

## Think prints - think Poland.



The Kraków Print Triennial is probably the best known of the few still continuing international open exhibitions of contemporary printmaking. The current triennial (2006 and touring) marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genesis of the event. In reality the Triennial is more like a national print festival running from summer to late autumn with the main exhibitions taking place in the Silesian capital, Kraków and related events opening in Warsaw, Katowice, Torun and other cities. The main international exhibition will also be presented in Oldenburg, Germany in the spring and in Vienna in the autumn of 2007. Readers of *Multiples* will hardly need me to point out that no celebration of contemporary printed art on this scale has ever taken in Britain.

I have attended the opening events of the Kraków Triennials as a participant artist since 1994 and my reference sources for the statistics in this paragraph

are the fully illustrated catalogues that are always provided for exhibitors. Last year 3,720 works by 930 artists were submitted. A jury of seven - with Richard Noyce, a British writer on printmaking as chairman, selected for exhibition 311 works by 229 artists. Thirty-four relief prints were included but not one of them was a wood engraving. Twelve years earlier in 1994, 4,500 works were submitted, 842 were accepted and 105 of these were relief prints but not one was described as a wood engraving. By contrast a search for images solely or partially created by computer processes indicates an upward trend – only 5 in the 1994 triennial but 67 from amongst the 311 items hung in 2006.

It is not easy to draw conclusions from these figures. Are wood engravings not included because they are not submitted or are all submitted wood engravings rejected by the jury? Not long after returning from Poland I was able to see the current SWE touring exhibition at Hereford City Art Gallery. Afterwards I thought about the diversity of contemporary print making and the wide variations in the aims of artists using print processes. A similarity between the two shows is that both attract specialist audiences and both are ignored by most of the art press and mainstream critics.

The majority of wood engravings are too small to be successful in Kraków which is geared towards large works although a minimum size is not given. The maximum permitted dimensions for Kraków submissions is one metre by one and a half metres (it used to be larger) and many artists work close to this limit. Relief printmakers using whole plywood boards, lino or panels of composite material can easily obtain a matrix on this scale and print from it by hand if no large enough press is available, but the challenge of gigantism for wood engravers is technically much greater and may also be seen by many – though not all – engravers as going against the nature of the medium which is '*characteristically a decorative and a figurative art*' to quote from James Hamilton's introduction to the Arts Council's 1994 '*Prints from Wood*' touring show.

A notion also underlined for me by the current SWE touring exhibition is that wood engraving is predominantly a monochrome art of meticulous depiction often suggesting narrative and illustration.

These are some of the qualities that make this form of printmaking fascinating to its enthusiasts. However if I had to characterise 'Triennial style' printmaking I would use words such as – big, conceptual, cryptic, allusive, sometimes colourful and often with an input from photography. The dichotomy is striking. SWE readers may feel unconcerned that wood engraving is marginalized – if it is. Maybe this separation is just an indication of healthy diversity. One could point to similar areas of radical separation in contemporary music with aficionados enjoying the excellence to be found within their own enclaves of, for example, jazz, minimalism, hip-hop or the atonal sound world of Boulez and Birtwhistle.

It is true that the catalogues of the last five Kraków Triennials do not list wood engravings amongst the exhibits but one cannot see these exhibitions without realising that some Polish artists have trained themselves to use long-grain wood and lino on a large scale with the refinement and delicacy of the specialist end-grain wood engraver. Work of this kind has featured in former SWE touring shows.

I want to end by drawing attention to one of the Triennial's associated exhibitions. The woodcuts of Jerzy Panek (1918 – 2001) have been shown in England occasionally since 1970 and some readers may remember the horse featured on the catalogue cover of the Arts Council touring show mentioned above. This man was a passionate cutter. His woodcuts sometimes look like spontaneous black line drawings, an effect achieved by cutting most of the wood away. Others feature obsessive mosaic-like patterning. This exhibition in the spacious galleries of the National Museum was most inventively displayed. It was a great bonus to be able to see the artist's woodblocks often cut on both sides, brilliantly displayed within a zigzag wall of plate glass, alternating the prints and the wood blocks. I thought both prints and woodblocks had an equal claim to be artworks. Text panels providing extracts from Panek's journals were another enriching feature. I particularly warmed to this statement.

*: 'I have never done things by halves. Competition has always been important. Swanking, posing, ambition drove me forward. I had to do everything better than other people. I couldn't bear the thought that somebody else had done something and I hadn't. I trained my sight, my sense of smell, my powers of observation. I only do well what I know well. I do things to the point. But swanking for me is also about moving on once I am familiar with something. You have to develop, change, run away, like I used to when I was small. If you don't keep on the move you seize up.'*

Jerzy Panek 1991

Peter Ford 30<sup>th</sup> December 2006

Article Illustration: Airborne – Woodcut on handmade paper – Peter Ford

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Details of Krakow Triennial tour dates and venues: An edited selection from the Krakow Print Triennial will be shown at **Horst Janssen Museum**, Am Stadtmuseum, 4-8 26121 Oldenburg, Germany. [www.horst-janssen-museum.de](http://www.horst-janssen-museum.de) (March 25<sup>th</sup> to May 6<sup>th</sup> 2007)

Another selection (also including works of prize winners) will be shown at: **Kunstlerhaus**, Karlsplatz, 5 A-1010 Vienna, Austria (Sept 2007, dates not known) [www.k-haus.at](http://www.k-haus.at)

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