

OAK

SHAUN O'DELL

10.01.10

It's been five years since Shaun O'Dell visited Paulson Bott Press. He is an artist who works in several forms, performing jazz, creating videos, building environments, and painting. Each form feeds the others. With these new prints, he is telling different stories, moving away from a recognizable narrative into more abstraction.

Paulson Bott Press: The recognizable imagery, like the pilgrims and the sun, seems to be receding in these new prints.

Shaun O'Dell: I was looking back at American history and trying to figure out truthfully what's been happening. Over the years, I worked chronologically and added my own narrative, reinterpreting things that made it more metaphorical.

I was interested in the narrative that takes on a figurative form. Formally, everything was pretty representational. The more I learned about all these things, the more I became interested in the abstractions. And I was also coming from a musical background. The whole process that I learned playing free jazz—it's about a structure that is improvised.

Q: This is a more improvisational visual ideal?



(above)

PLUNGED INTO IT, 2010

Color Aquatint Etching; 31" x 24"; Edition of 40

(right)
**HEED IT WELL, YE PANTHEISTS
 (BLUES AND GOLD), 2010**
 Hardground Etching; 20" x 15"; Edition of 40

(below)
**HEED IT WELL, YE PANTHEISTS
 (BLUES), 2010**
 Hardground Etching; 20" x 15"; Edition of 40



SO: I had established a paradigm of investigation. Now, in some ways, I've let it go. This work is based on ideas that come out of Moby Dick, one particular passage in the first chapter that sets up the larger philosophical questions in the book.

Q: These new prints are rooted in Melville?

SO: Melville was totally ahead of his time, years ahead of Freud. Ahab was a classic Narcissist. I was on a one-year residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito, and I was riding my bike across the Golden Gate Bridge, and stopping to look down into the bay. When the tide is ebbing or flowing there are sometimes whirlpools. And I

was investigating this vortex - there's a vortex also in Moby Dick in the end. The book itself is a vortex. It sends you back to the beginning.

I started doing some experiments and found that with these two particular ink colors I could get interesting moiré patterns going. And then I thought, I'm going to organize these patterns on horizon lines.

I was also working with some double triangle shapes, which I was interested in because they are close to the regular polygons that were produced in video feedback that we created in the video based on Moby Dick.

I ended up flipping the image and that created a receding space in the next print.

Q: Tell me about the imagery that we're seeing here. I recognize the pilgrims and the bell. What about the rock forms?

SO: What you call the rock forms are references to irregular polygons. I was thinking about geometry as a way of entering abstraction.

Regular polygons have a tradition in all kinds of culture, and there's no real origin for a triangle. They have taken on all these different kinds of symbolic meanings in all different kinds of cultures. Their origin is always related to nature, which is something I'm interested in.

Q: Did your imagery become more abstract when your investigations reached our own time?



(left)
**RINGING OUT OF, LEAPING OUT
 OF LIGHT, 2010**
 Color Aquatint Etching; 31" x 24";
 Edition of 40

SO: Those forms came from thinking about levels of water in this show that I did based on those passages from Moby Dick. And they were in some way references to water and levels of water, but then also to light going through the water.

Q: Yet they are flat.

SO: I don't have any interest in breaking the two-dimensional plane in any kind of traditional perspective schema, but I'm trying to by other means. These gradations have a feeling of depth, yet at the same time they are flat.

I'm interested in these flip-floppings, what's left in the shadows. Right now I am interested in trying to get at these thin transparent veils.

I have been looking at the relationship that the West has had with the East and the origin of knowledge and science. Interestingly, Persia had the best early astronomers. Those investigations led me to an eight-pointed star and star patterns based on infinitely repeating the eight-pointed star or tessellating it.

Some of the geometry comes from folk tradition too. I spoke with quilt authorities to find out where that star pattern came from. No one could even really tell me. And yet you find it throughout Islam.

These stepped-frame forms make me feel like I am falling in and out of the image.

Q: Almost like tissue. Does intaglio printing allow you to explore this in a different way than painting?

SO: Yes, there's just more transparency. With gouache, you can't get as subtle an effect as you can with spitbite. The variations just don't happen in other forms. With this kind of work, people are waiting on you, and I find it's good for an intuitive kind of working. You have to make a decision. ✦



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**WE DO NOT ADVANCE THROUGH FIXED
GRADATIONS, 2010**

Color Aquatint Etching; 31" x 24"; Edition of 40

Shaun O'Dell in the Paulson Bott studio.