Observing Birk's Method

BY GRAHAM LARKIN, PH.D., CURATOR OF EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN ART, NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

IN many of his recent paintings (plates 34-42) Sandow Birk conjures up dreams and nightmares of the invasion of Iraq, in a style emulating the labored illusionism and mawkish narrative explicitness of social-realist propaganda posters or Franklin Mint plates, with strong doses of Ingres and Gérôme thrown in for good measure.[1] The fifteen woodcuts in his *The Depravities of War* series organize scenes from the same war into capriccios recalling old masters – in this case the supreme etcher Callot, interfused with the styles of later graphic masters from Piranesi to Crumb. While no less staged, the prints are far less corny than the paintings, and arguably more interesting. The interest lies partly in the sheer sensual force of the fifteen enormous sheets of ink-drenched Japanese paper. But there is also room for more rational pleasure, in the decipherment of a willfully elaborate process of production.

Birk began this series by using pen and ink to render fifteen fantasies in Callot's manner on sheets of paper measuring approximately 10 by 17 inches. Had he been satisfied to merely make a "statement" about the war, he could just have exhibited the drawings, or he could have used them as the basis for prints on the same scale. But instead (on the advice of his collaborator Elyse Pignolet) he took the drawings "and then blew them up...simply on a copy machine at Kinko's, piecemeal, and taped [them] together at 4 by 8 feet on the floor of my studio."[2]

The visit to Kinko's is a natural course for a progressive artist of Birk's generation. Punk posters designers have long favored copy machines for their affordability (zero overhead, and a few cents a page) and – crucially – for the instant image degradation through the exaggeration of contrast and the resultant breakdown of forms. Photocopying is a good way of making an image raw and unfamiliar; a radical change of scale simply intensifies the desired estrangement. "Even in blowing them up," Birk cogently explains, "they became more interesting – the sketchiness of the small-scale drawings became bolder and the gestures more apparent, the figures more 'blocky' and stylized, etc. They got better as they were expanded."[3]

The logic of displacement is carried further in the printshop at HuiPress in Maui, where Birk and his collaborators "wheatpasted the big sheet of paper onto birch plywood sheets, varnished it to seal it, and then started carving the boards right through the paper." Judging from the patchwork of pictorial effects in the final product, this operation of laying siege to 480 square feet of plywood was a relatively speedy and unruly affair, with Birk giving direction but also allowing his company of carvers to improvise in their interpretation of his blown-up pen lines. Given the enormity of the task, the decision not to micromanage the carving was doubtless an economizing measure, but it was also a way of opening up the work to further displacement. From one print to the next, the differences in the rendering of smoke or sky feel like inventive local solutions to the collective task of translating the already-degraded copy. Countless other contingencies come into play in the laborious process of assembling the huge sheets of Japanese paper, inking the blocks, and pulling the inked prints – not to mention the vagaries of storage and display.[4]

And so Birk's taste for the conditional leads to a productive logic of displacement, beginning with his delighted misrecognition of his own handiwork upon seeing it enlarged. He is inexorably engaged in a process of estrangement, as theorized by Viktor Schklovsky in his concept of *ostranenie* (making strange, defamiliarization), and by Bertolt Brecht in his concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect). In his seminal 1917 essay "Art as Technique" Shklovsky argues that

[t]he technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.[5]

In the writing and staging of his plays Brecht used many tricks of estrangement to drive home the artificiality of the action before his audience, who would thereby avoid the Aristotelian traps of suspended disbelief and politically impotent catharsis. In analogous manner (and in stark contrast to the über-Aristotelian *Saving Private Ryan*), Birk's *Depravities* draw attention to their own constructedness through surprising beauty (mannered swirls of smoke with the blackness and viscosity of tar); through the roughly worked surface and the presence of degraded or distorted forms; through the evidence of varying styles of representation indicating multiple artists; through the stagelike arrangement of the composition; and through the self-conscious intermingling of figures based on photos of Iraq with figures adapted from Callot.

Many of these defamiliarizing ploys (staginess, stock poses, uncanny distortion, and enlargement) come together in the figures of soldiers, which we have already seen Birk describe as made "better" through exaggerated blockiness and stylization. Could it be that they are better because, in their uncanny stiffness, vagueness, and stockiness, they readily recall the 3-inch-high plastic soldiers that little boys consume by the bagful? Since their stockiness and genericism become even more pronounced through enlargement, the enormous woodcuts become thoroughly antimonumental – become mockumental, if you will. This play of scale is genuinely Callotesque, with a dash of Swift or Carroll. If Callot's little *Miseries* show the world through the wrong end of the telescope, then Birk's grandiose *Depravities* show a small drawing of tiny figures, blown up to such a size that ... I must be shrinking!

The persistent memory of those 3-inch plastic figures becomes most disturbing in the scenes of *Degradation* and *Humiliation*, where the dinky Lynndie England and friends take childlike pleasure in dumping out piles of faceless enemy soldiers and arranging them into scenes of obsessive order or picturesque disarray. Let's face it: this primal pleasure is familiar to all little boys, and evidently to some girls. Our leaders decry this child's play as abnormal, but wouldn't it be truer to see it as the origin of all war?

1   I am grateful to Sandow Birk and Paul Mullowney for providing me with information and proofs. Thanks also to Geoff Morrow for his wise and timely advice.

2   E-mail to the author, July 5, 2007. In the same e-mail Birk notes that "Elyse Pignolet…suggested that rather than doing small prints based on small prints, we could do huge prints based on small prints as a way of adding another tweak to the Callots, or of being more grandiose and more theatrical and bolder and pushing it farther."

3   Ibid.

4   Aside from reproductions, the only works from the series I had seen, upon writing this, were advanced proofs of *Occupation* and *Detention*, which I was able to view at the National Gallery of Canada thanks to a large table that could support one print plus a viewer or two. The printer, Paul Mullowney of HuiPress, informs me that to display the works he is "simply going to be putting hinges on the back which hold velcro tabs and then [suspending each work] on the wall." (E-mail to the author, 5 July 2007.)

5   Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwoodark: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), p. 12.