

Review of Alexander Tochilovsky by Cleon Peterson

Sasha presents one 114 x 19 inch ink jet print. The print can be divided into columns measuring 12.5 x 5.5 inches. The mid-section is seven columns wide and three columns high, framed on the right and left by two panels one column wide and three columns high.

In the mid top panel, set over varying skylscapes, reads the word ortolan 1.. Directly below running horizontally is a series of etchings from Diderot's Encyclopedia. The etchings, when read from left to right, depict the capture, preparation, and consumption of a bird. Below the etchings, faceless photos of hands interact with a full-scale cutout etching of the bird. These photos reenact the scene above. In the left panel is a white silhouette of a bird; in the right panel, a silhouette of the artist with the bird in his mouth.

I first begin by investigating the word ortolan. An ortolan is the French name for a small bird resembling a finch but with a dull orange brownish coloration and a greenish grey head.

Ortolans used to be hunted in large numbers, caught with nets, kept alive in artificially lightened, or darkened rooms, and fed with oats and millet. In a short time they became enormously fat and were killed for the table. For centuries a rite of passage for French gourmets has been the eating of the ortolan. These tiny birds—captured alive, force-fed, then drowned in Armagnac—were roasted whole and eaten that way, bones and all, while the diner draped his head with a linen napkin to preserve the precious aromas and, some believe, to hide from God. 2.

Next I investigate the etchings. These are illustrations are from Diderot's 18th century Encyclopedia, *The Universal Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts*. Originally published in France 1751-1772, this encyclopedia was filled with over 2900 plates. The encyclopedia is considered one of the most ambitious attempts in modern history to organize and represent the technology of the time for the purpose of dissemination. This was in an age where merchants wanted to keep knowledge of the mechanical arts a secret.

In looking at the history of the bird and the encyclopedia illustrations I can't help but travel back in time to 18th century France. Reading the work from left to right, one sees that the bird becomes a symbol of the individual in France's pre-Enlightenment political environment—beginning free, in its natural state, much like Rousseau's noble savage and then becoming a captive—captured, controlled, and eventually consumed by the aristocracy and monarchy.

The Enlightenment philosophers thought that they were oppressed by the long period of tradition and superstition left over from the middle ages and the tyranny of the current

corrupted monarchy. Their only hope for escaping these times was in replacing the arbitrary power of the state with an elite group of intellectuals who through rational, progressive, liberal, and scientific ideas could lead the citizens to liberty and perfection.

The organic illustrations and photography are strongly contrasted by the left and right panels' geometric grids, and the linear geometric interior-like spaces framing the mid-sections etchings. The grids might speak of the transference from faith in religious dogma and focus on the afterlife to the world of knowledge, reason, science, and independence. Our last step outward (to the left and right edges of the work) brings us to our protagonist transformed in form from bird, to man eating bird. This is an image of man consuming his own nature and in so doing becoming the glutton and the oppressor. This dualism illustrates the sometimes unrealized slight shift between oppressed to oppressor as one moves up in social and knowledge status.

Aesthetically this work uses truly postmodern devices: eclectic imagery and narratives connecting our world of today to the past; narrative contradiction; jouissance; and the use of words with image.

My question is this: Is this an aesthetic that is new, or pushing what we've already experienced? Soren Kierkegaard remarked that "Foresight is really hindsight, a reflection of the future revealed to the eye when it looks back on the past." But, when applied to the aesthetics we are seeing today, I feel like the straight use of other people's illustration leaves me with a vacant unfulfilled feeling. This could be because of the easy access everyone in society has to this material. This piece leaves me longing to see more of the artist's own individual mark in the work—even if it is only a few steps away from the model from which it is derived. Aesthetically, I think the most interesting element of this work is the photography. However, I feel that its narrative becomes redundant because of its point by point re-telling of the story represented in the illustrations above.

Sasha's work is reminiscent of: Manuscript book of Roberto Valturios (Renaissance), Dada Magazine Cover (1922), Max Ernst collage (1934), The Pushpin Group (1957), Kevin Zucker (1999).

1. Hoefler & Frere-Jones, a contemporary throwback to early-nineteenth century burlesque letter design

1. (wikipedia.org / Ortolan bunting)

