

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Lingen, Melby, Miller

By Elleree Erdos

"Proof: Lingen—Melby—Miller"
Planthouse, New York
27 June – 22 August 2014

A year after taking root in a vacant flower shop on West 28th Street in New York City, Planthouse has become a home to daring exhibitions by emerging artists as well as a supportive venue for prints. "Proof" was the gallery's first project to include the work of eminent artists such as Chuck Close, Joel Shapiro and Vija Celmins. The exhibition's focus, however, was not these "big names" but the critical contribution of three New York-based master printers: Ruth Lingen, Jennifer Melby and Leslie Miller.

Each has been running a press with a distinct area of expertise since the 1980s. As the director of the Brooklyn studio Pace Paper, Lingen works closely with artists of Pace Prints on papermaking, letterpress and artists' books; Melby works in intaglio and publishes through Jennifer Melby Editions; and Miller's Grenfell Press publishes artists' books and prints in woodcut, linocut and pochoir. Planthouse founders Brad Ewing and Katie Michel culled 41 works from the presses' flat files—etchings, woodcuts, reduction linocuts, handmade paper and extravagant explorations of mixed processes.

Though the show's theme was clearly stated in the press release and title, on the walls the prints were allowed to speak for themselves. The checklist did not explain which prints came from which presses, though techniques and specialties could be matched; the added detective work encouraged viewers to pay attention to process and aspects of connoisseurship in a way that rarely happens in galleries. In the "Cooler" (the back room that once served as a flower refrigerator), prints were densely hung, salon style, but in the two main spaces, each of the 24 works on view was treated as a masterpiece, elegantly framed and given ample breathing room. Streamlined wood tables by the sculptor Grayson Cox served as pedestals for the artists' books.

Arranged in chronological groupings, the prints engaged each other in



Vija Celmins, detail of *Wood Engraving, No Title* (1995), wood engraving, 16 x 14 inches. Edition of 47.

the space: the large skull in Jim Dine's *Head from Darker River* (1998, printed by Lingen) fixed its grinning gaze on the scrupulously modeled features of a Chuck Close reduction linoleum cut self-portrait, *S.P. II* (1997, Lingen also), whose deliberate grid echoed the repetitive marks of Celmins' *Wood Engraving, No Title* (1995, printed by Miller). Bringing the printer's role to the fore, "Proof" asked that the viewer consider something like Dine's skull not simply as an aestheticized, metaphor-laden sign, but also as a masterpiece of its peculiar medium: cardboard relief etching.

Robert Gober's unsettling doctor's appointment card, *Urology Appointment* (2007, Lingen), is usually considered from a conceptual standpoint—a play on the

commonplace object, resituated as art. But in the context of "Proof" the physical differences between an actual appointment card and the Gober (made with wood engraving, lead type and polymer engraving) demanded recognition.

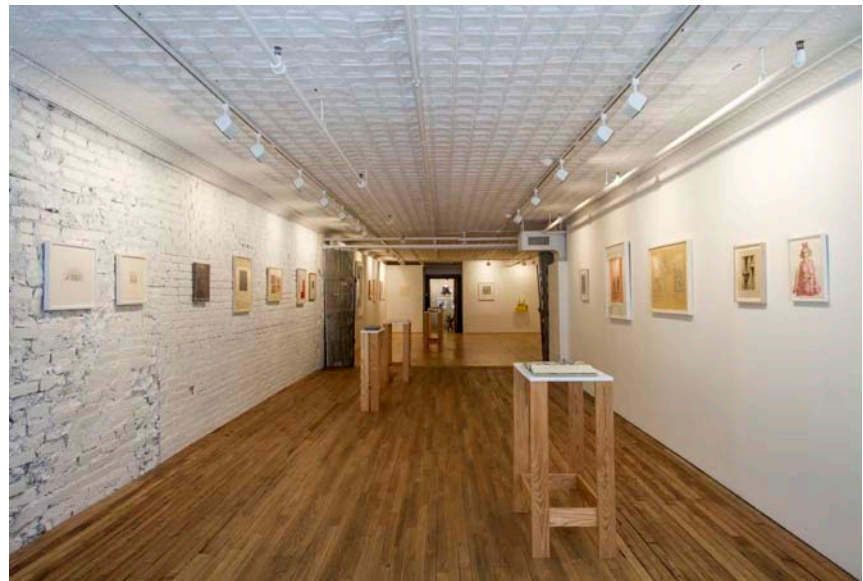
In another project printed by Lingen, Jessica Stockholder and poet Jeremy Stigler collaborated on *Led Almost by my Tie* (2006), a book combining letterpress, lithography, digital and collage affixed to balsa wood, set within a sculptural wall unit. Stockholder drew the lithographs and Lingen did the typography and printing onto papers, mylars and other plastics, including shower curtain material, resulting in a work with components by both the artists' hands as well as the printer's. Two etchings printed by Melby,



Above left: Robert Gober, *Urology Appointment* (2007), wood engraving, lead type, and polymer engraving, 2 x 3 1/2 inches. *Unique image.* **Above right:** Robert Ryman, *Second Conversation* (2013), relief from linoleum and rubber, 16 x 12 inches. Edition of 28. **Below right:** Installation view of “Proof: Ruth Lingen—Jennifer Melby—Leslie Miller.”

similar in size and refinement, use the medium to quite different ends. William Bailey’s serene, black-and-white etching, *Still Life* (c. 1983), is abstracted from reality and drawn from memory. Certain details—impossible overlaps and improbable shadows—reveal the fiction and prompt the viewer to wonder what actually existed as the image source. Mark Tansey’s small color etching *Interview II* (1983) hung nearby. A punning homage to Elihu Vedder’s *The Questioner of the Sphinx* (1863), Tansey’s print affects the look of a historical photograph but the microphone the young man holds up to the mouth of the sphinx turns the situation into a New Yorker-style cartoon. (The year after the etching, Tansey made a related oil painting, *Secret of the Sphinx* (Homage to Elihu Vedder)).

Robert Ryman’s linoleum and rubber relief print, *Second Conversation* (2013), is first and foremost a conceptual object—a flat, off-white field. A faint strip of text running sideways down the center functions as Ryman’s signature: “Ryman 03.” At the top, the work is editioned: “PP” (for “printer’s proof”) appears above the Roman numeral III. Finally, two nails interrupt the work’s center and pin it to



the wall. Ryman’s work acquires meaning from the walls and space around it. Here the placement of the nails—aesthetically spare and practical in purpose—begs us to question the boundaries of the work of art. Two faint arrows at the top left and top middle punctuate this inquiry and dictate the orientation of the work (the sideways signature is potentially confusing). The inclusion of such a visually austere object in this process-focused exhibition encouraged a deeper consideration of the methods and materials of creation.

As Michel noted, “prints can be shrouded in mystery.” Too often we view objects simply as images or representa-

tions, overlooking the technical intricacies and numerous choices that lead to their creation. “Proof” invited a conversation about process—the logistics, materials, skills, interactions and decisions that underlie any body of work. Acknowledging the printer’s role opens up the discussion and elucidates some, if not all, of that mysterious shroud. ■

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