

And now for your moment of Zen*

By Peter Kirkhoff Eriksen / Oby translation

An intricate tapestry of interwoven prints spreads itself across the extra-fine handmade paper in Jacob Noel's newest work. Two large pieces of nearly 3 by 4 meters dominate the collection, but are complimented by smaller works. All the pieces are monochrome – varying between black, yellow and red inks.

Viewed from a distance Noel's art becomes a blur of repetitious designs. One work forms a spinning vortex that relentlessly draws in your gaze. Another calmly holds your gaze with a light contour of a circle. A couple of pieces cover the entire surface with a myriad of overlapping prints – tiny figures bobbing and weaving before your very eyes. A number of seemingly identical works branch out in a root-like pattern.

No matter what piece grabs your attention, it is impossible to maintain the same perspective for long, and you inevitably move in close to decipher the details. Technically the work is ink on paper – stamped on with a wooden block engraved with the shape of a Bonsai tree. Noel uses blocks in two different sizes, but the motif is always the same.

The block – motif and technique

From an infinite number of possibilities Noel decided on the Bonsai tree as his basic motif. The tree is, of course, a very heavy-handed metaphor – a cliché for all Japanese culture, like for instance the Coca-Cola Company logo in some crude way signifies all that is American.

By choosing the Bonsai tree as the foundation for his collection Jacob Noel also draws upon hundreds of years of tradition and Japanese influence in European art.

In 1854 Japan opened up for international trade. This sparked an interest among European artists for Japanese culture and art. Especially France took to the Japanese influence and a period followed with Japanese-inspired models and motifs. Kimonos and rice paper umbrellas were everywhere in popular French culture, fashion and art. The influence also had formal implications on the Impressionists, who incorporated the portrait format, the diagonal composition and bird's eye view, while the post-Impressionists found new interpretations for the strong contours and vivid unmixed colors of Japanese prints.

Though Noel has traveled and lived in many of the big cities of the world – including Tokyo – the Bonsai tree is not supposed to express Japonism. The purpose of traveling is the same as the trip around the surface of Noel's works; estrangement as the first step to see the world anew.

The choice of motif is a cliché that distances itself from the viewer and becomes anonymous – devoid of meaning – through eternal repetition. This of course can be compared to the use of clichés and repetition in Pop art, which reflects the mechanics of

commercialism and uses it as a strategy of art in an endless re-production of well-known motifs, celebrities and other works of art. Andy Warhol's silk prints use cliché and the block and ultimately suggest that art (and the process of making it) is mere production. Something that does not require any particular talent and something that, at least in principle, anybody could do.

Working with the stamping technique and his wooden block, Noel takes a similar approach to making art. It takes no particular technical or artistic skill to stamp the ink onto the paper. But in the relative simplicity of the process Noel experiences a freedom of not having to exert himself so damn much. Noel thus distances himself from the role as artist, becomes anonymous and his presence, in this own work, evaporates. Instead he can concentrate on being in the process.

Where the Surrealists tried to reach their unconsciousness and had the process take over by letting the pen, or the brush, flow freely and spontaneously, Noel provokes a loss of control both for himself and the viewer of the work through different means. One inky stamp takes over from the next and spreads across the paper as the process repeats itself over and over. As the interwoven patterns spring forth we are seduced – the viewers and the artist – and move towards a state of letting-go. The extraction of meaning breaks down and we must surrender to the experience in the space between the individual symbol and the whole – being with the image, not reading it.

State over message

The image flows and flutters. It is impossible to comprehend all the little details and overlapping patterns. Rhythm and proximity is the only perceivable order. And when connections break down – meaning disappears and we must let go. There is nothing to understand. The tiny Bonsai trees stop being a symbol.

And there it is; our moment of Zen. The state of mind defies explanation. But we can feel the effect.

* From John Stewart's *Daily Show*. Your moment of Zen is a repeated sequence that rounds up the daily show with a moment of political absurdity that often inspires disbelief.