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THE ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

VISUAL CONCEPTS DEVELOPED THROUGH KAFKA

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE COLLEGE OF FINE AND APPLIED ARTS
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF FINE ARTS.

BY

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INTRODUCTION

I selected the author, Franz Kafka, for my inquiry into the creation of literary images because his images combine the qualities of the reality of the visual world and the unreality of the dream state.

During this inquiry, I obtained added insights into the concepts of another artist working in a different but related media, and made many discoveries about myself and my work. Many of Kafka's ideas served as catalysts in the formation of my concepts used in the production of a series of intaglio prints based on Kafka's metaphors and concepts.

I will discuss the relativity of his ideas to my decision to move from the objective to the abstract form; the development of the structure of that form; the personal symbols used in my images and the development of my working methods. These ideas motivated the production of the Kafka intaglio series and evolved during that process.

I will discuss each of the prints and their individual relationships to Kafka's motivating metaphors and concepts.
PART I

MY DISCOVERIES

"His mode of creativity was inspiration rather than making. He was the inspired poet rather than the poet maker. He did not make or construct so much as he transmitted, even though what he transmitted was shaped at every point by the pressure of his conscious art." ¹

I began my inquiry of Franz Kafka with the question: What was his main concern in his literary work? After reading Kafka's stories and in reading what others had determined about him, I found that his main concern was the transmission of an abstract idea or metaphor.

Most of his stories are based on a single metaphor; they are the literal enactment of an abstraction, the embodiment, in a concrete image, of an idea. This concern for simplification and the discipline needed to distill ideas and impulses toward one goal, motivated my transition to the abstract form.

Each of Kafka's short stories and novels is based on a single metaphor. All of the descriptive, naturalistically rendered events and characters are used to convey this one idea.

Often, in his stories, events and characters have no logical sequence. Seemingly unconnected characters appear and disappear; some events, even whole stories never reach conclusions.

All of these happenings, however, do have consistency in that they all relate to the transmission of a single metaphor. Kafka creates his own system of logic and makes it seem acceptable with his detailed descriptions of characters, surroundings and events.

This concept of channeling my energies and ideas to achieve a visual image based on one idea was exciting and challenging to me. It seemed to offer the possibility for consistency within the individual print and within a series of prints.

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2Ibid., p. 12
The one idea concept also offered a perimeter of judgement as to what was necessary or unnecessary to the image.

Within these considerations, I determined to produce a series of prints based on Franz Kafka's metaphors. These metaphors provided the basis for the abstract concept and organization for the prints. An example of that organization would be the concept used in the print, *What Use Can I Be To Them, What Do I Mean To Them*. This intaglio was derived from Kafka's short story, "The Homecoming". For me, the metaphor for this story is alienation. I took this metaphor and translated it into the visual terms: the alienation or separation of spatial planes; the separation of shapes in their spatial positions and shape separation due to their characteristic form.

All but one of the prints contain and are structured on a three inch grid system. The print, *Behind, Above, and Under*, contains a grid, but its basic structure is that of perspective lines.

The concept of the grid was developed from Kafka's method of relating a novel with a series of even, consistent events. In his work there is no one point of intense drama or climax. All of the events have equal importance and are used as building blocks to complete the story.

The building block concept initiated the use of the grid structure, but it also was the result of personal requirements in my work. This is clear to me because the use of that
structure in various ways was a very strong motivation in the series of Kafka prints.

As I consider the personal derivation of the grid, I must return to earlier works which were landscapes. For me, a major fascination with nature is its energy and diversity of form. Many of my previous drawings and paintings were of landscapes viewed from within a room, through the structure of a window. I see this combination of landscape and window form as an attempt, on my part, to select and stabilize portions of nature. I was working with the two diverse elements of energy and stability and trying to attain a balance between them. The grid structure served that purpose in the making of the Kafka prints. The grid was the stabilizer for the physical and mental energy which went into working on the plates and it stabilized the visual energy in the finished image.

The structure also served my requirements for the creation of a balanced composition. The grid was a framework on which to hang shapes, lines and tones. I used it as if I were constructing a mobile which became balanced or imbalanced with the addition of each mark.

Kafka's use of symbols to transmit his abstract ideas was another relevant concept for me as a visual artist. The symbols he chose to embody the abstract idea had to be universally translatable by others yet personal to Kafka as their creator. His stories function on a multitude of levels because his symbols are as diverse in their translation as those who read his work.
The whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread. His endings, or his absence of endings suggest explanations which, however, are not revealed in clear language but, before they seem justified require that the story be reread from another point of view. Sometimes there is a double possibility of interpretation, whence appears the necessity for two readings. This is what the author intended. But it would be wrong to try and interpret everything in Kafka in detail. A symbol is always in general and, however precise its translation, an artist can restore to it only its movement; there is no word for word rendering. Moreover, nothing is harder to understand than a symbolic work. A symbol always transcends the one who makes use of it and makes him say in reality more than he is aware of expressing.

Examples of symbols that Kafka created can be taken from his novel, The Castle. In this novel, Kafka uses the village that his characters inhabit and where the events occur as a symbol of Man's desire for a normal, healthy relationship to his earth and to other Men. The villagers are shown trying to go about the business of a simple life. The castle, on the hill above the village, represents an idea which is opposed to that of the village. The castle represents; divine authority and dispensation and modern bureaucracy. The story evolves around the conflict between these two ideas.

The choice of these symbols and others was very personal and relative to Kafka. They are symbols which can be understood by others, but they are not commonplace creations. They are original and reflect Kafka's attitudes toward his life.

In order to translate Kafka's metaphors visually, I had to use my own vocabulary of symbols. In this abstract symbolic framework, I was free to select and use the basic elements of my work that were important and relevant to me. Shapes, line and spatial relationships which had been used in objective images were simplified to their primary essence. Within this abstract framework I was free to create a world relevant to itself without the concern of relating to the consistency of the concrete visual world.

While developing and using my vocabulary of marks I made some discoveries about myself. I became aware of reoccurring interests in certain shapes, linear movements, and spatial relationships. At some point, I reached back to my previous work and experiences to try to determine why. Again, I realized that my very strong response to nature was, in large part, the answer. A sizeable portion of all my work, as I have stated, was devoted to objective or abstracted landscapes. This admiration for and fascination with the earth provided the major source for my symbols in my images.

Many of my forms are simplified contours of hills, masses of trees and cloud forms. I respond to the energy and serenity of nature through texture, and my sense of space and light are a response to changes in the atmospheric light due to weather and geographic variations.

Thus, my vocabulary of form is directly related to me and my responses to everyday observations of nature.
I do not owe my methods of working to Franz Kafka, but I do see him as the catalyst in making me aware of my working methods.

Kafka was aware that he needed periods of uninterrupted, concentrated working time. For him, these periods were important to the consistency of the idea and to his personal involvement with the story. In these sittings he found that he could maintain the initial motivation and the immediacy of his idea.

I have selected some entries from Kafka's diaries which show his awareness of his requirements to work. Others illustrate his attitudes towards his writing. All of them give an indication of his stream of consciousness writing style.

Sunday, July 19, slept, awake, slept, awake, miserable life.

10 o'clock, Nov. 15, I will not let myself become tired. I'll jump into my story even though it should cut my face to pieces.

That I have put aside and crossed out so much, indeed almost everything I wrote this year, that hinders me a great deal in writing. It is indeed a mountain, it is five times as much as I have in general ever written, and by its mass alone it draws everything that I write away from under my pen to itself.

Jan. 12, I haven't written down a great deal about myself these days, partly because of the fear of betraying my self-perception. This fear is justified, for one should permit a self-perception to be established definitively in writing only when it can be done with the greatest completeness, with all the incidental consequences as well as with entire truthfulness. For if this does not happen and in any event I am not capable of it, then what is written down will replace what has been felt only vaguely, in such a way that the real feeling will disappear while the worthlessness of what has been noted down will be recognized too late.
Embarrrassment and pain of not being able to write a perfect story.

As soon as I became aware in any way that I leave abuses undisturbed which it really was intended that I should correct, I lose all sensation in my arm muscles for a moment.

It is certain that everything I have conceived in advance, even when I was in a good mood, whether word for word or just casually, but in specific words, appears dry, wrong, inflexible, embarrassing to everybody around me, timid but above all incomplete when I try to write it down at my desk although I have forgotten nothing of the original conception. This is naturally related in large part to the fact that I conceive something good away from paper only in a time of exaltation; but then the fulness is so great that I have to give up. Blindly and arbitrarily I snatch handfuls out of the stream so that when I write down calmly, my acquisition is nothing in comparison with the fullness in which it lived, is incapable of restoring this fullness and thus is bad and disturbing because it tempts to no purpose.

I can take nothing on myself as long as I have not achieved a sustained work that satisfies me completely.

This story "The Judgement", I wrote at one stretch on the night of 22-23rd, from ten o'clock in the evening to six o'clock in the morning. I could hardly draw my legs from under the desk they had gotten so stiff from sitting. The terrible strain and joy, how the story unfolded before me as if I were advancing over water. Only in this way can writing be done, only with such coherence, only with such a complete opening out of body and soul.

Nov. 30, I can't write anymore. I've come up against the last boundary before which I shall in all likelihood, begin another story over again that will again remain unfinished. This fate pursues me.

Dec. 8, Again I realize that everything written down bit by bit rather than all at once in the course of the larger part of one night is inferior.

Dec. 19, Yesterday wrote "The Village Schoolmaster" almost without knowing it, but was afraid to go on writing later than a quarter to two.

The beginning of every story is ridiculous at first. There seems no hope that this new born thing still incomplete and tender in every joint, will be able to keep alive in the
completed organization of the world, which like every completed organization strives to close itself off. However, one should not forget that the story, if it has any justification to exist, bears its complete organization within itself before it has been fully formed.

Jan. 4, 1915, Great desire to begin another story, didn't yield to it. It is all pointless if I can't pursue the stories through the night they break away and disappear as with "The Assistant Attorney", now.

Jan. 18, Incapable of sustained concentrated work. Also have been in the open air too little. In spite of that I began a new story; I was afraid I should spoil the old ones.

Kafka's diaries were important to me for their direct insight into him as a person and as artist. However; the major discovery in the diaries for me, was the awareness that personal working requirements were as important as all of the other elements involved in the artistic activity. I had not until this point considered their importance.

Again, I returned to review earlier work, but I added one more criteria to its evaluation: How was it done? I found that the pieces that I still valued for their freshness, consistency, and subject matter were done in a concentrated time-span and with a strong motivating concept. They had an immediacy that the work which was done piecemeal, over an extended time, lacked.

My Kafka intaglio prints were done in a concentrated short time span: most plates were complete or almost complete within a day. I was aware that this method of work was beneficial to me in order to retain my energy and motivation. My method of working

was also the result of the accumulation of skills in the etching media. I was able to eliminate many time consuming processes which enabled me to concentrate on creating images on the plates without technical worries.

The activities of making the images and making the formal critical judgements necessary to the aesthetic whole were almost always simultaneous. Therefore, the return to the plate to rework was kept at a minimum. I was able to avoid the inconsistencies which might have occurred had I been in a different frame of consciousness than that in which the original image was created.

These intense working times were preceded with longer periods of consideration of the metaphor to be used and the abstract framework that would be relevant to that metaphor. Once that was established, I was free to let my vocabulary of forms flow from me onto the plate in a process of evolution that encouraged continual change and spontaneity. This process of evolution allowed more freedom than my previous method of making an image from a finished drawing. There were none of the restrictions which occur when working to achieve and maintain a predetermined image. I had no fear of mistakes while putting down my marks because I knew at any point they might be changed during the process of evolution. Thus, each mark was affirmative even if it negated a previous one.

The following quote of the poet, Marshall Stearns, is
very important to me. It beautifully explains this process of growth in an image, be it literary or visual.

A poem by myself needs a host of images. I make one image, though make is not the word, I let, perhaps an image be 'made' emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual and critical forces I possess--let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image and let them all, within my imposed formal limits conflict. Each image holds within it, the seed of its own destruction, and my dialectical method, as I understand it, is a constant building up and breaking down of the image that came out of the central seed which is itself destructive and constructive at the same time.

What I want to explain, and it's necessarily vague to me—is that the life of any poem of mine cannot concentrically round a central image; the life must come out of the centre; an image must be born and die in one another; and any sequence of my images must be a sequence of creations, recreations, destructive and contradictory to the nature of the motivating centre, the womb of war—I try to make the momentary peace which is a poem. A poem of mine is or should be a water tight section of a stream that is flowing.5

PART II

THE INDIVIDUAL PRINTS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS TO SELECTED WORKS OF FRANZ KAFKA

This series of intaglio prints is important to me for its singleness of purpose and for the personal discoveries made during its production.
CHAPTER I

Behind, Above, and Under

The print, Behind, Above, and Under, was motivated by Kafka's use of various spatial concepts in the short story "Blumfield, an Elderly Bachelor". I was fascinated with Kafka's use of space in relating this story.

Kafka opens the story with Blumfield ascending the steps to his room and considering the positive and negative aspects of owning a dog. He is lonely, but decides that he does not want the responsibility of that kind of relationship. He is expecting his room to be empty, as always, but instead, when he opens the door there are two cellulose balls bouncing together in his room. I believe Kafka uses these balls to represent Blumfield's longing for companionship and these companions embody the type of inanimate, undemanding relationship that Blumfield seeks.

As a visual artist, I responded to the use of these bouncing balls for the purpose of defining the space and the activity within the room. This is the purpose that motivated this first Kafka print.

The cellulose balls have a life of their own and follow Blumfield around the room. The distances which Blumfield covers as he moves within the room are emphasized and defined
by the movement of the balls.

The table in the room is made a three dimensional object when the balls bounce under it with a light tapping sound and by the description of Blumfield's activities on the top of the table. Certain objects in the room are given dimension and importance with this method while other areas and furnishings are left ambiguous.

Kafka also introduces a combination of two and three dimensional space with the use of Blumfield's perusal of a magazine. His mind wanders into the reality of the scene in a photograph:

It shows a meeting between the Czar of Russia and the President of France. This takes place on a ship. All about as far as can be seen are many other ships, the smoke from their funnels vanishing in the bright sky. Both the Czar and the President have rushed towards each other with long strides and are clasping one another by the hand. Lower down--the scene evidently takes place on the top deck--stand long lines of saluting sailors cut off by the margin.6

It is all described in its three dimensional reality, but Kafka subtly brings the reader back to the reality of the photograph's two dimensional space when he specifically notes that the lines of sailors on the ship's deck are abruptly cut off by the margin of the magazine page. This type of creative spatial description continues throughout the story.

The reader is let in and out of the confines of Blumfield's room by the comings and goings of Blumfield and the

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charwoman.

Kafka creates the circle of time-space with the lack of an actual ending to the story. Blumfield is left coping with work, but the reader at this point, knows where Blumfield was coming from when the story began.

I chose to translate Kafka's use of space and surrealistic mood with a very direct spatial construction of a perspective drawing. The drawing was done directly on the plate with the perspective points and lines forming a major part of the image. There are several horizon lines and types of perspective which give the image inconsistencies within a seemingly consistent perspective structure.

The table in the image is both two and three dimensional. This dichotomy is further emphasized by the black lozenge shape which serves as the shadow under the table, but this shape is flattened and made two dimensional by the white line edging two of its sides.

The floor is created by a simple use of one point perspective, but this space is interrupted and flattened by the rectangles which float on the floor area.

A square containing a grid relates to the picture plane, the space occupied by the table, and to the deeper atmospheric space in the image.

The whole image was made on an 18" by 24" zinc plate. However, the main part of the image is contained within a 16" by 18" rectangle; this leaves the rest of the plate--an
'L' shape—to carry the paper tone and the perspective lines which move into and out of the main image. This white border area activates the interior space but remains separate and relates to the paper plane. It also serves as a time-space area which lets the viewer move in and out of the confines of the interior rectangle.

This first print of the Kafka series is separate from the other body of Kafka prints in its concept and image. It was based upon a different type of structure, the perspective drawing, which was motivated by Kafka's use of space, not an abstract metaphor as were the others. Its image was based on abstract concepts, yet it retains a relationship to the objective images which previously occupied my work.

This print was a starting point toward the freedom which was expressed in the rest of the series. The image was drawn directly on the plate after considering various other sketches of the concept. I allowed my thought processes to show in the image; thus this print was a beginning for the concepts of evolution which were used in the rest of the Kafka series.

It is included in the Kafka print series because it is very related to Kafka's concepts and because it was an important step.
CHAPTER II

Kafka Concept II Triptych

This group of prints was also motivated by Kafka's varied techniques of creating space in the story "Blumfield, an Elderly Bachelor". It is the first group of prints based upon the grid structure, the concept of which was explained earlier. All three prints are concerned with the shallow spatial depth based on the grid which provides a type of a vertical screen structure. The shapes and lines function in intertwining, overlapping layers, with the grid structure providing stability for the floating lines, shapes and tones.

After the first print was completed, my advisors and I realized the image provided the opportunity to create a more expansive kind of space. The first image was complete in its composition, but it also seemed to be a section of a much larger space. Thus, the decision was made to produce two more plates based upon the same structure and concept. Each image was done separately without a concern for matching shapes and lines between each image. This would have been a contrived visual unity. Rather than force the visual flow and integration of the prints, I let the consistency of the concepts and methods provide the unifying elements among all three.
The prints have no white borders and are presented in separate frames placed two inches apart. This provides separateness for each image and it also provides the viewer with the opportunity to wander visually back and forth through the prints or to view the total three foot by six foot space.

These were the formal considerations involved in the making of the triptych. At this point, however, I would like to indicate to the reader their major importance in my growth as an artist. They were the first large scale prints and the first prints based upon a grid structure which occupied my work for a year. The change of scale and the discovery of the structure propagated a new sense of freedom in my work. This dichotomy of structure and freedom had no apparent logic to me at first, but after reflection on these contrasting concepts, I realized that the grid provided me with the minimum structure that would stabilize my natural tendency to work with free flowing, energetic lines and shapes. Thus, with this combination, I struck a balance between my impulsive and rational tendencies.

I consider this triptych to be the first of my work that is totally relevant to and reflective of me. The images evolved spontaneously, without the struggles that were involved in previous works; they are honest and personal to me and are a result of my aesthetic and personal needs to express forms and energies which are important to me.

I do not pretend to fully understand why this change in
my work occurred, but it is important that it did, and that I realized its importance.
CHAPTER III

What Use Can I Be To Them,
What Do I Mean To Them

This print is based on Kafka's short story, "The Homecoming", and my translation of its metaphor as alienation. For me, the story expresses Kafka's personal sense of alienation from his family and others around him. On a more universal level, the separateness of all humans in their relationships with each other.

The story begins with the alienated man passing under the arch into the courtyard of his father's house. There he sees many objects which remind him of his childhood. Kafka uses short, separate sentences to describe these objects to emphasize the separateness the man feels between himself, the objects, and the past.

The man turns and stands before the kitchen door, listening to the household noises....he desperately wants to enter the house and become a part of the present as well as his past, but he cannot bring himself to do so. To emphasize this desire Kafka uses the pronoun 'I', thirteen times within fifteen lines.

Kafka leaves the figure standing; alienated.

To translate this literary metaphor of alienation
visually, I chose to express it with the separation of spatial planes and shapes. There are three separate planes of space with the grid serving as the middle or barrier plane between the other two. It separates the large caligraphic shape, the 'I' shape, from the other free floating shapes in the space behind the grid. The 'I' shape is also different from the other shapes in its human, caligraphic form. Floating shapes behind the grid plane are the equivalents of the objects in the courtyard and are in the plane alienated from the 'I' shape. Only one of these object shapes has a corner which slips in front of the grid expressing the 'I's desire to relate to the surroundings.
CHAPTER IV

The Castle

This print is based on Kafka's unfinished novel of the same name. I believe the motivating idea for this novel is the dichotomy of the way modern man is forced to live and the way he desires to live. All of the events and characters of the novel illustrate this idea.

To symbolize this struggle, Kafka uses a village and its castle. The village represents people living together trying to relate to each other in human terms. The castle which rises above the village on a hill represents the opposing idea of bureaucracy, impersonal in its dispensation of facts and regulations.

Everyone in the village with the remotest connection with the castle tries to balance their lives according to their own needs and the castle's requirements.

The print is based upon this concept of freedom versus restriction. The grid structure in this image contains two contrasting surface areas. There are squares which are left blank: these are my responses to the castle and its preoccupation with charts and figures. These blank areas are contrasted with the rest of the image which is made up of very active brush and line work. This textured area visualizes
Man's and Nature's energy and variety. The area is made more human because of the direct application of my calligraphy and energy.

Both areas balance each other compositionally. This was done consciously to illustrate my belief that one has to achieve a balance between freedom and restraint. Also, my aesthetic preference is for stabilized energy.
CHAPTER V

Can The Two Exist Together

This two color etching is directly related to The Castle print in its image and in its motivating metaphor of freedom versus control.

As a printmaker, I responded to the possibilities of combining two intaglio plates that contained images based on the same grid structure and similar concepts. This print is the result of combining The Castle plate with one of the plates used in My Print, a print which was related but not a part of the Kafka series.

The Castle plate was printed first with a blue-grey ink; the second plate was overprinted in a warm vine black ink. The resulting image contains strong contrasts between the textured areas and the blank untouched squares, due to the overlays of brush work and color of each plate. The depth of texture is increased by the mixture of warm and cool colors.

Areas of the plate used in My Print were modified in shape and tone to achieve a variety in subtle shapes and a balanced composition.

All of the large grid structured prints are presented without the standard paper margins and without mats. Frames
are fitted to the edge of the printed surface and each print is signed and numbered within the image. This method of presentation is used for two reasons: first, the white or paper tone areas of the images were created for specific visual and spatial considerations. Any outer paper-white margins or mats would interfere with these considerations. Also each print was conceived as an enclosed window of space which recedes visually into the wall space; as if the viewer were looking through the wall into a space beyond.
KAFKA CONCEPT II TRIPHTYCH  

fig. 2
WHAT USE CAN I BE TO THEM
WHAT DO I MEAN TO THEM
fig. 3
CAN THE TWO EXIST TOGETHER  fig. 5
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


