

# GALERIE FONSWELTERS

Matthew Monahan

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## ***What are these?***

The technique and subject matter of the 2004 series was first developed when I was traveling in China. It brings together two very Chinese materials: rice paper, used by artists of the ink painting tradition for thousands of years; and carbon paper, a much newer material favored by shopkeepers and bureaucrats. Already those materials represent two different poles of what I saw in China between the modern and the ancient.

I invented a way to fold the two papers together in an accordion pattern, similar to the way that ancient Chinese books were made. On the “pages” of this booklet I made marks that printed the carbon through many layers of paper. When the whole booklet is unfolded the drawing reveals an array of bilateral symmetry patterns.

But the real breakthrough was the fade out. The marks get fainter the further down in the accordion book because the pressure of the mark is absorbed. The marks made on the first page travel across five or six sections but gradually fade out. The marks made on the next page are layered on top of the first. So, I’m turning the pages and adding marks but then a part of the drawing is also disappearing as the full length of the paper opens. It becomes a narrative process. Marks travel and mutate. The image is built and disappearing at same time. A seed is planted, a foundation is laid and then I introduce a little character, and that character lays a brick, a city rises up around him. In a way I’m building groups and environments of mass culture and quantity through impressed, multiplied lines and the symmetry of the folds.

***When I look at this body of work all together, it's like looking at a kaleidoscopic history from the Industrial Revolution up through the drone age. It starts with the symmetry of nature, with works that look cellular or floral; giving way to works that look like industrial design objects, like Arts and Crafts wallpaper and red brick patterns; giving way to symmetries that look like Art Deco urban design; and then giving way to machinic imagery of fantastic military-grade equipment on parade; and then giving way to an endless sprawl and anomie, as in Commuter, the green one. It's like kaleidoscopic quarter-turns from the early nineteenth century through the 2000s.***

I think that's a wonderful description. In a way, they were also very much assembly lines with additive elements where I could build something in a very methodical way. I'm very interested in something that can be made methodically within strict parameters as in some conceptual art. But I want to inject something fantastical into it, historical and even psychedelic imagery, to process it with the rationality of a post-conceptual drawing technique.

What I hear repeated in your description is the phrase “giving way.” Industrialization, the tearing down that I witnessed, or the giving way from one era to another, was very much on display in China – it was a national program, a seemingly relentless renovation, which was destructive and productive. This way of drawing seemed to access that. I had been making symmetrical “Rorschach” drawing for some years, creating single totemic figures, frozen in a sort of cosmic time, but this new method allowed me to suggest the historical time. The drawings are made on

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two axes: on the vertical, strong forms assert their power. But turned on the horizontal axis, the axis of narrative time, everything fades away.

***You described the resulting imagery to me with a phrase that is on the timescale of civilizations – “rise and fall.” But actually, it seems like the drawings are processing something different from that: not the dramatic “fall” of anything, but the subtler selection, multiplication, of certain selected traits or ideas, or people.***

There is something beautiful about observing the process of transformation without judgment, or combat. I can't erase anything; a mistake is only multiplied but gradually “gives way.” When Mao was asked about the French Revolution, he said, “It's too early to tell.” Given 4,000-years of Chinese history there's pleasure in seeing the landscape from afar. And Taoism also celebrates an infinite flow of objects. Ornamentation and decorative motifs burst forth. Some discipline is required to get control of the decorative aspects and start telling stories.

***Do you know this term: public ornament?***

I don't.

***Sorry, I think I actually mean “mass ornament.” It's not only to describe architectural features, but also things like military parades, cinemas, these kinds of popular consumer-grade nationalist events that have a certain level of pageantry to them and involve the state or another power mobilizing masses of people and equipment in public space. I think of it as a late nineteenth century thing: you build a temporary triumphal arch for a parade to march through and you have the horses, whatever newest bit of equipment or military-grade machinery there is, and then formations of people on foot following waving flags and receiving swag.***

So, the mass ornament includes not only the architectural site, but also the people that it was designed to impress. Interesting. That is very nineteenth century, and one does feel that countries like China or North Korea still adhere to the power of that nineteenth century imagery. Whereas the United States invite the National Guard to the Capitol, and they sleep in a disorderly fashion under the former public ornaments. That really says a lot about either, and it could mean that we are “advanced,” or that our former sense of empire is giving way to a slovenly individualism.

In one of these drawings, the yellow and red one, I tried to stage a military procession, with ranks of soldiers and tanks set in some capital. And I started thinking of the Tiananmen Square protests. And I tried to draw a lone protester to face off against the tank. But the technique wouldn't allow it. He was multiplied and subjected to the symmetrical system. In society, and in art, the systematic and the technical facilitate huge progress and productivity, but sometimes it becomes a trap. The individual has to resist the symmetrical nature of its own body and the systemic order of its society.

In other words, I hit the wall with the technique. As soon as I tried to portray a lone individual, it didn't work. It just wouldn't allow it. I see a parallel between artistic invention and social invention here in that there are limits to what a particular format of society, or technique of society, or technique of art, can produce.

***Totally. And you're surprised that the type of social reproduction that this folding technique modeled, or the figurative reproduction that it effected, couldn't produce an individual. Exactly. It couldn't produce the asymmetrical. Is the individual always asymmetrical? In a way, to have symmetry among people, you need at least two. And then they would be in a symmetrical power relation, or not.***

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*Probably not, most of the time.*

Probably not. Anyway, the newer works in this exhibition are maybe a reaction to this problem, repetitive but not symmetrical. I probably have made 50 different rubber stamp silhouettes. Most of these drawings are really made with only a handful at a time. I think I'm able to get a lot of different qualities from each silhouette. In other words, a silhouette is not a fixed character but it's relational. One figure for example, alone, with just a little bit of space from the other ones, seems to have maybe broken off, and they're maybe trying to negotiate a peace between the two groups, maybe. The way that the character of the silhouette changes in relation to the other silhouettes is fascinating to me.

I think it has a lot to do with what it is like to be in a crowd. You give up individuality, but you gain a greater strength. You have to be willing to become a silhouette or a sign. For me personally, that's a difficult thing to do. But it's also very liberating and empowering. So you give up a certain power of individuation for a power of the group. But it can also turn. This year especially, we're just saturated with the notion of demographics. We experience each other as statistics, risk groups, likely voters, infected clusters. The world is an ongoing enumeration of people as statistics, positive test cases, ICU beds, the number of dead. And it's impossible to identify patient zero, we're just part of an exploding algorithm.

*It's an odd pendant to your frustration with the folded works, which was that the older works couldn't produce an individual form, or a figure that felt singular, because it was instantly replicated, dragged across the width page, faded in and out. With these stamps you create extremely singular forms, but you still manually arrange into groups.*

That's exactly right. This is a transition, in that I'm able to have multiplicity but the figures are much freer in space. They're loose in the world and they can form much more spontaneously in a non-governmental way. I can make the police line, but I can also express the inability for that police line to hold. Someone's going to break out of that line and have a face to face. And even though you don't see their faces, you do sense, even the same figure, that in one print it's the back of a figure and then in the next instance I print, it's the front. So, by being silhouettes, they have this incredible range and versatility.

*The symmetrical, orderly group versus the group that's more of a swarm. It's the difference between, again, these mass ornament groups or the groups that you made on the perimeters of the folded drawings, versus the group where you acknowledge the unpredictability and the affinity and repulsion of individual actors, even if they're anonymized.*

A crowd can't be depicted as a multiplication of individuals. The individual has to be signified, reduced to a sign, enumerated or turned into a number in order to be multiplied, and set free in a compositional play. The rubber stamp was the way to achieve this and so now in 2021, years after the China series, I'm exploring the crowd again with a simple set of formal elements that allows me to experiment with a wide range of themes and stories. The character of the individual is not erased, but it's determined in its placement in the game. The same figure in a group is different in isolation. The same silhouette can be victim, aggressor, or merely a shadow of itself. All the characters are relational. They represent different forces, but the forces can quickly shift on you. Someone caught up in a swarm has gotten exhausted and leaves the group or one of them just can't keep up the pace and falls down. One of them gets knocked over. This type of work has really allowed me to address the shortcomings of the symmetrical work, or not so much shortcomings, but the reality of what happens when the bureaucratic state power of symmetry has eroded or is being challenged by the more spontaneous emotional forces of the cluster or the mob.

**Kyle Dancewicz is Interim Director of SculptureCenter, New York.**