

How I discovered the woodcut

When the six female portrait paintings were exhibited at the Kunsthalle Basel in 1986, I felt a little uncomfortable in the presence of the women. They suddenly struck me as too lifelike, triggering a kind of 'Pygmalion effect'. Moreover, when a critic wrote that it must be sad for Johanna to be packed in a box, I felt the need to remove and obscure their faces. It was then I opted for the woodcut as a new medium. It is probably the least suitable method of producing a realistic depiction true to my intentions: without lines, but with fluid transitions between light and dark. I had to invent a new technique for the purpose. A number of small-scale experiments failed to provide a satisfactory solution. One day, however, I projected a slide of the then 18-year-old Natascha onto one of the ready-prepared 105 by 90.5 cm pear wood blocks and began hollowing out holes in it with a 1mm gouge. I did that for seven long years without once taking up a paint brush.

The concept

The creative process comprises three main steps: the photographic work, the selection of the models from the wealth of photographic material and their transformation into a painting or woodcut, which mostly takes a year to complete.

Why not wood engravings?

Some people think – quite wrongly – that my woodcuts should be called wood engravings. When I was thirteen years old, I was in an art shop where I came across instructions on how to make woodcuts in a little book I found, which I asked my father to buy. The dust cover had a picture of Emil Nolde's *The Prophet* on it. This little book was the source of inspiration for my first woodcut. But, more importantly, it stated in black and white that a woodcut is made in long wood with the help of a gouge – which is exactly how I do it. In a wood engraving, by contrast, you use a burin and work in end-grain wood. That's the difference.

The making of a woodcut

First of all you have a lime tree which is felled and sawn up. The joiner selects suitable planks and glues them together to form a fine woodblock. Not long after, it hangs as a finished monochrome dark blue work of art on the large white studio wall. But I am a realist painter. The selected slide model is now projected onto the block and I begin carving little notches out of the wood with my gouge. In doing so I destroy the blue monochrome picture. A long period of concentrated work gradually yields a visible realistic drawing. Bright spots of light appear on the block in the warm tone of the wood; later on in the printing process it is the colour of the Japan paper. The reason I have devoted myself for such a long time to this new woodcut technique is that it enables me to realise my vision of a realistic monochrome picture. On the other hand, I am fascinated by the fact that it is the light which illuminates the paper; it appears mysteriously from the depths of the colour space and is quite distinct from the white paint applied with a brush in traditional white heightening.

The skin of the cloud – Kumohadamashi Japan paper

Maria, Nik and I watch as the handmade Japan paper we ordered measuring an incredible 276 x 380 cm is produced by a handful of men and

women – some young, others a little older – under the guidance of the master, Heizaburo Iwano. Papers of this size are made solely to order and only during a few days in summer. They require a broad, high-roofed workshop, in the middle of which stands a large tub containing the paper pulp. In retrospect, the whole paper-making procedure seems to me like a well-rehearsed, light-hearted play directed by Heizaburo in which all the actors perform slow, synchronous movements lasting for about twelve minutes until, finally, a freshly made paper is laid to one side and the procedure begins anew. The light, which is rather gloomy but still illuminates the faces of the actors, the bright costumes of the young women and all the wet and fluid elements, reinforces the theatrical nature of the proceedings. There is also the soporific sloshing of the water, which regularly makes me nod off as I lean against a bale of mulberry fibres. All this continues until the late afternoon, by which time a stack of fresh, dripping wet papers has been formed between layers of thin cotton cloth. I shut my eyes again and think of what awaits me before my colour woodcuts become visible on all the sheets.

The models

One step out of the house and we are in the midst of a natural garden. This is where the originals I have immortalised exist. The butterbur, the shadow grass, the 'seasons copse' and, down in the valley, the wild Schwarzwasser river. If I look across the valley to the west, I can see the house in which Silvia grew up, a farmer's daughter and the model in several of my pictures.

Maria in Guadeloupe

In 1985, Maria and I flew to the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe with its secluded sandy beaches lined by coconut trees. We bathed in the limpid, turquoise water. We climbed up the Soufrière volcano and waded in the streams of the rain forest in which there were neither predatory animals

nor poisonous snakes. Back home again, I looked at the over one hundred Guadeloupe slides on the light table, but none of them was suitable as the subject for a picture. There was a fine nude photo of Maria asleep in the half-shade near the beach. But the time did not yet seem right to transfer the slide to the medium of a woodcut or painting. Seventeen years were to pass before I rediscovered the slide of Maria in the photo archive. Intrigued, I projected it onto the wall. By zooming the projector in and out I was able to determine the size of the woodcut and resolved to use the slide as the model for a monumental woodcut.

A day of printing

I averted any possibility of duplication by making each impression unique in colour. In the colouring of woodcuts it is not the case that umpteen shades are selected at random just to produce as many colour variants as possible. On the contrary, the colouring always derives from a vision you have the evening before or often the morning of a day spent printing and it fits the subject of the respective woodcut. You might say that the more realistic a depiction is, above all in landscapes, the more limited the colouring. The *Triptychon Schwarzwasser*, for example, is limited to watery shades ranging from light to dark and is very remote from the fine blue colour of a charming lake.