Variations, an analysis

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VARIATIONS: AN ANALYSIS

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For living takes place each instant and that instant is always changing. The wisest thing to do is to open one's ears immediately and hear a sound suddenly before one's thinking has a chance to turn it into something logical, abstract or symbolical.
I.

A portfolio of prints was produced during the last four months using the processes of photography, lithography and intaglio. The imagery employed for this investigation revolved around the disintegration of living matter, specifically that of birds, fish and animals found in a natural environment. The prints were based largely on an examination of natural processes which the subject matter underwent. The approach to this investigation was similar to that of a scientific experiment. There were controls and variables created within the process of documenting and regenerating imagery in order to exemplify the discoveries. As a result of this research, elements particular to the processes of photography and printmaking became evident. These elements were utilized to recreate the process of change which the original subject experienced.

Composer John Cage, in his quest for enlightenment, advocates the imitation of nature "in her manner of operation (not outward appearance)."\(^2\) It was with a similar intention that the processes of printmaking and photography were used. These reproductive processes have two qualities which were cultivated: (1) the ability
to parallel the progress of change, and (2) the capacity to illustrate not only continuity, through repetition, but variations within this evolution. The body of prints began to formulate a family tree which displays evidence of both common factors and unique explorations within a given series.

The processes were executed with limited manipulation in order to facilitate discovery. Henry Geldzahler, former curator of Twentieth Century Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, alluded to this same concern for personal discovery in his review of Josef Albers' work:

...And that is the continuing interest in a career like Mondrian's or Albers'. Each rethinks his problems each time he starts a painting, and while they learn from their own experience, it must always be a renewed experience, never merely a remembered one.³

Particularly in the early stages of image-making, the importance of responding to the images as they presented themselves was clear. The structure of each piece was determined by the photographic information collected from nature. Therefore, each series revealed yet another facet of the natural world rather than a reiteration of my particular character.

Throughout this period, the capabilities and idiosyncrasies of the techniques grew more obvious. The characteristics of photography and printmaking are often
recognizable in the final results which allows for an understanding of the constitution of the work.

The specific imagery of once-living debris was used with the assumption that death is a function of an ongoing cycle. All the images explore the changing nature of life with a general disposition towards deterioration. The images of animal remains are used as metaphors for human existence as it relates to the inevitable changes.

The following written material is a retrospective analysis of the process and product of my research distilled from an ongoing journal. The material is divided into two main categories: the form, and the content. The processes, both in technical preparation and creative execution, are intended to support the content of the work. The content is examined in terms of spiritual motivation for the work as well as in relation to the metaphors which were used to voice this impulse.
II.

This (purposeless) play, however, is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.  

Throughout the working process, I attempted to deal with the images of birds, fish and animals as artlessly, that is, as honestly as possible. I worked towards an unbiased presentation of the elements, one which would avoid overt romanticism or drama. I was searching for the poetry bestowed on the elements themselves which might reveal something of the profound. This required an examination of the essence of each image. In all cases, the attempt was made to accept the results of the photographic and print processes at each phase in order to capture the nature of the images as well as the nature of the processes. I chose to act more often as a facilitator for the media rather than an administrator.

Generally, the images were photographed with a 50mm lens attached to an Olympus OM1 camera, although in several instances, such as "Discoveries (with Suzanne)," and "Road Kill," the lens was changed to a 28-85mm zoom lens for its wide angle and telephoto capabilities.
The carcases were in rather horrid states of decay and the lens allowed me to retain some distance without losing details. The film used was black and white Tri-X with an ASA of 400 which allowed me to capitalize on the substantial grain of the film. This grain later translated especially well in the intaglio images where the grain became a natural substitute for an aquatint. The tonalities were generally less designed as a result; this quality proved to be very instructive to me.

After developing the film with D76 developer, a negative was exposed to ortho film through an enlarger. The image on the negative remained unmodified except in dimensions which were determined by printing plate size or ortho film capacity. I especially responded to the incidentals of the negative: the accidental inclusion of stray articles such as discarded tampons and beer tabs which subtly altered the composition of the image. They attracted me the way improvisational notes might in an otherwise structured piece of music.

In order to retain the quality of the film grain, the kodalith film was developed in D72 paper developer instead of the high contrast A/B developer commonly used for this film. The film was immersed in stop bath, and agitated in fixer until the white areas became clear. The film was then rinsed under running water for five to ten minutes, and dried.
The aim of this process was to obtain an image with a density suitable for exposure in an arc lamp, with considerable detail and sufficient definition. The photographic process, because it becomes auxiliary to the print process, was conducted with the lithographic and intaglio plates in mind. The most important thing was to develop a candid foundation for a print.

The next step was the nonsilver photographic process. The aluminum lithographic plate was coated with negative-working Wipe-O sensitizer, dried and exposed in an arc lamp to a kodalith image. Likewise, the zinc intaglio plate was flow-coated with positive-working KPR3 photo-resist, dried, baked for approximately ten minutes at low heat, and exposed in an arc lamp to a kodalith image. The exposure times varied; the aim was to create an image suitable for etching and printing. The lithographic plate was developed in red lacquer, rinsed and dried, and etched. The plate was then ready to print; often the plate was used as the first in a multiple-plate color image with subsequent non-photographic imagery. The intaglio plate, after exposure, was developed in a tank for several minutes, rinsed and dyed to reveal the results. The borders were reinforced with painted hard ground and the plate was etched in nitric acid solutions.

The zinc plates all carry a single image. The treatment of each plate was directed towards this
particular end. The plates were all deeply etched to amplify the intrinsic qualities of the original photographic source. The tonalities in each piece were nurtured throughout the etching process and became an integral part of the plate. When a plate had acquired the tactile quality of relief sculpture, it was proofed. The necessary improvements were made to enhance printability and the plate was editioned.

The color lithographs offered another facet of printmaking to enter into the imagery: the stratification of information. The initial plates generally carried the photographic imagery and the subsequent plates were composed as responses to the original subject. The non-photographic plates tended to be more private, consisting of print language which was used with a childlike spontaneity to define the forms emotionally. The personal activity created a contrast in terms of visual texture; the resulting visual noise was generally bittersweet: coarse and gracious. Where the photographic record remained essentially neutral, the manually-generated imagery editorialized. A conflict was thus created between the two forms of language in much the same way as an objective nature conflicts with a subjective nature.

In all cases, the intaglio and lithographic plates were produced with a regard for the processes while avoiding the propensity for craft. The subject matter was
presented in a direct manner, and the processes were employed to accommodate this simplicity. I wanted to avoid the embellishments which might be extraneous to the content. I felt that the images, from the photographic state to completion, were the most beautiful in their naked truth.
III.

#7: There are five routes to the top of a mountain, in how many ways can a person go up and down?

#19: Having bunting for five different colours, in how many ways can I select three colours for a tri-colour flag?

#20: In how many ways can I make the tricolour, the three selected colours being arranged in horizontal order?

#92: How many arrangements of five letters can be made out of the letters of pallmall?^5

The processes, up to this point, tended to adhere to a consistency in approach. The aim was to divulge the pure nature of the subject matter. At the point at which an image became a printing problem, the image experienced the flexibility of the process. The manipulations of color combinations and printed surfaces were made to reveal the possibilities inherent to the processes of lithography and intaglio. An excerpt from a dictionary definition of "variation" reinforces the aspect of diversity within a particular structure: "A repetition with its essential features intact and other features modified."^6 The results of an exploration of variations provided an experiential value. The reproductive
processes were an expedient means by which to achieve multitudinous results from limited elements.

The intaglio plates were all editioned on Rives BFK white paper using black inks. The variations were usually made as a result of lithographic and intaglio combinations which included images on d'Arches black and Rives BFK gray papers. In the case of "Discoveries," the negative image was printed in blue-silver lithographic ink and the intaglio plate was printed on top. In the fish series ("Fish I," "Fish II," and "Fish III"), the variations were made in terms of content on the three separate plates. The three plates were a progression of decay, from a well-defined fish, to a carcass disturbed by natural forces such as rain, tides, and predators, to a badly-decomposed body in which only the head and tail remain recognizable. The plates, after being editioned in black ink, were also printed as viscosity images and rolled color plates as experimental images. "Road Kill" was printed as a black and white image for a collective portfolio piece. This plate in particular addressed both the cause and effect of the recorded incident; the carcass signified a less natural violence which occurred in an urban area.

The lithographs, because they were all multiple-plate images, tended to produce more variations. The variables included not only paper selection but also
color combinations which created permutations of the original image. All the lithographs, unlike the intaglio plates, were printed as bleed images, that is, without paper borders.

In the first lithographic series entitled "Birds Die, Bones Fly," the variable was originally the difference between Rives BFK white, d'Arches black and matte mylar with the colors printed in sequence in all cases except half the black papers and two mylar sheets. The addition of a final tusche drawing split the white edition almost in half.

Within the image, three interrelated images were juxtaposed. The images of bones, a contour of a bird and three versions of rock cross-sections were presented as variations of natural change. The images were all treated in a like manner to emphasize their equal relationship.

The second lithographic series entitled "Traces: bird, bone, rock" made use of similar juxtaposition of related imagery, this time in an asymmetrical composition. The imagery was printed on Rives BFK white, and gray, d'Arches black, matte and silver mylar and a thin piece of tissue paper. The imagery included photographic and nonphotographic plates as well as two shaped woodblocks. The variable was the elimination of some plates in several versions of the image and various color combinations that
occurred as a result of the paper variations. One color plate was printed as a single black and white image. The imagery printed on black paper, still unresolved by the time the other versions reached completion, was re-examined at a later time and three color plates were added. These plates were also printed on some of the black and white images and several of the original BFK edition. At this point, the attention was turned to a more two-dimensional surface concern and the results are considerably different.

A third and more extensive lithographic series entitled "Fish and Bird," as well as the subseries entitled "Calypso I" and "Calypso II," made use of variations in paper surfaces as well as choice of color and color combinations. Throughout this series, some plates were printed out of sequence or eliminated altogether from some of the versions. The final color plate was printed using three different colors. This interchange of imagery and printed color resulted in a breadth of resolution which is quite tangible in the finished pieces. The subseries were both printed in black and white, with two prints from each plate printed again in color; this explored, in a more direct way, the qualities of over-printing which are inherent to lithography such as the generation of a third color from two printings.

"Two Birds and A Fish," the fourth and final
lithographic series, was an eclectic culmination of elements from the previous explorations. Initially, three photographic images animals were printed simultaneously using three separate colors. This arranged the space asymmetrically in a triangular configuration. Thereafter, the plates began to create an environment for the animal images which also functioned as a surface texture in a two-dimensional space. All the versions were printed on Rives BFK white; the variations were more dependent on color differences and the sequence of plates. One plate was printed as a black and white edition. Many plates were printed twice on a single image to create softer edges and a fusion of two closely-related colors. In some cases, the photographic plate was printed last.

The experimentation allowed me to discover the potentials of the printmaking processes. The variations allowed me to satisfy my curiosity without avoiding the manufacture of consistent multiple images. The unpredictable results developed many new aesthetic ideas which were previously unfamiliar to me, and which caused me to actively evaluate the production.

Thus the probability...is seen to be entirely conditional on the respective degrees of our knowledge and ignorance; as soon as our ignorance vanishes--as soon as we know all about the event, and become as far as that event is concerned omniscient,--then there no longer remains a question of probability; the probability is replaced by certainty.\textsuperscript{7}
Meanwhile, we can sum up the initial progress that the spirit of rebellion provokes in a mind that is originally imbued with the absurdity and apparent sterility of the world. In absurdist experience, suffering is individual. But from the moment when a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience. Therefore the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men and that the human reality, in its entirety, suffers from the distance which separates it from the rest of the universe. The malady experienced by a single man becomes a mass plague. In our daily trials rebellion plays the same role as does the "cognito" in the realm of thought: it is the first piece of evidence. But this evidence lures the individual from his solitude. It finds its first value on the whole human race. I rebel---therefore we exist.8

Art is born out of a need to communicate. The message of this art is born out of what the maker knows. This knowledge becomes the purpose of the work while still remaining something of an enigma. The work becomes an abstraction of this deeply-seated idea which is channeled through language in order to acquire a set of symbols. There is a personal vocabulary created to define and give context to these symbols. Beyond this system of communication lies the soul of the work.
The two most specific sources for this current series of prints are my mother's death from somewhere in the middle of an awkward stage, and the secondary relationship I have to those tragedies which occur every day which seem to have offered some perspective on my private loss. Death, due to violence or accident, seems to be a part of my permanent vocabulary. I am aware of the death of circumstances and personalities through events in my own life as well as through information gathered from the media and conversations in passing. On a more specific note, the feelings of pain and sadness and vulnerability seem to be very real to me in relation to losses in general. I suppose it is the defenselessness I feel towards forces outside myself which motivates me to examine the nature of a random destiny.

I recall the strangeness of the earlier years when the potency of feeling was very high. Those were volatile times. At present, similar feelings are tempered with detachment. I no longer feel at the center of these events. I have mixed feelings about this distancing. It seems to act as a coping mechanism which buffers the relationship between fact and feelings. This has led to an objectivity in the visual work which was not previously present. It is a self-protective measure. The modification of a recognizable romanticism is the deliberate
obscurity of my feelings.

Until you knew a Native well, it was almost impossible to get a straight answer from him. To a direct question as to how many cows he had, he had an eluding reply,--"As many as I told you yesterday." It goes against the feelings of Europeans to be answered in such a manner, it very likely goes against the feelings of the Natives to be questioned in this way. If we pressed or pursued them, to get an explanation of their behavior out of them, they receded as long as they possibly could, and then they used a grotesque humorous fantasy to lead us on the wrong track. Even small children in this situation had all the qualities of old poker players, who do not mind if you overvalue or undervalue their hand, so long as you do not know its real nature.9

For my own purposes, this objectivity seems to lead towards a welcome transcendence of these feelings.

The images used to make reference to these experiences all involve a corporal death. The birds, fish and animals represent a kind of half-life that living matter experiences as it dies and changes form. The residual matter is illustrative of the continual process of destruction and construction in a cycle of regeneration; it varies in degrees of decay and cause of death. The printed results vary in the degree of recognizability of subject matter within the matrix. In the etchings, the subject matter tends to be more oblique in terms of subject matter and the color tends to give the prints a luminosity rather than an intensity. The differences in
media have evoked different nuances of feeling about these creatures.
V.

Logician: A syllogism consists of a main preposition, a secondary one, and a conclusion.

Old Gentleman: What conclusion?¹⁰

The process of exploration can be viewed as a fact-finding mission. The cycle is engaged by a way-farer without resolution. The experience becomes a portion of one's information; the cycle spirals onward.

The photographic process was utilized to create a credible representation of reality. This symbolism was juxtaposed with a variety of print languages to form a dialogue between the subjective and objective facets of each image. The variations within each series explored technical options as well as a range in the relationship between these subjective and objective elements. The variations prompted considerable thought and affirmed several preferences, such as a predilection for subtle color combinations and low-resolution photographic information. An outcome of the restricted manipulation of imagery caused me to acknowledge the legitimacy of nature's way despite the apparent inequities, particularly as this relates to the tonal structure of each etching. This deference to the given information produced a broader
sense of design. A rhetorical question which was prompted by this analysis of asymmetry is verbalized eloquently by Thornton Wilder: "Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan." As a result of this study the definition for accident and plan have become synonymous.
FOOTNOTES


4 Calvin Tomkins, The Bride and the Bachelors, p. 73.


7 William Allen Whitworth, Choice and Chance, p. 121.


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