

# IMPRINT

SPRING 2014

VOLUME 49

NUMBER 3



## CONTEMPORARY ART IN PRINT

THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE PRINT COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA INC.  
printmaking + works on paper + digital art + artists' books



# Don't say the P word

## Intrepid Artmaking at STPI

by Emily Kiddell, Melbourne-based writer

Emi Eu, Director of STPI Creative Workshop and Gallery (formerly known as the Singapore Tyler Print Institute) is keenly aware that 'print' is something of a dirty word in broader contemporary art world consciousness. As a discipline, it has not enjoyed the reevaluation and elevation that drawing and ceramics have been subject to in recent years. In a fashion resembling the blinkered attitudes that reinforce any class system, significant artworks that employ print techniques run the risk of being overlooked for critical attention thanks to their form. An artist who works exclusively in print might be pejoratively labelled a printmaker, as though incapable of imbuing meaning beyond technical prowess. Outside the art world, 'print' usually means something else altogether: mere reproduction. It is this overly commercial connotation that seems to have had the most damning effect — except, perhaps, where a print or edition deliberately subverts or exploits this element in keeping with a conceptual framework.

Preoccupied with painting and sculpture, Eu admits that she didn't have as much time for works on paper until she experienced a misadventure while interning at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the mid '90s. Though she had arranged a placement in Painting, a last minute shuffle owing to an overburdened curator saw her relegated to the Print Department: a place, one curator revealed to Eu, that still sometimes received transferred calls from people looking for posters. She was surprised: 'That kind of made me feel good because I realised that it wasn't just here in Asia that people think of print as pure reproduction and copy.'<sup>1</sup>

There, for the first time, she encountered Parkett — a Swiss organisation that has been collaborating with leading contemporary artists to produce books and limited edition works since 1984 — and the realm of the multiple. Her understanding of what a print, or an edition, could be exploded.

Today, STPI has evolved into something of an artist's wonderland. One is hard-pressed to find a comparable organisation. During a recent conversation between two previous resident artists, Ryan Gander and Rirkrit Tiravanija, STPI was described as a kind of creative resort peopled by Jedi Print Masters.<sup>2</sup> Both artists are known for their conceptual rigour. In the case of Tiravanija, whose practice has been closely associated with the relational aesthetics movement (meaning the audience's interaction within a constructed environment — the experience of the work — is the art), the residency challenged and allowed him to step outside his usual performance-based practice and make a series of object-based

artworks that remained loyal to his concerns. The results, a spectacular series of 2- and 3-D 'time machines', formed the exhibition *Time Travelers Chronicle (Doubt): 2014 — 802,701 A.D.*, which STPI presented at Art Basel 45.

In the spirit of time travel, let's go back a bit. When Ken Tyler of the eponymous Tyler Graphics in Mount Kisco, New York, announced his retirement and proposed the Singapore Government buy his archive as a teaching aid, the timing couldn't have been better. It was the year 2000, and the Singapore Government had just opened three new museums with a view to positioning Singapore as an arts hub. Tyler was enlisted as a consultant to help set up a workshop that would entice and foster leading artists of the region and beyond. 'The whole angle was that instead of buying the contemporary arts from abroad, why can't we make the arts here, and therefore, [create] other repercussions and benefits for students, and members of the broader arts community?' Eu recalls. But even with such powerful support and motivation, the early days were challenging: 'There was a lot of resistance... [from] people who didn't see what it could become. They just didn't understand what print [could] do for artists and collectors alike. And we're still working on that,' says Eu.

These days, STPI is known internationally as a creative hub. 'We're no longer a traditional print publisher. STPI is really a place where artists come to discover and [explore] the possibilities [of what] they can do by employing what we have here.' And that is: incredible facilities, a highly skilled team, and an intrepid attitude. Eu's directorship supports and informs a situation where meaningful intersections between concept and technique in artmaking are celebrated. Artists are invited to interrogate traditional printmaking processes — to adapt media to fit and extend their broader individual practices. In many cases it has been an artist's technical naiveté when it comes to printmaking that has afforded the workshop's greatest technical breakthroughs. Eu emphasises that the most exciting breakthroughs are the ones that feature a parallel conceptual development that influences an artist's broader practice.

For example, when Japanese animation artist Tabaimo was approached to work at STPI she was somewhat hesitant: 'I thought I would [not] be able to make good works because of the ideas I had about print before I came here.' Initially, she found the open-ended possibilities presented by the dedicated team and vast facilities intimidating. 'There are so many things available for me here that I [was not] challenging myself to think deeper. I lost confidence in making the right judgements.' Best known for her hand-drawn, surreal animation works, such as *Japanese*

*Commuter Train* (2001) and *Haunted House* (2003), a return to the habits and themes of her outside practice helped her overcome inertia: 'At first I kept drawing to dispel my anxiety. I drew so many insects that my fears faded away.' These drawings led the artist to meditate on and bring form to themes of hidden anxiety relating to the passage of time, the most impressive of these being the *Wallpaper* series, which embraced and exploited STPI's print and papermaking possibilities. Printed layers are stripped away to reveal walls pulsating with dream-like glimpses of past days, past worlds. The experience was something of a revelation for Tabaimo: 'I realised how interesting it can be to be more specific in everything you set your eyes on. I may have become a much more stubborn, difficult and troublesome artist.'

Another project that embodies STPI's ambitions, and a personal favourite of Eu's, is the work produced by Qiu Zhijie for the exhibition *The Bridge. Nanjing. Under The Heaven* in 2007–08. Bringing an extensive body of research surrounding the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge — an important symbol of independence and innovation during Mao's Cultural Revolution — Zhijie was especially concerned with one aspect of the bridge's history: the thousands of suicides that have occurred at the site to date. Having studied printmaking, but renowned for his performance and video art, Zhijie was no stranger to many of the processes on offer. However, it was his introduction to STPI's paper mill that triggered his imagination. He produced detailed schematics for elaborate, moulded paper works. These works formed the foundation of a hugely ambitious project that involved multiple strands addressing aspects of China's social, political and architectural history, including the establishment of a suicide prevention foundation.<sup>4</sup> Later the project evolved further into what became the major exhibition *Breaking the Ice: A History*, presented at Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art, Beijing, in 2009.

For all its focus on innovation, STPI is also dedicated to the appreciation and analysis of what has come before. On the back of Tiravanija's experimental show, which included chromed plinths displaying 3-D printed objects, as well as 2-D interactive heat-sensitive prints, comes *Edo Pop: The Graphic Impact of Japanese Print*. Presented in conjunction with the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Edo Pop draws clear parallels between Ukiyo-e artists of the Edo period in Japan (1615–1868) and those of the 1950's Western Pop Art movement. Works by Ukiyo-e masters, including Hokusai and Hiroshige, are presented alongside contemporary artists — such as Wilson Shieh, Tabaimo, and Masami Teraoka





**Rirkrit Tiravanija,**

*Eighth Chapter: Return to the unknowing desire, the further one travels the closer one returns (to doubt), Spongebob's the surreal realm of nothingness, he wakes up under the tree, again, 2013,* screenprint, metal foil, cast paper, STPI handmade cotton paper, stainless steel pedestal, 3D printed object, paper: 269.5 x 269.5 cm (4 sheets), pedestal: 100.5 x 18 x 18 cm, object: 4.5 x 8.5 x 8.5 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and STPI.

**Qiu Zhijie** in the STPI artist studio. Image courtesy of STPI.



— demonstrating the movement's continuing relevance.

In a similar effort to promote print's continuing relevance more broadly, STPI has been exhibiting at international art fairs since 2008. 'It became my personal crusade: we have to get into Art Basel because this is the place where not only the collectors, but also museum curators and directors converge.' In 2013, and again this year, STPI exhibited at Art Basel Hong Kong; and for the first time, in 2014, was selected to exhibit at Art Basel 45 in Switzerland. However, it is somewhat disappointing to Eu that STPI has, so far, been separated out from the main exhibitors as part of the Edition program. 'When Basel first started, 45 years ago, for quite some time people just went to the Editions section, and [it] was really flourishing. But now it is the other way around. It's almost kind of dying out.' Considering STPI's progressive spirit, and that it produces many unique works as well as

editions, Eu cannot see why they can't be part of the main program. There is a sense that to be grouped with other print publishers is to be tainted. 'While STPI would never do offset prints of an existing work, there are people still doing that and they bring them to the fair. I mean, what can I say? It has to start within.' However, Eu acknowledges: 'it is not easy for others to do what we do because there is a very large amount of money involved and that's why there are so few workshops left in the world.'

When asked how artists are selected, Eu mentions a wish list devised by every member of the workshop and gallery teams. Many of the artists from that list have since completed residencies. Ultimately, though, it is an expanding list and Eu has the final say on who is invited. 'I have to be sure that both parties will benefit from this marriage.' There is no denying it can be a lengthy and delicate process. Eu first approached Rirkrit Tiravanija in 2005. 'I was kind of like a stalker,' Eu says.

'We laugh about that now.'

So will STPI continue to make edition works? The answer is yes, if it makes sense in the context of the artist's work. But the key thing is: there is no formula. 'We're different from one month to the next, and it's because [of] the artists... every day is different here,' Eu laughs. •

**References**

1. Emi Eu, interview with the author, 13 June 2014. All subsequent quotes attributed to Eu are from this interview.
2. Anna Dickie, 'Ocula Conversation: Rirkrit Tiravanija and Ryan Gander', *Ocula Magazine*, viewed 14 June 2014, [www.ocula.com/magazine/conversations/rirkrit-tiravanija-and-ryan-gander/?preview=true](http://www.ocula.com/magazine/conversations/rirkrit-tiravanija-and-ryan-gander/?preview=true).
3. Eitaro Ogawa, 'Interview with Tabaimo', *Emerge As*, exhibition catalogue published by STPI, 2010, pp.12-14. All subsequent quotes attributed to Tabaimo are from this interview.
4. Qiu Zhijie, *A Suicidology of the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge: The Bridge. Nanjin. Under the Heaven*, exhibition catalogue published by STPI, 2008, pp. 14-15.