

TURKISH DELIGHTS

What is printmaking like on the other side of the world?

This past December I had the occasion to find out. I was invited to Istanbul Turkey to collaborate in the studio of Suleyman Saim Tekcan, professor, master printer, innovator and pioneer of printmaking in Turkey. I was to also deliver lectures about my artistic process and production at both Marmara and Bosphorous Universities. Included within this schedule was a public lecture to be delivered at Ercument Kalmik Museum on Contemporary Printmaking in Canada. For this I came armed with slides of various artists as well as CD and slides of the work included in the CQE exhibition, Viva, and intentions for a digital hook-up to the BNQ print archives. I didn't know what to expect but with nomadism in my heart and in my practice I was delighted with the adventure.

After 20 hours of flight time I landed in Istanbul. Boarding a taxi I was to cross from the European side to the Asian side to the home and studio of Suleyman Saim Tekcan. This was to take at least two hours, Istanbul is huge, population 10 million. And the only city in the world that stands astride two continents. My arrival marked the beginning of the Muslim religious ceremony of Ramadan. Chanting and prayers were amplified in the streets and around the domes and minarets mediating the space with an eerie soulful presence. This was indeed the Imperial City, the capital in turn of two world empires over a period of nearly sixteen centuries. Ruins and monuments from the Byzantine and Ottoman empires crown the hills while the sides are covered with a beehive of housing and construction. The main part of the European City is separated from its suburbs in Asia by the Bosphorus, which flows through a deep cleft that separates the two continents. All things are experienced in relationship to this body of water, constant, wild and strong. It's presence is always felt.

By the time I was nearing my destination I had a better sense of how things worked or didn't. Istanbul is cosmopolitan, heady, and glorious. At the same time there is sadness as the noble richness is lying in neglect and decay. Construction and ruin; a city planner's nightmare. Rhythm and speed of things was pumped up almost frenzy like. Traffic was a blind organic beast. The roads were packed, sometimes there were road signs sometimes not, it didn't matter no one paid attention to them anyway.

We seemed to have been driving for a very long time. I had only my little paper with the address and phone number for directions. The Turkish language sounded like Hungarian to me and I was left with drawing pictures to facilitate communication. Finally the cab driver admitted defeat and stopped to telephone the Tekcan home. Apparently that every time the government changes so does the names of the streets. Consequently no one, least of all the cab drivers, knows where anything is except by visual clues.

Walking into Artess, Camlica; the art gallery, studio and home of Suleyman Saim Tekcan was walking into the arms of a hospitality that I never knew was possible. What a rare and privileged experience I had living and working with this extraordinary family. And I say family because everyone is involved in the union of art and culture, quality of life and work. There is an elegance of form and an elegance of generosity of this family. Suleyman's composure is measured and calm. It doesn't take long before one is impressed with his honesty and firm principals. Just walking down the street with him in Istanbul it is evident how well he is known within the community and how much he is revered and

respected. It is his vision, which fuels the projects at Artess. His two daughters are both printmakers and both studying. Elvan is completing her PHD in Arts Management and Eda is working on her Masters in England. Both have families and both are vital and deeply involved in the productions and projects at Artess. Elvan oversees the business of Artess and Eda works with guest artists in the studios. Emel, Suleyman's beautiful wife and an artist as well, is considered the soul of the household making sure everything runs smoothly between the obligations of their multifaceted lives.

It is rare that one sees people with such a sense of mission. In a country with few art galleries and no contemporary museums the population is detached from the arts. People are so engaged in solving their economic problems that there is time for little else. It is Tekcan's profound conviction that a person is alive as long as they have culture and arts in their lives and otherwise they are not. Arts bring quality and progress to life and the opposite brings total destruction. His entire life has been in the service of teaching and establishing these principals in his country. One is reminded of Ataturk and his creation of the republic of Turkey a mere 75 years ago. Ataturk was impressed by Europe and wanted to create a secular state. From 1970-71 Tekcan went to Germany to completed extensive research on printmaking in various institutions. From this experience he submitted a report to the ministry of education with a recommendation that print shops be set up at the ministry's teacher-training institutes. Tekcan's report was influential in the establishment of engraving and serigraphy studios in schools all over the country. In 1975 Tekcan joined the fine arts faculty of Mimar Sinan University and in 1994 he became the dean of this faculty, as well as in 1995 the founding dean of Yeditepe University. Education and personal production have always gone hand and hand.

Tekcan comes from an idealistic generation that has projects, excitement and trust in the future. He believes in the notion that prints are the way to give the greatest number of people an original artwork at an affordable price as well as a practical means to become a part of the international art arena. He has a number of comprehensive catalogues on his work and in each publication he includes an interview or explanation of the definition of what is an original print. His devotion to prints stems not only from his enjoyment in their creation and invention but in large part due to prints' capacity as an economic, political and practical means of helping to develop his country and artistic community.

Tekcan believes that young artists should find their personal voice and that voice should carry traces of their own culture. Tekcan's work is inspired by Turkish traditional art. The transitions of the series that he has created have gone from non-figurative works to "Anatolian Civilizations" to the "Horses and Horsemen Series" and finally "Horses and Calligraphy". In the present series horses are a symbol of continuity and recall a cultural past going back to the centaurs. This metaphor for expressing time is overlaid with embossed calligraphy. Sometimes there is no color in the embossing and it serves as shadow and memory. Other times it is inked and reads as ornament as well as language and sign. Calligraphy reached a summit of perfection in traditional Turkish graphic art. Understanding "Huve'l baki" (only God is permanent) that everything is transitory, Tekcan uses a "tugra" (imperial signature) prepared in his own name by the last of the great calligraphers which he then embosses upon the notion of time. His work expresses not only an aesthetic but also a social and cultural dimension of his preoccupation with time. Tekcan has garnered a number of awards and honors from his extensive participation in international biennials and exhibitions.

In 1968 he began teaching printmaking and set up his personal printshop which was to become Artess at Camlica, which he modeled after European printshops. To this date he has invited over 70 different artists to work with him in his studio, almost one from every nation. I'm certain that each one of them feels equally as privileged as I to have been part of this experience. Artess maintains catalogued archives of over 1000 prints with which Tekcan wishes to someday open a Museum or donate for the education of the Turkish people. Artess is a perfect studio, it is housed in a building where each floor in the building has a different function. The basement is the acid room and the screen exposure room as well as a library of catalogues and periodicals. On the next floor is the etching press, 3 silkscreen units, drawing tables and office. Above that is a gallery and the archives. The next floor is where Sulleyman lives with Emel and the top floor is for guests. His daughters have houses on the same street and there is a framing shop in the next building. Activity is constant between the floors. Work is being sent out to exhibitions, people are coming to the gallery, production is going on in the studio, and children are playing upstairs. Beautifully contained and efficiently run. During my month in Turkey, I gave lectures, talked to students, met a number of people in the academic and cultural circles of Istanbul, was a tourist, shot a good deal of video and created over 100 prints. This would not have been possible without the excellent managing found at Artess.

Tekcan is an innovator. His working methods, tools and presses have been streamlined to be efficient and affective. When he began there were no presses in Turkey. He designed and had made his press as well as the screen print units. He prefers monoprints and varied editions to paintings, as he is able to reach a wider audience. He thinks fast and is stimulated by the calculated risk and immediacy of developing a monoprint. His methods do not cultivate the delayed gratification, which is so often a part of printmaking. American health and safety standards would most likely prevent these techniques from being taught in North American Universities. All the same we would be fortunate to bring Tekcan over to Québec to continue this rich and fruitful exchange.

Even though in this day and age I feel like a heretic speaking about "technique" in relationship to prints, I will because I want Tekcan to be credited for his innovations. The engravings were done on large sheets of lead, which were cut and formed with a torch and scissors. They were then embossed with relief plates made in aluminum containing Ottoman Calligraphy. The plates were inked à la poupée with traditional German and French inks. The lead does not flatten with the pressure of the press, colors do not oxidize and the look of the quality of ink on the surface is softer than that on an etched zinc plate. The screen prints approach Hayter's viscosity technique with their possibility of color variation and interaction. The inks are oil based, there are 3 screens and a stencil cut out of Bristol board. The image is printed wet on wet with the inclusion or exclusion of the stencil, which either blocks or adds color to the printed surface. When removing the stencil from the heavily inked surface, the resulting suction creates a kind of relief on the surface of the paper. The images are printed on glossy stock and the results are lacquered and jewel like.

So this is what printmaking is like on the other side of the world. It is a wonderful place to be indeed. In Artess printmaking is fueled by passion, professionalism within a true democratic spirit.

Ahhhhhhhhhhh just like the good ol days. I wonder what will happen to that 100-year-old convention of the original editioned print if the computer becomes a significant printmaking tool in Turkey. What will happen to the modernist notion of the genius and the original? The North American print world

is in the process of change. New language and criteria are being set forth in an expanded definition for printmaking. Certainly economic structures are largely responsible for market and how art is perceived. Can print media ever really challenge the limited edition fine art prints in Turkey when no market has even been established?

Significant to note that Tekcan was also responsible for pairing technology along side of traditional creative disciplines in a number of teaching institutions in Turkey.

Suleyman Saim Tekcan is one of the most prolific artists in Turkey today and has been quoted in interviews as saying he was living in a panic. That life was too short to realize all of the projects and artwork that he has inside. 40 years of active production is a brief time and that he had to accelerate his pace to make careful use of the years to come.

It is a small world after all.

Bonnie Baxter