

Decalogo

By Brett Littman

Paolo Canevari's recent project entitled *Decalogo*, a commission for the Calcografia Nazionale Roma, directly inverts our expectations of how prints operate. Here the plates themselves become the primary art object rather than the prints on paper. Canevari's long term interest in printing began when he was a young art student in Rome and learned how to engrave and etch plates. Since that time Canevari has incorporated the logic of printing into his work and has used these skills to produce his large scale graphite drawings composed with bold energetic marks.

For *Decalogo*, which in Italian means "rules to live by", Canevari produced 10 large-scale 40" x 60" etched copper plates and prints (ed. of 10) with the assistance of the master printers at the Calcografia Nazionale. In this exhibition, however, the viewer is confronted with a paradox. Although Canevari employs traditional engraving techniques he purposefully created the plates as discrete objects whose end goal is sculptural rather than just being the printing vehicle. The plates have been bent and mounted on the wall and are displayed independently of the prints. This is rare as one does not often see the plate itself displayed as a work of art. As well, since the plate is mounted it can no longer be archived or reprinted thus canceling one of its main "raisons d'être." There is a certain ironic statement being made here by Canevari with these sculptural prints - since the Calcografia Nazionale Roma currently has more than 30,000 plates in its archive and is primarily responsible for overseeing the re-printing of major historical works by old master artists and architects. By showing the plates, Canevari focuses our attention on their impressive and technically challenging scale (these are the largest prints ever made at the center) and the role that the quality and density of the lines on the plate play in creating the print on the paper. A word about the process - these copper plates, are first ground with wax to create an engraving surface and then the wax is cut into with spurs, rowels and knives to articulate the depth of the lines that will form the image. After the engraving is set the plate is "bit" with acid which is left on for varying durations depending on the depth of the cut and the desired effect on the plate. The images have been etched into the plate so that they would be readable on the plate surface rather than on the print itself. By choosing this method Canevari determines that any text present in the resulting print will read backwards - which also reflects the secondary character of the print in this project.

In terms of the content each plate signifies an iconic image from Canevari's personal visual lexicon that he has used in recent videos and drawings. There is no subterfuge in the images themselves - they are challenging, provocative and direct in their message. One set of six plates and prints use conflagrations as their main image. The burning gun, skull, dress on a cross, tree, Roman Coliseum, and a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* all remind us the current political instability in countries like Italy, Iraq, Iran, and The Republic of Georgia. These gothic decadent images of torched objects and places highlight the destructive property of fire and provide an excellent opportunity for Canevari to best exploit the inherent relationship between drawing and etching. Representing fire in a drawing, plate or print is not an easy task but Canevari is able to

capture the fleeting kinetic energy released when something burns through his total control and knowledge of how to work the wax ground plate.

The second set of four plates and prints show an ominous tire swing on a hangman's wooden frame, a dog chained to a tire, a bible with a gun placed on it and a man with arms outstretched to catch a falling bomb. These images are more static than the fire images but no less powerful. In my mind, these are meditations on personal freedom, destiny and the negative effects of religion on our society.

These exploration of these ideas are not new territory for the artist - he has been mining the harrowing nature of war and torture in much of his recent work. *Welcome to Oz*, 2004 shown in the P.S.1 courtyard in 2004, was made with inner tube tires and a wooden frame to simulate the barbed wire outside of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. It was stark reminder of the newspaper photos showing smiling American military personnel outside of the prison where terrible atrocities were being committed. In Robert Storr's 2007 Venice Biennial, Canevari's arresting video "Bouncing Skull" showed a young Serbian boy kicking a rubber skull like a soccer ball in a bombed out courtyard of a building. Powerful in its economy of means – this video is one of the best examples of Canevari's clear vision when it comes to difficult material.

For Canevari, the *Decalogo* series then is a logical extension of his continued investigation into how these dynamic images reveal political and social crisis in a variety of media. These plates and prints reverberate on technical and emotional levels for us – well beyond our first or second viewings – and bolster Canevari's acute and perceptive understand of the times we are living in.

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