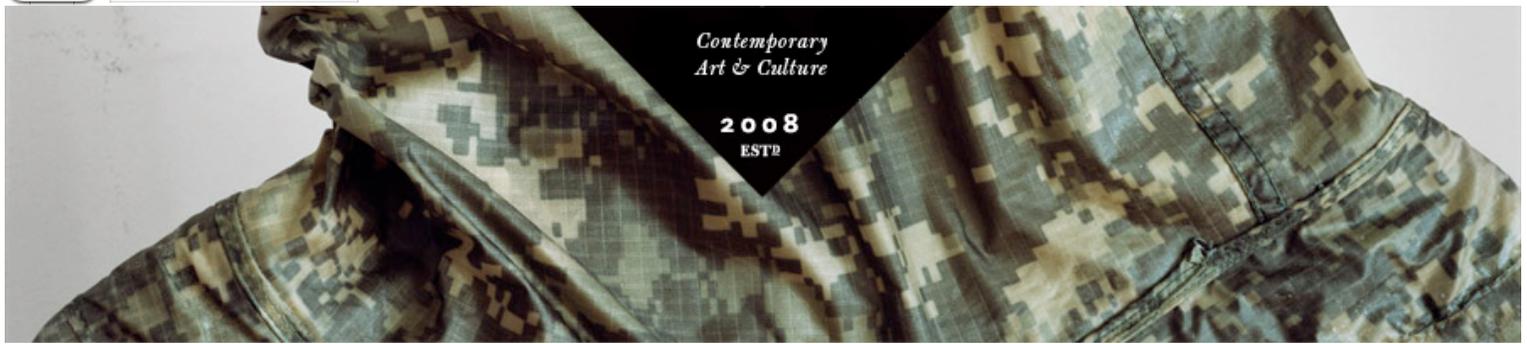


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## I Don't Believe You

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A few weeks ago, the city of Chicago temporarily found itself host to a frenzy of artistic activity as the Southern Graphics Council held its annual Conference, North America's single largest gathering of professional printmakers, at Columbia College in the South Loop. The conference added an unusual amount of excitement to what would have ordinarily been yet another few days of this winter's dreary extra innings. Hundreds of events took place all over the city ranging from keynote addresses to instructional workshops, hands on print activities, and plenty of exhibition openings. With the presence of overwhelming number of artistic professionals indelibly linked to printmaking naturally a discussion arose of the medium's disputed status as a stand-alone mode of contemporary artistic practice. At the crux of this discussion is a perceived need on the part of many practitioners to escape, or redefine, the boundaries of the medium as defined by the narrowing constraints of specialization and conventionality. The most unsettling question now facing printmakers is whether their medium's intrinsic characteristics are compelling enough to attract sustained attention from fine arts establishment, without dissolving into the structures of other media. The consequences of such a debate will undoubtedly influence the appearance of printmaking in the future, and whether or not printmaking will make any future appearances, within the world of fine art.

During this brief moment of heightened attention and heated discussion, two exhibitions of print-related work may be found on display. *Ce n'est pas un spectacle de caractères*, had been up at Packer Schopf Gallery, in the West Loop, since late February, remaining on display during the Southern Graphics Council programming. The title translated into English reads- This is not a print show, an obvious reference to Magritte's *La Trahison des images* (The Treachery of Images) 1928-29, reinforced by Michael Krueger's recreation of Magritte's famous painting for the show's postcard. Similar to Magritte, Krueger's postcard reads with the show's title, which one would assume is a contradiction, but as Magritte taught us, references can be deceiving and the reference in this case is to nothing but the postcard itself. The show certainly is an exhibition of conventional print media; so what are we to make of its title? Perhaps its an ironic statement on the part of the curator indicating- yes, they know they are being conventional by displaying traditional print-media- and, no they will not succumb to criticism surrounding this type of work, which considers it outmoded and unremarkable; there by excusing themselves from what would be there own naïveté.

We get large volume of printmaking in all its textbook formats: etching, relief, silk-screen, lithograph, etc... typically presented on paper, framed, and on the wall. The roster of artists includes a few big names of printmaking including Tom Huck, who has contributed an enormous woodcut triptych on paper, titled *The Transformation of Brandy Baghead* (2007-09). The piece describes of the perilous journey of a woman, who becomes part chicken, in order to win a reality-TV ice-skating contest while showing close ties to infamous Chicagoan Ivan Albright. Albright's service, documenting injuries on the battlefields of France as medical

illustrator during the First World War, tainted his work with an irrevocably gruesome regard toward the human body. Huck uses an expression of intense, and gruesome detail, similar to Albright- tightly packing in as much information per square inch as the woodblock will allow.

Huck has no qualms with being crude; the Baghead piece shows he relishes every opportunity. His brand of crude is not necessarily the studious kind like Albright's grotesque extreme realism; but the same treatment infused with the bad-boy, rockabilly sensibility of Kustom Culture artists like Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, with a devoted adherence to traditional woodblock printing. Huck's work pushes the medium to such extremes with regards to scale, detail, and skill, showing a dedication to print making so strong, making us entirely sure he does not care one bit about debates over the redefinition of the limits of the medium. If we were given the chance to ask him what he thought, we could be sure he would tell us to "fuck off".

If Huck represents one of the most irredeemably conventional aspect of contemporary printmaking, then Michael Kruger shows not only a mastery of craft, but an ability to apply his mastery to ideas that lie 'outside the box' - or in this case 'the block'. Kruger uses his skills to recreate pages torn from his high school notebooks at roughly twice their original size. Meticulous attention is paid to replicating the original appearance of the page including the most un-expected and minute details. In *Drowning Giant* (2007), the artist goes as far as recreating a ghost-image, from the opposite side of the page, with a very faint impression of lithography. We see the primary image, a hand immersing from a turbulent seascape in black, drawn over blue lecture notes, with faint reversed text from the assumed opposite side. The attention towards precise replication of the original pages (with the exception of their scale) extends all the way to the edges, which are cut to include the hole-punches and fringes at the left-hand of the page.

Kruger trades the notebook for another staple of the high school experience with *Detention* (2007), where he has recreated an enlarged version of a detention slip like those, we can assume, he once received as a high school student. Similar to the heavily doodled notebook pages, anyone who was in any way a less than perfect high school student can relate to this piece from personal experience. A drawing of a pelican perched on a branch superimposes the pink page. The pelican's beak is open with the words "so what" drawn near enough to it to suggest it as a phrase the bird is uttering. Not necessarily blatant or provocative, but instead a quaint gesture of defiance, from an individual undaunted by adolescent circumstances. Anyone who has experienced similar situations must envy this nonchalance. The emotional detachment expressed in the phrase "so what", parallels the historical detachment viewer and artist have with regards to the works. The doodles of logos from rock bands like Twisted Sister, Raven, and Black Sabbath, place the drawings a few decades in the past. Combined, these two foster a sense of removal in Kruger's works, presenting a potent reminder of the insubstantial nature of our temporal concerns in light of life's overriding scope.

Kruger's notebook pages are echoed across town as another show of three print-related artists opens at Roots and Culture; the similarities between the two seem to almost exceed simple coincidence. Though not officially part of the Southern Graphics Council's weekend of programming, the show at Roots and Culture, opens at an opportune moment for work, which finds unique new ways of employing a verity of familiar printmaking techniques. *I Don't Believe You*, showcases new work by three artists, Oli Watt, Lauren Anderson, and Jamisen Ogg- all of whom share strong ties to printmaking, the School of the Art institute of Chicago, and the city itself.

Watt takes on a paternal role, providing a hint of coherence and a thread of direction to what might otherwise be a dissonant collection of work, by creating a forum for collaboration between the three. Using screen-prints, Watt has replicated the image notebook pager on larger sheets and handed them off to his companions, providing a uniform format to showcase their individual personalities. If further justification is needed for these collaborative projects then perhaps the cheerful brevity of Watt and Anderson's, results will suffice.

The two share a kindred affinity with work that is rooted in a jovial appreciation of leisure and life's less than serious side. Anderson accepts Watt's blank sheets of paper, responding with simple images and clever titles. She screen-prints a simple line drawing of a house, or possibly an envelope with its flap open, created using only one line to render the form. The title of the piece, *Oneliner*, invokes a term often overused in intra-art-school criticism, calling together the mutual experience both artists acquired at the School of the Art Institute, while pandering to the disaffection of many compatriots in their audience. In *Composition Number Something or Other*, Anderson appropriates the marbled pattern found on the covers of cheap composition notebooks, in green, atop Watt's contribution. Again, title and image combine to

form a witty visual pun, but this time referencing her partner's ideas, rather than their shared experience with the art school milieu.

On her own, Anderson is worthy of praise. Similar to her collaborative efforts with Watt, Anderson also references mutual experience- not with puns or clever word play, but instead by exploring an entirely new drawing process. She displays two works on paper Untitled (Smoke Bomb Drawing #12), and Trying to Draw Mickey Mouse, made with smoke bombs- the type one might find for sale in a fireworks shop. She uses the spray of colorful particles, which make up the smoke, to paint the paper much like an airbrush, but with a drier, reduced presence. Further clarification is needed for the process to register as more than just traditional spray media- unless one lives in a neighborhood where children have taken to making impromptu drawings on the sidewalks in the same manner. With these connotations Anderson connects to a feeling of juvenile playfulness, which may be taken as immaturity, or as a sign that seriousness and legitimacy may not necessarily arrive hand in hand.

Chicago expatriate Jamisen Ogg, returns from New York with a collection of two-dimensional mixed-media works on a combination of surfaces ranging from woven strips of canvas, to sections of drywall, and replications of old letterhead from the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York- a Robert Gober reference and an offhand jab at art historical misappropriation. Ogg's leaves his mark on nearly everything he touches with anxious flurries of colored pencil rendered repeatedly in the same three hues: blue, yellow and magenta. Perhaps a reference to printmaking's four-color process of producing color photographic reproductions through precise overlay of cyan (a particular type of blue), magenta, yellow, and black- a color Ogg relies upon with the utmost regularity, the reference falls short at this point though, as Ogg sacrifices substance for aesthetic packaging. We could understand Ogg's use of primary colors and simple geometry as a reference to, or invocation of, highly distilled brands of abstraction like LeWitt or Mondrian, but there is little more to suggest this connection than sheer appearances, thus such high-minded speculative attempts degenerate into glib delight. His remaining oeuvre, which includes the Gober reference, similarly fails to display more than a self-conscious concern for creating a distinct and palatable exterior, setting him apart from the relaxed and self-content manner of his companions, Anderson and Watt.

Oli Watt's installation, Snowmelt (2009), A collection of screen printed paper assembled to mimic yellow bags of Morton's Snowmelt(r)- the ice melting agent commonly kept on hand for use during heavy winter weather, graces the entrance to the gallery. Quarter-inch holes have been punched out of some of the bags and the corresponding sections of paper spread around the sculpture, mimicking the spilled contents of the bags- exposing the fact that the bags are not the real thing, but instead printed paper sculptures. Snowmelt, typifies Watt's contribution to this show, both in its general stance and its specific cultural vocabulary. The references to a specifically Chicagoan vernacular are subtle but run deep. The Snowmelt, a necessity during Midwestern winters, and the fact it is a product from Morton Salt, an internationally recognized corporate name- based out of Chicago (who's emblematic warehouses running along the Eisenhower Expressway are a scant half-mile from the gallery space), demonstrates one instance of these connections.

Snowmelt, like much of Watt's work in the show, upend screen-printing's tendency to flatten, by producing three-dimensional replications of objects appropriated from everyday life. Though they do not break new ground- remember Warhol's Brillo Boxes- Watt's assembled screen-prints create an interesting loop in Warhol's trajectory. If the goal of this trajectory was to elevate commonplace consumer goods to the realm of high art, highlighting the interchangeability of art and commodity, Watt's goal is to pull them back down, drawing out their symbolic significance as ubiquitous objects of a shared vernacular, by placing them in a fine art context. In the same fashion as Snowmelt, Watt inflates two corresponding sheets of screen-printed paper, into a three dimensional replication of a failed whoopee cushion. The title of the piece Funny Thing Happened, directly references the shared recollection of a particular experience; the object itself references an experience many can share- the failure of a cheaply produced novelty gag. The cartoon-like hole blown the whoopee cushion's face, exaggerated evidence of its rupture, provides it significance as an individuated object, rather than one of many. Similar openings reoccur persistently in Watt's three-dimensional replications, whether the holes are punched in bags of salt, blown from in whoopee cushion, or simply the open top of an empty package once containing a Wiffle(r) Ball. The opening gives us a glimpse inside the object revealing its physical nature as simply ink on paper connecting, what may be mistaken for entirely solid material, back to its procedural origins as a print on paper. Watt has found a way to reinvigorate printed-media with out departing too far from its essential characteristics by testing the capacity of printed-paper; asking it to do something it normally cannot; mimic a three-dimensional object.

*by Nate Lee*



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