

EPLUCHER LES OIGNONS (PEELING THE ONION)

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My creative intent is to connect with viewers at an emotional level. My chosen metaphor is “Peeling the Onion.” The implication is that understanding is achieved after one views the underlying “layers.” At times the creative process proceeds in a linear manner and other times it seems to take on a life of its own. My search for a balance between the literal and ambiguous involved exploring the circle, the spiral and the sphere. Printmaking offers opportunities to produce evocative imagery. Drawing is the basic tool I employ to define form and my use of printmaking processes allows for evolving the image over time. Exploring these shapes and the metaphor “Peeling the Onion” has provided a means of giving form to my concepts and a connection with the viewer.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Graduate school for the visual artist provides a platform to advance aesthetic and conceptual themes, and an environment where artists pursue their unique individual paths while sharing experiences and aspirations. From this platform, my own work explores interpersonal relationships and metaphors of the often hidden conflicts that characterize the human condition. This universal theme underlies my exploration into these relationships and the effect of these relationships on the individual. I am fascinated by the dichotomy of isolation contrasted with the desire for connection with others and use symbolism to portray this idea.

Art lifts the observer out of the mundane assumptions of everyday existence. It provides a bridge of understanding that can elevate and achieve connection with others. Artistic expression is a form of communication that moves another person from observer to participant. When a connection is formed an observer internalizes a concept and achieves an understanding of the artist's intent or projects his/her unique viewpoint into the work. It stimulates thought, discussion, and a desire to explore further. This connection is what I hope for those who view my work.

Each of us is a unique product of our culture, education, family, and experience. Our artistic expressions allow us to share our uniqueness, and to some extent it enables us to dispel our isolation. The creative process involves some form of self-examination if

even at a subconscious level.

Throughout my artistic life, I have been drawn to the spiral, circle and sphere shapes more than others and have often wondered why. Sometimes I see it as a throwback to primitive man as part of a collective unconsciousness. Research of the origins of these circular forms has taken me from ancient cultures to our present era. As children, our first drawings usually imitate the circular shapes we encounter in the world. In an article by Ellen Dissanayake on the beginnings of artful form, she writes, “The scribbles of children evolve naturally and inevitably into labyrinthine forms, meanders, and spirals and eventually into more refined shapes and variations of these shapes, such as circles, concentric circles, and quadrisectioned circles. These drawings are similar in artistic structure to those of prehistoric and tribal people and contemporary artists alike. They reveal that the principles of visual thinking are common to our species, developing jointly from inherent motor impulses and the eye’s search for and recognition of universally satisfying shapes.”¹

Modern humans probably have a more spontaneous relationship with the straight line than with the curve. We appreciate rounded forms with the senses rather than the mind. In the circle, the viewer encounters the line with eternal recurrence, neither beginning nor ending, and going around an invisible but very precise center. This compares with the idea of the course of time, which comes from nowhere and has no end. For primitive humans, the circle was certainly of strong symbolic importance due to its

¹ Ellen Dissanayake, *Surface Design Journal* v22 (Winter 1998): The Beginnings of Artful Form: The Penchant for Pattern. Sebastopol, California

association with sun, moon, and stars.”² According to Carl Jung, the circle in dream analysis represents wholeness or completeness. Additionally, the circle represented the portal through which we are all born and to where we return to an afterlife.

The spiral shape was sacred among Neolithic Europeans. People believed it stood for the cycles of seasons, day and night, and life and death. It also represented the astronomical movements of the sun, moon, and stars. Whorls depicted the continuous creation and dissolution of the world. The passages between spirals symbolize divisions between life, death and rebirth. Jung interpreted the spiral as rising to another level much like the children’s story of *Jack and the Beanstalk* in which the plant grew up through the clouds and to another level where trials and treasures awaited Jack.

The sphere was the cosmic symbol for the natural form of growth, evident in various fruits and vegetables of harvest as well as shape of the planetary bodies. It was also a symbol of eternal life reminding us of the flow of the cosmos.

As a practicing printmaker, I have chose to explore the spiral, sphere, circles, and particularly the metaphor of “peeling the onion,” which is to reveal the layers of the human psyche. The onion has been considered a lowly vegetable but symbolizes a profound truth. The organic nature of this pungent vegetable ties earthiness to the psychological/spiritual ideal of uncovering layers of meaning. I made preliminary sketches as to how I visualized my approach to this metaphor utilizing the knowledge I have of printmaking processes. Additionally, I kept a written and a visual journal of ideas, thoughts, and feelings on this theme.

² Frutiger, Adrian. *Signs and Symbols: Their Design and Meaning*. New York: Watson-Guption Publications 1997

Statement of the Problem

My primary objective in commencing on this path with the metaphor “peeling the onion” was to recognize and acknowledge the ephemeral layers of my life. The challenge was to find images and metaphors that are both self-examining and also connected to the viewer. In searching for a balance between being too literal and too ambiguous, I wanted to metaphorically explore the circle, spiral and sphere and their connection to the physical properties of the onion. I wanted to find thought-provoking ways of representation, using scale and size to an advantage as well as innovative and energetic mixtures of techniques and media. The images I used are symbolic because they hold meaning for me as well as depict a life full of hardships, conflict, and isolation, but also a life full of purpose and hope. They served me as cathartic outlet expressing a personal thesis. This endeavor assisted me in answering the following questions:

1. How does scale affect the force of the print;
2. Does the metaphor of “peeling the onion” fulfill my previously stated conception of the universal significance of the sphere;
3. Which printmaking processes more accurately fulfill my expectations with regard to the metaphor of “peeling the onion.”

Methodology

Printmaking is my chosen medium. It offers me unique opportunities to produce evocative imagery. Drawing is the basic tool I employed to provide form and my use of printmaking processes allowed for evolving the image over time. The immediacy and spontaneity of my drawing can be combined with a more studied approach to image

development. I made fifteen prints utilizing various printmaking processes. Of the total prints that I produced, I selected five to examine for this descriptive paper. I maintained a written and visual journal to achieve my objectives, and concluded with a finished paper and preparation for a show to be held November 16-24, 2002.

CHAPTER 2

DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

A circle of radius “ r ” has an area of “ πr^2 ” and circumference of “ $2\pi r$ ”. The volume and surface area of a sphere is also determined by mathematical formula. To find the volume of an onion, you can peel off a series of spherical layers and the sum of the volumes of the layers is the total volume of the onion. An onion of radius “ r ” has volume of “ $\frac{4\pi r^3}{3}$ ” and surface area of “ $4\pi r^2$ ”.

Mathematics offers one way to peel an onion. A bisected onion reveals familiar physical properties. Concentric circles surround a core. Each layer can be cut and peeled away. Metaphorically speaking, one can view the onion as symbolic of life, personality, soul or body to eventually reveal who you really are at the core. For example, like the skin of an onion, our external appearance is what the world sees. There are layers that can be defense mechanisms or partitions that evolve during the course of our lives. There is the core, or heart from which we grow. At times the outer skin can be very different from what is inside. The outside skin keeps the inside safe from harm and protects it from the outside world. The onion can also be used metaphorically to represent the layers as experiences one has in life or even as a gauge of life’s phases.

My choice of *Peeling the Onion* is derived from my attraction to the spherical shape in much of my work. The sphere is my favorite geometric form.

³ James Stewart, *Calculus*, 3rd Edition, Brooks/Cole 1995, p. 966, problem 12. On finding the volume $V(r)$ and surface $S(r)$ area of the n -ball.

The work I have done for my Master of Fine Arts show clearly depicts my interest and exploration into spherical, circular and spiral shapes. In particular, I have selected five works for description.

In the first piece I produced twelve 6" x 6" square etchings depicting a series of mathematical equations pertaining to circles and spirals. These etchings were made from copper plates using ferric chloride as the etching medium and a magnetic stirrer to keep the mixture in suspension. I selected a different color for each and printed them separately on Lana Gravure paper. This first work is a series of etchings arranged collectively. This piece is an analytical and objective approach to defining spherical forms.

The second piece is a composite print consisting of the twelve plates from the first piece arranged around a larger 6" x 18" panel that is a very loose depiction of concentric circular rings. It shows the relationships between the shapes, but differentiates the formal objective images from a more subjective interpretation. The central panel has a softer feel and is an aquatint and soft ground etching with Dutch mordant as the acid formula. This piece is printed on Somerset Satin White.

When planning the third print I decided to do an etching honoring Leonardo da Vinci. I call it "*Leonardo's Onion*." Most people are familiar with da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man", but not as familiar with a drawing titled "Gradation of a Sphere." My approach to this aquatint and soft ground copper plate etching was to combine the two drawings of da Vinci's and enclose them in my own drawing of a transparent onion globe. This piece is 18" x 24" and is printed on Somerset Satin White. "*Leonardo's Onion*" is a departure

from the previous two pieces although it also combines structured and interpretive depictions of circular shapes. In this piece the objects are depicted three-dimensionally. This is in contrast to the first two pieces that are two-dimensional representations.

The fourth print is a lithograph. Eva Hesse, a female artist I admire, is the inspiration for this piece. She used circular shapes and spheres enclosed in grid patterns in many of her works. Eva Hesse was an artist whose work I explored after a professor told me she saw a relationship between my work and Hesse's. Once I researched her work I felt that she was someone I could relate to artistically and although she passed away at a young age, I find her work timeless and as poignant today as it was when she created it. My lithograph consists of forty-eight circles. Within each circle are four concentric circles representing layers and a core. I used tusche washes to make each circle distinctive. They are generally similar, but different from each other in their detail. Each is unique. This piece has a more spiritual side to it. Each circle represents an individual, how we stand side by side or across from one another. We are similar and yet have our own unique characteristics. Eva Hesse's studies were all untitled, done in 1966 and 1967. Lucy Lippard describes her work as, "an endless internal vitality that made each one different."⁴

The fifth print is quite different from the other four in procedure. It is a watercolor transfer monoprint. This piece was inspired by Kandinsky's "Color Study", and I felt the monotype process allowed more spontaneity in creating this piece. I have titled it, "*Kandinsky's Red Onion.*" As in Kandinsky's "Color Study", concentric rings of various

⁴ Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, DeCapo Press, Inc., N.Y. 1976, p. 71

shades of red reveal a playfulness and joy for life. Red is also a symbolic color for life, creativity, and energy. It is my opinion that Kandinsky chose the circle for his study because the rings of color produce a type of vibration to please the eye. I wanted to capture that same sensation in my work.

The scale of my work varies. My equation pieces are small, but in combination they take on greater significance. Each image stands on its own. Collectively they are not only larger in scale, but intentionally project a more significant presence. This was done to convey the combined force of underlying principles defining the universe around and beyond us. With "*Tribute to Eva*" the situation is similar. The image is produced as a single print composed of individual elements combined to convey a greater combined force.

In all of the prints I feel I have fulfilled my previously stated conception of the universal significance of the spherical form. "We appreciate rounded forms with the senses rather than the mind."⁵ I have found that from the beginning of man's existence, he has used the spiral, sphere and circle in all phases of life. Even before the discovery of the wheel (a circle that changed the world), primitive man symbolically drew on cave walls. Circles or similar round forms depicted things and objects from nature and were used as a means of communication. In all cultures, in all parts of the world, these shapes and forms are evident. The drawings of primitive man and the drawings of children and contemporary artists today are similar in artistic formation. The use of the spherical form is common to the human race, evolved from our inborn motor impulses and our eye's

⁵ Ellen Dissanayake, *Surface Design Journal* v222 (Winter 1998) p. 5: *The Beginnings of Artful Form: The Penchant for Pattern*. Sebastopol, California

search for pleasing lines. Circular shapes, spheres and spirals are in abundance in my work and the viewer can experience the impact of each print as they encounter the recurring lines and annuli.

Of all the printmaking processes available, such as lithography, intaglio, silk-screen, monotype, etching, dry point, photogravure, etc., only three lended themselves to serious consideration for my most recent work. Those three are lithography, intaglio and monotype. While I produced a number of etchings for my body of work, I felt the lithographic process more accurately fulfilled my objectives for the metaphor peeling the onion. Lithography has a warmth and depth that adds to my concepts in a way that is visually rewarding. I frequently experienced an element of surprise and delight in the printing process. At times I forgot that my work would be reversed when I printed and when the print comes off the stone, and I always felt excitement and anticipation. I did not think printing the circles in *Tribute to Eva* would hold surprises because I was thinking, “a circle will come out as a circle.” Yes, each circle was unique and in reverse and I did have pleasing non-preconceived results. From a creative standpoint I strived to perfect technique, yet there was always a sense of wonder when the print was revealed. Very much like peeling an onion, if everything in art were totally predictable, I would be deprived of the sense of delight that motivates me to continually experiment and reveal another layer.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

In many ways I view my creative process much as an archeologist might when exploring a dig site. As I continue my exploration I ultimately find that I am constantly in a process of discovery. This occurs on several levels. Exploration of technique ultimately leads to greater options for expression. Exploration of subject involves a process of finding ways to express my internal perceptions in a way that can be experienced by others. When technique and subject come together in a way that connects with a viewer and a sense of visual delight is achieved, I feel gratified and motivated to continue the process. Predictability of technique is a goal shared by most artists because it allows one to achieve a desired pre-visualized goal. This having been said, our universe offers unpredictability and it is the ability to use technique to navigate and communicate our individual reactions to this condition that breaks through the surface and creates a connection with other people. I believe this is one of the functions of the artist in society. That is to “peel the onion” and not only reveal the layers beneath the surface, but to cause the viewer to experience artist, artwork and themselves at multiple levels that ultimately provides understanding and a sense of connection and delight.

As a result of this exploration and experience, I have only dug a trench into an extraordinary discovery. The use of my favorite shape caused me to seek out the mystery of why I was attracted to it and why it held meaning for me. *Peeling the Onion* came

about because the spherical shape lent itself to my investigation of the circle, spiral and sphere. This will be a lifelong study, as I know I will discover more about this form as I continue my life outside of graduate school as a practicing artist and printmaker. There is much to look forward to and still much to learn. It will be an ongoing and incredible journey.

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