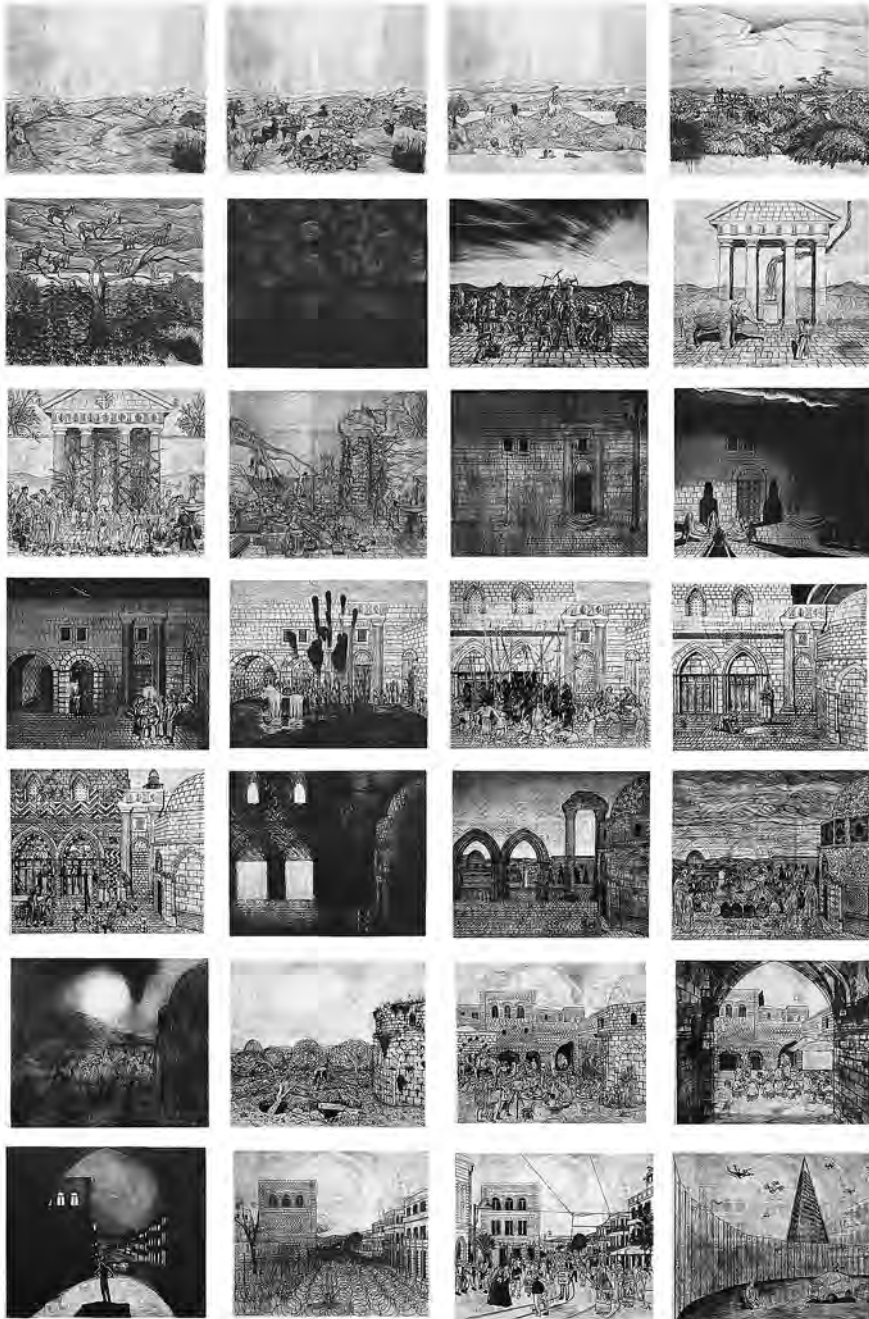


Unsettled histories:
the transformation of a print
Dan Starling

ODD Gallery at Dënäkär Zho
Klondike Institute of Art & Culture
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Artist biography:

Dan Starling is an interdisciplinary artist who works with print media and film. Teaching Print Media in the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory at UBC he holds a Meistershuler from the Städelschule, Frankfurt and has previously taught at Emily Carr University of Art + Design and NSCAD University.

As a settler inhabiting the unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples, he dedicates his research based practice to the deconstruction of Western Art as an “immanent critique” of mainstream paradigms. His work attends to how strategies of intervention, extrapolation, repetition and recombination of existing narratives serve to challenge the myths necessary to maintaining the status quo. How art can create friction to rupture and de-stabilize normative narratives; How art can leap into the past to re-situate present cultural, social, and political configurations; How art’s speculative fictions open the door to an equitable future.

Recent and forthcoming solo exhibitions include The Burnaby Art Gallery (2022), Wil Aballe Art Projects & VIVO Media Arts Centre, Vancouver (2018). His published books include *The Chorus* (Western Front, 2018) and *The Culture Industry and the Propaganda Factory* (New Documents, 2014). His work has appeared in numerous group exhibitions, notably at Kunsthall Oslo, Kunstverein Frankfurt, M HKA Antwerp, Confederation Centre PEI, Malaspina Printmakers, Cinematheque, and the Vancouver Art Gallery. His work has also received support from the Canada Council for the Arts and British Columbia Arts Council and he was a long list finalist for the Sobey Art Award in 2014.

Exhibition images:

Unsettled Histories
drypoint prints
15.5 x 18 inches each (image size)
20.5 x 24 inches each (paper size)
25.5 x 27 inches each (frame size)
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The 28 drypoint prints in this exhibition continue the narrative of one of Rembrandt's most renowned works, *Christ Crucified Between Two Thieves: The Three Crosses*. Utilizing this famous print as a starting point, the project expands the narrative potential of the original work by creating images of speculative events taking place on the same landscape over time to realign the *timelessness* of his religiously inspired original with the *timeliness* of the contemporary socio-political struggle in the settler-colonial context of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. Western art presents itself as God given, timeless and immutable. In contrast, my project advances the potential latent within the work by moving the narrative forward in time through erasure; drawing on top of the original work with diverse content and imagery which shows the instability of occupation. As a settler living on the unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples, and as this exhibition is taking place on the traditional and contemporary territory of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in peoples, I hope it resonates with the conversations around Canadian settlers' responsibility to actively combat the legacies of colonialism in Canada.

The project utilizes the special properties of the medium of drypoint: its ability to be drawn, printed, re-drawn, altered and printed again. A drypoint is created by using a scribe to incise the surface of a copper sheet, rather than using chemical biting of the plate as in etching. The main properties of drypoint that make it different from etching are that the marks are more fragile and wear down more easily with each printed impression and that the marks have a burr, that is, metal displaced from the plate, which sits

on the ridge of the linework which holds the ink and gives the print a fuzzier, richer character. I began by creating a copper plate the exact size of the final fifth state of Rembrandt's plate through photo-etching and burnished it by scraping the metal, so that a faint, effaced impression of the image remained visible. I then drew on top of the plate, creating a new layer each time, but leaving ghost-like images of each previous state in the background by burnishing the metal before each new state. The project is driven by the features of the mediums of printmaking and drawing, because through their unique material manifestation of variation, erasure, and layering they provide an opportunity to consider the idea of contingency—that which is fleeting and fragile. The series is purposely open-ended, and more prints could be added to it.

The new images in this series appear to progress in time but remain always within the same landscape—somewhat similar to time-lapse photography. The work depicts changes in the landscape, both real and fantastical: a pile of dogs, a flood, overgrown nature, metamorphosing buildings, and human activity. Some of the new images propose forgotten or overlooked narratives through straightforward depiction of events, while others instead focus on capturing a certain mood. The images are not supposed to be realistic, but they are not supposed to be pure fantasy either. A guiding principle was simply if something *could* have but did not happen and therefore should be treated as fictional, even when there are references to actual histories. For example, print XIV in the series depicts stargazing astronomers using the *Book of Fixed Stars* (964) to look at the night sky which gives a rough time frame for the event even though it is fictional. All of the references made in this series can be detected easily enough, but they are not given directly to the viewer, in order to leave the prints as open as possible to imaginative reflection.



Figure 1. Rembrandt, *Christ Crucified Between Two Thieves: The Three Crosses*, 1653, 1661, drypoint, 38.1 x 43.8 cm. Right to Left: State 3, State 4, State 5

Rembrandt is celebrated for altering his print images in the process of their creation. He made variations of several of his print images; the largest and best-known example being *The Three Crosses* (plate size 18 x 15.75 inches), which he reworked in five variations initially in 1653 and then again in 1661 (Figure 1). The different affordances that caused Rembrandt to make changes to *The Three Crosses* give insight into his artistic working method. One purpose of the variations was simply to make corrections or to refine the composition; for example, the Roman soldiers on horseback lose their medieval armor and feathered plumes in exchange for large “oriental” hats between the third and fourth state. When composing the image, Rembrandt sketched directly onto the plate in a way akin to a preparatory drawing; in addition, he experimented with the printing process by leaving more or less ink on the plate. The most dramatic tonal change in the mood of the scene is achieved by adding more contrast between dark and light, to increase the sense of drama between the fourth and fifth states of the plate. This display of non-naturalism has been cited as one example of how the work influenced modern artists.

As a consequence of his approach to art, Rembrandt stood out as an “experimental” artist among his contemporaries. Robert Fucci's book *Rembrandt's Changing Impressions* emphasizes the experimental nature of his work and credits him with not only “thematiz[ing] the notion of change” but re-

alizing the potential of printmaking to create multiple variations of the same image, both as artistic innovation and to satisfy collectors (1). The spontaneity and openness of this working method is surprising, since it contrasts sharply with those of other artists who wanted to keep their methods secret. For example, the recent discovery by David Hockney and others that artists like Vermeer (1632–1675) used a camera obscura demystifies the secretive nature of their working process and might make them seem dishonest in our appraisal. By displaying his working method, Rembrandt was signaling to his audience that he had nothing to hide.

The fact that drawing was primarily a medium of practice, trial, and error has indeed become its contemporary redemption. In celebrating drawing over painting, Emma Dexter senses an artistic equivalent to the philosophical movement from Plato to Heidegger, or from the idea of “being” to “becoming”:

Drawing forever describes its own making in its becoming. In a sense, drawing is nothing more than that, and in its eternal incompleteness always re-enacts imperfection and incompleteness... the act of drawing itself betokens honesty and transparency – all the marks and tracks, whether deliberate or not, are there for all to see in perpetuity. Any erasures or attempts to change the line mid-flow are obvious – drawing is a form that wears its mistakes and errors on its sleeve. Drawing is improvisatory and always in motion, in the sense that it can proceed ad infinitum without closure or completion, continually part of a process that is never-ending. (2)

Similarly, Alain Badiou sees drawing as a model for a needed insurgent politics of contingent togetherness:

It is that sort of movable reciprocity between existence and nonexistence that constitutes the very essence of drawing. It is a description without place that creates a sort of artificial world. This world does not obey the common law of separation between real being and appearances. In this world, or at least in some points of this world, there is no difference between “to be” and “to exist”, or between “to be” and “to seem”, to “appear.” ... In a drawing, the “together” is only the together of some vanishing marks. ... Together is enough. (3)

By making erasure part of the work, Rembrandt’s print connects to what Christian Rattemeyer calls the “radical act” of a contemporary work like Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) which “occupy another order of invention and expression” to that of the “masterpiece” because “we value them for their immediacy, for the insights they offer into the process of the creative act, for their fragmentary, incomplete nature, their intimacy and directness; in drawings we seek truth, not power” (4).

If the academic tradition of Western art has yielded a hierarchy of privilege for artistic mediums that values division between the arts, with painting as the apotheosis, then the prevailing ethic of contemporary art is the equality of mediums, their com-

bination and synthesis, and the potential for collaboration between different artists. While installation and performance hold a special place in this debate, as new mediums that re-configure the boundaries of art-making, the case can also be made for the unique contribution of printmaking. For example, the flexibility of this medium to create multiples invites the artist to explore what we would today consider a collaborative artwork. Rembrandt had already done this to one of his contemporaries, transforming a Hercules Segers plate from *Tobias and the Angel* into *Flight into Egypt* (Figure 2). Other artists in turn did the same thing to Rembrandt after his death, by appropriating, reprinting and transforming his original plates. For example, William Baillie added a lightning bolt to Rembrandt’s *The Three Trees* more than a hundred years after it was originally printed (Figure 3).

Printmaking stands at an interesting intersection of the visual arts today precisely because of its in-betweenness. The relationship between the plate—the “matrix”—as it is called, and the print finds many resonances in the wide-ranging debates around the copy and the original, especially in the twentieth century. However, while the fragility and ephemerality of this relationship has provoked considerable philosophical reflection and has been noticed as a central feature of printmaking (5), it has rarely been explored within the medium to any conse-



Figure 2. Left: Hercules Segers, *Tobias and the Angel*, c. 1630, etching, 21 x 28 cm
Right: Rembrandt, *The Flight Into Egypt*, 1653, etching and drypoint, 21 x 28 cm



Figure 3. Left: Rembrandt, *The Three Trees*, 1643, etching, engraving and drypoint, 21 x 28 cm
Right: Captain William E. Baillie, *The Three Trees*, 1758, etching, 21 x 28 cm

quence. In one notable essay, Charles Cohan argues that “the matrix acts as a memory of residue and impression, of charging and discharging. It is a structure of faith. It connotes a belief in that which is produced by transfer – not the thing itself, but its imprint” (6). By taking the print image to be the residue of the encounter with the physical plate, we can explore the implications of the “event” raised by print practice.

It was Sigmund Freud who proposed conceiving psychic processes as the “residue and impression” of physical events: there are certain events that the subject cannot process and cannot find an adequate way to integrate into the psyche. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud reasons why people would psychically repeat past traumatic experiences: their unconscious repeatedly brings these experiences back so as to provide a new opportunity for the subject to integrate them psychologically. Repetition through symptoms is therefore the key to uncovering traumatic experiences, originally repressed and stored in the unconscious. The process of the psychoanalytical cure unfolds through the relationship of transference, which constructs a situation conducive to reproducing and detecting repetitious behaviors that normally go unnoticed.

Artists can take these symptoms and transform them into art, in a process called

sublimation. Sublimation by artists implies an ethics, because it creates a space that enables us to talk about things denied by the dominant discourse or thought of within that discourse as not useful or profitable. At the level of society, what individual symptoms point towards is a more fundamental underlying antagonism. An underlying antagonism in our democratic society, for example, is that all people are formally equal but the economic process of capitalism is based on and produces inequality. If we see it in this way, the sublimation occasioned by the return of the repressed is an opportunity to address the symptom, the antagonism, anew. Where the psychoanalyst looks for repetition in the actions of the subject, in words or actions, the artist looks for a “constellation”: that situation in which time seems to stop, or pause, or hold its breath, in a configuration that is pregnant with tensions.

Due to globalization and capitalism, it has been argued, experience today is replaced by an endless stream of information; there is nothing to arrest the flow and give something for memory to cling onto. For philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin, the artist is totally crucial for producing sublimation, that is, arranging things in the form of a “constellation” that can moderate the endless phantasmagoric stream:

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. (7)

The constellation is a breakdown. It is the moment of discontinuity from the smooth succession of linear time. For Donna Haraway, “Breakdown is a word for those moments when denaturalization occurs, when what is taken for granted can no longer be taken for granted precisely because there is a glitch in the system. A breakdown is not a negative situation to be avoided, but a situation of non-obviousness, in which some aspect of the network of tools that we are engaged in using is brought forth to visibility.” (8) The moment of discontinuity is an opportunity to re-examine the situation.

For psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who reworked Freud’s ideas, the primary mechanism of sublimation is “raising the ordinary object to the dignity of the Thing.” This concerns a repetition: the same object in a different time and a different place can be “elevated,” that is, looked at completely differently. It concerns a new place and time, but it’s the same object. There is a second operation of repetition that occurs in the montage—actually a “de-sublimation” which is the overlap of two appearances at the same time. In her essay “On Love as Comedy,” Alenka Zupančič develops the notion of “de-sublimation” and links it to how comedy (and true love) works. The overlap or montage of two appearances shows the non-coincidence of the same thing with itself, a split or disconnect within the same image, the banal and the transcendent occur at the

same time and in the same place. It occurs as a gap between the two appearances. The time/place is a virtual space:

“...desublimation” consists [of], not the transformation of the sublime object into a banal object, but of repetition as a “time warp,” the future and past are here “now”, we see the sublime and the banal at the same time and in the same place. ... They are not the same, yet they cannot simply be separated—they are, in a manner of speaking, “dislocated.” (9)

The virtual space created by the montage reflects the atemporality of the unconscious, existing outside of time. “History” is therefore created retrospectively in the present. Even though there can be no return to the original event as it really happened because, it no longer exists, the effects of the history can be dealt with. The “transference situation” creates a short-circuit between the present and the past that arrests the temporal continuity because of the signifier’s synchrony: “It is literally the point of “suspended dialectics,” of pure repetition where historical movement is placed within parentheses” (10).

This corresponds to Walter Benjamin’s view that the meaning of historical events is always made retroactively and is altered by changes in the symbolic practices of the culture of which these events are a part. According to Benjamin, one must make a “tiger’s” leap into the past to blast out a specific moment from the continuum of history (Thesis XIV). If we look at history “the way it really was”, as a series of events, the traditional view is from the perspective of “those who have won”: it sees history as a closed continuity, a progression leading to the reign of those who rule today. It leaves out of consideration what has failed in history, what has to be denied so that the continuity of what “really” happened can establish itself. The oppressed appropriates the past in-

sofar as it is “open.” By means of repetition, the revolution redeems the past retroactively, because it “comes from the future” (11).

By engaging in the process of appropriating the past we also get the chance to understand it in a new way, which can change our view of history. The struggle is to contrast the “triumphal procession of the victors exhibited by official historiography” with the histories that will give a more just account of the barbarism necessary in them:

“If we are prepared to conceive history as a text, we can say about it what some modern author said about a literary text: the past has deposited in it images which could be compared to those retained by a photographic plate. Only the future disposes of developers strong enough to make appear the picture with all its details.” (12)

Through the critical re-examination of history it is possible to learn from our past misconceptions, failures and prejudices. In the case of Christ’s crucifixion, what I’m attempting to do is to return to this “fundamental fantasy,” so that we might be able to dislodge this symptom and therefore deal with the antagonism in a new way, to make it move, and to propose an alternative that can affect the present. The Israeli settlement of the Palestinian territories is the current face of struggle over this long-contested region. The settler occupation of land is foundational to colonialism. What this settlement sheds light on is how conflict is inevitable so long as there is political, economic, and societal drive for control through division, subjugation, and discrimination. Despite the apparent fixity of this foundation, however, settler-colonialism remains an inherently unstable, contested, and ultimately self-destructive force. When a story is retold, it is slightly altered in the re-telling. Instead of generating alternative narratives that are fantasies of escape from our world, my work seeks to generate “frictions” leading to disruptive breakdowns into the continuum of history. The repetitions and montages introduced here

through the medium of print allow for the marks and their ghost images to appear, so that we can slowly and methodically reflect on the antagonisms that go unacknowledged by colonized history. With these prints, I hope to re-situate the present by showing that what appears closed and static can be transformed; the story is not yet concluded and open for us to change.

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