

Vignette



Prints by Steven Sorman



Steven Sorman and Kenneth Tyler using brushes to blend ink colors onto woodblock for "From Away" screen, at Tyler Graphics' artist's studio, February 1988. Photo: Marabeth Cohen.

Recently, Steven Sorman was interviewed by Pinky Kase. They discussed how Sorman approaches his work and how his style has been influenced and shaped.

PK: Most of your prints are neither pure lithography nor etching. Can you discuss this aspect of your work?

SS: Actually, I've always done multi-media works. It's a pragmatic approach, rather than trying to get a litho line to look like an intaglio line or a litho wash to look like an aquatint. I figure if you're working on a lithograph and need a mark of a different character there's no problem whatever in switching media in midstream. It's not something that a lot of people have really done until recently; a good number of prints these days are multi-media print, but I've just always tried to use the best tool for the job so that's essentially my relationship to the media. Each particular print technique has its own inherent qualities and limitations. I find it quite exciting to combine them not just for the sake of combining them but to do the work as pragmatically as possible.

PK: I understand that you work with a number of different works in varying stages of progress.

SS: I find that pieces almost carry on an imaginary dialogue with one another and rather than getting stuck on one piece and staying stuck for God knows how long I find it much more practical and much more interesting from my perspective to jump from piece to piece. When I run into a little wall on one piece it's nice to shift gears, jump to another piece, perhaps get to the root of the problem with the piece that I ran into a wall on and then return to that piece. The pieces are constantly borrowing from one another and sometimes quite literally. Sometimes the right hand section of one piece will be cut off and attached to the left hand side of another piece and so forth.

PK: You seem to have a very real love of paper and an understanding of its rather unique properties. Do you know how certain papers will perform before you start?

SS: Not particularly and that's part of the excitement of it. Oftentimes something will react in a very unexpected manner and I will discover an interesting little technique in the process. I've used a variety of papers and I've used them long enough now so that I can make a pretty good guess, but I'm constantly using new materials and oftentimes I really can't predict what's going to happen with a particular material on that surface.

PK: How important, really, are the titles of your work to the body of the work?

SS: Actually, the titles oftentimes are indications of process, indications of where or of when a piece was done relative to another. For instance at one time I made a piece that was called "Said" and then after some period of time passed I made another piece which made references to that earlier piece and it was called "Again Said," so there is, if you will, sort of an illogical logic applied to them in many instances. Oftentimes when I work on a series of pieces, eight or ten pieces, they'll have a generic title. At one point I did a series of pieces that were called "The Fault Is Mine:" One of them was "The Fault is Mine (More or Less)" so each one had a parenthetical title and the generic title was a reflection of the fact that there was a series of these pieces and that these pieces came in a group.

PK: The titles are not necessarily then an aid to the viewer?

SS: Yes, they are. I've always tried to make plain or clear, rather than trying to obscure so oftentimes they are little doors into the pieces themselves. For instance there was a piece that I did at Tyler Graphics called "Forgetting and Forgetting." It was an edition piece, but it also had a large monotyped area in the piece, and if you were to look at one of those pieces in one room and then walk across the street and go into another room and look at another piece from that edition they would appear to be the same to you — but if you saw them right next to one another, there would be pretty pronounced differences. That was an indication of what was actually happening within the edition: one piece essentially "forgot" the look of the previous piece.

PK: You have often produced variants of a print, yet because you do so much handwork in them do you still consider them a series of prints, a run of identical brothers and sisters?

SS: Yes, identical more or less. For all intents and purposes, they are of the same ilk, the same family, there is something that marks them genetically as being siblings, but each one has their own character to a fairly slight degree. I really enjoy a hands-on printmaking.

PK: Are you moving away from the gestural or just moving back and forth?

SS: I would say just moving back and forth. Oftentimes I'll stumble upon a little form and then I'll use it in different permutations over and over again until I just get tired of it and go on to something else. So I would say that it would be something that crept in and out of the work.

PK: Are there certain predecessors in the art world that really appeal to your sensibilities, such as Henri Matisse and Robert Motherwell?

SS: I would like to say that the influences are extremely wide and varied. There are a couple of particular artists whose work has interested me but one thing that I try to do, and it's not a matter of ego, is down-play the emphasis on influences. Oftentimes what people want to do is to label someone's work and say that so-and-so's work is like so-and-so. That label gives them an illusion of understanding and then what happens is that they stop looking at the work. My influences are as diverse as Fra Angelico, Rauschenberg, Matisse, Motherwell, and certain ethnographic works of art.

PK: For a long time, the term decorative was considered a perjorative one. Perhaps now it's acceptable for a painting to be decorative but there might be a better term.

SS: Actually, there's a lot of silliness in the world and one of the things that I've found incredibly silly is that any work of art by its very nature has performed something of a decorative function. I used to get a big charge out of the fact that conceptual artists would often do these real scruffy things on cheap paper with bad xerox reproductions and mount them in a particular way that was peculiar to that school. That essentially is decoration and what it does is espouse a certain kind of look, it makes use of a certain kind of look. Work that is very minimal still is decorative; it may be very severe but it is still decorative. It's put there for you to look at. The distinction that people have to make is between something that is decorative and something that is just simply

ornamental, and there is a big difference. An assumption has been made by some people that if something is opulent it is just simply ornamental and perhaps without intelligence. There's a big difference between mindless ornamentation and an intelligent working of materials to make something that even though it's relative, something that one feels will be beautiful, pleasant to look at and that's something that I've always wanted to celebrate.

PK: Let's talk a bit about your work now with Ken Tyler at Tyler Graphics. What is it like to work together on a print?

SS: It's certainly a close working relationship. I have sort of an eye on him and he's got an eye on me. What I'm trying to do is to talk about the collaborative process, and that's a word that's been beaten to death but for lack of a better one, in a way that really makes a situation clear for people who haven't been inside print shops. Basically what you try to do is get to be familiar enough with another's personality and moves and everything so that you can use the best of each other's qualities and abilities. No matter how good Ken is at what he does, if I'm no good he can't produce a good print and vice-versa. No matter how good I am as an artist if I go in there and he's no good, we can't do anything. So it sounds almost like a commercial but it's a matter of both of us trying to perform at our optimum and seeing what we can cook up. I may want to give a gesture a particular nuance and I will speak to him about it and he will say that can be accomplished by such and such a technique or with the use of such and such an ink and so forth and that doesn't mean to imply that he's just simply a technical advisor I mean it goes down to trying everything out that you can possibly try out and bouncing off one another.

PK: Steven, where are you going, where have you been and where are you now?

SS: I feel that I'm always on the same train, but waking up in different towns. I really never know exactly what's going to come up, but I do know that something's going to come up, tomorrow we'll be in a different town and we'll see what happens there. I'd hate to be predisposed to a future that I don't know anything about, it would be like rehearsing everything that you were going to say before you said it! I just bumble around the world, looking for clues that will make it a little more exciting place visually if for no one else, at least for myself.

Exhibition Checklist

All dimensions are given in inches with height preceding width. Works with an asterisk (*) are reproduced in this brochure.

I Am Looking At You, I Am Looking At You, 1985
Relief, etching, lithograph, collage with hand-painting by the artist. 66 1/4" x 43" collaged yellow-ocher TGL handmade and Oriental papers. Edition of 10. Courtesy of Tyler Graphics, Ltd.

Now At First And When, 1985
Woodcut, relief, etching, collage. 66 1/4" x 52" collaged yellow-ocher TGL handmade and Oriental papers. Edition of 18. Courtesy of Tyler Graphics Ltd.

Trees Like Men Walking, 1985
Relief, woodcut, etching, collage with hand-painting by the artist. 93 1/2" x 40 1/2" collaged white TGL handmade and Oriental papers. Edition of 10. Courtesy of Tyler Graphics Ltd.

Trees Blowing And Blowing Like Arms Akimbo, 1985
Woodcut, etching, relief, lithograph, collage with hand-painting by the artist. 59" x 37" collaged white TGL handmade and Oriental papers and painted materials from the artist's studio. Edition of 42. Courtesy of Tyler Graphics Ltd.

Those From Away II, 1989
Linocut, hand-colored on two sheets of laminated, light-colored Fuji handmade papers. 14 1/2" x 12 1/4". Edition of 32. Courtesy of Tyler Graphics Ltd.

Those From Away IV, 1989
Linocut, hand-colored on two sheets of laminated, light-colored Fuji handmade papers. 20 1/2" x 18 1/4". Edition of 26. Courtesy of Tyler Graphics Ltd.

Those From Away V, 1989
Linocut, hand-colored on two sheets of laminated, light-colored Fuji handmade papers. 23" x 23". Edition of 24. Courtesy of Tyler Graphics Ltd.

*Those From Away VI, 1989
Linocut, hand-colored on two sheets of laminated, light-colored Fuji handmade papers. 29 1/2" x 29". Edition of 29.
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Photo: Steven Sloman
Courtesy of Tyler Graphics Ltd.

Those From Away VII, 1989

Linocut, hand-colored on two sheets of laminated, light-colored Fuji handmade papers. 46³/₄" x 31¹/₄".

Edition of 30.

Courtesy of Tyler Graphics Ltd.

From Away, 1989

Woodcut, lithograph, collage, screenprint, hand-carved, hand-painted two-sided screen. 60¹/₂" x 81¹/₂" x 12" natural Okawara paper laminated to Tycore panels and maple wood base. Variant edition of 12.

Courtesy of Tyler Graphics Ltd.

Linoleum Block, 35" x 22" used for Steven Sorman print, Those From Away VII, 1989, printed with dark red.

Linoleum Block, 29¹/₂" x 23" used for Steven Sorman print, Those From Away VII, 1989, printed with violet black.

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