EUAN HENG and the archaeology of the modern

A case study in the poles of paint and print

by Robert Nelson

Printmaking is Eu Heng's laboratory for critical images. Perhaps better known for monumental figures in oil paint, Heng assays his imagery through works on paper, especially watercolour and print. On account of certain chromatic and graphic limits inherent in printmaking, an image can be conceptually weighted, scanned, divided, combined and adapted, all in sympathy with the medium.

Painting does not offer Heng the same privileges. Painting may have a greater synthesizing charm, an ability to 'bring things together' in its infinite illusionistic potential and its power of atmospheric evocation. But for Heng, that use of oil paint is appropriate for the final stages of a vision, precisely when the multifaceted aspects of an image need to be resolved toward a monumental outcome. The processes leading up to that synthesis in oil paint are necessarily more 'isolating', more rigorously of means, less profligate of chromatic and textual variations.

Hence the discipline of printmaking. The great virtue of the art, for Heng, does not really confirm its autonomous status. He is not interested in mark-making per se; he is not dedicated to the 'look' of a print, and does not covet the formalist mannerisms which the printed image harbours almost by default. He is more interested in printmaking as an investigatory tool. It allows him to pick up an image in a more essential form than is encouraged by any other medium.

Drawing would certainly be the closest analogy. But drawing in its normal sense does not suit Heng quite so well (though, of course, Heng draws). A drawing is conceived as a 'study' or a pictorial preamble. Heng is not inclined to create preliminary drawings for his paintings. What he wants is something which can indeed aspire to the condition of a complete artwork, something which tests the calibre of an image to stand alone in a final form. A drawing, for that purpose, may be too provisional; furthermore, the fulfillment of the drawing as a complete work—like a Renaissance presentation drawing—would in any case aspire to the illusionistic condition of a painting, without necessarily inducing an emphasis on the essential force of the image. Printmaking 'naturally' does this, and especially linocut.

The subtlety of this choice of medium entirely matches the sensitive balance in Heng's iconography. Heng's art always seemed poised to become a direct narrative. But it never is a narrative in the classical sense of showing a protagonist in some action whose causes we know and whose outcome we conjecture. Heng's work is not quite narrative but nor does it simply turn out symbols.

The reason Heng needs to test his figures so much is that they have a lot of allegorical work to do. They have to embody the psychological history of a whole generation, the generation which we now look back upon—with a mixture of awe and scorn—as the modernists. Those guys are in big trouble these days. Heng has to work out exactly what they represent.

Heng's figures are monumentalized and iconically static but always seem to have paused in some action. They often hold toy attributes of work, a veritable list of diminutive technology, ranging from instruments for making things (such as a hammer) to the thing made by industrial assembly (such as the electric power pole or aeroplane). These objects used to inspire men with great enthusiasm. In the heroic age of modernism, they were potent symbols of progress. Today, they seem sad tokens of a former ideal of progress. To their loss of credibility as
symbols of industrial vigour, Heng attaches the melancholy of lost childhood; for as children we loved such toys but now they no longer belong to us, in the same way that youth is no longer ours.

What a mood overtakes the single figures in Heng’s pictures! Their dreamy suspension of personal thoughts contests the severity of their institutional dress, their trim professionalism of yesteryear and rather rigid adherence to social codes. Why are these geometricised people so motionless, so short of outlook? The bleak terrain projects the figures in a hiatus of vigour; there is an unnatural tranquillity in which the men fondle their hats with a literally ‘touching’ awkwardness, some indisposition of the prehistoric faculty which will disqualify them from any concerted action.

The meaning of Heng’s abstracted professionals is suggested by the purposeful historicism of his works. The wardrobe of the figures dates from between the World Wars and includes gangsters’ hats. Furthermore, the style of the painting recollects the lyrical and metaphysical English masters of the thirties, such as Stanley Spencer; in recent times, the linear succinctness of Léger has asserted itself more powerfully, both in the prints and the paintings. Both the conventions of printmaking and the schematics of Léger seem to explain the greater use of greys—especially the very dark shading of geometric volumes—which has infiltrated the recent paintings. Against this, the outrageous totemic colour of Rivera entains the skin tone of Tupper Tumble. In all events, the sources of the imagery are now old. Heng’s protagonists are ‘yesterday’s men’. With their beloved mechanical lo-tech, they no longer seem spunky or even relevant in today’s world of computers. They should wield taxes rather than axes; their wires should aspire to satellites, not to turbines. Heng leaves us in no doubt that his visible men in bluish or reddish-grey suits are economic antiquities, just as the style of painting parades a proud but now defunct modernism, cool, detached, universal in its language of sheer volumes and totalizing drawing.

On one level, the works are an allegory of the displaced industrial prowess of the Anglo-Saxon world, a culture nourished by heroic modernism. Just as England, Australia, America and Heng’s native Scotland can no longer rely on the industrial manufactures of the post-War years, so the art of the same countries must say melancholy goodbye to the bold modernism which symbolized their former progress. Now we think of enthusiasm for those same industrial manufactures of that period as boyish, immature, embarrassing. Of course, we still have all those tools and industrial installations—albeit with great refinements—and so we paradoxically never say goodbye. As a culture with feminist aspirations, we can reject the boyish enthusiasm for lo-tech; we can transcend the enthusiasm but we still need the lo-tech. And as artists, we can reject modernism but we still live with modernity. Heng never lets us forget that modernity is haunting.

Printmaking lets Heng explore all of these allegories as an aside to painting. The images are not necessarily fragments which will be reconstituted in a painting but simply ideas which feel their way to meaning. The only part of the allegory which the print cannot investigate is the part which is proper to the medium of paint itself.

Consider the paint in one of the large oils: it is an allegory in its own right. Within the abstracted drawing of trouser or jacket, Heng expatiates in the celebration of the elements of painting. There are passages of a modernist lyrurgy, the apotheosis of purity, perhaps just in the heightened luminosity of a cadmium. Heng’s red seductively takes us to orange here and magenta there; his blue moves between green and purple.

Why would this chromatic habit be allegorical all of a sudden? Because it narrates history, a peculiar and identifiable moment belonging to the modernist tradition. The spectral transitions make me think of a subdued Delaunay. It is an optical strategy elaborated from the precepts of Chevreul: as in Orphic Cubism, the colour wheel goes busy, spinning its systematic cycles over visual reality and the artist is empowered with a logical way of conditioning vision. The result is extremely beautiful. The resonance of the tones does not proceed from their transparency but by analogous colours bouncing off one another, as though singing higher and lower than a clear note and producing a headier chord through their combination.

These are effects proper to painting rather than print. The advantage of printmaking, for Heng, is to create an image in a complete form which, however, lacks such painterly effects. The ‘effects’ are not the aim, neither in painting nor printmaking. Heng is as little interested in mark-making per se in painting as he is in printmaking. However, as he is going to elaborate his images in a painted form using the modernist language of painting, he first forges his ideas outside that medium which encourages the manipulation of a formalist language for its own sake.

By using printmaking, Heng can avoid conditioning his images solely by the painted language, a language full of gestural incumbrances. Heng’s method is a strategy to avoid that same mark-making formalism which, ironically, is often associated with the modernist print. Heng’s art comments on modernism; it does not subscribe to modernism. It uses modernist tropes; but the investigative paradigm—which uses printmaking so centrally—ultimately denies the autonomy of any visual language (either belonging to painting or printmaking) which was a central conceit of modernism.