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Missa cantata

Kevin Mann

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Missa Cantata
by
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7/20/96
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Date: July 20, 1996
Acknowledgements

For so long I have been eager to be granted the opportunity to stamp a written work with personal dedications and gratitude to those who assisted me in its creation. After careful consideration, I have decided it would be most prudent to thank my darling wife right off. For your endless patience, unspoken faith in me, and an incredible resilience to my difficult nature, thank you Kimberly. To Judd, I owe thanks for broadening my understanding of art and printmaking, and in developing a wiser eye. To Ed and Kathy, for their criticism and knowledge and encouragement. To my parents and in-laws for their interest and support. To Chaz, Chris, and Jill for comradery. Thanks also go to a number of fellow artists and faculty who participated in critiques and individuals who attended my opening. To anyone whose interest in my work has assisted its survival. A catchall thanks to all things unconsidered. And finally I thank Albert Camus for helping me perpetually understand finitude.
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Introduction

Within the past two years, I have endeavored to engage myself in a perpetual catharsis of art making. This effort required a sober approach to my own thoughts and an elimination of any self doubt that impedes my progress. The production of a number of drawings, paintings, and prints are testimony to my personal interaction with art. Much of the efforts involved in creating this work have been in isolated moments which seemed wholly unrelated. Though in my consideration of each piece, I have found every moment of conscious art making contributes to a collective sense of progress; each piece communicates something about myself; each piece contributes vitally to a body of work.

I am interested in portraying an active vortex of thought within the language of the medium. Through any traditional use of medium (lithography, monoprinting, drawing) as well as any experimentation that I have explored, an intentional outpouring of adopted visual language has occurred and a disclosure of associative relationships between memory and picture space emerges. In this thesis I will explore each work individually, and discuss how each piece has evolved. I will explain what techniques I used and how each piece contributes to a system of exploration and discovery. I will also discuss what external influences have impacted my work.
Through this disclosure I intend to explain how this body of work came together. After months of sporadic attempts at forming a body of work that reflected an assured inner vision, I felt that I had produced nothing to fit this criteria. Yet I had not seen how these attempts supported each other by revealing unavoidable recurrences of self-disclosure and visual relatedness. I know that every effort at making art professes the need to see what cannot be seen by any other means. These works act as fragments of an ongoing vision that will never tell a complete story, but by themselves offer a complete view.

Robert Henri once said, "All art that is worthwhile is a record of intense life, and each individual artist's work is a record of his special effort, search and findings, in language especially chosen by himself and devised best to express him..."1 This is what I want to stress above all, that my work is a representation of who I am and what I have thought to say to those who wish to see.

"I tell you honestly, I do not live in air. I live in air filled with images, waiting, waiting. And they are mad at me because I don’t make them. This is not a fantasy. It is real, I assure you."²

—Jacques Lipchitz

"The Sudden Evolution of the Imagination"

In October of 1995, I began a series of drawings that explored many ideas I had for making prints. These drawings gave me a ready surface for creating a particular language of expression and discarding those things that might lead me away from a cohesive body of work. These drawings provided a way to lay out ideas more quickly than planning a print would allow. So many peripheral stimulations distracted me from pursuing ideas thoroughly so I needed to find ways to incorporate enough of what interests me before everything worth remembering became hopelessly mired.

This particular drawing epitomizes the work that was made in October, November, and December of 1995. Working on Evolution helped me understand how future prints would evolve. The dark mass that characterizes this drawing, contrasted by a sparing use of surface in others, act as fertile ground for many ideas to be sown. Through a constant reworking of the surface and intuitive mark making, I found a rich and varied surface emerged, sparse in appearance, yet densely packed with texture, scored line, written word, and color that seeped up from beneath black. The use of words, scrawled lines, and fabricated symbols seems spontaneous, but always was carefully considered. These elements were rearranged repeatedly, removed and reapplied until they spoke to each other with enthusiasm.

I reconsidered this piece several times before it became a finished drawing. It began nearly ten months before as an entirely different drawing accompanied by different ideas. After reworking it a few times I stored it away for future consideration. As new drawings began and with them a search for new material, it occurred to me that paper already marked with information would lead to more interesting results than new paper. This method came to be
understood as a metaphor for my condition—a constant awareness and allowance for the peripheral to influence my choices.

A reworking of a discarded drawing brought out unexpected nuances. By covering the old drawing with grease crayon soaked in solvent and then scraping this away with an etching needle and a razor blade, I found selected sections of the previous drawing peaked through veiled residue with a new disguise. This method of drawing provided my work with a new richness and many possibilities. A surface could be covered, scraped away, scrawled into, and worked on again until it became rich and varied infinitely more than without this aggressive undertaking. Even certain areas that were preserved amidst this onslaught of medium—such as the tool shapes—would be enriched by reworked areas. New surfaces constantly evolved, encouraging further change.

With this method I disciplined myself to allow a drawing to be set aside long enough to forget its present significance and come back to it much later with a fresh approach. If I stored a drawing for a time and began new ones, I found that this interim would bring on a new phase of creativity that would return vigor to an otherwise frustrating endeavor. This increased my productivity and multiplied the possibilities of exploration in each new work.
Sans Sanctum Sanctorum

lithograph monoprint

By reworking older drawings I acquired the idea of reusing prints from old editions. After finishing a new edition, for instance, I would print over a few prints from an old one using selected parts of the newer image. These prints, like the drawings, took on new looks as the ink absorbed into the paper and the underlying layers appeared as slight shifts in tone. In Sans Sanctum Sanctorum, the earlier layers of color peak through a mass of black ink, and upon closer inspection, the black image becomes an undulating swarm of tangled forms. A slight overall bronzing of the ink baths the print in a shimmering display of greens, amber, and reds as light reflects at different angles. Two yellow stripes run vertically through this mass, breaking up the print into thirds.

With this print came a temptation to do more. It was the first effort in this direction and I felt that it hadn't undergone enough transformation. Yet the addition of the yellow stripes completed it. They seemed to act as cattle prods, ordering the space into assembly, visually shuffling the information into palatable portions. It would have been a mistake to allow any more yellow; I had placed sheets of newsprint over the stone leaving only narrow bars to print. The decision was learned from looking at Barnett Newman's resolution of his "zips"\(^3\) in his large-scale paintings and prints.

After completing and selecting work for the thesis exhibit, I referred to my original intents for direction when choosing titles. While using imagery that would suggest certain thoughts and then supplying titles and incorporating words that would support them, I would also encourage multiple interpretations by leaving these thoughts obscured. I hoped that titles would

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entice those who viewed them to explore explanations while looking at the work and encounter further discovery later as they ran across information incidentally or spoke with me personally. Hopefully, the work could be enjoyed esthetically, then could be reconsidered as a fragment of my life and imagination, and finally connected with the experiences of the viewer.

The title refers to my Catholic upbringing and a liberal use of languages I never formally learned. The translation would be “without the holiest of holies.” The improper use of Latin with French fits a pattern of collaging incongruent elements to uncover new meaning and varied sources of input. The three spaces created by the yellow strips represent the Trinity, revealing only a black void. I saw them as portraits of a sort, much like long narrow stained glass windows seen in darkness. These applications did not occur to me until long after the piece was completed, though I do not find that misleading in any way. Rather, I feel that the relevance of this work changes as I work out my ideas. These ideas suggest meaning for a piece each time I consider it and the title provides a direction for those considerations.

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4 Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, (1990), s.v. "sans," "sanctum sanctorum."
"Like algebraic equations, Ray Johnson's collages are precisely assembled but cryptic configurations that hint at a multitude of plausible meanings. They consist of images and words, visual and verbal puns, and references to celebrated art, literary, and film personalities... references are relative and cumulative, to be assigned and reassigned depending on context."

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Fabricating a human unnecessary, he then
is now to the Farm
in the end a Farm
now...no...alive. I'm not a man
any more. You're the Most
Mostly the Monster
Just me, me, me
Most import the Truth
And that... is all...
Again, I added selected parts of an image to older prints, using bits of cut or ripped paper or tape to block out more of the image. This one evolved more slowly and wasn’t completed until I wrote a poem over the image and then printed over it once more. The flesh colors along the side and bits of yellow at the bottom of the print provide a warm release for a nearly impenetrable web of color in the background.

A poem can be read only in part. “Fabricating destiny remains/unnecessary. It’s trips/I want to take. I am/the incidental pilgrim./Drips, dreams, drinks,/folklore. I’m telling you/something. Prefabricate/prevaricate, combobulate./What is the difference?/I am trying to/reconstruct the truth./And that is mired.” Along the right side is written “FRAG-MENT-ED.” The poem reads like a pop song. It seems to say quite a lot, but it means very little. Like a pop song and like art many times, it is an indulgence. While I am trying so hard to express a personal vision, I find it difficult not to feel self-serving.

Laden with ink and somber colors, the print seems aged. To me, it is a fragment of a history, a piece of information disclosing something vital, an insight to clearer understanding of a larger whole. The search for a larger whole, perhaps for something meaningful—-for the truth—-may reveal little or nothing. But it is the excitement and the complexity of the search that entices me, not the ends that I hope it may achieve. I have yet to define the ends.

"...A creative person...directs his [attention] toward the other thing in human existence as rich, sensitive, supple, and complicated as human beings themselves: that is to say, toward an artistic medium which is not an inert object, or conversely, a set of rules for composition but a living
collaboration, which not only reflects every nuance of one's being but which, in the moment in which one is 'lost' comes to one's aid, not arbitrarily or capriciously... but seriously, accurately, and concretely..." 6

Reflected in Robert Motherwell's statement are the things that excite me about making art and the things that I attempt to express in my work. Not only does art unravel the complexity of myself, it has a way of assisting me when I find myself mired.

6 Stephanie Terenzio, Note by the Artist from The Prints of Robert Motherwell by Robert Motherwell (New York: Hudson Hills Press in Association with the American Federation of Arts, 1984) 9.
This piece began much like Evolution. After printing a series of monoprints using strips of paper to block out certain areas, I used the strips to print the remaining ink onto a fresh sheet of paper. I then took one of the strips and adhered it to the upper left section of the paper. From this new information, I chose to add three balloon like shapes that connected to the strip of paper.

Considering not words, but language as a whole, I found an interesting way to structure the right hand portion of this monoprint. I drew a series of fabricated symbols in a connected bar, a series of six bars lying atop one another. Finally, I cut out long amorphous shapes from aluminum plates and printed them.

The entire print seemed to hover in a surrealistic stasis. The balloon shapes appeared to be a pelvic bone and the bars like alien script. I noted the pelvic bone as a reference to Terry Winters biological drawings, and the writing to my obsession with the TV series “the X-Files.” An apocalyptic notion followed and in keeping with the religious undertones of my work, I made reference to the day of judgment.

A sparing use of the space is evident in this print. Though the piece was never preconceived in any way, it settled into a finished state without a lot of reworking the surface. This reminded me of something I had said previously about the work. I feel as if I’m waking up the surface of the paper by bringing out the nuances of the medium and exposing the tendencies of my mind. I am not creating from nothing, rather I am searching for something new using what I already know. As Robert Motherwell states, “The subject does not preexist. It emerges out of the interaction between the artist and the medium. That is why, and how [my work] can be created, and why its conclusion cannot be predetermined.”

Sometimes that interaction can be a struggle or it
can be ongoing indefinitely, while other times it is resolved very quickly.

7 Terenzio, 9.
A fresh approach to my work followed *Dies Irae*. Spontaneous drawings, generated fairly quickly on the stone would be printed in one or two layers. Each layer would be carefully considered when interacting with a second. One impression was taken on a sheet of acetate and this image was transferred back onto the stone after it was grained using a sheet of newsprint rubbed with conte crayon. The next drawing would be executed fairly quickly as well, this time with some guidance.

*De Novo(Mea Culpa)* translates into “from the beginning(I was to blame).” The reference is to creation and the fall of man. The original intent had something to do with birth as evidenced by the use of the word “seed,” but it was not until the amorphous mustard-colored shapes (reappearing from *Dies Irae*) were added that I decided to turn the drawing upside-down and add the title. At this point, I made the association with bars as a means of confinement, or in the case of a gate, of non admittance.

As I added the titles, adhering mainly to the theme of religiosity, I found these pieces to be metaphorical. They often become objects of self-disclosure, communicating to me ideas I have about art, beauty, God, and reality. They become a mental journey and a cathartic endeavor, both in their making and in their presentation.

*Imitatio Dei* or “to imitate God” recognizes the parallel between the creative act and the act of creation. There is a wonderful heaviness and

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8 *Webster's Ninth*, s.v. “de novo,” “mea culpa.”

9 ibid., s.v. “dies irae.”
beauty about the black mass that dominates the composition. The three semblances of circles are another recurrent motif in my drawings.

A high degree of technical success occurred in this print. My method of dissolving grease crayon with solvent, applying it with the crayon or my fingers, often left wonderful wispy edges to large shapes. I found it difficult to maintain a flat black or to prevent fill-in when parts of drawings that were delicate were close to areas of dense black. To combat the problem, I first used a weak etch of about 6:1 for 11/2 minutes and then a hot etch for a few seconds. This, in combination with a careful watch over the consistency of the ink, produced wonderful results.

A second achievement was the use of multiple blacks. This print has a wonderfully rich appearance to it with contrasting warm and cool blacks. The warm black appears to be a deep brown. I discovered tremendous potential for a subtle build up of various blacks, yielding very rich prints.
The simplicity of this print and its sparing use of the paper was a great success for me. The simplest and most powerful works of art have occurred through a long evolutionary process. A drawing that uses very little space, that does not conform to the rectangle it exists within has not been produced arbitrarily. This demonstrates an awareness of the effect that any mark has on a sheet of paper. It shows the understanding of the history of the drawn image and how artists have struggled with many ways of seeing. I am easily reminded of Picasso, of Motherwell, Matisse, Goya, Monet, and Gorky. Yet there are a thousand others.

I enjoy the clarity with which this image can be seen. There is a lack of tension in this print that gives it a sense of assurance. A sense of playfulness frees the viewer from the kind of imposition that the other pieces seize upon. The ubiquitous stick figure dances nimbly off to the left of the print. It becomes part of a loosely bound bundle of sticks. To the right, a tangle of line hovers. From above a flickering tumble of black and two playful marks appear, like a sun or the core of some fruit. The mystery of the marks is much like the other prints, yet this one has more freedom.

The title acts as a slight bit of humor. Alternative to the accepted remark "untitled," it bucks the assignment much like the pop star "formerly known as Prince" and allows the insertion of suitable titles or perhaps suggests the inclusion of a collective whole.
In Nominus ( )
lithograph

Et Spiritus ( )
lithograph

Et Filius (Motif)
lithograph

These three lithographs evolved over a period of about three months. They serve as the core of my work with spontaneous generation of drawing, massing of color and form, and a careful consideration of space. They incorporate many of the motifs I used in all of my drawings, prints, and paintings that I have amassed over the last two years. What I learned in drawing and printing these three lithos has informed the creation of all other prints and has been reciprocal as well, considering the time in which these were made.

The largest of the three, In Nominus ( ), was printed in two blacks. The first drawing was made by applying a layer of gum arabic over certain portions of the stone, then removing some of it with a wet sponge, leaving unseen traces. Next a drawing was applied with grease crayon and solvent. The etch was applied in three increments of strength: 10 drops, 15 drops, and 20 drops. The 20 drop etch was added to the darkest parts of the drawing. The result was a fragmented drawing, a remnant of something undefinable. The second black was drawn in much the same way. The black mass in the center was smeared on with autographic ink.

Et Spiritus ( ) appears much more delicate than the other two. It seems to be materializing. The same elements that exist in the other two prints seem to drift into the cool gray background. The beige shape floats over the print like a veil.
The hardness of the dark blues in *Et Filius* (*Motif*) contribute to its sense of solidity and definitiveness. Brown, whimsical plants roughly adorn the edges of the print. The pink seems to be an afterthought, almost incidental to the rest.

Thematically, the assignment of the three titles is a reference to the Holy Trinity. Though “father” has been left from the first, “holy” from the second, and “the son” referred to parenthetically as a motif. This system of intentional ambiguity and selective references speaks of animosity toward this enterprise of God, Son, and Holy Spirit. It also points toward the ignorance of those who perpetuate such animosity. Perhaps, as with all pieces considered here, the continual ambiguity and the choice of non-objective imagery shows the lack of clarity I have in defining things such as God, origin, existence, reality, and so on. The subjects I approach peripherally and discard almost as soon as I consider them, become easily misconstrued, tiresome to understand, encountered only as I explore the limits of the medium and the joys of its potential.
“Cornell’s singular feeling for childhood’s games and toys, his sanctification of the small object—a marble or a block, which he treated as if it were a treasure—merged with his nostalgia for the paraphernalia of Victorian parlors—stuffed birds and shell-encrusted compositions under belljars. Fascinated with the flotsam and jetsam of our lives—from driftwood and dried twigs to postage stamps, sequins, and clay pipes—he preserved these precious items as carefully as any curator protects his collection.”

Object Piece 1
lithograph monoprints, altered wood
(Obiter Dictum) Object Piece 2
lithographs, latex rubber molds

One last direction I took with my exploration was to add found and altered or made objects to prints. This effort had been considered from the beginning of the thesis work as shown in Evolution with the addition of a tool made from modeling paste and secured with gel medium. As with any new medium introduced, this was intended to add new dimension and potential to my prints. The use of objects makes stronger associations with religion, referent to such things as reliquaries in the Catholic church, the ritual of the mass, or wards to protect from evil spirits.

The use of objects in the pieces was a natural step for me. I had admired the work of Jim Dine and Robert Rauschenberg for a long time and recently discovered Antoni Tapies. These artists use real objects to recreate an environment and comment metaphorically, perhaps in an arbitrary manner, on what associations emerge from their paintings. Dine’s bathroom series epitomizes this associative situation; the bathroom is an arena for a number of rituals which prepare us for a day and complete our day.

In these object pieces, I was looking for a way to imbue these objects with a sense of status by containing them in a frame. Under glass, they are like museum pieces, precious artifacts, though they remain my personal creations.

I perceive the ritual of the artist as alternately similar to the ritual of the priest and the parishioner. When making these pieces, I engage in a ritual, closing off peripheral distraction, preparing my work surface and materials, then commencing with the delicacy of a surgeon, often believing I am making the motions of a master. When my pace was broken or continuity couldn’t be maintained, I was the audience admiring the work, needing its
significance, believing in its power.

Object Piece 1 evolved as a monoprint much the same as Sans Sanctum Sanctorum and Mired, yet it evolved as a diptych and involved a more restricted palette of color. I was specifically searching for a combination of color that gave the appearance of earth or moss and that avoided the appearance the two aforementioned prints took on. The title was an effort to apply a more generic labeling of the work and avoid overt or even covert meaning. This print involved a more direct attachment to the print alone and my interest in exploring purely formal aspects with it.

(Obiter Dictum) Object Piece 2 turns back toward the direction of the rest of the work, but remains slightly unique. The white area in the black and white print and the yellow area in the color print that run from top to bottom along the left side were intentional references to God’s appearance in the Old Testament as a column of fire. Again, the symbols are fabricated, having no particular meaning.

There are two fragments of text in this piece. They read: “couldn’t hear a damn thing” and “it was the sort of thing you’d expect -------, a true trademark of God.” These bits of narrative, as I see them, are what the title suggests, comments made in passing.

The latex tools are recurring objects in my pieces, fabricated by myself. I found that they had an interesting pictorial relationship to the narrative, a suggestion perhaps that they were tools a divine Creator used when forging man. I found the material to be like skin of some kind; it peels, has shiny and matte surfaces, and has a fleshy semi-opacity to it.

I’m constantly associating God and our misunderstandings of him to our fascination with paranormal phenomenon, or more particularly, extra-terrestrials. In this piece, unlike the others, I deliberately made reference to God but never found the kind of religious associations I saw in the other pieces. Though this piece does point toward a strong interest in disjointed narratives and objects or surfaces that contain ambiguity or mystery.
Conclusion

Within all this work a continual and ongoing association of ideas and an experimentation with materials is evident. My interest in words and literature has lead to the inevitable usage of them in my work. Words also suggest in non-objective work what image would convey, yet with more possibility for different associations. An interest in building surfaces with ink or other materials has become very important as well as efforts to carefully consider space and composition to support esthetic interests. Incorporating objects and textural materials, including the build up of ink, has brought new language for further association and exploration. Finally, use of fabricated symbols and varied motifs in my work creates cohesion and structure.

All these things contribute to constant self-disclosure and self-discovery. I understand the personal vision to be the most reliable reference in making art. From my research I have gained an appreciation for and understanding of the personal vision of other artists. Joseph Cornell’s boxes, Jasper Johns’ and Jim Dine’s extension of the canvas and the print, Robert Motherwell’s intellectualism, Helen Frankenthaler’s lush surfaces, Robert Rauschenburg’s collages, Paul Klee’s imagination; these visions have all brought me delight as well as inspiration. I expect the work presented in this thesis to be the beginning of much more.

Looking at work by other artists was important in forming ideas about how I wanted to approach each print. I am attracted to a minimalist approach to working a surface, such as those adopted by painters Robert Ryman and Ad Reinhardt. Additionally, Antoni Tapies’ textural surfaces and Jim Dine’s use of actual objects influenced early drawings and two later prints. Jasper Johns dense accumulation of marks and Robert Motherwell’s variety of shape and spontaneous drawing were strong influences. The extensive list of painters and sculptors whose ideas and images influenced my work has grown considerably.
in the past two years, assisting in the development of a personal style. In considering this, I feel it is imperative to mention them in this paper.

The language of the print, of the artwork, speaks in many ways at many different moments. Not in words or in a definable language, but with perceptible grace, demanding attention, denying resolution. These prints are in a perpetual rhythm, allowing some explanation, but really only encouraging further exploration. That explains the impact that past artists’ work has had on me. A perpetual temptation exists; to reassemble what I see, to recombine, recycle, remark, reconsider, resuscitate.

Within the nonobjective print, I have found a way to be creative and avoid following any predestined pattern. No sooner do I begin than I am looking for a stopping point, yet this can’t be anticipated. The act of forming a painting, drawing, or any other work of art is a Sisyphusian task; forward-moving, promising reward, yet only finished in the interim, between the conclusive marks applied to one surface and the quest for a new one. While shifting pace between one work and the next, my mind is at rest, contemplative, reserved. Like Sisyphus, I can calculate only the quantity of my trips, the distanced traveled, not the distance remaining.


