

Yael Brotman

At McMaster Museum of Art

Artist's Statement

leaving their mark

For the past five years the thrust in my art making has been the exploration of storytelling and the nature of narrative. When invited by the McMaster Museum of Art to respond to one artist or one body of work in their print and drawing collection, I was immediately drawn to the Japanese woodblock prints. Why? What are the elements in the images of that distant culture that connect with my own perspective on contemporary culture?

Yes, I did begin artistic life as a printmaker and was trained to deconstruct an image and edit down the mark making to bare essentials. This economy of line and colour is certainly evident in the Japanese prints. Colour application in my own drawings and paintings is also limited in its palette. As well, I still approach my image making in the way a printmaker does - the under painting, the colour flats and the black and white images of the **Dreamline** block paintings, are placed on top of each other in distinct layers.

Yet, I believe it is the Japanese approach to storytelling with which I feel a particular affinity. There are many genres of Japanese prints. But the ones that show scenes of battles or daily life often make reference to traditional folk tales. The details are unfamiliar to our Western eyes and so sometimes we are confronted by what seem like odd yet fascinating juxtapositions. Significant elements are isolated and scale is manipulated to highlight a character or object. There is a filmic quality to angles of view and close ups. As disjointed as a story may seem to us when looking at a series of Japanese woodblock prints, we still get clear glimpses into real life activities of 19th century Japanese society and we are certainly able to read universal human emotions that although stylized in their manifestation, lie at the core of these pictures.

The narratives in both my **Fractured Heads** series and in the block painting installation incorporate similar elements. The **Fractured Heads** are composed of units that are installed as broken grids. And the story being told is about perspective and looking at the face of a person from the outside while at the same time seeing what that person sees. There are isolated highlighted rectangular images superimposed on the etched face. They reveal emblems of industry, northern landscape, backyard barbeque, etc. These juxtapositions are elements in an open-ended narrative that invites the viewer to participate.

The more physically linear installation **Dreamline** of paintings on blocks presents an equally fractured narrative. As in the Japanese prints, there are referenced to daily life activities, to elements found in traditional fables juxtaposed with swatches of arabesque patterns. Likewise, context is manipulated by the square dimensions of each little painting: the general lack of horizon lines removes the visual connection to place. The shape of each unit also alludes to pixilation and contemporary electronic media, thus commenting on the disjointed nature of communication in contemporary Western life. Finally, the varied shades of blue of the pieces harkens back to a more low-tech time when black and white televisions were first creating blue shadow shapes on darkened living room walls. The nature and format of storytelling was transformed in the 50s as it was by the introduction of woodblock printing in Japan and as it is in our zippy culture today.