

Mining the Surface

Review of Mattew Shlian by Sasha Tochilovsky

We are presented with two pieces; the first piece is 16' x 18", and is printed using a red ball-point pen on an off-white paper. The second piece is 30" x 19" and is printed using a black and red ball-point pens on a slightly heavier cream paper.

Looking at the pieces I think of topography, of mapping, of mountains and rivers. I also think of the coldness, detachment and rationality that mapping entails. Once something is mapped it becomes commodifiable.

Art is primarily a question of form, not of content –Paul Rand

The reason I start with this quote is because the first thoughts I had when viewing these pieces is the incessant relationship of form and content. Are these purely formal pieces? Is there more to them than meets the eye? Do we critique the content or the form? I think that in this case we can agree that the content is the form. Which leads me to consider the generation of these pieces. Is there a concept? I would argue that the concept is in the process. What unites these two pieces, which are formally different, is the process by which they are made. I think it might be safe to describe that process as translation. From my understanding of it, the final form is the result of a computer software translating a specific form/model which is entered into it. There is probably no need to go into more details as it may not be necessary for this interpretation. What is important, I think, is the idea that a computer, a machine, creates the final form. From this follows that the computer makes all the crucial decisions, it dictates the aesthetic. I see a danger in working in such a manner; the danger being that the artist is no longer responsible for the work. This absolving of responsibilities makes it hard to objectively view the piece and protects it from criticism. The solution that I see is to treat the results not as a finished product but as a step towards one. In other words, to take the results that the computer generates and to continue to work with them. The flip side of this is that such a method can invariably produce unpredictable results. But I am really drawn to such unpredictability, and to chance which exists in working in such a manner.

I would like to view this work through the critical framework of the Russian Formalists, who formulated the theory of *defamiliarization*. This was a literary theory which attempted to analyze how authors and artists make things noticeable. I quote Victor Shklovsky, one of the originators of this theory. "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important." (from "Art as Device"). Viewed through such a lens I think that the pieces are quite successful at making the objects unfamiliar. The forms are complex and the viewing time required

to absorb the piece is prolonged. The forms are seductive enough to warrant investigation and interpretation. The only problem that I see is the absence of the actual object. The object is no longer requisite for an interpretation, because we are so far removed from it. I for one would be interested in seeing the generation of the piece reflected in the final form. There is fertile ground to investigate the relationship between the form in the beginning and at the end of the process.

Looking at the work I can't help but think of the work of John Maeda, especially the series of posters he made for the Morisawa corporation. The posters were generated using a computer code, which "drew" the forms, which in turn were derived from the Morisawa logo. The similarity is that this work is also intended to be seen in its printed form. The difference is that Maeda knew the forms he wanted to achieve, thus manipulating the code to arrive at the desired result. The computer became a tool to create something quite complex and quite precise. The other reference that I am reminded of is Peter Saville's cover for Joy Division's "Unknown Pleasures" record. I get a very strong reference to music and to sound wave visualization from the larger piece. The peaks and the rhythms of music, loops and patterns are visual associations that I make. The smaller piece reminds me of the Japanese Sumi-e paintings; both through its color scheme and through the delicacy of the line.

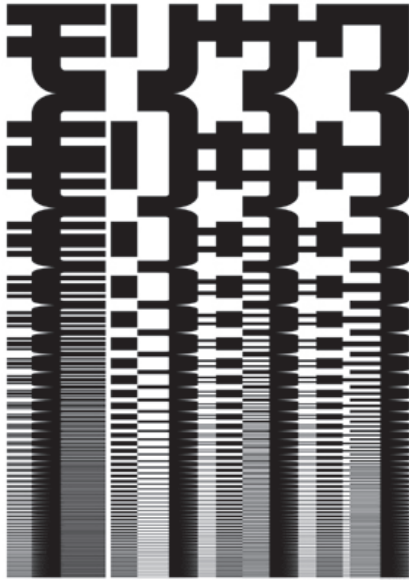
I would also like to bring up some formal issues relating to the pieces at hand. On the purely formal level I think that the smaller piece is much more successful. It holds my attention longer, and it invites me to engage in its forms. Conversely I think the large piece lacks a central focal point to retain my attention. The overall monotony can be attributed to the relatively same height of the peaks. I also feel that with a piece of such dimensions the viewer would be tempted to navigate through the piece; unfortunately I feel there isn't enough clarity or path to lead the eye through the piece. Where both pieces succeed is in their use of color. The red and black colors are certainly striking; they help to create a strong statement, and add drama to the pieces. I am also drawn to the complete enclosure of the larger piece; the entire form is a single closed shape. It is entirely self-sufficient. For me the most interesting parts are the sections where the lines overlap and create really dense areas of tone. The modeling in those sections is really interesting, especially as a contrast to all of the lines. The shaded areas also speak of the tool that created the piece. I appreciate those areas because they reflect the limitations of the ball point pen. They serve more as an artifact of the tool than the lines. For me they also highlight the idea of perception. At what distance do the lines become a solid shape? The other really interesting aspect of this piece is that there are no real curves. All the perceived curves are made up of straight lines; which again brings me to the theme of perception; to the capacity of our eyes/ brains to interpret visual information in a certain way. A theme I am happy to indulge in.

Text, visual references

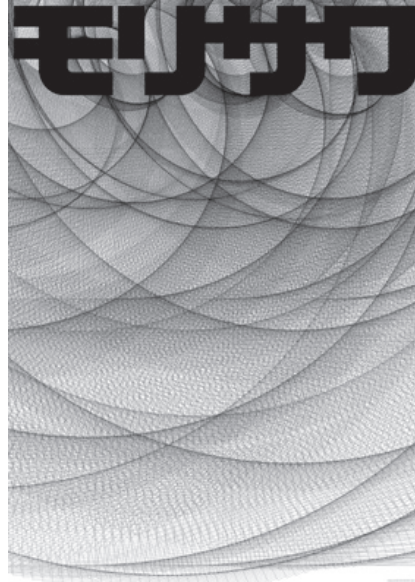
Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics by Peter Steiner

Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays edited by L.T. Lemon

Maeda@Media by John Maeda



John Maeda



John Maeda



Peter Saville



Sumi-e painting