



Betty Merken: Monotypes

By Leonard Lehrer

The monotype is one of the several high profile print techniques. While it is likely the least of the methodologies utilized by the majority of professional printmakers, it is also among the most challenging and rewarding. As the intaglio, relief print, screen print and lithography churn out a variety of different images, the monotype is all too often seen as a distant cousin. To explore its qualities, its demands, and its special traits requires a type of commitment and passion of a singular nature, e.g., in the other print mediums the artist can make various adjustments and gradually reach the desired effect; with the monotype there is one run through the press. Period. A second run changes everything.



A particularly secretive and private process, the monotype requires a focus and concentration that are virtually absolute. While all print mediums tend to be held fairly close to the chest, the monotype experience seems to require a greater element of risk coupled with a strain of privacy almost monastic in its seclusion. Notwithstanding the tactile pleasure of the so-called major print methodologies, the monotype embraces a sensibility that takes this process to another level of chance – an immersion in the visceral challenge of immediacy.

Betty Merken is one of the very rare contemporary printmakers who has embraced the monotype with the focus and passion of her fullest artistic sensibilities. What she has achieved is significant in that few others have added so much to a specific technique (e.g., the relief print: Antonio Frasconi; wood engraving: Fritz Eichenberg; lithography: June Wayne; et.al.). She follows in the footsteps of Benedetto Castiglione, Blake, Degas and Jules Heller's discoveries in monotype printing. She has exploited the tactile nature of monotype printing to make method and content appear as a single enterprise. Simply put, seeing Merken's monotypes does not permit second guessing to the rhetorical questions – is there a proof in another color scheme, on different paper, etc.? What is there is the whole thing – as in a painting, for example. It is an "edition" of one. And that impression is totally different than number 6 in an edition of 50. The monotype is accountable to a different set of visual cues.

In an era that reflects what Gertrude Stein once called "...the art of knowing exactly how far to go in going too far" and the view of art as noted by Andy Warhol "... art is what you can get away with," it is gratifying to confront a very serious and very gifted artist of the fine art print providing such resonance, depth and affirmation of her vision. Betty Merken comes from a long standing tradition that embraced the rich underpinnings of mathematics to achieve a "lingua franca" – the wonders of the "Golden Section", the "Divine Proportion", perspective, geometry, the pentagon and the visual harmony of the Renaissance. These basic components of our visual history also produced the remarkable qualities implicit to the *de Menil Rothko Chapel* in Houston. In fact, Merken's monotypes often appear to have been created in the shadow of that chapel. Suspended blocks of color floating in a not clearly delineated space, the diptych format with the slender white negative space separating two caverns of color all contribute to a superstructure of an architectural nature. As Merken herself wrote in 2004, "... I created a different spatial relationship to the working surface – more from the ground up, more architectural ... processes that were once strange and unfamiliar have now become reassuringly familiar and are interwoven into a tapestry of geometry." And then, quite unexpectedly, and very alive and potent, one finds a variation on one of Motherwell's *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, an image that fits comfortably in Merken's stunning portfolio *Twelve on Twelve – a Monotype Portfolio* (2004).

Of great importance in Betty Merken's monotypes is her remarkably effectively use of color. In simplest terms I would have to say she is an explorer, an explorer of color and hue and tone. Her decisions are intense, fresh, unexpected and demanding. Her selection of colors invites discourse, contemplation and surprise. Her surface quality is a remarkable part of these images. One has to see these close up to appreciate the full impact of what this artist does with the richness of her surfaces: many of the "slabs" of color have several layers of density applied and when the pressure of going through the press takes place one sees the rectangle of the solid color, then one also notes the wonderful surface texture resulting from the pressure of the transfer of a color to the paper – a sea of minute pulls, a sea of texture, visual evidence of a process born. Part of this is due to Merken's view of her monotypes as direct extensions of her paintings; a significant

component of these images clearly embraces the transformation of her paintings into the monotype methodology. This subtle mixture is literally a new way of seeing and understanding this artist's blending of two worlds and absorbing the best of both as a result – presenting a banquet –a feast from an unending cornucopia. “The brush dances over some sections of the image and elsewhere drags its heavy loaded paint mixes into the nooks and crannies of the carapace. Luminosity and light resisting sculptural solidity tease the eye. It is iridescent with refracted and reflected light. A compound of gorgeous hues and intricately detailed but never costive draftsmanship, prompting the spectator to slip and slide over certain parts, to linger upon others, and to chase down detail that comes close to vanishing on the closest inspection, this is genuine visual wit.”¹

In my view Betty Merken belongs to a cluster of American artists loosely defined as the “hard edge” abstract artists or the minimalists. Her intuitive sensibility is a first cousin to the likes of Newman, Frank Stella, Ad Reinhardt, Fred Sandback, et. al.; all their images are both on the paper as well as in the paper. At the same time Merken is accommodating another force in her work, the remarkable series *Homage to the Square* part of Josef Albers' 1963 *Interaction of Color*. She appears to be from the same genetic pool as Albers, i.e., theme and variation, endlessly as in a Bach fugue or the studies presented in Charles Bouleaux's book *The Painter's Secret Geometry* (1980). Further, given her passion for the slab-like images may even suggest that part of that pool is a direct connection with Mary McCarthy's *The Stones of Florence* (1956). It's easy to relate several prints in the *Monotype Portfolio* to these close relatives. In addition to the reference to mathematics, the Renaissance and Rothko, I have come to see the connections in her exploratory attitudes to other facets of the arts such as the formal qualities of Erik Satie's exquisite *Gymnopodies* and the contemplative nature of Zen-like qualities. In short, there is a depth in what I see that continually reveals one layer after another. We have just begun to see the complexities of Merken's work, the resonance of belief and method, the deeply satisfying experience revealed again and again by her multi-faceted artistry.

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¹ Conal Shields, “John Ruskin – Artist and Observer” National Gallery of Canada -- 2014