

Overview



Three Angels, 2005. Color direct gravure with aquatint and spit bite aquatint and gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 27 x 23"; image size: 18 x 15 inches. Edition 30. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

WILSON SHIEH

Wilson Shieh, a new artist for Crown Point Press in 2005, lives in Hong Kong, where he was born in 1970. He has said that he is concerned in his work with an "exploration of different ideas and inclusion of cultural significance," and this quite neatly sums up the approach of Crown Point Press in choosing artists to work with us over the years. We invite four to six artists a year to spend one to three weeks in our studio in San Francisco making

etchings. Most of the artists are part of a core group who return to us regularly within a given time frame; we insert new artists with care, and there is always excitement as we look forward to fresh insights into our own lives through their work. As John Cage said, "the way you could have enjoyed life in, say, 1200 is different from the way you enjoy it now. And that accounts for the changes in art." The fine-brush painting style, called *gongbi*,

that Shieh uses was at its height of popularity in the year 800, but he is a thoroughly modern man, having grown up with the violence of Tiananmen Square (1989) as a youthful memory and the transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty from Great Britain to China (1997) as a mature one. His careful mastery of the delicacy and precision of *gongbi* painting mixes with a slightly surrealist sensibility, a sense of humor, and a poignant humanity.

I, myself, made a trip to China in 2005, my first since the Tiananmen Square massacre (I was on the way home from China when it happened). Crown Point had a program then in which we took Western artists to Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Beijing to work with skilled woodblock printers and, beginning in 1987, I made five visits. Many people still wore the blue worker suits favored by Mao, and there were mainly bicycles on the roads; private cars were illegal except for government officials. Things have changed. People are smartly dressed in Western clothes and most of them seem busy and affluent. Beijing is an unrelenting traffic jam; pollution hangs heavy in the air.



Swimmer, 2005. Color soft ground etching with aquatint and gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 20 x 16"; image size: 11 x 8". Edition 20. Printed by Catherine Brooks.



Mother, 2005. Color direct gravure with aquatint and spit bite and water bite aquatints. Paper size: 25 x 17¾"; image size: 18 x 11¾". Edition 20. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

We visited the first contemporary art gallery in Beijing, founded in 1991, and also a wonderful SoHo-like complex of galleries, artist studios, and cafés in a tree-shaded collection of warehouses slightly outside the city center. We saw a great deal of Western-style installation art, but even more present was broad-brushstroke figure painting. Despite its often radical subject matter and political or sexual overtones, it is reminiscent of the Russian-style social realist painting that most artists in China were doing in the late 1980s.

After Beijing, we went to the desert area of China, the embarkation point of the Silk Road. In the Mogao Caves at the oasis town of Dunhuang are five hundred painted and sculpted grottoes created over the period of a thousand years from the 4th to the 14th centuries by artists funded by merchants hoping to gain divine protection as they set out on perilous trips to the West. We were able to spend time in nine of the caves, filled with art beautifully preserved by the dry air. On the cave walls and ceilings we saw *gongbi* painting in its ancient glory: fine brush-made lines swelling and thinning with expressive poise defining colorful detailed figures of flying dancers (called *apsaras*), musicians (*gandharvas*), and *bodhisattvas* who always have halos and guard different territories of people's lives: compassion, knowledge, the future. *The Diamond Sutra*, the world's oldest printed book (868)



Baby, 2005. Color direct gravure with aquatint, spit bite aquatint and gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 22½ x 22"; image size: 15½ x 16". Edition 20. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

was found in a cave at Dunhuang, and a stanza from it characterizes the feelings I had in that place:

*This fleeting world is like a star at dawn, a bubble
in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a
flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.*

Now, back to Wilson Shieh. He is the son of a trading family, and briefly studied architecture in search of "a stable life." He gave up that idea after a year and transferred to the Chinese University of Hong Kong where he studied traditional painting and received a B.A. in 1994 and an M.F.A. in 2001. The next year, 2002, he had a sell-out exhibition titled "An Alternative Antiquity" at Hong Kong's best art gallery, Grotto Fine Art, and an exhibition in a gallery in Melbourne, Australia. Barbara Toll Curatorial Projects with Jan Abrams Fine Arts showed his work in New York in 2004, and he has been included in several group shows, the most recent being "Past in Reverse: Contemporary Art of East Asia" organized in 2004 by the San Diego Museum of Art and traveling to the Kemper Museum, Kansas City, and the Hood Museum, New Hampshire. In the four years since he

has been out of school his work has entered the collections of the Hong Kong Museum of Art, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, Queensland Art Gallery, Australia, and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, U.K. His career has only just begun.



Wilson Shieh in the Crown Point studio, 2005.

Christopher Knight in a review of the San Diego “East Asia” show in the *Los Angeles Times* says that “with power comes artistic prominence. The American Century is over, and the Chinese Century has begun.” I think he is exaggerating, but it is true that contemporary Chinese art in general is attracting “big money from collectors” now, as a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* pointed out. I noticed that some of the artists listed there (Yue Minjun and Zhang Huan, for example) work in the somewhat social realist style I saw so much of in Beijing. Shieh, being much younger, didn’t learn his craft at the time that style was being taught, and I think he is better off for it. Christopher Knight, in his Los Angeles article, calls Shieh one of the show’s three (in an exhibition of twenty-two) “most compelling artists.” He says Shieh uses “precise contour drawing, transparent colors and amorphous space to render a sense of ageless fragility.”

For my own part, perhaps because of my experience in Dunhuang, I see in Shieh’s work something of China’s great sweeping history, from traders on camels moving across deserts to refined courtiers writing poetry and scholars contemplating convoluted rocks. The past is in Shieh’s style; in his subject matter are the present and the future. We are all caught in history as it moves along seemingly of its own accord. We acquiesce like Shieh’s swimmer, not panicking. Like the sturdy but graceful mother, we protect our children with equanimity. And we believe that human beings, like the robust baby born from nature, will continue through eons to come. Shieh’s work, of course, looks nothing like the *gongbi* paintings in the caves of Dunhuang. There are no asparas or gandharvas or bodhisattvas with halos guarding the future—or are there?

—Kathan Brown



The Lovers, 2005. Color soft ground etching with aquatint and gampi paper chine collé. Paper size: 10¾ x 10¼"; image size: 5¼ x 5¼". Edition 20. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

In the Crown Point Gallery:

Nathan Oliveira: The Figure 1989–2005

Wilson Shieh: Five New Color Etchings

September 23 - November 19, 2005

In the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco:

Four paintings by Wilson Shieh are part of an ongoing exhibition, *In a New Light: The Asian Art Museum Collection*.

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