

Interview

Filipe Dos Santos & Alois Lichtsteiner

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Filipe Dos Santos (FDS) : Your artistic path has followed the discipline of painting for several decades. How did you come to encounter paper as a medium and how did you get into woodblock printing ?

Alois Lichtsteiner (AL) : While I was completing my first woodblock plate – I had been invited to participate in a large-scale project – I studied the history of woodcut or relief printing. I quickly realised that I was not terribly interested in the technical aspects of engraving. That led me to seek alternative approaches with digital and technical aids. The compositions for the print templates are created in Photoshop, based on existing paintings or photographic material. They are then generated using a vector graphic.

The first plates were milled using the CNC machine (computer automated milling machine). Nowadays they are engraved with lasers. This special way of creating the plate, the printing block, freed me from tradition and opened the way for me to rediscover and further develop my painting through the technique of woodcut printing.

FDS : What is the basic difference between your painting and your work on paper ?

AL : Monotypically colouring in the print block allows me to create originals. In terms of hierarchy, I do not differentiate between working on canvas or with the print block, and the results are of equal value.

But the printing block is an invitation to experiment. The process is much more immediate and riskier, whereas my painting is more conceptually guided and oriented. Printing adds a playful aspect, it is much more varied as creating a print calls for at least four or five steps. In addition, I am working with a partner. Painting, on the other hand, is a lonely and somewhat tedious activity that can take a long time, and may be reworked.

FDS : All of your woodblock work is printed on Japanese paper. Have you tried working with other kinds of paper ? How did you come to select Tosa Shoji ?

AL : I discovered the Japanese Tosa Shoji paper at a paper restorer's workshop. It is made out of very long mulberry fibres. That makes it very tear-resistant but also delicate and lucid. Its appearance is like that of skin. The restorer uses it as "transplants" for injured paper. To me, the skin-like quality is the most important aspect, its durability and slight transparency.

I haven't found yet any other print medium that so explicitly embodies the metaphor of skin. But this aspect has stimulated me to think about whether I could use this printing technique on canvas (skin).

FDS : When you describe working with Tosa Shoji, you say that printing each sheet requires a great deal of physical exertion. Is this effort of significance in creating the work ?

AL : No, not at all. No amount of effort, whether great or small, can ever justify a work of art. With the physical exertion I simply meant that peeling the delicate Japanese paper from the print block requires four hands, not only due to the size of the format but also because of the great resistance. It often reminds me of rabbit skin, which I stripped from the carcasses of slaughtered animals as a youth.

FDS : The patterns developed on the paper resemble mountains, snow cover and rocky landscapes. What do these patterns represent for you ?

AL : Well, they are really just “ patterns “ of exposed mountain slopes. They are pretty much registered in everyone’s memory. In the “ Alpine paintings “ I have discovered an analogy to painting itself. Just as snow covers the body of the mountain, painting covers the canvas stretched over a frame. Painting presents itself for what it is.

With graphics, there is a double analogy: as the snow covers the body of the mountain, the Japanese paper covers the body of the printing block. The Tosa Shoji is the skin that is pulled off with traces of the painting from the print block.

FDS : The Alpine landscapes had already appeared in your paintings before you used them for woodcut printings. Is this the continuation of a line of work or a new development ?

AL : While printing the first plates I already had the impression that I was entering new territory, but over time and with the experiences I gathered, I came to realise on the one hand that painting with the foam roller on the plate, on the matrix, was technically distinct from painting with a brush on canvas. Mentally, printing was a logical extension of painting.

On the printing block, the shapes are already predetermined, which calls for a new approach, for example in the colouration or in testing the limits of applying paints, etc. Experimentation with printing led me back to employing colours after 13 years of working with black-and-white.

FDS : We have been talking about your woodcut work, but based on the technique employed, it is not really woodcut *per se*. You do not ink in the plates, you paint the plates and then print this painting out onto the paper. What motivated you to this decision ?

AL : Graphics as a reproduction technique was never of great interest to me, and actually, I could have simply handed the task over to a professional printer after completing the matrices. But it was at exactly this point where my great doubts arose. I didn’t want a printer to execute work for me which, when finished, bears witness to my reference. Perhaps I wanted to make my way like the first woodcut artists, who, I imagine, were astounded at each printed page and at the same time felt a desire to pursue even more new possibilities.

I want each Tosa Shoji to be a new and unique work of art, one which through the act of repetition (in contrast to canvas paintings) is related, connected but not identical with what preceded it. The sheets from each plate are like siblings. Their DNA lies in the vector graphics for the matrices.

FDS : The question of unique works or monotypes is important to you. Why did you never want to produce editions ?

AL : The point of graphics when it was invented in the 17th century was to serially reproduce an image; what I am doing with monotypical relief printing is the very opposite of that. A monotype is in principle like a drawing, a watercolour or gouache..., to what end would I then choose the detour via a printing block ? When I express it that way, I try to say that I have never been interested in reproduction in and of itself. It is much more the painting that occupies the foreground through the printing. The intention is to gather new experiences and insights for my painting through printing.

FDS : Are you planning to strike out in new directions in your engraving work ?

AL : Right now, I am back into painting. They never went side-by-side. In the past years when I was predominantly occupied with printed graphics, I did not do a lot of painting. I could imagine applying my printing experiences to media other than Japanese paper, such as canvas. Painting on canvas, in contrast to the print block, is a direct means of working. Whereas when printing, I paint a picture that appears as a mirror image and indirectly on the skin of the medium.