



Shaping a Visual Language for our Times

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In his classic work, *What is Art?* the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy argues that the point of art is not the product, but the process. The process of art, he wrote, is part of the basic human need to communicate in an alternative language—which distinguishes it from the written word. Through the word, people convey their thoughts to each other. Through art, however, they convey their feelings.

Over the last few years, I have been walking in the borderlands of art, exploring the mysterious regions where the language of images, words, and music meet and speak to each other. I have been trying to shape a visual language that can function poetically. Like the structures in my prints, I have been reaching across ambiguities towards more illuminating questions.

Exploring the emotive sides of human experience through the medium of visual poetry is an ambiguous exercise. But it is a necessary and intentional ambiguity. The significant questions in my research hang on the nature of poetic language. What is it? What is it for?

The language of poetry and art is the only way to express certain aspects of experience. How do you even describe a simple activity like going for a walk? Perceptions, consciousness, emotions, memories, and cultural influences continuously interact in our experience of reality in subtle and complex ways. Poetry can help us make sense of this complexity, clarifying our relationship to each other and to the world.

The starting point of my visual poetry is in the contemplation of experience. This eventually leads to questions that affect every aspect of society—cultural, ethical, and political. And because reality itself is multi-layered, I have layered my work with many different visual vocabularies.

The path to creativity

To illustrate what I mean, let us walk through the printmaking process—or at least, through the process that has become both a working method and a creative journey for me.

Over the last six years, I have been involved in an intense period of studio research, first at Northern Illinois University, then at Illinois State University, and now at the University of Alberta. My studio work over those years was broken into several suites of prints exploring related themes. I started each suite with an intentionally simple everyday activity. Every day for two months, I set out on a planned route around the outskirts of Bloomington in central Illinois, a borderland where the rural environment meets the urban. The walks fostered a meditative state in which I was open to whatever images I might encounter. This was my “walking research.” Returning to my studio, I made drawings from memory of visual events that had struck me during the walk.

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After a while, I began to see recurring visual motifs in my drawings. Most of them focused on industrial objects, sirens, water towers, generators, and fragments of garbage that stood out—threatening and foreboding—on the prairie landscape. I liked these objects on a visual level because they were in such harsh contrast to their rural surroundings and because of their suggestive qualities. They allowed me to reference figurative forms without literally drawing the figure. I hoped this ambiguity would allow viewers to react to the forms in more open ways, and to bring their own experience to the image. Through the drawings, I was also able to investigate visual motifs and the formal possibilities of space, composition, and colour.

As I worked on these drawings, I simultaneously researched other artistic sources, primarily Béla Bartók's opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, Arnold Schoenberg's stage work *Erwartung*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Initially, I turned to *Paradise Lost* for subject matter—simply as a powerful and evocative source of visual inspiration. I allowed the rich language to colour the mood and atmosphere of my drawings.

Very quickly, the religious content of the work by these masters began to influence my attitude in the studio. This attitude shift is best illustrated by Ingmar Bergman's words in relation to his film *The Seventh Seal*. "Regardless of my own beliefs and my own doubts, which are unimportant in this connection," he wrote, "it is my opinion that art lost its basic creative drive the moment it was separated from worship..." In considering these series of prints, I wanted to build upon the contradiction that, regardless of my own belief and doubts, I have an interest in religious images and ideas.

Once these ideas began to emerge, I felt ready to bring my walking research and my literary research together. It was not my intention to illustrate *The Metamorphoses* or *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, but rather to use them as creative spurs. They became, in a sense, the stage on which the forms drawn from my walks appeared as characters. The dialogue between image and text or music stimulated me to manipulate and change the emotive and physical state of the images.

In *Paradise Lost*, for example, I focused on the famous passage that describes Sin, Death, and Satan facing one another at the gates of Hell—the passage so beautifully illustrated by William Blake. I started by drawing from the poem in abstract language using line etching, aquatint, and mezzotint. As the characters, I used the forms that I had discovered on my walks. For example, the print entitled "*Double Formed Object*" emerged from the passage in which Satan asks Sin, "What art thou, thus double-formed?" For this work, I placed two siren shapes, one on top of the other in a serpent-like arrangement. To me, the passage is a clear expression of the western idea of a divided human nature—part spiritual, part material. Another series of images emerged from a similar working method, this time with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as literary inspiration.

In my images drawn from walks in semi-rural Illinois, however, instead of focusing closely on objects, I pulled back in space a little and made the images somewhat more landscape in feeling. "*Reservoir*" is an image based on the drainage ditches and water

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reservoirs used by the corn farmers of the area. The print “*Broken Tower*” resulted from taking images suggested on my walks and merging them with the story of Daphne and Apollo. These prints are sensual and vividly coloured, quite different from the darker, more foreboding mood of the series based on *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle*.

Art in turbulent times

What am I attempting to say in this multi-layered visual poetry? The answer ties into the function of art in society. There is no question that poetic language has a unique power to sway the course of human affairs. A look at the historic role of music, art, and literature in religion, politics, and society confirms it. Humanity has used art in all its forms during the times of greatest social ferment and during the darkest times of war. The twentieth century offers countless examples of this, including the novels of Primo Levi, the etchings of Otto Dix, and Iri and Toshi Maruki’s *Hiroshima* paintings.

Even Plato, who condemned the moral ambiguities and tragic ironies of poetry as dangerous to tender minds, tacitly underscored the importance of poetry in philosophical debates. More than two millennia later, Bertrand Russell found that the most compelling rebuttal he could make to Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*: “As against any unpleasant but internally self-consistent ethic, lies not in an appeal to facts but in an appeal to the emotions.” Poetry is the language in which we make this kind of appeal.

Since Russell wrote those words in 1945, several developments have combined to complicate our lives still further. Advancing technologies have supplied us with an endless stream of new ethical questions, from the relationship between technology and the environment, to the implications of our new ability to manipulate genetics. At the same time, many of our traditional sources of authority—the political, social, and religious institutions that used to guide public opinion—no longer have the standing they once had. They no longer provide a clear ethical framework for addressing complex issues.

Meanwhile, our own Canadian culture has continued to emphasize a belief in the notion of individualism. While I was considering ideas for my planned series of prints, Bergman’s thoughts on the creative drive and its link to worship became an interesting point of departure. Written almost half a century ago, his words resonate with issues that concern us today. The rise of individualism in western culture has been, Bergman says, “the highest form and the greatest bane of artistic creation.” For many, the freedom associated with modern culture has come at a price: the creation of a society that seems to slip all too easily into self-centered pursuits. As a result, it is tempting to view the sacred and eternal values of the past as a remedy for today’s malaise of disenchantment.

Art’s role in mass media

One aspect of individualism is consumerism. This is where visual language, in the form of advertising, plays an important role. In the age of mass media it is often the loudest voice, not the most relevant or insightful, that makes itself heard. Visual noise penetrates into every corner of our lives, using increasingly sophisticated methods to manipulate and tantalize. Although advertising and the emphasis on material consumption have helped to expand the economy, their success has created a spiritual

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and ethical crisis by undermining our ability to make judgments on social or political issues outside an economic framework.

Artists exploring poetic language, whether visual, literary, or musical, are in a unique position to take part in contemporary ethical, political, and social debates. They can do this by appealing to emotive aspects of human experience. Poetic work can also provide a way for our culture to maintain a healthier relationship with the forces of consumerism. That is because poetry demands a greater level of interaction from the viewer, reader, or listener than mass media usually requires. We discuss the intangible aspects of existence—the subtler experiences that give rise to the most difficult questions about the meaning of our lives—in poetic language. By contrast, mass media strives for a simple message that avoids complexity and nuance.

Although many artists today create work that is explicitly political, my studio research is not intended to take part directly in ethical debates. Instead, by making emotive poetic images, I hope to create an artistic experience that will compel viewers to consider their own life experiences with greater insight. The idea is not to direct a viewer to a particular ethical or political position (although to a certain degree this cannot be avoided), but to create an experience of contemplation and reflection.

The images in my work are jarring—intentionally so. Looking at them the viewer feels that something doesn't quite fit. They may, in fact, feel disoriented. But once nudged out of the conventional way of seeing things, the viewer can begin the process of reorientation to the world, taking the long way home through the mysterious landscape of metaphor and myth.

Contemporary culture offers many scientific, political, and economic models for discussing reality. However, as necessary and beneficial as these models are, I believe they fail to embrace the whole of human experience. Contemplation and reflection, fostered in poetic language, are central to the process of dealing with the world in all its complexity.