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Here and Now: Prints, Drawings, and Photographs by Ten Philadelphia Artists



The Philadelphia Museum of Art

By Daniel Gerwin

Astrid Magdalen Bowlby, The Dufala Brothers (Steven and Billy), Vincent D. Feldman, Daniel Heyman, Isaac Tin Wei Lin, Virgil Marti, Joshua Mosley, Serena Perrone, Hannah Price, and Mia Rosenthal

Through December 4, 2011



For some years now, contemporary art has seen a trend toward deskilling, in which craft and technical ability seem increasingly irrelevant. Here and Now, the [Philadelphia Museum of Art's](#) survey of works on paper by ten local artists, separates itself from the deskilling phenomenon by highlighting fairly traditional notions of technique. The artists assembled by curator Innis Howe Shoemaker demonstrate a commitment to conceptual, manual, and material refinement.

The Dufala brothers are known for their sculptural inventions, but Here and Now brings attention to their drawings. Three small works portray an ice cream cone, a burger, and a pork chop, each made entirely of human hair. This surrealist menu at once preserves and reverses the old adage, "you are what you eat," accomplishing the merger before we've taken a single bite, while recalling and updating Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined cup and saucer (Object, 1936). Hung next to the drawings, their watercolors consist of carefully

placed pools that build to form each image. In *Fog* (2010), a mass of discarded bottles floats on the page like an enormous column of jellyfish, a resemblance as painful to consider as it is beautiful.

Like the Dufalas, Daniel Heyman directly addresses social concerns in his work. When *Photographers Are Blinded, Eagles' Wings Are Clipped* (2009-10) is a grand narrative of sorts, a wall-size tableau laden with dramatic imagery. On the right is a large, blindfolded figure with camera at the ready, wearing only a shirt and underpants through which his genitals are clearly seen. This figure was inspired by a photojournalist, but serves as a humbling warning to any artist with the courage to take on the enormous subject of war: one is apt to find oneself blind and without pants. On the other side of the same wall, eight drypoints from Heyman's *Amman Portfolio* (2006) bear intimate witness to suffering. Heyman drew these images directly on copper plates as he sat in on interviews with innocent Iraqis who had been tortured by Americans at Abu Ghraib, simultaneously inscribing portions of each man's testimony around his portrait. In the immediacy of the moment, Heyman masterfully captured details of gesture and expression, allowing these men to speak for themselves. Their words and faces are unassuming and devastating.

Joshua Mosley's photographs in and around the Hôtel du Parc in Switzerland also bear witness, using what may be the exact opposite of Heyman's approach in the *Amman Portfolio*. The hotel was the site of a conference organized by economist Friedrich Hayek in 1947, and the images evoke a ghostly presence. Mosley is an historical witness as exemplified by the author W. G. Sebald, in whose writing the past haunts the present through architecture, geography, and material documentation. One photograph, *View from Hôtel du Parc (Meeting Room Exterior), Mont Pèlerin, Switzerland* (2011), especially caught my eye for its reflection of silhouetted trees in an exterior window. In the context of the intaglio and woodcut throughout *Here and Now*, the reflection becomes an ephemeral printmaking process, a fleeting image consisting of nothing but light on glass.

Astrid Bowlby takes obsessive drawing straight to the sublime, producing gorgeously dense visual facts. Much of her work in this show is based on a systematic approach to filling the page, reminiscent of the painter James Siena, though her drawings feel more organic. Despite the laborious process by which they're made, Bowlby's prints and drawings are brimming with a sense of wonder, a characteristic also present in the work of Serena Perrone. Perrone's work combines multiple printing techniques and appears unabashedly romantic, tempered by a strange and gentle mystery. *A Volcano Pilgrim* in

Exchange for Fire(2010), her suite of twenty connecting landscapes rendered in symphonic reds and blues, put me in mind of Sebald once again, in this case recalling his mixture of fiction and historical fact. Each of the twenty images includes text from the last words of poet Craig Arnold who disappeared in 2009, but Perrone extends the poet's final days far into her imagination, taking the deceased to see live volcanoes across the globe. Vincent Feldman's photographs are placed between Bowlby's drawings and Perrone's prints, and this feels right because his pictures are open, passionate love letters to Japanese architecture.

Isaac Tin Wei Lin is represented by four framed photographs with superimposed layers of patterns and writing, hung on a wall with an all-over pattern similar to those he paints on the photos. The effect is awkward because the frames prevent the images from integrating with the wall behind them, as in homes where art is jarringly hung against loud, ornate wallpaper. The immersive environment Lin created at the Philadelphia Print Center in 2010 seemed a better fit.

While the Dufalas have a reputation for their humor, two other artists take the comedic lead in Here and Now. Virgil Marti's 3-D self-portraits Untitled and Untitled (Yellow Flowers) (both 1995) vaguely recall Andy Warhol's color offset lithographs while introducing the goofiness of 3-D glasses (provided on the wall). Mia Rosenthal's Wheel, August 2, 2010 (2010) shows the disc made famous by The Price is Right, constructed from the transcribed text of one full episode of the game show. In a similar vein, her Sample Size Box of Rice Krispies (2009) and Breakfast Cereals of This Great Nation (2009) seem to both laugh and cringe at American consumer culture. More fundamentally, however, Rosenthal is driven by a sober documentary impulse evident throughout her work on display.

Hannah Price, the show's youngest artist at twenty-five, uses photography to document her anxieties of ethnic identity as much as the facts of her surroundings. The pictures seem to project a reproach into most of her subjects. In Marian Anderson, South Philly (2011), even a small billboard image of the great singer seems to stare sternly down at the photographer, scolding her for an unknown offense. These photos suggest an artist attempting to simultaneously navigate the urban environment and her developing sense of self.

For all the high caliber work in this exhibit, the category of works on paper feels overbroad

as a curatorial focus. The Philadelphia art scene is robust enough to support more specific investigations by this world-class museum. There is plenty of territory between a show like this one and the solo shows planned for Tristin Lowe and Zoe Strauss in the coming year. The city would surely welcome additional efforts with enthusiasm.

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