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Unity and Continuity in Jon Lee's Abstract Woodblock Prints

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Jon Lee: Unity & Continuity

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September 30 – November 21, 2009

Opening reception: September 30, 5:00 – 7:00PM

Michael and Noémi Neidorff Art Gallery
Dicke Smith Art Building
Trinity University
One Trinity Place
San Antonio, Texas 78212
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COVER IMAGE: *L0908* (detail), 2009, woodcut, 24" x 18"

Jon Lee: Unity & Continuity

Critics of modern art periodically distinguish the handmade from the industrially or mechanically made as a way to address a common modern preoccupation, even anxiety. The handmade, they argue, stands for the irreducible and unique features of a human engagement with a medium; the mechanical, for the standardized, reproducible, and impersonal. The argument is made with such regularity that the division itself is commonly assumed, a conventional dichotomy so widely accepted that it seems naturally true.

Although not the first to do so, Meyer Schapiro thematized the tension in his 1957 essay, "The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art." Writing in the context of a postwar consumer society dominated by new technologies of industrial and commodity production, Schapiro saw abstract artworks—the "last handmade, personal objects" within the culture—as symbols of free individuality and self-generated meaning, counterpoised to mechanical regimentation. By cultivating procedures of marking and handling which indexed an intimately human, physical connection to a medium, artists of Schapiro's generation, or so he thought, successfully resisted the leveling effects of reproduction. From a more skeptical point of view, it could be suggested that artists merely exploited the presumed dichotomy, perpetuating various dogmatic oppositions between the mechanical and the organic, technique and spontaneity, regimentation and freedom.

What would characterize an artwork or art practice that operated to reduce the antagonism between these poles? At first glance, the seventeen prints comprising Jon Lee's Unity and Continuity series might suggest 'mechanical' associations. The first nine of the abstract images consist of eight equally sized gray rectangles, oriented horizontally to the paper format and arranged one above the other, spaced about one-quarter of an inch apart. A ninth rectangle, half as high as the others, serves at the base of each image. Excepting it, all the rectangles are horizontally divided, or nearly divided, by a black line that is equally wide as the negative spacing between the rectangles (although in viewing, this 'negative' interval itself becomes a 'positive' line; just as all the elements grasped simultaneously appear as a single striped block). The final eight images follow a similar format, but the rectangles are connected to one another along the left or right edge. They too are divided, or nearly divided, either by lines printed in black, blue, green, red, or yellow; or else by negative white spaces. For viewers accustomed to viewing modern art, the initial impression suggests any number of artists whose imagery consists of minimal, geometric abstraction. Nor would it be surprising if viewers attempted to discern some simple system here, a regularity or order that determines the appearance of the series.

"Perhaps it is not really simple, it only appears simple at first glance, but soon reveals itself to be more complex." Jon's own statements about his art are as deceptively simple as the imagery itself. To achieve this recent series, he has thought at length about the Korean letter 'ryul' (ㄹ). He chose this particular letter because it was developed in the fifteenth century as part of an alphabet intended to ensure national literacy in Korea. It has since been recognized as one of the most significant visual elements of Korean culture. The grapheme of a sound (pronounced like a rolling 'r', in between 'l' and 'r'), ryul was designed to be an actual picture of the way the tongue must be curled to make the letter audible. Such a motivated connection between shape and sound is for Jon central to his aesthetic and to the philosophy behind it. When iconic cultural markers (ㄹ) are derived from an indexical mimicry, the result can produce a kind of a 'natural' image, a motivated sign. The social implications are that such signs are democratic, potentially accessible to all.

In part because they are derived from the human attempt to legibly and verbally communicate meanings, the images Jon presents to us do not come across as coldly abstract. In his words, they instead “re-discover an innate human sensibility” in the most common of things, a mere letter. Ryul has special appeal to Jon for its complex, but productive equilibrium. Its shape—symmetrical around a horizontal axis when either the top or the bottom half of the letter is rotated by 180 degrees; symmetrical around a vertical axis when either the right or left side of the letter is flipped upside down—is full of potential. Formally discrete, it is nonetheless open-ended, suggesting fluidity and continuity. The sequencing of the print series follows in this spirit. Beginning with one inaugural image (more like a template for what follows than an independent work itself), it is comprised of eight pairs of prints that are related to each other by a complex symmetry and an animated reciprocity: lines between one print and the next seem to respond to one another reflexively, as if involved in a tug of war. But the transition from one image to the next, or from one pair to the next, is hardly progressive in any predictable sense. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to discern a strictly mathematical or rational system at work here. The works simply develop. Jon’s work is intuitively generated and displayed to maximize the complexity that can grow from elemental things.

Jon has written that he aspires to an “intimate minimalism,” and this is no more evident than in the care he has taken with his mediums: hand-crafted paper, organic inks, and hand-carved woodblock plates (printed, of course, by hand, with hand-made tools). The paper itself might be considered an artwork in its own right, were it not also the ground for Jon’s imagery. Constituted by pulverized milk cartons, raw hemp, and unbleached sisal, the sturdy fiber paper naturally appears imperfect, full of organic variations that give each of these prints a unique character. As much as anything else, these evidently irregular features destabilize any easy associations we might otherwise make between the abstract printed image and the reproductive (and thus repetitive or mechanical) aspects of the print medium. Instead, that image appears bound to its ground in a compelling way. The woodblock-on-paper method is uniquely suited to achieve this unity—a unity that is as much physical as visual, because the process integrates figure and ground through the pressure that transfers the image to paper, leaving an indelible impression behind.

As was the case in Schapiro’s time, it is commonplace in contemporary cultural analysis to assert that accelerating technological change has a diminishing effect on human sensibility—on fulfilling modes of thinking, understanding, and feeling. Within such a context, both the abstract imagery and the medium that makes it visible of Jon Lee’s *Unity and Continuity* series affords attentive viewers the opportunity to re-evaluate the supposed ‘opposition’ between the mechanical and the organic, the reproducible and the handmade. Just as the anatomy of the human body is the condition of possibility for the emergence of the linguistic sign (2), so too is the print medium the condition of possibility for the emergence of this particular imagery. In each case, the medium and the sign appear indissolubly bound, revealing something essential or basic in the process. Escaping dogmatic polarizations (no easy task) requires a flexibility of thought, imagination, and action that overcomes our seemingly ‘natural’ divisions, not reinforces them.

Michael Schreyach, *Assistant Professor of Modern Art, Trinity University*