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Rewriting History:
The Press as a Tool for Destruction and Preservation

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Abstract

This statement describes my two bodies of work, *Aufheben* and *Artist-Hero/Squish*, in which I use printmaking processes to rewrite history. In *Artist-Hero/Squish* I mimic canonical paintings of women by modernist male painters and run my quotations of these paintings through the press while the paint is still wet on the canvas. Through this process, I examine, confront, and change the male-dominated history of art. *Aufheben* currently includes one hundred drypoint prints that catalogue the personal history of my mark. This series represents a process of constant change, with individual prints suggesting stages of my process including moments of growth and regression. I frame both of these series through the philosophies of Hans Belting and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel by classifying my processes as either acts of iconoclasm or *Aufheben* (sublation). I also use Jose Roca's definition of a print as encompassing the matrix, the transfer medium, and the receiving surface, to compare my two bodies of work and examine how they address the history of art and the history of my mark.

Art History/My History

I am rewriting history. Although this may seem like a presumptuous claim, history is always being rewritten. As an artist and an art historian, I am critical of history as a construct and eager to change it for the better. I am consciously reexamining and changing the history of my visual output and the history of modern painting. This examination of cultural and personal histories manifests in a series of oil paintings and a series of drypoint prints respectively. My work uses printmaking as both a process and a conceptual framework to explore the creation and destruction of images and the rewriting of history.

My paintings are part of a series entitled *Artist-Hero/Squish*. I mimic prominent works by modernist male painters such as William de Kooning, Henri Matisse, and Ernst Ludwig Kirshchner that depict images of women. While the paint is still wet on the unstretched canvas, I

fold these reproductions and run them through the press, obscuring and changing the image. The paintings keep their original titles, suggesting their genesis. Rather than copying the original paintings, I create unique interpretations of the work. Squishing the painting on the press creates an uncanny doubling that obscures the image. By restretching the canvas after the squish, I reclaim the new painting as my own.



Figure 1
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner,
Nude Figure,
77 3/16 × 25 3/4 in,
oil on canvas, 1907



Figure 2 Emily Mogavero,
Nude Figure (Kirchner),
from *Artist-Hero/Squish*
66 x 34 in, oil on canvas,
April 2016

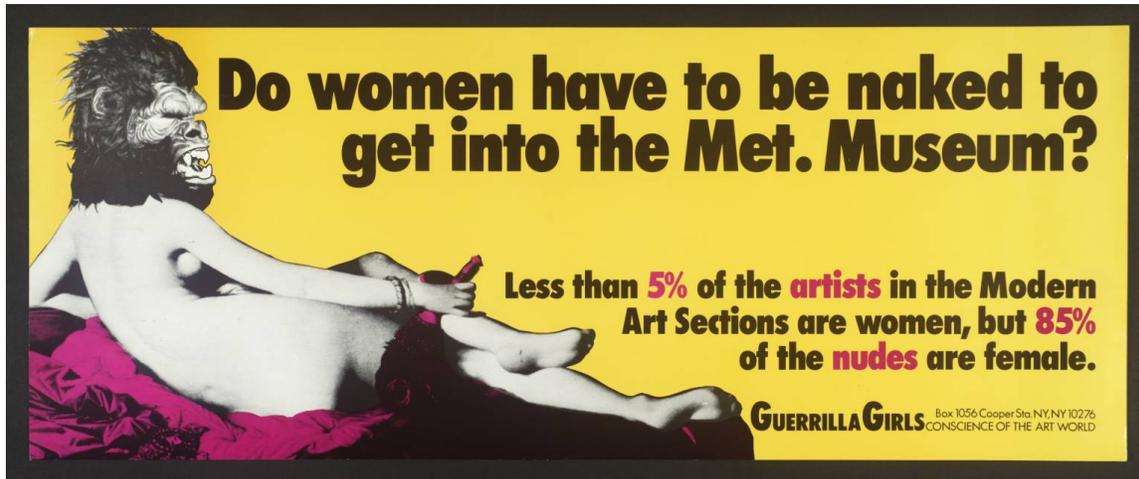


Figure 3 Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met Museum?* from Guerrilla Girls Talk Back, 11 x 31 in, screenprint on paper, 1989

There is urgency to this series. As a woman painter, it is demoralizing to work in medium in which the relationship between man as active creator and woman as passive subject is expected and accepted. In their 1989 poster protesting the representation of women in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guerrilla Girls exclaim, “Less than 5% of artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.” Twenty-five years after this publication, the Metropolitan Museum of Art has had only one solo show by a woman artist (“The Late Show with Stephen Colbert Video”). Art historian, Griselda Pollock cites the “myth of the painter.” She explains, “The image in the West of a lonely, tortured white man. I could run rings around you with great women artists but there isn’t space in the cultural imagination,” describing the prominence of the Artist-Hero myth in western society’s collective understanding of painting (Clark). Even supposedly feminist critics simultaneously praise women painters while trying to fit them into the established masculine construct of painting. For example, critic Jerry Salz asks the contradictory question, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Bad-Boy Artists?” critiquing the lack of institutional success of women artists while forcing them into the existing masculine cultural narrative (Salz). My work challenges the art-historical framing of painting as a masculine discipline.



Figure 4 Emily Mogavero, *Aufheben* installation view showing a selection of drypoints, May 2016

While my paintings react to art history, my drypoint series, *Aufheben* – a term coined by philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel that means to both elevate and abolish – reflects a more immediate personal history (Magee 238). I began this series by making fifty prints from the same zinc plate, which I modified between each print. As I continued, I introduced a second larger plate and began layering them. At the current stage of *Aufheben*, I am working with four zinc plates as well as chine-collé collage. These additional materials were giving to me by teachers and friends. My vocabulary is expanding organically as I introduce new elements into the work, demonstrating my openness to outside forces as my process progresses and grows. The



first chapter of twenty-five prints is housed in a nesting box and each subsequent box holds twenty-five more prints as well as the previous boxes. These boxes are an archive of my mark. I will continue to build more boxes to hold additional prints as I indefinitely create drypoints, emphasizing the organic growth of this project.

Figure 5 Emily Mogavero, *Aufheben* installation view with box May 2016



Figure 6 Reginald Sylvester II, *It All Feels Right*, 42 1/4 × 54 1/2 in, acrylic and oil stick on paper, 2016

Painter Reginald Sylvester II similarly creates process-based works that evolve from previous projects. He describes his work as an organic and intuitive search for his “true visual voice” that will ultimately be unsuccessful (Pace Prints). Like Sylvester’s paintings, my prints record a process of learning and developing with no obtainable end goal.

My drypoints parallel life. We are always growing and changing and are susceptible to forces beyond our control. *Aufheben* reflect this constant change with individual prints suggesting stages of my process including moments of growth and regression.

Printmaking as Picture and Medium

Printmaking is a both a series of processes as well as a conceptual framework in which I locate my work. Curator José Roca defines a print as anything that encompasses a matrix substrate on which the artist makes a mark, a transfer medium, and a receiving surface (Roca 1). In *An Anthropology of Images*, Hans Belting defines an image as a picture that exists in a medium support with a medium being a physical or mental substrate as opposed to an artistic material. He continues, “I would contend that our bodies themselves operate as a living medium by processing, receiving, and transmitting images” (Belting 5). Belting writes about images generally, but his theories can be applied to visual art and printmaking specifically. Through Jose Roca’s components of print and Belting’s discussion of the image, we can understand that the

image on the matrix is preserved, although flipped, and goes through a very literal change of medium as it is printed onto the paper. The multiplicity and variability of the image through the process of printmaking is essential to both *Aufheben* and *Artist-Hero/Squish*.

The Multiple and The Double: Confronting History while Relinquishing Control

My drypoints are not multiples in the traditional sense. They are monoprints preserving the history of my mark. For *Aufheben*, I create my matrixes by drawing intuitively while working under the constraints of a set paper size for each set of twenty-five prints. The common format suggests a narrative that is never complete, with each print existing both as an autonomous collection of marks and as a moment within the series. In my first fifty prints, there is a medium shift in the Belting sense as the image on my plate is printed onto the paper. This change in medium still exists in the later prints, but the layering of plates brings in the element of chance and creates a new image in the final print. Despite relinquishing some level of control in my later drypoints, the multiplicity of drypoint allows me to obsessively archive the history of my mark through the indirect process of the print.

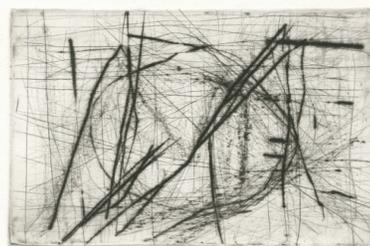


Figure 7 Emily Mogavero, *Aufheben 48*, 7 3/4 x 10 in, drypoint, December 2015



Figure 8 Emily Mogavero, *Aufheben 68*, 13 x 10 in, drypoint and chine-collé, March 2016

My paintings, on the other hand, are multiples of existing artworks, although they deviate from the original paintings extensively. By re-painting original images, I honor canonical masters. I acknowledge the skill of these modernist masters, the merit of their work, and their importance to my artistic lineage. Although I find the passive representation of women in painting problematic, I have learned about painting through the act of mimicking, and I have found parallels between this process and my study of art history. Rather than painting a study of an original artwork by exactly copying the painting's proportions and the artist's color choices, I paint my own interpretations. I acknowledge previous paintings while beginning to rewrite their histories.

My process not only recognizes historical painters by making a second interpretation of their work, but also creates a redoubling of the of the female figure on the canvas when it is folded and run through the press. This multiplicity speaks to the ubiquity of the female figure in painting by presenting the figure, with its multiplied body parts as disturbing or ridiculous. In *Blue Nude (Matisse)* the figure becomes a grotesque insect or animal, with four breasts, four arms, and four legs. The fold and the squish allow for this chaotic doubling while replacing the mark of the brushstroke with the mechanical yet unpredictable mark of the press.



Figure 9 Emily Mogavero, *Blue Nude (Matisse)*, from *Artist-Hero/Squish*, 34 x 52 in, oil on canvas, March 2016

Aufheben and Iconoclasm

In *An Anthropology of Images*, Belting also analyses violence against images or iconoclasm. Belting explains that an image exists between the medium support and the body that processes the image and that “iconoclasm which is violence against images, only succeeds in destroying the medium or medium support of an image” (Belting 5). Destroying the image creates a new image of the act of iconoclasm, but the original image is unharmed in the mind of the viewer.

Using the press to squish my paintings is an act of iconoclasm. I act violently against the painting, destroying my quotation of the original artwork and creating a new, obscured image. This action is not to be confused with violence against women. By being depicted as the passive object in a painting, the painted figure is divorced from life and therefore cannot be equated with an actual person. The act of the reproduction and the squish both acknowledges the modernist work, and symbolically destroys it, creating a new image that suggests the violence it has undergone. The squish is further complicated by the fact that I am not destroying the original artwork, but rather I am destroying my reproduction of it. The squish is symbolic iconoclasm. The original image both remains physically unharmed and is engrained in the medium of collective culture.

A parallel relationship to destruction and preservation is reflected in my prints, which are titled *Aufheben* to reflect this tension. Philosopher Glenn Alexander Magee translates G.W.F. Hegel’s meaning of *aufheben*: “*Aufheben* essentially means to cancel or abolish and to preserve or retain. *Aufheben* can also mean to ‘raise up’...Hegel’s use of *aufheben* often connotes *all* of these meanings simultaneously” (238). I modify my drypoint plates between each print. I draw over the existing marks or scrape away at the plate to erase previous images. Despite this

continual eradication of the image on the plate, a record of each stage of drawing is preserved in its print. Each print represents a separate state or moment this open-ended series. Discussing the idea of the finished print, Peter Parshall writes, “In principle the term ‘state’ is neutral to the question of completeness since it refers only to alterations in the plate without evaluating these changes in any relation to an aesthetic finish” (Parshall et al 13). The fluidity of the singular “finished” print as demonstrated by the concept of discreet stages or states resists the singular iconic image. My drypoints reflect

my desire to preserve, respond to, and learn from my mark in a continuous series, with each print representing a state within this process.

The classification of my paintings as acts of iconoclasm and my prints as *Aufheben* may seem to be merely a semantic distinction indicative of my reluctance to elevate my prints to the status of canonical works by modern masters. Both series involve actions of preservation and alteration or partial destruction of their material support. The difference is that in my prints I create a drawing on the matrix that is destroyed through modifications of the plate. The print remains as a record of the drawing on the zinc plate that once was, although images from multiple plates may be layered to form a new image. In my paintings, my quotation of a modernist is printed onto itself. There is a literal and figurative blurring of image and plate, leaving no record of my original reproduction. This more finite act of destruction is iconoclastic, while the preservation and destruction have more equal weight in my *Aufheben* prints.

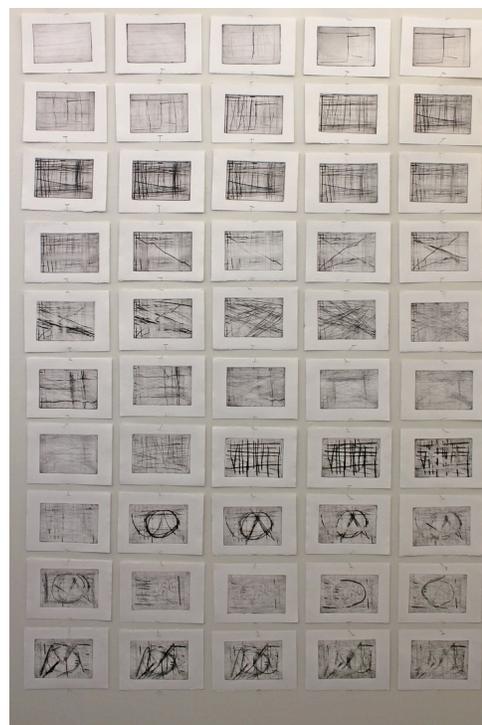


Figure 10 Emily Mogavero, *Aufheben 1-50*
installation view, drypoint, December 2015

The Matrix and the Receiving Surface

Historically, the Rorschach inkblot print is the only print in which the matrix is the receiving surface. Rorschach's tests are images onto which psychological patients projected their thoughts. In visual art and popular culture, the woman is also a passive site onto which the active male viewer projects. In her seminal feminist text, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey writes:

The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey 38)

Mulvey explains the phenomenon of the woman as object for the male gaze in terms of Freudian psychology, making the connection between depicted woman and Rorschach test all the more explicit. Lisa Yuskavage explores this connection in *Rorschach Blot*. She paints "a standing woman with no nose and an open O-shaped mouth designed for one purpose only. Her legs are spread, her pubic area shaved. She is a sex doll painted as if by Fragonard or Boucher" (Smee). The female figure in Yuskavage's painting is grotesquely eroticized and bilaterally symmetrical, depicted as both inkblot for psychological projection and sexual object for the male gaze. While Yuskavage employs outrageous sexualization to create subversive images, I use the squish to call attention to the ubiquity and fragility of the dominant depiction of women.



Figure 11 Lisa Yuskavage, *Rorschach Blot*, 84 x 77 in.

In my prints, on the other hand, the zinc matrix and the paper receiving surface are separate entities and are materially traditional. The progression of the series reflects the changes I make on the matrix while the multiple matrices reflect multiple trains of thought. I am interested in using printmaking as a context to catalogue the changing matrix, as exemplified by Xu Bing's *Five Series of Repetition*. In this series, "Xu preserved the stages of carving the block of wood by printing each stage and mounting the prints successively in a strip" (Erickson 4). The prints progress from almost black, with little carved away from the matrix, to almost white with extensive carving. While both my drypoints and Xu Bing's woodcut catalogues the history of the matrix, Xu's prints have a discrete beginning and end but my work is open ended. My matrix is a sketchbook that is continually being rewritten.



Figure 12 Xu Bing, *Five Series of Repetitions*, installation view at the Elvehjem Museum of Art, Wisconsin, woodcut on paper, 1987

Conclusion

In many ways, *Artist-Hero/Squish* and *Aufheben* are foils of each other. My paintings are doubles of original works that are folded and squished while each drypoint is an independent image that resists the multiple. In painting, I commit acts of iconoclasm in order to subvert an

already existing image, but in printmaking I repetitively preserve and erase my mark. Despite these differences both *Aufheben* and *Artist-Hero/Squish* are reexaminations of history that question what it means to be an artist.

As a painter and art historian, I must consume and study canonical works. The act of painting from these original images parallels my education and the squish represents my refusal to accept the objectification of women in painting as the norm. The squish transforms my quotation of an original artwork into painting. By stretching, the canvas after it has gone through the press, I claim the new painting as my own. My prints, as obsessive preservations of my drawing, insist that my mark is worth preserving. By rewriting history, I fit myself into it.

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Figure 3 - Guerrilla Girls <tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-p78793>

Figure 4 – Emily Mogavero

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Figure 6 - Reginald Sylvester II <paceprints.com/reginald-sylvester-ii/it-all-feels-right-2016>

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