

## NORDIC STONE SPEAKS

### Helsinki Litho – An Introduction

Art often makes use of things that have already been abandoned and forgotten. Paradoxically the stone lithography developed by the Czech-German Alois Senefelder in the 1790s is the source of the whole of today's offset-printing industry, while, at the same time, present-day visual artists who still use the original lithography frequently make comments on the media, i.e. on the world of images printed using offset.

What makes this art graphics printed with heavy stones unique is its sensitivity, in both drawn and painted impressions. The surface of the smooth-polished stone reflects the touch of the wash brush as much as it does the precise pen and ink drawing or the lush marks of chalk. Senefelder's idea is based on a simple observation and insight – water and grease repel each other. The drawing and painting are done on the greasy sections and, before printing, the stone is wetted so that the water acts as a protective film over the undrawn-on areas. The roll-on printing ink then adheres only to the bits drawn and processed in the greasy areas.

In Finland the history of lithography is associated with the first 19<sup>th</sup>-century panoramas of the nation's landscapes and regions (Zacharias Topelius' *Matkustus Suomessa* [*En resa i Finland*, a journey in Finland]). The most important mediator of technical know-how to current generations was the respected graphic artist Aukusti Tuhka (1895-1973). As a workshop Helsinki Litho carries on the best of these traditions with an almost fundamentalist Puritanism, in the name of the authentic stone-printed artwork. At the same time, it reacts in timely fashion in the manner of topical visual arts, here and now.

The group of six at Helsinki Litho (Ben Allal Ayad, Kalle Berg, Matti Hintikka, Tero Laaksonen, Kuutti Lavonen and Marjatta Tapiola) gives a multifaceted overview of Finnish and international approaches to the possibilities of lithography. The group is especially grateful to its long-Finnish-resident Moroccan member, Ben Allal Ayad, for new Mediterranean contacts.

Allal Ayad says: "We have a tendency to forget things, or maybe things are simply absorbed into our emotional world and rise to the surface again with the aid of art. Through painting, drawing and sculpting I deal with my deepest nature. Art has taught me to tolerate errors, but not to forget them."

Kalle Berg contemplates stone lithography as a tool: "I am fascinated by the history of lithography as a medium for mass producing commercial images, especially its role in the development of poster art. On one way or another, text appears as a part of my works. The perhaps marginal status of lithography in contemporary art pushes me to make statements and in the conceptual direction. The printer/artist tries to coerce his body into being a machine, while at the same time being very aware that none of his working processes is mechanical."

Matti Hintikka's works are animistic images of the Finnish mentality and relationship with nature. Feelings and tensions that arise in the mind coalesce into shapes that push against each other like lumps of stone in the white space of the paper. Over there water, marsh, land and rocks, there an outline like a bear's head. The pictures breathe in multiple layers, from pallid to deep shadow. The deep black fortifies the scale of the earth tones and the associations with nature.

Tero Laaksonen and Kuutti Lavonen are the group's historicists, drawing on the ornamentation or mythologies of Classical culture. Laaksonen's highly developed aestheticism is well-balanced, but rich in its detail and feel for the material.

In his bowls there resides a fragile, shimmering eternity, the trace of a moment escaping behind the chariot of time. Kuutti Lavonen launches himself forwards from the foundations of the western painting tradition, especially the Baroque. His works often involve Classical tales or Christian legends.

The woman artist of the group, Marjatta Tapiola, rose to fame in the 1980s as one of the leading pioneers of neo-expressionism. Tapiola's works are characterised by a powerful, bravura mode of expression that gets its starting point in the figure and in actual reality, but which inflects, arcs and diffuses into images in the mind. Her brushstrokes draw as they paint. Her most recent large black-and-white lithographs evoke conviction with their lucidity and the richness of their treatment.

### **Kuutti Lavonen**