

Post War Press

A review of the exhibition: *Art of the Mid 20th Century American Print* at the Yale University Art Gallery

By Geoffrey Detrani

When Henry Luce declared the years 1941 and after “the American Century” he probably didn’t have American printmaking in mind. The then publisher of *Time* magazine observed a world in the throes of war and a burgeoning United States, rousing itself from an isolationist nap, ramping up it’s productivity and potential. That potential had clear effects in politics and economics but also in cultural expression. As the center of political gravity shifted to America following WWII, so did the center of cultural gravity. Artist émigrés fleeing a ravaged Europe poured into the United States, where they mixed with artists of a domestic stripe. The resulting amalgam of talent proved fertile terrain for innovation.

Though Luce may not have noticed, printmaking underwent a revolution during the apex of the American Century. This, at least, is the contention of the curators of the intriguing exhibition *The Pull of Experiment: Postwar American Printmaking* at the Yale University Art Gallery.

Once a junior partner to painting, printmaking came to be seen as a supple and nuanced medium, no longer just a nice way to get a ream of reproductions. The mechanical parameters of the printmaking process –press, plates, ink and tools, all that stuff standing between the artist and the image – became not impediments to spontaneity but useful vehicles for experimentation.

The Pull of Experiment showcases 42 prints produced in the two decades following WWII. Drawn primarily from the gallery’s permanent collection, the show includes some A-list names (Jackson Pollock and Louise Nevelson among them) and many lesser-known artists.

Grouped into four sections, the titles of which ring like excerpts from a manifesto (“to liberate”, “to question”, “to challenge”, “to express”), the show presents an overview of an art-historical moment that had clear antecedents in cubism, surrealism, expressionism and abstract expressionism. (Pollack, is represented by a small, muted and restrained print).

And those connections make sense. These printmakers rejected their medium’s second-class status and aligned themselves directly with the prevailing moods of the day. One gets the impression that they were vanguards of a sort. Working during a post-war economic boom provisioned by an abundance of mass produced consumable goods, they rejected the very quality of the printmaking process that lent itself to mass production – the easy repetition (via mechanical reproduction) of a consumable image - in favor of a more authentically-worked original.

And mechanization itself is an ever-present (if underlying) presence. This is a show of somber thought and evocation. Nothing is exuberant in mood, no colors are saturated; black is a pervasive motif. The colors of the factory, of the industrialized landscape – and mindscape – prevail. Blacks, umbers, burnt oranges and oxide reds dominate. John Paul Jones's "Double Portrait," an impressive print of shadowy figuration and cascading verticals is largely swallowed in black.

"Arrival," a print by Bernard Childs, is notable for its absence of overt form. Childs, a machinist in a factory during the war, used tools borrowed from the machine shop to create a dynamic picture filled with energetic small and broad marks of various weights and lengths. The work resembles an automatic drawing crossed with a weathered battle map mated to a land survey of Mars.

Henry Luce's American Century was coincident with the atomic brinkmanship of the cold war. One can imagine that the end of it all was an ever-present ballast in the imagination of many of these artists. Gabor Petedi's work "The Vision of Fear" exemplifies this. Its a moody picture suggestive of a scarred landscape under a darkening sky, punctuated by 4 irregular polygons of disparate color, some cruciform in shape, some crossed by lines and barbs. Is it a snapshot of remembrance and recognition, or an eye blink's worth of foreshadowing projecting an atomic-age fear?

Petedi, in speaking of his print, stated: "My basic idea was to create an oppressive, enervating image haunted by fearful symbols of destruction." He hit his mark.