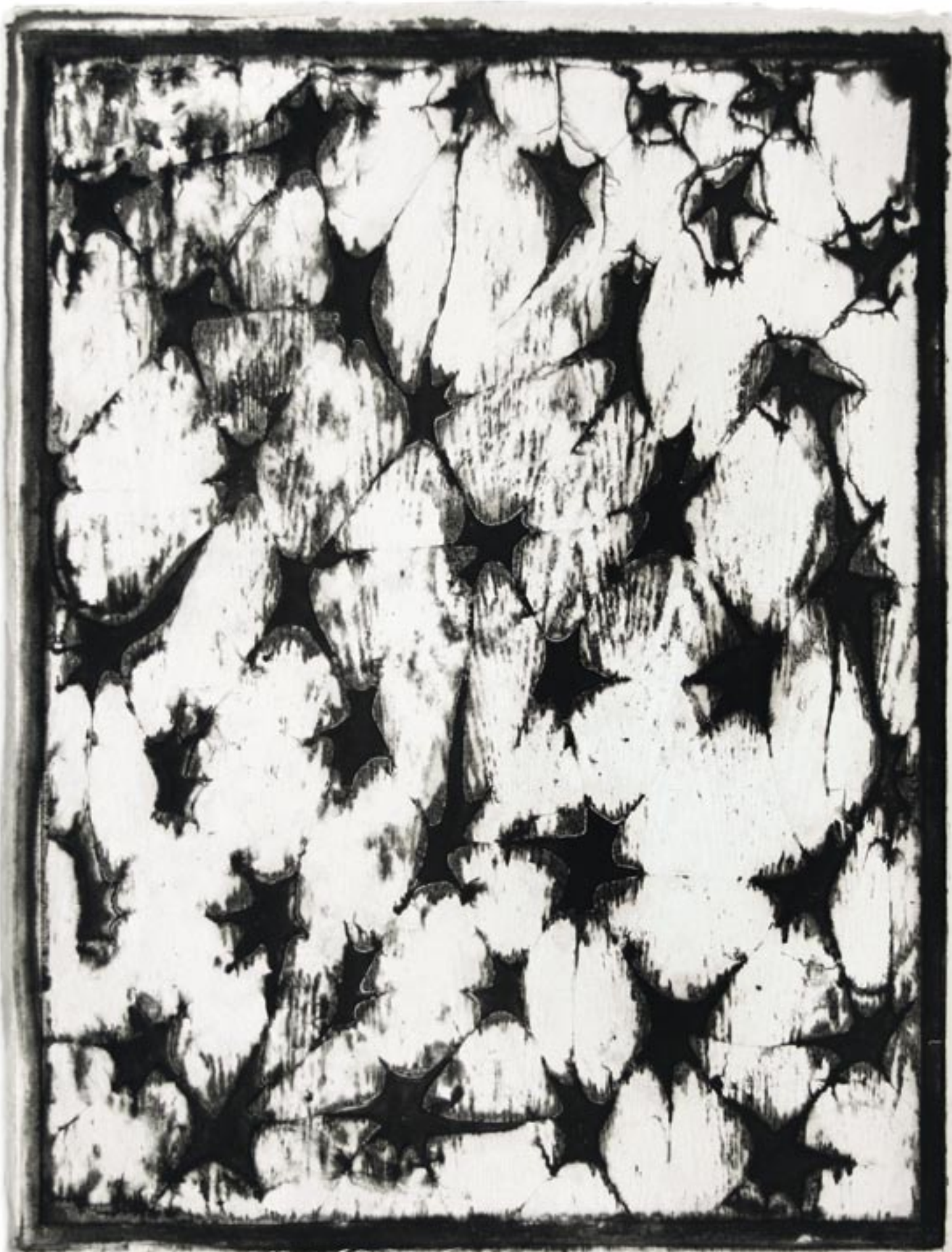


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Mel Kendrick *Loopholes*



Initial Notes, Later Developments: Seeing “Loopholes”

by Lynne Tillman

On a studio wall, Mel Kendrick has hung six of twelve new prints—actually, cast paper pulp—and the others lie stacked on the floor. Kendrick carved or cut into blocks of wood, to reveal layers and textures. Oddly, the prints that result appear fragile and lacy and also dense and heavy. There are holes and lines piercing the surfaces, shapes like leaves or ovals, or eggs and sperm, in scant relief, black on white, white on black, black on black. The series, *Loopholes*, elaborates on a theme, its leitmotifs deployed with subtle differences.

NB: Think instantly of Wallace Stevens' poem, Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird, especially its fifth stanza: "I do not know which to prefer, / the beauty of inflections / Or the beauty of innuendoes, / the blackbird whistling / or just after."

For Kendrick's last exhibition, he'd shown sculpted wood blocks, painted a medium red. Three sit on the floor now, about shin-height, chunky, and in two pieces. Holes or openings in the bases suggest insides as outsides, gaps, incompleteness, and also sexual organs: mouths, anuses, vaginas, ears, nostrils, places to enter.

NB: Dialogue between artist and writer, a process that can't be controlled: the art of conversation, with its unscripted turns, follows anarchic laws and is different from any other art; a studio visit's dynamic is also unlike any other art event. Artist's presence and intimacy of space effects stranger/critic; artist subjects self to critic/stranger's scrutiny, may feel violation of space. Vulnerability on both sides, in tradition-bound encounter (how old?).

Kendrick ruminates aloud: “But what’s the base, what’s the sculpture?” The so-called bases, though technically supports, with their gaps, might be insecure. The base can be looked through, may be shaky; while a solid piece of wood—“the sculpture”—rests on it. In painting, an analogous issue might be about the perception of image as foreground or background. Kendrick’s question stimulates, in me, a

visual reversal: the so-called base is now above and questions its foundation. What lies beneath? Does it provide stability, or, proverbially, is there a leg to stand on, anywhere?

NB: How do metaphors serve art? Imagery from another language. Strict description can seem like an instruction manual, similar to book reviews that only tell the story. What are the possibilities for an artwork's reasons to be? Meanwhile, art responds to itself, criticizing and overturning its own paradigms, etc.

Kendrick’s prints appear concrete, tactile, abstract, with figurative elements; they also seem sculptural. The “surfaces are punctured,” he says, and the prints have in them something about “wounding and repair.” Ideas about human vulnerability, pain, and dependency occur. Kendrick jokes wryly about his “penetrating the inside” of the paper. He comments too that they exist at a “cellular level.”

Now I look at them as bodies—“a body of work.” The prints’ movement is circular, maybe like the circulatory system, or maybe the energy is centrifugal, moving off from the center. Thinking about “wounding and repair,” I wonder about aggressivity—the lightning bolt image tearing at the center of most of the prints—and sensitivity, lines connecting to all of the objects. The “individuals” touch, however tentatively or delicately.

NB: Always curious why an artist pursues, for life, a medium, form. Why is Kendrick drawn to certain shapes, materials? Freud says, “the object of an instinct is the thing in regard to which or through which the instinct is able to achieve its aim.” [The object is] “assigned to the instinct only in consequence of being peculiarly fitted to make satisfaction possible.” The school of object relations follows Freud, but dwells more on the interrelationships of objects—in Freud too an object is never just a thing, but also a person or persons—a world of relationships for each individual.

During the second studio visit, I tell Kendrick that, for me, the prints have a somber quality, a sadness. Maybe it’s

their darkness. He's surprised; he hadn't seen them that way. (Later, he adds: when he talks about them, he sees them differently from when he worked on them.) I tend toward melancholic readings, but each viewer will project onto them, imagining in ways no artist can ever determine.

NB: Freud's object that "make[s] satisfaction possible" works here: My interpretations "satisfy" me, and are, in a sense, object choices—loves. My goals, aims, in looking, lead me to certain assumptions, conclusions... Is this where interpretation begins?

Each print varies from and "repairs to" the themes of relatedness and separateness, bodies penetrating and disconnecting. There's darkness in them, but, contrarily, the prints keep returning me to Stevens' reassuring, optimistic Blackbird poem, now its second stanza: "I was of three minds, / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds."

When read through the prism of those lines, many more than three "blackbirds" or "minds" exist in the prints. There might be a tree of life, too, one growing branches with leaves and fruit.

NB: Fruitfulness, a tree bears fruit, like a theory might. How many ways in which I don't think.

In writing fiction—fiction derives from the Latin, *facere*, "to do or to make"—the writer starts a sentence, one word leads to another, and there may be an unexpected ending. A visual artist also creates fictions, doing, making. Artists and writers have some control, choosing colors, say, drawing a plan, mapping a structure—even opting for randomness can be a plan. Any medium's language has a cornucopia of meanings and histories, freighted by usage and tradition, while the heft of material and medium expresses itself and inheres in every practice.

Kendrick explains that, in part, his attempt is "to show good and bad decisions." One mark or cut leads to another, there's a logic—or a necessity—to the way he proceeds. A bit later, he muses, wryly, "Well, it's always about what can't be known." Choices are conscious and unconscious; there's as much doubt as conviction in deciding what's best or right.

NB: Kendrick also risks outcomes he will like or dislike; but he may solve problems he's set for himself. That way, artists answer questions. The other side of this equation: a viewer's experience. Experience! But whose do you trust?

It's a peculiar fact of artists' lives that their work emerges with an acceptance or grudging acknowledgment of a common philosophical problem—the unknowableness of outcomes, the indeterminacy of objects: "*The beauty of inflections / or the beauty of innuendoes / the blackbird whistling / or just after.*"

So, Kendrick's series, *Loopholes*, is aptly named. It

doesn't shout out certainty or contentment, but considers them; and, while one should never judge a book by its cover, or art by its title, the title does lend itself to ambiguousness, openings, alternatives, ways out. For the viewer, looking and not knowing what exactly one is seeing creates a space for wondering, fantasizing, even satisfying some inchoate drive.

Quotations from Freud can be found in The Language of Psychoanalysis, by J. LaPlanche and J.-B. Pontalis (W.W. Norton and Co., 1973, p. 273.)

Lynne Tillman is a novelist, short story writer, and critic. American Genius, A Comedy, her fifth novel, was published in 2006. Her previous novel, No Lease on Life, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in fiction (1998) and a New York Times Notable Book of the Year. Her collection, This Is Not It (2002), contained stories and novellas that responded to the work of twenty-two contemporary artists and had originally appeared in artists books and museum and gallery catalogues. She is Professor/Writer-in-Residence at The University at Albany, and in 2006 was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.



Installation view, artist's studio

February 7, 2008



Untitled, 2007
handmade paper with pigment
80 x 60 inches
(203.2 x 152.4 cm)

Exhibition

Mel Kendrick

Loopholes

February 15–March 30, 2008

Reception: Friday, February 15, 6–8 PM

About the artist

Through the Lab Grant Program, Kendrick experimented with paper pulp-casting of large, two-dimensional, wood relief sculptures. Kendrick's use of this technique reflects upon his prints, bronzes, and rubber castings of wood sculptures, developed throughout the 1980s and 90s. During his exploration of handmade paper, Kendrick employed a variety of techniques, including watermarking, stencils, and the multiple layering of wet sheets. Kendrick's experimentation led to several large-scale and tiled works, produced in collaboration with artistic director, Paul Wong and staff.

Kendrick's 2007 exhibition, *Red Blocks* at David Nolan Gallery was described by critic Nancy Princenthal as "stealthily potent... [defying] intuitive spatial sense in a way that is, like any good puzzle, deeply engrossing" (*Art in America*, January 2008, p. 120). Kendrick has exhibited widely since his first solo exhibition at Artists' Space in 1974 and was the recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1978, '81, and '94, and the Academy Award for Art given by the American Academy of Arts & Letters in 2002.

Kendrick's work is in many important public collections, including: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, DC; Dallas Museum of Art, Texas; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania; Walker Art Center, Minnesota; and many others. Kendrick lives and works in New York City.

Dieu Donné

Founded in 1976, Dieu Donné is a nonprofit artist workspace dedicated to the creation, promotion, and preservation of contemporary art in the hand-papermaking process. In support of this mission, Dieu Donné collaborates with artists and partners with the professional visual arts community.

The Lab Grant Program, initiated in 2000, provides mid-career artists with a twelve-day residency to collaborate in hand papermaking at Dieu Donné. Through this program, Dieu Donné intends to produce exciting new work with artists who have a mature vision and long-standing commitment to artistic practice, thereby raising the profile of hand papermaking as an artmaking process and breaking new ground in the field. Past participants in the program include: Melvin Edwards, Dorthea Rockburne, (2000); Jane Hammond, Jim Hodges, (2001); Robert Cottingham, Polly Apfelbaum, (2002); Glenn Ligon, Kiki Smith (2003); Jessica Stockholder, Arturo Herrera, (2004); Mel Kendrick, Kate Shepherd, (2005); Tony Fitzpatrick, Do-ho Suh, (2006); Jon Kessler, and Ursula von Rydingsvard, (2007).

This is issue number 10 of the Dieu Donné Lab Grant Program publication series documenting the residency program for mid-career artists.

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Untitled, 2007

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