

Interview between Christian Cuénoud and Alois Lichtsteiner on his monotypes, 2016

Christian Cuénoud (CC) : The first question that I want to ask you is simple, why all this sudden appearance of great cycles of engravings and this very intense search in the direction of wood, paper and ink?

Alois Lichtsteiner (AL) : As it often happens, this process was set in motion by an invitation to take part in a project that I could not turn down for tactical reasons. While realizing the woodcut block, I studied and reflected on the history of woodcut engraving or relief printing. It became clear right away the the aspect of craftsmanship in engraving did not personally interest me. This led me to seek new approaches employing electronic and technical aids. The print templates are composed using Photoshop, whereby a vector graphic is created at the end. The first plates were engraved with a CNC machine (computer-guided engraving machine). Nowadays they are produced using a laser. The special type of plate used to create the wood block has freed me from tradition and opened a doorway by way of the woodcutting technique to explore my painting in new ways and to set off again on a voyage of discovery.

CC : How do you define your work as an engraver? In other words, when you are in what could be called "engraving" in the broad sense of the term, are you in a different world that when you pain: Do you make a hierarchy between your work as an engraver and a painter?

AL : Colouring in the block using a monotype method allows me to create a sort of original work. It was a new start which allowed me to further develop my painting using the new medium. Hierarchically, I see to difference between working on canvas or with a woodblock, the results are also equal in nature and when they are archived, the folios are listed on the same level as paintings and all bear an archive number.

But the wood block is also more conducive to experimentation, the process is more immediate and not as risky, whereas my painting is more conceptually guided / directed. There is a playful aspect to printing, it is more varied because it requires at least four or five working steps until a folio is created and I have a partner working at my side. The process must be kept moving along quickly. Painting can be a lonesome and tedious process, which can take a long time, and can always be reworked.

CC : In your activity of engraver, as you conceive it, there is not strictly speaking the repetition of an act, since each impression is unique, for so far it is not strictly speaking a monotype, since the initial support: the engraved wood stays the same for the series of print that you want to make; the work, therefore, takes all its signification by the inking that you want to make (which by the way is not ink but oil. The same like the one used for painting), the laying of the paper and the transfer onto it by the pressure of the pad. Can you tell us why this complex resort to a physical experience in which your body is heavily engaged?

AL : I love repetition, it is a meditative act, like walking or hiking, "one foot in front of the other..." Overall, a lot of my works have this aspect, although it often has a negative connotation in the artistic context, and one would rather talk of variation in this sense. Variation is concentrated on that which is different, next, new. Through repetition, one remains fixed on the topic and immerses oneself in it, concentrating on what is happening with the content, its impact and consequences...

Actually, I could have handed the task over to a professional printer, which is what I did with the first woodcuts. Back then, the folios were "only" in black-and-white and I did not have a lot of experience with printing, but I had spent several years doing lithography together with Nik Hausmann. It was supposed to be a collaborative work, in which the printer and the artist were to be involved and responsible to an equal degree. I asked him to completely forget / ignore the subject, the drawing, and to concentrate only on applying the ink, the rhythm and the characteristic style. This experiment led to the creation of marvellous folios, magnificent surprises. Applying the ink became an artistic act in itself.

CC : It is an obvious fact that the technique that you have developed for your engravings is unique and requires a lot of know-how, even endurance and force. By fixing many constraints: cutting the subject's computer, using oil paint to "ink" the woods, transferring the color mixture onto the paper and detaching the paper by taking off, drying; are all these physical constraints related to the efforts

made in your mountain races? In other words, does your physical experience of the mountain also echo in your workshop's work?

AL : The only way in which was the experience of printing might compare to skiing trips would be the endurance, the meditative drawing out of the activity, the adrenaline rush and the drive to just keep going on and on, brought about not least because of the large printing runs for the Swiss Graphics Society, where the production went on for over four weeks. But I do not force myself. Work begins with preparing the plates, five to ten oil paints (not printing ink) are mixed together on glass plates, then the paint is applied to the plate with foam rollers. Then the gaps are cleaned up thoroughly, the thin but durable Japanese paper is applied and the borders of the interior forms are rubbed in using the edge of glass lenses. Only then is the Japanese paper properly rubbed in and the final image highlighted and then, finally, peeled off from the body of the woodblock like a layer of skin. The folios are moistened again after the drying process and flattened out in the press. Each folio receives a number and is archived just like any other canvas or paper-based work.

CC : When we look at your recent paintings one is struck by the constant use that you make of the grey scales. On the other hand, in your engravings, the colour register is predominant and consubstantial to your approach. What is this demand for the use of colour? What impression do you want to share with the viewer by insisting on the mixtures of colours?

AL : I started seven years ago with monotype-like coloured woodblock and relief printing. For a long time, they were, like my painting, done in gray-black colour tones. Then suddenly while printing I discovered an opening which led me back to a polychromatic approach. I was suddenly again at ease with bright colours and I used them not in reference to nature, the world of the mountains or such, but in the sense of expanding the abstract element. As I started using more colours in my alpine paintings on canvas and handmade paper, I thought: this is what I always had in mind, this is the abstraction I have sought to achieve. With prints, whose format requires them to be smaller, the reduction in size also adds a more naturalistic, realistic aspect, that I had however not intended before. It was not until the end of the 90's that I totally abandoned colour. It was, as I see it today, a withdrawal, a reaction to party art and the nearly total commercialisation within a global set of rules. With b/w painting I gained valuable experiences and lessons not just about colours, but about composition. Now I am much freer in my use of colours and allow observers a chance to create their own images. What I organise with colours on the surface is not yet an painting. It comes about with and through the observer, with and through their experiences.

CC : Oddly enough, looking at your pictures on canvas, we tend to think of an enlargement of space, whereas in your engravings one is more in the idea of deepening this same space; do you share this rather personal perception or is it an illusion on my part?

AL : That is a difficult, but good question. With a painting, which has its own body, is one more oriented to the expanse of the room? Does one start with a graphic image which portrays the surface as a skin and then start looking into its depths, into its body? Is the view of a painting a broader one, but of an image on paper, a deeper, closer and physically more intimate one? Or is it again the meditative repetition that draws your view into the depths? I cannot answer that question.

CC : There is a great coherence between your work as a painter and the one as an engraver; to both forms of representation one can apply the same concern to be always on the crest between representation and abstraction. How did you come to this result, is it the fruit of unexpected research or chance?

AL : I would say that the line dividing abstraction and objectivity could be the same as the one between graphics and painting. One has to take leave of it repeatedly, to climb down onto the other side in order to be sure where this dividing line runs. Both of them share hesitancy and doubt of the impetus to continue along the path, in this sense a search, an attempt.

The subject is never what inspires me to paint. It is always the compositional constitution which combines with the semiotic content (body, skin) and expresses itself in metaphors (mountain, snow, vessel, content) in paintings. There are many things that occur to you, but you must put them in their place, assign them potential relationships and let them linger there.