

Some remarks on Michael Schneider's wood-block print technique

By Monika Knofler

While Michael Schneider was studying at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts with Maximilian Melcher, he became interested in the technique of woodcuts. At first he concentrated on the European traditions, which only fascinated him as long as he had not entirely mastered their technique. The closer he got to perfection, however, the more "elegant" his works became, the more dissatisfied he grew with them. After all he strives for artistic and not for technical perfection as such.

After finishing his degree he was awarded a scholarship at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music* in order to study the classic Japanese tradition of woodcuts more closely, yet again after a while he was no longer satisfied with the technical perfection this tradition could offer. Since he did not want to cease working with wood, he chose to use the simplest devices, i.e. he started to work wood with a stone. This is an extremely primitive procedure by Japanese standards and at first Schneider did not meet with much approval for doing it. He has chiseled his pictures into poplar panels since then (and sometimes also into long pieces of wood which are harder and hence more painful to work on). As the stone is neither shaped nor held nor driven in exactly the same manner, the structures and lines vary accordingly. Unlike the classic European tradition of woodcuts, which is characterized by print lines and spots of the same level and hence by the same density of ink, the print lines and spots chiseled into the wood by Schneider vary, which results in color tones of varying density. When you look at one of these slabs the picture remains hidden like a secret message that only becomes visible in print.

Schneider uses colors only for sample prints. For the final prints he relies on black and white contrast. He uses the traditional brush proof that he has adapted to his own needs. After he has put paint (Indian ink and sometimes oil-based paint) on the slab, he covers it with wet Japanese paper (washi) and cellophane. He smoothes the paper with his hands and then with a scrubbing brush and a ball-bearing print tool (called baren in Japanese), working from the centre to the edges and then along the edges. He finishes off with circular movements from the edges back to the centre. Since the wet paper becomes transparent, the printing can be closely observed while in progress.

For Schneider technical mechanisms and formal creation are interdependent. By concentrating on simpler devices and on the underlying meaning of things he has created a new sign language, which serves to render the illegible legible and does not presuppose a particular meaning. Paul Klee has argued that art should not content itself with merely depicting the visible but rather make the invisible visible. Similarly, Schneider strives to capture the moment when form acquires sign character and points at contents that are partly no longer legible without a key. This key, however, is not known to everyone. Schneider's works are part of a larger invisible picture beyond the existing canvas and only a total view of this picture would enable us to decipher the contents of the pictorial worlds Michael Schneider has created.

* Now: Tokyo University of the Arts

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