory for critical
images. Perhaps better known for monumental figures in
oil paint, Heng assays his imagery through works on
paper, especially watercolour and print. On account of
certain chromatic and graphic limits inherent in
printmaking, an image can be conceptually weighed,
scanned, divided, combined and adapted, all in
sympathy with the medium.

Painting does not offer Heng the same privileges.
Painting may have a greater synthesizing charm, an
ability to 'bring things together' in its infinite illusionistic
potential and its power of atmospheric evocation. But for
Heng, that use of oil paint is appropriate for the final
stages of a vision, precisely the moment when the multi-
faceted aspects of an image need to be resolved toward a
monumental outcome. The processes leading up to that
synthesis in oil paint are necessarily more 'isolating',
more niggardly of means, less profligate of chromatic
and textural variation.

Hence the discipline of printmaking. The great virtue
of the art, for Heng, does not really confirm its
autonomous status. He is not interested in mark-making
per se; he is not dedicated to the 'look' of a print, and does
not covet the formalist mannerisms which the printed
image harbours almost by default. He is more interested
in printmaking as an investigatory tool. It allows him to
pick up an image in a more essential form than is
encouraged by any other medium.

Drawing would certainly be the closest analogy. But
drawing in the normal sense does not suit Heng quite so
well (though, of course, Heng draws). A drawing is
conceived as a 'study' or a pictorial preamble. Heng is
not inclined to create preliminary drawings for his
paintings. What he wants is something which can indeed
aspire to the condition of a complete artwork, something
which tests the calibre of an image to stand alone in a
final form. A drawing, for that purpose, may be too
provisional; furthermore, the fulfilment of the drawing
as a complete work—like a Renaissance presentation
drawing—would in any case aspire to the illusionistic
condition of a painting, without necessarily inducing an
emphasis on the essential force of the image. Print-
making 'naturally' does this, and especially linocut.



Euan Heng ORNITHOLOGIST, 1993

linocut 56 cm x 44 cm

The subtlety of this choice of medium entirely matches
the sensitive balance in Heng's iconography. Heng's art
always seems poised to become a direct narrative. But it
never is a narrative in the classical sense of showing a
protagonist in some action whose causes we know and
whose outcome we conjecture. Heng's work is not quite
narrative; but nor does it simply turn out symbols.

The reason Heng needs to test his figures so much is
that they have a lot of allegorical work to do. They have
to embody the psychological history of a whole
generation, the generation which we now look back
upon—with a mixture of awe and scorn—as the
modernists. Those guys are in big trouble these days.
Heng has to work out exactly what they represent.

Heng's figures are monumentalized and iconically
static but always seem to have paused in some action.
They often hold toy attributes of work, a veritable kit of
diminutive technology, ranging from instruments for
making things (such as a hammer) to the thing made by
industrial assembly (such as the electric power pole or
aeroplane). These objects used to inspire men with great
enthusiasm. In the heroic age of modernism, they were
potent symbols of progress. Today, they seem sad tokens
of a former ideal of progress. To their loss of credibility as

symbols of industrial vigour, Heng attaches the melancholy of lost childhood; for as children we loved such toys but now they no longer belong to us, in the same way that youth is no longer ours.

What a mood overtakes the single figures in Heng's pictures! Their dreamy suspension of personal thoughts contests the severity of their institutional dress, their trim professionalism of yesteryear and rather rigid adherence to social codes. Why are these geometricized people so motionless, so short of outlook? The bleak terrain projects the figures in a hiatus of vigour; there is an unnatural tranquillity in which the men fondle their hats with a literally 'touching' awkwardness, some indisposition of the prehensile faculty which will disqualify them from any concerted action.

The meaning of Heng's abstracted professionals is suggested by the purposeful historicism of his works. The wardrobe of the figures dates from between the World Wars and includes gangsters' hats. Furthermore, the style of the painting recollects the lyrical and metaphysical English masters of the thirties, such as Stanley Spencer; in recent times, the linear succinctness of Léger has asserted itself more powerfully, both in the prints and the paintings. Both the conventions of printmaking and the schematizations of Léger seem to explain the greater use of greys—especially in the very dark shading of geometric volumes—which has infiltrated the recent paintings. Against this, the outrageous totemic colour of Rivera enters the skin tone of *Topple Tumble*. In all events, the sources of the imagery are now old.

Heng's protagonists are 'yesterday's men'. With their beloved mechanical lo-tech, they no longer seem spunky or even relevant in today's world of computers. They should wield faxes rather than axes; their wires should aspire to satellites, not to turbines. Heng leaves us in no doubt that his virile men in bluish or reddish-grey suits are economic antiquities, just as the style of painting parades a proud but now defunct modernism, cool, detached, universal in its language of sheer volumes and totalizing drawing.

On one level, the works are an allegory of the displaced industrial prowess of the Anglo-Saxon world, a culture nourished by heroic modernism. Just as England, Australia, America and Heng's native Scotland can no longer rely on the industrial manufactures of the post-War years, so the art of the same countries must say melancholy goodbye to the bold modernism which symbolized their former progress. Now we think of enthusiasm for those same industrial manufactures of that period as boyish, immature, embarrassing.

Of course, we still have all those tools and industrial installations—albeit with great refinements—and so we paradoxically never say goodbye. As a culture with feminist aspirations, we can reject the boyish enthusiasm

for lo-tech; we can transcend the enthusiasm but we still need the lo-tech. And as artists, we can reject modernism but we still live with modernity. Heng never lets us forget that modernity is haunting.

Printmaking lets Heng explore all of these allegories as an aside to painting. The images are not necessarily fragments which will be reconstituted in a painting but simply ideas which feel their way to meaning. The only part of the allegory which the print cannot investigate is the part which is proper to the medium of paint itself.

Consider the paint in one of the large oils: it is an allegory in its own right. Within the abstracted drawing of trouser or jacket, Heng expatiates in the celebration of the elements of painting. There are passages of a modernist liturgy, the apotheosis of purity, perhaps just in the heightened luminosity of a cadmium. Heng's red seductively takes us to orange here and magenta there; his blue moves between green and purple.

Why would this chromatic habit be allegorical all of a sudden? Because it narrates history, a peculiar and identifiable moment belonging to the modernist tradition. The spectral transitions make me think of a subdued Delaunay. It is an optical strategy elaborated from the precepts of Chevreul: as in Orphic Cubism, the colour wheel goes busily spinning its systematic cycles over visual reality and the artist is empowered with a logical way of conditioning vision. The result is extremely beautiful. The resonance of the colours does not proceed from their transparency but by analogous colours bouncing off one another, as though singing higher and lower than a clear note and producing a headier chord through their combination.

These are effects proper to painting rather than print. The advantage of printmaking, for Heng, is to create an image in a complete form which, however, lacks such painterly effects. The 'effects' are not the aim, neither in painting nor printmaking. Heng is as little interested in mark-making per se in painting as he is in printmaking. However, as he is going to elaborate his images in a painted form using the modernist language of painting, he first forges his ideas outside that medium which encourages the manipulation of a formalist language for its own sake.

By using printmaking, Heng can avoid conditioning his images solely by the painted language, a language full of gestural incumbencies. Heng's method is a strategy to avoid that same mark-making formalism which, ironically, is often associated with the modernist print. Heng's art comments on modernism; it does not subscribe to modernism. It uses modernist tropes; but the investigative paradigm—which uses printmaking so centrally—ultimately denies the autonomy of any visual language (either belonging to painting or printmaking) which was a central conceit of modernism. •



Top: Euan Heng TOPPLE TUMBLE, 1994 linocut 56 cm x 53 cm

Above: Euan Heng TOPPLE TUMBLE, 1994 oil on linen 102 cm x 102 cm