

Graphic prints after Alois Lichtsteiner

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Alois Lichtsteiner sees himself as a painter, nothing more, nothing less. This seems at first glance to be a rather banal observation. But in the light of a large body of graphic prints, this exhibition also contains aspects that should be considered in the discussion of Lichtsteiner's overall concept. His self-perception as a painter has a distinct influence on his approach to graphic prints while it leaves a certain mark on his bearing, on the one hand ruling out certain possibilities in order on the other hand to strengthen others.

Basically, painters have various points of reference when approaching graphic prints. They usually choose a technique that is closest to their working process as a starting point to find genuine solutions to the artistic problems that arise. In past decades, this was often lithography, etchings or other related processes, woodcut or various forms of photo-mechanical reproduction. The decisive criterion is present, whether primarily as an attempt to expand typical elements or to create a distinct, independent function. Even in the case of apparent independence, retroactive effects with other media are not only impossible to exclude, but rather are most often to be expected. In principle, graphic prints are very different from other solutions, and because of their mirror imaging, they are comparable only to a limited extent. One distinct challenge in any case is the reversal of the image through the printing process and the change in perception connected with it.

While painting and drawing primarily produce unique works, graphic prints are generally employed to reproduce images, at least when printing blocks or plates are used for this purpose. Repeated use of the printing block allows prints to be reproduced in large numbers. Although they are rarely completely identical, the differences are minimal. It is subsequently advantageous in the economy of work, since it allows an established concept to be used repeatedly.

But in to a certain extent, Alois Lichtsteiner pursues the very opposite of that. Since the technique does not allow him to avoid reversing the image, he uses it as a creative means, just as numerous other artists do, but in the end he has developed a radically new approach. Although he works with printing blocks and their potential to produce predominantly identical prints, he consciously avoids using this potential. He describes his technique as a monotypical woodcut. A monotype is actually a print of a drawing or painting on a flat surface, for example on a copper plate. Since the composition is found only on the surface of the printing medium but is not connected with it in any way, only one print can be made. The printing process transfers the composition to the paper and the printing form, destroying it. Its purpose is a transfer to another medium, including the reversal of the image and a certain naturally occurring slight blurring of the lines. It is a painting-based process of creating the image, not a graphic print as such. In the end, Lichtsteiner combines both of these mutually exclusive processes. He creates a print block, usually with aid of a digital template, and then uses an industrial milling machine which creates a print block from a sheet of plywood. Normally, this would be inked in with a roller, preferably as evenly as possible and always with the same density and thickness. But he paints the printing block, differently each time, using the paint left over from the previous printing process. In doing so, he does not use printing ink, and accepts that colours will accumulate during the printing process, that the thickness of the layer will grow and that the paints will react differently. Additionally, he changes the colours, not remaining in any previously established range, but retaining instead the flexibility to react to any

sort of effect. This leads him to constantly discover new ways of seeing things while he accepts a certainly unpredictability of results.

Each of the elements that comprise the image are, as in his paintings, isolated areas of colours, separated from each other. Unworked areas are not uncommon in graphic prints, they usually serve to express light or to brighten the image. Lichtsteiner employs them for another purpose. Starting with the slight addition of colour, he achieves an outstanding lightness and allows the tone of the paper to shine through, creating the fullness of light without directly portraying the light itself. The "free areas" thus assume a concrete function, they are not just blank spaces, but rather lend structure to the printed surface and give the paper a chance to produce its own effect. It is an astounding enhancement that he undertakes here. No longer just a print medium, or means of producing lightness, the paper and its shade of colour become structure-shaping elements. Lichtsteiner uses exclusively Japan papers. These are known for their outstanding quality, are sometimes slightly translucent and thus underscore the transparency created by the application of paint. In doing so, Lichtsteiner actually creates irresolvable contradictions to the accepted practice and to a conventional understanding. Usually, graphic prints are based on relatively opaque colours, especially in relief printing, partially over layering each other without combining. Glazing media, with their slightly transparent colour layers, are only rarely used. Technically, it is entirely possible, but more often it is the concrete choice of the artist to determine the extent to which this sort of lightness is desirable. For conventional woodblock prints, the relatively thick layers of colour generally correspond to the artist's creative intent. The down-to-earth quality that is usually ascribed to traditional woodblock printing finds a congenial counterpart in this application of colour.

The transparency and the light application of colour fully alters the character of the individual elements of the image. Originally, Lichtsteiner found himself inspired by something he observed at the Furka Pass, as he saw the exposed areas left by the melting snowfields. The combination of receding snowfields and the protruding tufts of grass produced a visually attractive structure, which despite its apparent reality, harboured a great potential for abstraction. Thematically, he places himself among the landscape or Alpine painters, but not in the conventional sense. Only when one comes to know where he draws his inspiration does the connection become clear, otherwise the markedly close-up views render any direct identification impossible. It remains primarily associative and does not portray any particular location. Lichtsteiner is not concerned with reproducing a particular topography, but rather portraying a concept of space and a span of time. First, Lichtsteiner captures this as a painting, in which he has to actively paint in all the elements, both the white of the snow and also the ground and the vegetation. These are all conscious processes which have to be undertaken and even when an apparently blank space arises, there is never a true emptiness. Everything is active, everything is conscious, no background surface remains exposed at any point. And this is the fundamental difference between his paintings and his graphic prints. At first glance they seem to be similar in nature, varying only in their size. But the application of colour and the surface structures are different, and most of all, the medium itself assumes a new meaning. In his prints, the white surfaces are left blank, this is after all a conscious decision, but a decision to omit something. Through the structure of the paper, the unprinted areas appear not as blank spaces, but as a surface on which to project one's own perceptions, thoughts or emotions. It is an essentially more abstract process than in his paintings, one which involves the viewer on a much deeper level. They do not see a finished solution, but are offered an option which they must exercise themselves. Without creating a true series, that is, a certain sequence of discourse or analysis, his prints seem to approach such a series, but refuse to be appropriated in this manner. In the end it is the free variations, the independent solutions, which are similar due to the basic shape of the printing block, yet retain their individuality. The ultimate consequence of this is a tension inherent to the image, which remains a special feature in the works of Lichtsteiner as well as with other woodblock artists.