

THE IMAGE MULTIPLIED

Prints and Photographs

Abhishek N. Verma
Chhering Negi
Koustav Nag

Lakshmi Kiran. K
Sagnik Samanta
Tejswini N. Sonawane

Tushar Sahay

Essay by Shukla Sawant

27 November 2021 - January 17, 2022



ART HERITAGE



Abhishek Narayan Verma, A Game of Permutations & Combinations, 2016-2019, Lithograph, 14 x 17 inches (set of 16)

The Slow Art of the Fine Print

By Shukla Sawant, 2021

Let me begin by raising a query. What does it mean to hold a medium specific exhibition, focusing on printmaking at this juncture of history? The modernist impulse to define art practice in terms of medium specificity, by now has a history of its own that has been questioned, contested and subjected to scrutiny, not just thorough theoretical probing, but also through critical forms of printmaking practices. In a sense, it would be counterintuitive to go against this process of reflection and mount a printmaking

exhibition without pondering over what printmaking might mean in today's context. If one pauses for a while on the formalist concerns of modernism and then pivots to reflect on the initial impulse to produce a multiple of an image, it primarily lies in the desire to disseminate information, often as an image-text interface, mass-produced and mass-consumed. For this precise reason, it's potential for a politically charged aesthetics is extremely significant. The history of printmaking is replete with instances of the medium being used to usher in radical change.

In his highly regarded history of printmaking, Fritz Eichenberg observes that an image multiplied manifold times as a print, can shape historical events by giving rise to peasant uprisings and student rebellions, champion people's causes and contest religious authority. "They have worked for peace or for war, for God or for Devil. Tyrants and political bosses have feared their power." ¹

In recent years though, rapid changes in the technological order have altered the way politics

manifests itself and the capacity for an image to be replicated and transported at the speed of electricity has also changed the fundamental essence of what images are and what they can do. On the other hand, premised on an autographic mark of the artist on a printing matrix and limited edition, the 'Fine Print' has an older origin. When printmaking began to proliferate with the advent of paper, matrix plates were initially made by specialist draftsmen, based on visual templates by artists with signature value. In the modern period, it became almost de rigueur for artists to produce



**Tejswini Narayan Sonawane, A Migrant - I, 2018,
Woodcut on cloth, 48 inches diameter**

the matrix of the image themselves. This transition from the matrix being the work of an assistant to that of being a part of the artwork process itself, led to comparing the matrix produced by an artist to the whorls of a fingerprint. In this new incarnation, wherein the artist was the producer of both the matrix and the print itself, the final product was characterized by two interrelated qualities, namely multiplicity (the print) and originality (the matrix), Frank Getlein the noted American art critic, at one point noted, rather prophetically, "You can leave fingerprints all over

the world and all over the years and they will always be the same, your own, identifiable, original", suggesting also that this indexicality had created a situation whereby curators had "caught up with police courts".²

Against the backdrop of the growing unease about how every little gesture or mark can be tracked and traced to the point of origin in the digital world, the cultural import of the 'Fine Print' may need re-examining. It is after all premised on the claim to authorship and with it, a responsibility



Koustav Nag, Human Hanger, 2019, Plywoodcut, 72 x 48 inches

regarding the aesthetic and political assertions made in the image through a signature that authorizes its circulation. With the haptic quality of a tactile printed surface now possible through 3-D printing and the flat screen of the digital interface exhibiting its own haptic order of pinching and pulling gestures to zoom in and zoom out (made possible only through a transfer of bodily electricity onto a touch screen), what exactly would an ‘indexical’ autonomous gesture mean today? If one must historicize, what connections can we make between older forms of

making multiples and the more recent articulations? And what is ‘new’ about printmaking practices today that offer the possibility of a break from the older order?

To think through the notion of the ‘Fine Print’, one should consider some observations made by the historian Sumati Ramaswamy, and her discussion of Gandhi's performative acts of walking, a form of protest that became the mainstay of his acts of civil disobedience after he encountered the writings of Henry David



Chhering Negi, Rear Window - V, 2018, Lithograph, 23.5 x 17.5 inches



Laskshmi Kiran. K, Nostalgia - I, 2020, Etching, 20 x 15 inches

Thoreau's whilst imprisoned. Thoreau's 1849 essay 'Resistance to Civil Government', which was eventually renamed 'Essay of Civil Disobedience', suggests that human actions can become a 'counter friction to stop the machine,' in order to speak back to power.³ In the early twentieth century, when artists in Santiniketan took to printmaking using the simplest of means, Nandalal Bose made print of Gandhi mid-stride, a condensed symbol of the march undertaken by Gandhi and his followers, from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi to enact the Salt Satyagraha in 1930. The



Sagnik Samanta, Farmland to La La Land, 2021, Digital print on Archival paper, 12 x 18 inches (set of 17), Edition 1 of 5



Sagnik Samanta, Photobook Project Apothanasia, 2021, Digital Photography on Archival paper, 22 x 30 inches each (set of 36), Edition 1 of 5

linocut process in which the print was made, required very little capital, in sharp contrast to the nineteenth century pioneering artist Ravi Varma, who built up an infrastructure with imported German machines that could produce print runs by the hundreds.⁴ Several decades after the steam powered press had arrived in India, the choice of the artists in Santinikentan to make educational primers using the simplest of printmaking techniques, a repertoire of ‘slowed down’ images offered the possibility to express an alternative politics in a world governed by colonial laws. The

mass produced image had a ready market but Nandalal's 'Fine' prints too did not just limit their existence to a wall. They travelled as illustrations and gifts and penetrated the museum and gallery and were embedded in books and catalogues, creating a community of readers, thinkers, art collectors and even the layperson, who could see through the varnished gloss of an oleograph. The 'Fine Print' therefore needs to be looked at as a placeholder for what came to be valued for its politics and simple means, in the face of a mechanized speeding up of life.

Not too long ago in 1989, a year that many scholars have marked as of great significance to Global Art History, the Roopankar Museum in Bhopal inaugurated a print biennale with Jyoti Bhatt as its commissioner and Tokuhiro Nakajima (Japan), Denis Long (Spain) and Jeram Patel (India) as jury members. The ambitious exhibition with 1200 prints from 45 countries was, according to J. Swaminathan, the Director of the Roopankar Museum, an attempt to retrieve "the authentic from the mass media of reproduction." For Swaminathan printmaking was not a static form.



Tushar Sahay, Mirror, 2020, Mezzotint, 10 x 14 inches

Regarding the potential of the medium, he noted some interesting attributes, particularly the ease with which it could be transported across national boundaries, thus fostering an internationalism and make ideas available to a participatory public through the exhibition form.⁵

Several artists today are questioning whether the ‘Fine Print’ is a historically bounded category, destined for the museum as an artifact of a particular period in history. They ask if, as artists, they can renew their engagement with the politics

of the medium and make some kind of a contemporary critical gesture towards that category. With printmakers turning to ecologically sustainable techniques such as the labour intensive mezzotint that requires no acid based modulation, or the gestural, expressive woodcut, and the ability to let ideas percolate into everyday life through a slowing down of the image making process, it seems as though printmaking may indeed get a new lease of life as a critically informed life for the politics of our times.

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¹ Fritz Eichenberg, 'Preface' *The Art of The Print: Masterpieces, History, Technique*. London Thames and Hudson, 1976, Unpaginated.

² Frank Getlein, 'The Multiple Image', *New Republic*. Vol. 141, Issue 15, dated 10th December, 1959, pp. 20-21. Getlein wrote extensively on printmaking and also travelled to India as a guest of the United States Information Service.

³ See George Hendrick, The Influence of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" on Gandhi's Satyagraha, *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (December, 1956), pp. 462-471. I thank Sumati Ramaswamy for drawing my attention to the images of Gandhi walking that dominate contemporary visual representations of civil disobedience through her lecture *He Ram! The Optics of a Dying Moment in the Life of a Nation* delivered at the University of Chicago Centre in Delhi on 11th January, 2018.

⁴ Neumayer and Christine Schelberger Raja Ravi Varma, Portrait of an Artist: The Diary of C. Raja Raja Varma, Edited by Erwin; with a foreword by Partha Mitter. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005. pp. 4, 266.

⁵ J. Swaminathan, Directors note, Catalogue of the 1st International Print Biennale, Roopankar Museum of Fine Arts Bharat Bhavan Bhopal. 1989, Unpaginated.

A longer version of this essay has been published in the Lalit Kala Contemporary, Volume 57, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 2021
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