

kathryn reeves

Infinite Palimpsest

(A palimpsest is a parchment written on and later erased or scraped, often two or more times, to make room for subsequent texts or images. The delicate skins often show traces of the earlier layers.)

Printmaking, as an infinite palimpsest, is a material and conceptual surface that stretches across vast spatial and temporal distances. More than a two-dimensional surface, it is always in our now and always beyond it. Dependent on materials that are subject to touch, writing, drawing, cutting, scraping, erasure, deletion, and reuse, printmaking in all its forms resonates with the notion of palimpsest. The infinite palimpsest of printmaking exists; it records the past and awaits the future.

Interational attention has recently given to the Archimedes palimpsest, a treatise, "On floating Bodies." The parchment, copied by a 10th century scribe from the Greek mathematician's original scrolls, was erased some two hundred years later by a monk who wrote a prayer book over the treatise, thus creating a palimpsest. Teams of contemporary scientists used hyperspectral imaging, digital cameras, ultraviolet and infrared filters to reveal the chemical traces of the original ink, the only-known copy of the ancient manuscript. In the case of the Archimedes palimpsest, the first text has turned out to be the most significant layer.

Parchment as a material evokes skin and so the infinite palimpsest is also a metaphor for the printmaker/human being, and it speaks to the embodied experience of creation. Particularly in reproductive media, this evocation of skin can be understood to have sexual and gendered significance. It is a recognition that our bodies are a part of the medium and that materials are subject to tactile manipulation.

Artists should not feel torn between Marshall McLuhan's modernist credo (or warning), "The medium is the message" and Ian Hamilton Findlay's postmodernist statement, "Better truth to intellect than truth to materials." These concepts and others are viable and coexistent options. Unlike the Archimedes palimpsest, all materials and layers in the infinite are meaningful.

Within the context of the infinite palimpsest, electronic imaging embraces the analog operator creating with digital media for analog receptors (the viewers). Print artists today should embrace both analog and digital because the future of computers and electronic imaging will certainly be molecular computing, based on organic chemistry - an incredible leap in technology, as well as a loop back to analog and a link to the body. It is envisioned that "computer screens" could be painted or printed on walls, buildings, roads - all materials could be coated with molecular computers. Ideas of analog vs. digital seem outmoded already.

Author Henry Miller wrote, "The artist gives back to us a vital, singing universe, alive in all its parts." Printmaking must embrace all its parts, keeping

everything that has come before, adding new media and materials, losing nothing, gaining everything, and stretching our minds, our bodies, and our art without limits across the infinite palimpsest.