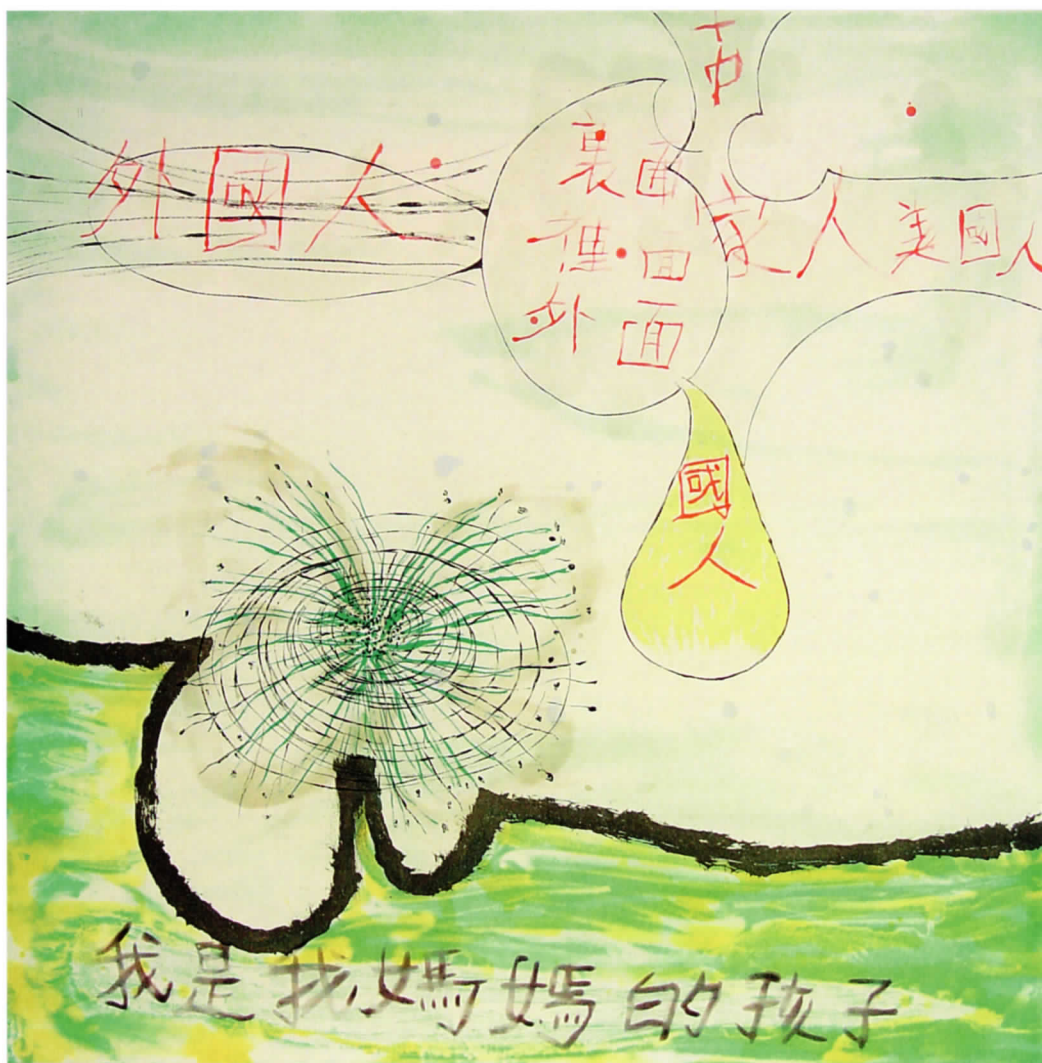


Overview



Janis Provisor, *Foreigner*, 2004. Color spit bite, soap ground and sugar lift aquatints on Gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 42 x 40-1/2"; image size: 35-1/2 x 35-1/2". Edition 10. Printed by Emily York.

Janis Provisor

"I've been something of vagabond in my adult life, and this has affected how I think and what I do/make in my art. Living in China and being a witness to a culture moving and changing so quickly has led me to incorporate cultural events, along with personal ones, into my work, with abstraction as the device."

—Janis Provisor, 2004

Janis Provisor, with her husband Brad Davis and son Alec, is back in New York, after nine years living in China. Two of her new etchings, *Foreigner* and *Family Values*, incorporate Chinese characters

in her own handwriting. Anyone who knows the language will see that she, as a foreigner, writes awkwardly, but will be able to read the message. The rest of us see the Chinese characters as decorative elements in animated works of art that respond brightly to the changing, shrinking, nature of the world in our time.

Three of the four prints presented here incorporate butterflies, symbols of transformation, fastened loosely to the paper, not printed directly on it. Provisor has said that she works "not in an ironic or cynical way but with complete sincerity and emotional connection." She uses Chinese characters "to convey my simulta-



Janis Provisor, *Family Values*, 2004. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with hard ground etching and printed collage elements on *Gampi paper chine collé*. Paper size: 26-1/4 x 39-1/2"; image size: 17-3/4 x 31-1/2". Edition 20. Printed by Emily York.

neous feelings of rootedness and of not belonging anywhere."

Provisor was born in 1946 in Brooklyn. She grew up in Cincinnati going to museums with her mother and excelling in art classes. To please her father, who was a lawyer, she enrolled in pre-law at the University of Michigan, but at the

moment of committing to the program broke out in hives. She took this as a sign that she should study art instead, and went into the School of Architecture and Design at U. Michigan. After further study at the College of Art, University of Cincinnati, she went to the San Francisco Art Institute where she gained both a B.F.A. and (in 1971) an M.F.A. In 1978 she was included in a show of six artists at the New Museum called "Outside New York." This led to an invitation to join New York's prestigious Holly Solomon Gallery.

The Holly Solomon Gallery was the focal point of the art movement called Pattern and Decoration, which flourished in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and included Robert Kushner, Joyce Kozloff, Valerie Jaudon, and Brad Davis, among others. The movement reacted against the austerity of minimal art and was largely inspired by Islamic, Indian, Native American and other non-Western art traditions. Provisor, though more involved with nature than some of the artists involved, was sympathetic to their approach. As a writer in *ArtSpace* said in 1990, "Provisor's is a romantic vision, but it is not dewey-eyed. ...It is both decorative and psychologically resonant, evoking in painterly terms the harsh beauty of nature viewed up close, and the quiet terror such intimacy inspires."

After she moved from San Francisco to New York in 1981, Provisor spent a great deal of time in museums, searching for ways to energize her work, and there she discovered the eighteenth century Chinese painter Bada Shanren. "He was painting elements from nature that seemed almost incidental to what I viewed as the abstract force," she says. "His composition on the page somehow electrified me." Later, in *Orientations* magazine, Arnold Chang, a historian of Chinese art, wrote: "In the whole history of Chinese painting, only Bada Shanren's work comes close to being charged



Janis Provisor, *Fly*, 2004. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with printed collage elements on *Gampi paper chine collé*. Paper size: 29-3/4 x 26-3/4"; image size: 21-3/4 x 19-3/4". Edition 20. Printed by Emily York.



Janis Provisor, *Flower Power*, 2004. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with drypoint and printed collage elements on *Gampi paper chine collé*. Paper size: 29-3/4 x 26-3/4"; image size: 21-3/4 x 19-3/4". Edition 15. Printed by Emily York.

with the psychological tension evident in Provisor's painting. Like Bada, her work is direct, intuitive, and spontaneous, full of private symbols and secret meanings."

Provisor shared her growing enthusiasm for Chinese painting with Brad Davis, a serious scholar of the culture, and the couple later married. Davis accompanied her in 1989 on her first trip to China, where I took her to work in the Crown Point Press woodblock program in Hangzhou and Shanghai. "Everyone is so engaged; everything is so real," Provisor said at the time. I remember that we were in a small boat on the West Lake in Hangzhou when she remarked dreamily, "I'm going to try to come back here with Brad and Alec (a toddler at the time) to live for a while." I laughed. That was 1989. We saw demonstrations everywhere in support of the "democracy" students occupying Tiananmen Square in Beijing, and the day after we left China the students were gunned down by government forces. For three or four years people feared even to speak to foreigners.

But things changed in China, and in 1993 Provisor and Davis made the big decision to move there with their (then) six-year-old son. They went back to Hangzhou, where they spent nearly a year, then moved to Hong Kong where their life in China stretched to nine years. They returned to New York in 2002 with substantial gains. Alec speaks and writes Chinese fluently, and Davis and Provisor are the proprietors of a celebrated and flourishing business producing silk carpets under the name Fort Street Studio.

Hangzhou is a center of the Chinese silk industry, and soon after they arrived there Davis had the idea that they should design a silk carpet for their home and have it made. This, wrote Steven Henry

Madoff in a long article in the *New York Times Magazine* Design Supplement in 2003, "was a little like saying, 'Well, I'm in Texas, so I may as well drill an oil well.'" The project took years and involved rescuing a bankrupt rug factory, but now Davis and Provisor design, produce, and sell carpets described by Madoff as "silvery in the light, beige like suede or the resonant blue of night skies, with drifting brushstrokes or soft squares like tiles worn by age and weather." There is a list of celebrity purchasers: Madonna, Elton John, Tom Clancy. Madoff concludes his article by commenting that Provisor and Davis "have joined the long history of artists crossing into craft, from William Morris to the Bauhaus and beyond."

Beyond that, Provisor continues to pursue her paintings and prints. "The design work," she says, "is more public than the painting and printmaking, which comes from a more personal place, one of expression of who I am at any given time." It is important to remember that Provisor came to design by way of being a painter. Walter Gropius, who wrote the Bauhaus manifesto, was an architect, and said "the final goal of all artistic activity is architecture." And William Morris (1834-1896) was first and foremost a designer, though he did some painting. Morris believed that there should be no distinction between decorative and fine arts, and he worried that "men in struggling towards the complete attainment of all the luxuries of life could deprive their whole race of the beauty of life." He recommended that people be vigilant in keeping ugly things out of their homes, and in that Provisor is in complete agreement with him.

In making the carpets, Provisor says, "Neither Brad nor I were interested in just designing for the marketplace (though indeed we had to learn about that to survive). What we wanted was to create something new, a new vocabulary in rug making. We didn't look for the expedient way to get something made, but came to it from a



Janis Provisor in the Crown Point studio, 2004.

more organic direction, more like making art. But we don't think of it as making art. It's something different, but related to art."

Provisor says that she has learned to work in a variety of ways. "Is it all fascinating and worthwhile?" she asks, and answers with a resounding yes. To the next question, "Is it all art?" she answers no, but adds that living in China and working on the carpets has freed her from being very concerned about the differences. She finds her painting more relaxed. The experience, she says, "has made me lighter (though just as demanding) and opened my eyes to a larger world."

—Kathan Brown



Janis Provisor and Brad Davis, wild silk hand knotted carpet, Fo32-A, SQ-Teal.

In the Crown Point Gallery:

Janis Provisor: Four New Color Etchings

Pat Steir: Mixed Marks, seven new color etchings

April 28 - May 28, 2005

In Basel, Switzerland:

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In New York:

William Bailey, through May 7 at Betty Cuninghame Gallery, 54 West 25 Street.

Pat Steir, through May 7, Cheim & Read, 547 West 25 Street.

Pat Steir Drawings, in association with Cheim & Read, at Cook Fine Art, 1063 Madison Avenue, through May 11.

Wayne Thiebaud Since 1962: A Survey, Alan Stone Gallery, 113 East 90 Street, through May 27.

Sol LeWitt and Robert Mangold: Drawing into Print, through June 11 at Senior & Shopmaker, 21 East 26 Street.

In Washington D.C.:

In the Beginning was the Word: A Selection of Prints by William T. Wiley from the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Corcoran Gallery of Art, July 2 - September 19.

William T. Wiley: New Work, Marsha Mateyka Gallery, 2012 R Street NW, through May.

William T. Wiley is the recipient of the 2005 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Southern Graphics Council.

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20 Hawthorne Street
San Francisco, CA 94105
415. 974.6273
FAX 415.495.4220
www.crownpoint.com

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