

STRUCTURE

Curator's Statement

It was challenging and inspiring to view the over 300 submissions to the *Structure* printmaking exhibition. Overall the work was impressive – due to space limitations it was not possible to choose every work that could have been included. In selecting the work my first consideration was the strength of each piece, independent of the larger narrative that as curator I have imagined in putting these particular prints together.

The germinal idea for *Structure* arose from the French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, who writes in the first chapter of his widely influential book, *The Poetics of Space*: “. . . the real beginnings of images, if we study them phenomenologically, will give concrete evidence of the values of inhabited space, of the non-I that protects the I” (5). He asks the question, “. . . can we isolate an intimate, concrete essence that would be a justification of the uncommon value of all of our images of protected intimacy” (3)? He continues, “. . . if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (6).

Work that is experienced as a direct response to this aspect of structure – protector of intimacy and daydreams – is seen in a number of the works exhibited. The archetypal house, itself, or the “house-shaped house” is one of the more compelling images of sheltering, and is found in a number of the prints. The architectural website, openbuildings.com expresses this, “Architects note historical roots and environmental advantages, but house-shaped houses also touch on a feeling deep inside us about what a house -- and essentially our home -- should look like.”

In addition to the house itself, Bachelard contemplates areas within inhabited space, which are also evoked in images in the exhibit. Inside the house, “from cellar to garret,” there are drawers, chests, wardrobes, corners: “. . . every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the germ of a room or of a house” (136). He writes of nests and shells, he explores miniature and “intimate immensity,” and the “dialectics of outside and inside.”

Conversely, however, also implied by the desire for the sheltering structure is the expression of its lack, or the fear of its loss. The prospectus has elicited work that responds out from the sheltering center in both directions through time: images take us forward – the structure changes and decays, it shatters, chaos ensues with time, or by powerful energy, either forces of nature or of humankind. Buildings, cities, the natural environment are destroyed. Other images take us back in time – we experience primordial origins, cell-like structures growing into larger organisms, raw materials. Trees, moldings, building blocks appear in the prints.

The theme of structure was also suggested by another French philosopher, Roland Barthes, who writes in *Mythologies*, “Semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal” (142). He also writes, “What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, . . . and what myth gives in return is a *natural* image of this reality,” and he continues, “. . . myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it things lose the memory that they once were made” (142). The

artist de-mystifies the world and in the *Structure* exhibit the “naturalness” of the social structure is challenged in works that explore the unseen costs of conformity, environmental degradation, urban decay, poverty, racism, incarceration. We see the destructive forces unleashed by oppression, and the detritus of ruined cities decaying in an unsustainable built environment. Warnings are expressed in mediums of ravishing visual impact. The powerful visual means by which the artist expresses “ideas-in-form” (*Mythologies* 112) causes an anomaly, creating a contrast with the devastating subject matter. The anomaly, itself becomes a mechanism of re-politicizing the image.

Strong materials and strong cultural bonds may limit our ability to locate and test boundaries. Thus, at the same time that the structure protectively keeps something out, it may constrictively keep us in. It may protect only the few and imprison the many. Such confining structures may be external, literal, physical, and they may be internal, virtual, psychological – imposed from without but accepted within. A number of works in the exhibit evoke this equivocation. Yet, there are unrelenting challenges to structural integrity – fences decay, fabric frays, cage doors open, society changes.

Some of the work in the exhibition captures our interest through quieter formal means. We may be drawn to the beauty of the structure or of the subject: we take the usefulness and design of a fork or a chair so much for granted that they are no longer seen until brought back into view by the artist. We may be drawn in by the sheer beauty of a piece of paper, an etched line, the intensity of a color, the unique quality of ink on a surface.

Prints in traditional printmaking mediums, including lithographs, etchings, aquatints and other traditional intaglio techniques, linocuts, woodcuts, screen prints, and monotypes, are all included, in which we admire the virtuosity of the printmaker. There are works made entirely of handmade paper pulp. Photo-printmaking techniques including photogravure, have become widely practiced and can be found in the exhibit. A number of works combine more than one type of traditional printmaking medium, and/or include collage, chine collé, hand work, or monoprint additions. There are also works that challenge traditional ideas about what a print can be. Most works are printed on paper however a few are printed on unusual surfaces, such as canvas or other fabric, aluminum/hardboard, even cinderblock. We find three-dimensional prints as artist’s books and/or as sculpture, and prints lighted from within.

In the end, however, we should return to where we began. While thoughts of these connections among the prints, which I have suggested, or different connections, which you bring from your own experience, may write a larger narrative, it is necessary to step back and spend time with each work again, by itself and enter the individual daydream – even if it turns into a nightmare. It is necessary to see the image that each artist has invited us to experience, in its own context.

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Works Cited

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969. Print.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. Print.

“House-Shaped Houses,” openbuildings.com, *The Atlantic*, Web. Oct 10, 2011.