

Katja Oxman: The Archeology of Images

“We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but the expression of a poetry lost.” Gaston Bachelard ¹

Katja Oxman was born in Munich in 1942 and has childhood memories of the horrors of World War II. Her father Mischa Protassowsky, a White Russian, fled his homeland after fighting against the Bolsheviks in the revolution. Katja’s mother Gretl was German, and her marriage to a Russian resulted in the loss of her citizenship, which placed the family in a dangerous position in Nazi Germany. The Protassowskys immigrated to the United States in 1952 and settled in Rose Valley, an old suburb of Philadelphia. Mischa became an automobile painter, an occupation that was a far cry from his experience working with horses in Russia and the German Alps, and Gretl later became a psychiatric occupational therapist. They instilled a love of classical music, literature, and poetry in Katja and her sister Tanja. ²

Oxman began her education in art at the venerable Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, which assured her a solid formal foundation. She was attracted to printmaking very early and began making large woodcuts while at the Academy. After completing her studies she returned to Munich and studied for a year at Die Akademie der bildenden Kunst. From there she applied to the Royal College in London and was one of fifteen students accepted in the School of Graphics graduate program. It was at the Royal College that she took up etching, a medium that has proven to be extremely compatible with both her formal inclinations and esthetic sensibility. Her first directly observed aquatints depicted children’s toys carefully arranged on an oriental rug. They were made twenty years ago.

While Katja Oxman’s prints are fastidiously lucid transcriptions of the still life arrangements from which they are derived, the impulse behind them and her poetic temperament lies closer to Joseph Cornell and his boxes than the literalism that characterizes so much of contemporary American realism. His enigmatic cabinets filled with disparate, dreamlike assemblages of mirrors, snippets of ribbons, fragments of old maps, chromolithographs, and reproductions of paintings are among the most deeply personal works in twentieth century American art. Cornell accurately summed up the effect of his diminutive boxes of objects in 1948. “Shadow boxes become poetic theatres or settings wherein are metamorphosed the elements of a childhood pastime.” ³

Katja Oxman’s still lifes allude to a tranquil, interior world. Their unidentifiable space serves as miniature rooms where seemingly nothing occurs beyond their perimeters. The prints are structured like tableaux and appear to be settings for parables with unknown or half-remembered connotations and pay homage to the artist’s private history and cultural past. Each composition is filled with an elegant and a deeply personal array of objects. To quote Noël Arnaud, “I am the space where I am.”

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1969) p. 6.

2. The background material on Katja Oxman is based on an interview by the author and the article by Janet T. Margquardt-Cherry, *Katja Oxman: Working in the Tradition of the Woman Artist* (*Women’s Art Journal*, Spring/Summer, 1993)

3. Quoted in Milton Rugoff, et al, *The Britannica Encyclopedia of American Art* (New York, Chanticleer Press, n.d.) p. 126

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In addition to the closed, secretive boxes, fruits, and orchids there are colorful feathers, small birds and other subtle references to air and flight. Another constant is her use of Oriental rugs and a wide assortment of postcards, announcements, and reproductions of paintings. While grounding the objects, the carpets provide an intricate, geometrically patterned foundation with an exotic cultural history. The postcards establish an orderly—if at times jittering—Mondrian-like grid in her interior space while simultaneously providing visual puns and paying homage to the art and artists she admires.

There are no windows or shadows in Oxman's prints. The only allusions to the exterior, topographical world are through the postcards views of brooding landscapes by Martin Johnson Heade, cloud covered nights of Albert Pinkham Ryder, the invented topography of Rembrandt's Mill, and fictive accounts of Tahiti by Gauguin. Her repertoire of objects and reproductions reappear in an altered guise or different space, such as the classically serene Dance of the Gods by Giovanni Bellini. In the first panel of the diptych, *If Bird the Silence Contradict*, the landscape backdrop for Bellini's allegory is incorporated as a window. The same reproduction is used again in the later *A Cap of Lead Across the Sky*, except here the painting is reproduced with the figures. Augustus Tack's paint-by-numbers landscape abstraction is also carried over.

It becomes clear that these precisely arranged miniatures—ranging from postcards of Pompeian frescos to the abstractions of Rothko and Diebenkorn, elegant Japanese screens to the opulent floral fantasies of the Dutch masters, landscapes from Cole's allegorical *Oxbow in the Connecticut River* to Gauguin's apparition *Matamoe*, still lifes from the baroque pronk of *Cup* to an intensely chromatic arrangement by *Fish*—serve as both props and characters in Oxman's repertoire, and they are used to elucidate and compliment the autobiographical, formal, and delicate emotional nuances of her aquatints. Her rummaging through our cultural past for these souvenirs and assigning them interpretive, illusory, and at times whimsical connotations are what Bachelard has described as the "archeology of images".

In spite of their apparent clarity and specificity, reminiscences and reveries are played out deep in the interior of one's mind, and Oxman's assemblages, like dreams, are never defined in an exterior light. As musings and remembrances they exist in a state of penumbra, and through their absence of shadows Oxman reminds us that they are conjured images rather than fragments of reality. Their titles, which are taken from the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke and Emily Dickinson, reinforce the fact that her prints are both formal inventions and deeply personal meditations. The fragments of verse have no literal connotations, and like poetry, her images have no specific meanings. However, they consistently provide a sense of solace and solitude. "Poets convince us that our all our childhood reveries are worth starting over again."⁴

4. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971) p. 105.

One of the most deeply personal examples of the subtle autobiographical disposition of Oxman's prints can be found in the recent *Pass through all Distance*. This memorial to her mother, Gretl Protassowsky, contains a white

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orchid, old books, a note, her German passport issued at the end of World War II, a reference to the Alps through the image of Durer's Tuft of Cowslip, a pocket watch, scattered feathers, and other objects spread out on an antique embroidered fabric. It can be read as both homage and portrait.

"I say Mother. And my thoughts are of you, oh, House.
House of the lovely dark summers of my childhood".

Melancholy

O.V. de Milosz ⁵

Beyond their subtle narrative and formal aspects, it is clearly evident that Katja Oxman's still lifes have not been arrived at easily and the results could not have been achieved haphazardly. In regard to the demands made on the intaglio process and her technical finesse Oxman has few peers in the arena of contemporary realist prints. For example, Robert Cottingham has taxed a multitude of graphic media—pochoir, lithography, drypoint, linocut, and aquatint—to their extremes. Richard Estes has obsessively pushed the inherent characteristics of silkscreen to its limits, but he could have achieved very little without the experience and expertise of Michael Domberger's shop in Stuttgart, Germany.

But perhaps closest to Oxman's color aquatints are the lush, dark mezzotints of Manhattan by Craig McPherson and the allegorical intaglios of Peter Milton. Like her, both have concentrated on a singular, painstaking, and arduous method of printmaking. McPherson, however, is equally well known as a painter and muralist. As a result of colorblindness, Milton has devoted his forty-year career to etching. Excluding her earlier endeavors, Oxman's oeuvre of color aquatints now spans more than two decades. Milton's large, elaborate compositions slowly unfold from an assortment of drawings, photographs, and other source materials. Because of their allegorical character, sly references and homage's to art and artists, and the dazzling formal and technical facility that brings them to life, Milton's etching/engravings most closely parallel Oxman's aquatints. They differ in that his prints are figurative, monochromatic, and evolve through an open-ended, inventive course. However, the works of both printmakers are among the most labor intensive graphics in contemporary art. Oxman produces only two or three prints a year.

Katja Oxman's graphics are among the most seductive and chromatically lush works in contemporary printmaking. While she never allows the technical aspect to overwhelm her subject, her aquatints are an exceptionally remarkable achievement.

There is much rearranging and shuffling of objects before a still life composition is settled, but once Oxman begins the drawing her procedure is unwaveringly direct. The preparatory study is rendered with great precision on museum board trimmed to the exact size of the copper etching plate or plates for the print. Everything is worked out in this graphite drawing, including the intricate tonal patterns of the objects, reproductions, and the Oriental rug beneath the arrangement. A line drawing is made on tracing paper and then the

5. Quoted in Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, p. 45

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image is transferred in reverse to the hard ground surface of the copper plate. She then goes over the lines with an etching needle, drawing through the dark waxy ground to the surface of the copper. Then the contour drawing is etched. This ultimately will serve as the key plate and will be printed in blue. Returning to the still life arrangement, the elaborate tonal patterns are established working directly on the plate.

Oxman's chromatic and tonal range is constructed using the three primary colors only: red, yellow, and blue. The secondary colors—violet, green, and orange—are each derived from combinations of two primary colors. Mixtures of any two of the secondary colors gives an endless variety of grays and browns. These are tertiary colors. The broad, prismatic and tonal range of tans, ochre's, muted greens, blue-violets, deep wines, and salmons, so evident in Katja Oxman's prints, are variants of these primary, secondary, and tertiary colors. In her aquatints color theory is transposed into chromatic fact.

On this first plate areas that contain no blue are blocked out with asphaltum varnish. The exposed areas are sprayed with an acid resistant acrylic paint and etched to approximately five different depths, which ultimately creates the broad range of color and tone. A proof of the blue plate is transferred to a clean etching plate, which is then used for the red. It is etched just enough to retain the image and the aquatint (acrylic spray) procedure is again followed directly from the still life. Then a proof from both the blue and red plates is transferred to another clean plate for the yellow, and the same course with the varnish blackout is followed. If a fourth color is required, she usually augments with a dark brown or violet rather than black (which produces muddy greens when combined with yellow) and prints that color from an additional plate. There are several exceptions to Oxman's avoidance of black. It is incorporated in *Silence Agreed* for the Peter Moran etching in the upper right corner and for the same print, shown with a Vermeer and Dürer postcard stuck in its frame, in *A House Within*. Given the abundant detail and numerous edges, perfect registration of each plate is essential.

Rather than nearing the end of the process, the proof containing all three colors marks the point where many subtle color shifts and tonal modifications begins. This often requires extensive reworking of the plates. It is lengthy and an extremely meticulous process. Oxman states, "After all the colors are etched and printed together, the fine-tuning starts. Burnishing, re-etching, and color changes are almost always necessary. Careful and exact registration is essential to this process."⁶

Obtaining these delicately nuanced hues, tones, and patterns is further complicated in the diptychs, such as *Transparent Days*, *Unto a Purple Wood*, and *A Cap of Lead Across the Sky*, for the background, reproductions, and oriental rugs that join at the seams must be consistent.

The soft copper plates are strengthened by steel-facing before the edition of one hundred to a hundred and fifty impressions is pulled in her studio. Only

6. The technical information is based on an interview with the artist, Laurie S. Hurwitz, *Controlling Colors in Aquatint Etchings* (American Artist, 19--) pp. 46–81, and Herbert Cooper, *Conversations with Artists: Katja Oxman* (The Washington Print Club Quarterly, Winter 1993-94) pp. 13-14.

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at this stage does Oxman use assistants, and throughout the printing she exercises complete control over the inking and fastidious registration of the various plates. To ink and pull each impression takes approximately an hour.

As the work on one print draws to a conclusion, Katja Oxman begins planning and arranging a new still life and the evolutionary process starts again. She does no paintings or watercolors, only the preparatory drawings for her prints. Her luxuriant depictions of images, flowers, and objects clustered on the floor can be interpreted as variations on a deeply personal theme. As has been noted earlier, all are subtly tinged with homages to past and contemporary art, references to poetry and literature, and autobiographical gleanings. Oxman's aquatints serve as reminders that in the end we are a mixture of what we give our attention to, where we are, and what Bachelard described as our "attics of yesteryear".

John Arthur