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Rethinking Art History Through the Cockerline Collection: Some Missing Links

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The printmaking medium links Neil Cockerline's all-inclusive vision of his collection during those exciting years of intense experimentation, between the Sixties and the early Eighties. A great variety of styles, subject matter and thought processes is included. Through a few significant examples, this essay analyzes the complexity of artistic research and provides elements to rethink the historical assessment of the period. Included in this analysis are mixed media works carrying political and social overtones (Rothenstein, Weege); screenprints focused on social conflicts (Kuhn, Hamilton); screenprints and lithographs dealing with perceptual phenomena (Anuszkiewicz and Stella); diverse print techniques employed by artists more renowned for three-dimensional work (Segal, Pepper, Tilson, Chryssa); and finally, a lithograph by Photorealist painter Robert Cottingham, a work which stimulates major questions of the information era.

Cockerline has been particularly attracted by mixed media because of the added elements and material, consistently incorporated into all the prints within an entire edition. In Michael Rothenstein's *Letters Home* he features two actual letters pasted on the sides of the war image, projecting a nostalgic dimension. Ironic is the stereotypical presentation of mass-media sex symbol Raquel Welch by William Weege; her scantily dressed image stands passively in front of a stove in Weege's 1970 screenprint *Home, Home on the Range...Played...*, a title that comes from a Kansas patriotic song; flocking scattered on the surface of the print to add a touch of humor.

The Cockerline Collection features numerous pure prints, especially lithographs and screenprints, often with the involvement of photography. The emphasis on historical and cultural themes, such as communication, memory, and conflict, has largely shaped Cockerline's vision of a didactical role for this collection.

In 1970, Richard Hamilton silkscreened a photo from a television screen broadcasting the shooting of student demonstrators by the National Guard during a riot at Kent State University in Ohio. The blurred image struggles to remain impressed in the viewer's consciousness. A comparison between Hamilton and Gerhard Richter reveals that Hamilton borrowed the blurred technique invented by Richter no later than 1964 (Foster, 2012, p.174). Eighteen years later Richter treated his subject matter similarly to Hamilton's; the availability of Hamilton's print for comparison allows a reflection on the complexity of historical reconstruction with a reciprocal artistic dialogue.

The advent of abstraction since the late Forties "has made it permissible for color, tone, line, and shape to operate autonomously" (Seitz, 1965, p.7), with a much more intense perceptual component than the still largely figurative Impressionism in the late 19th century. Richard Anuszkiewicz' 1979 *Blue with Black* seems to combine the premises of Joseph Albers' chromo-perceptual squares with Ad Reinhardt's chase to the impossible monochrome.

Despite the fact that "Almost as soon as Op debuted, it degenerated into one of the most visibly dated features of the '60s" (Rich, 2007, p.315), the analysis of those chromatic struggles between word and background is seen in Morris' prints. They reveal Op influences in Conceptual art, even though Morris uses such effects to refer to either incommunicability, or ineffability, or the progressive and dangerous loss of historical memory and collective identity evident in Morris's *Roller Disco Cenotaph For a Public Figure*. The lesson learned is that it is difficult to completely dismiss a style, such as Op Art, without considering possible legacies beyond itself.

Frank Stella's black paintings, which gained him notoriety within Minimalism, have a deep stretcher casting them off the wall. Paradoxically, while preventing the painting from referring to anything outside itself (including merging into the wall), the added depth of the stretcher simultaneously "would focus attention on the picture as an object" (Rubin, 1970, p.15). The evolution of Stella's two-dimensional work into his later bombastic sculptures has mysterious traits, and his printmaking contributes in shedding some light. Indeed, the irregular coloring of *Tomlinson Court Park* and even the implied diagonals at the rectangle's corners (not visible in the famous large black paintings) paradoxically reintroduce a kind of spatial illusion that noted critic Greenberg and the Minimalists meant to fight.

The Cockerline collection will provide a great opportunity for reassessing the role of printmaking in the professional development of artists who have gained notoriety in three-dimensional media. Works by Segal, Pepper, Tilson, and Chryssa elaborate diverse ideas related to the exchange between inner and outer realities, to vulnerability, and to the passage from nature to artifice.

The freehand gestural possibilities of lithography allowed George Segal to render in *White Rain* the effect of rough surface that is also part of his more notorious plaster cast figures, whether nude or dressed. The experience of the skin is of pain and pleasure, as Segal himself wrote for *Newsweek* in 1965, when he first placed plaster bandages on himself with the help of his wife (Seitz, 1970, p.6). The resulting human-derived cast retains the realistic impression of the model, but at the same time features the action of plaster dripped all over the surface before drying. The cast brings Segal's focus on both result and process from abstraction to the realistic domain. A similar treatment encompasses both

approaches his paintings by suggesting new applications and relationships of color and scale" (Serwer, 1998, p.8). The words chosen by the artist provide a meaning that is always elusive due to partial cropping. This strategy leaves both a few clues for the viewer and some room for guessing, thus "causing the viewer to question place and purpose. His propensity for taking words and letters out of context leads to varied and uncertain conclusions" (Sartorius, 2003, p.39). Allowing varied interpretations is a postmodern feature.

If the advent of sharp-focus realism has eliminated those human-centered hierarchies of space and of subject matter cherished during the Renaissance and pre-modern era, what is important now? And how can we decide it? Are objects more important than humans? Are advertising signs to be considered the mark of mass consumption to be exorcised, or rather expressions of the designer's individual creativity that should be celebrated? Is this a new expression of a 'visual democracy,' so to speak? Is it good that the advertising sign that nobody pays attention to is viewed through the camera and enters the artistic arena, as much as the hobbyist singer, without access to traditional elitist channels, uploads his/her performances in YouTube® and becomes immediately a mass celebrity? Or rather, is Cottingham's work a visual prophecy on the daily challenges of sorting through an enormous amount of information to find what is needed? Which ones are the new criterian to make the selections?

Paradoxically, while being the prophet of this dense information era, Photorealism still carries strong human-centered values within the artistic process. After all, who takes the picture? By looking at Cottingham's *Cold Beer* (1980), made mechanically through photographic and printmaking technologies, the viewer is still able to feel a warm human presence. This finds expression in the freehand style of the lithograph: its soft, hand-painted and imperfect edges take us back to the pictorial tradition of Precisionism. Cottingham still thinks as a humanist: he proposes the ever-present dualism of handcrafted and man made, the man and the machine.

The collector's independent and all-inclusive vision provides an important contribution to the reassessment of the late modernist era. Some of its outcomes (especially Op art and Photorealism) have been largely underestimated, neglected, or even deeply misunderstood. The Cockerline Collections's ambitious mission is to be applauded.

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