

SHOICHI IDA: AN INTERVIEW

Author(s): SHOICHI IDA and Leslie Brody

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SHOICHI IDA: AN INTERVIEW by Leslie Brody

screenprint that adheres closely to the original gouache and watercolor drawing. Although it reverts to the marvelous colorism of *At Sea, Japan*, it far surpasses the earlier work in the variety and delicacy of its painterly repertoire. It is truly a garden of sensuous delights. Skill (115 colors!) is again placed in the service of the eye rather than of the mind. The comparisons between the two images—between relative opacity and transparency, between two points of view—are of less consequence in the presence of such utter seductiveness. Only with a determined effort would one seek to relate this print to the didactic enterprise of the whole, to the inventory of artistic reports that compose *In the Garden*. Bartlett's work has gradually withdrawn even further from the arena of criticism. To the degree that her style has become more elusive, words seem less and less significant.

Bartlett's latest print, *In the Garden #40* (1983), was inspired by one of the earlier drawings done directly from nature in three or four conte crayons. The proliferation of the original image onto three more sheets (each a diptych, it will be recalled) is by now as familiar as Bartlett's crossbreeding of techniques. The first sheet is entirely screenprinted, the second is woodcut, the third pairs screenprint with woodcut, and finally the fourth contrasts woodcut with screenprint. While the first two follow the original drawing, the third and fourth prints form a common variant. In addition, Bartlett again succeeds in forcing her woodcuts to appear like broad crayon or gouache drawings and in imparting a woodcutlike, angular planarity to her screenprints. Such description, however, cannot quite get to the heart of these works. Why is the combined impact of these eight images so terribly moving? Why do they remain so aloof from stylistic analysis? What is the meaning of their reticence to comment on the world they depict? Deceptively, they seem to partake of the autographic, expressionist modes of the '80s, but their repetitiveness is totally antinarrative. Or is it that we are searching for the wrong meanings? The most accurate assessment may be Jeff Perrone's claim that Bartlett's works dissect the meanings of style itself. From the incredible richness of her own formal and technical inventiveness, she is able to undermine the notion of singularity of style to the advantage of generalized human creativity. By constantly playing off one image against another, by creating and then willfully altering rules and expectations, Bartlett somehow manages to praise the endless variety of human expression and interpretation. And, by not allowing herself to be appropriated by any of the styles of the past or the isms of the present, she assumes what may turn out to be a particularly feminist stance. Ultimately, hers is an art that releases the viewer from the tyranny of criticism.

Richard S. Field is associate director and curator of prints, drawings, and photographs at the Yale University Art Gallery.



The interview, in English and Japanese, took place December 24, 1983, at the Gallery Ueda, Tokyo. Special thanks go to Andrew Watsky of Gallery Ueda.

Leslie Brody How did you get involved in art?

Shoichi Ida I never had any particular interest in art as a child, but in nature. I felt such wonderment. Why does the rain fall, the wind blow, the tree grow? My teachers couldn't answer. They could give the scientific reasons, but I wanted to know the reasons beyond all that, the implications for us as people. My art is my way of pursuing these natural phenomena that happen every day. The way I explore them is very simple, and I want that simplicity to be inherent in the work. The processes, movements, actions

I use are simply ways to express that strange, mysterious thing that is going on.

LB When did you start doing prints?

SI In art school. A friend went to England and brought me back a rock. I'd always had an interest in rocks—they're frozen nature. I left it on my desk in my studio, and it got covered up by junk and papers. After two years or so, I opened the window, it was spring, and the wind blew everything off the desk. Except the rock, and the paper under the rock. There was an impression, an imprint on the paper in the shape of the rock, that interested me. The surface was the between. Between the two forces—the gravity's pressure on the rock and the desk holding it—in between was the piece of paper that held the imprint of the function of both forces. Essentially, it was a print. Actually, I didn't

Shoichi Ida, *Surface is the Between—Between Vertical and Horizon: Paper Between a Leaf and Water No. 11*, lithograph with screenprint printed both sides (55x39.5 cm), 1981. Gallery Ueda, Tokyo.

want to be an artist so much then. I wanted to be an archaeologist.

LB An archaeologist?

SI I've always liked cultures interested in nature—Egyptian pyramids, Indian graves—putting someone back in the earth is a very natural act. I want to create that same balance with nature. In college I wasn't so interested in techniques—"to paint the picture, do this or that"—I was really interested in the materials, the shape of nature, the way the rain falls and makes a shape. How can I, as a human being, get involved in the process? What's my role in it? My art is a document of my search to understand what I'm doing here.

LB For ten years you've been giving your prints the title *Surface is the Between—Between Vertical and Horizon*. What does that mean?

SI The reason prints fascinate me is that each of the printing processes has this element: there's always a vertical force and a horizontal force, and between them the print is made. There's the force of the press, coming down on a horizontal thing, and at that instant there is a transfer of the image and the instant of contact. With screenprint, for example, you come down with a squeegee on the horizontal screen, and the ink comes down through the holes. That interaction of forces creates something, which is the work, and the work is the document of the process. With woodblocks, you bring the baren down on the block, and in between you have the paper. The result is the document of the impact.

LB So the "Between" is both spatial and temporal?

SI Right.

LB And your prints that show vertical and horizontal lines are almost graphic representations of the printing process?

SI Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I ask myself how I can slip in between the two forces, the vertical and the horizontal. That's my locus. Prints allow me to get involved in the natural forces, and so get involved in nature.

LB How do you get involved in the material?

SI I want to appreciate the natural characteristics of the material. Rauschenberg, say, is always thinking, "How can I occupy the material?" Western artists want to change the material, to control it, to make it theirs. I don't want to do that, but to use the material the way its character demands. Paper is paper. Sometimes I wet a piece of paper, put it on a carved form, just leave it there for a week, and let it make some kind of shape. If I put it in water again, it will go flat. Another example—with etchings, the corrosion of the copper with acid is a natural interaction. I scratch the plate, and that's a human move-

ment. Somewhere between my scratching and the corrosion something occurs, and that is a work.

LB What would you say about the prints that have images of natural objects in them, like leaves and stones?

SI We look at them and say, "That's a leaf." But it's not a leaf, it's a printed leaf, an illusion of a leaf, between us and the paper.

LB Does illusion play an important part in your work?

SI Yes. That goes back to when I was a child. My parents were actors. Their job was to create illusions, but they would come home to lead a normal life as well. They showed a different face to us as kids, and as kids we were always confused about what to do with our lives. This gap between illusion and reality was very difficult for me as a child; I was very confused. My parents said, "Our theater life is illusions," but I said, "I never noticed." When my parents passed away, I picked up after their kind of life. It was all very sad. . . . I don't like the use of particular images for my work. My work doesn't have a particular subject, but an effect. When I use a leaf, or stone, it's an illusion. Even when I use paint, it's not real paint anymore, but an illusion of pure paint, because I've changed it. There's illusion even in a painting that has no image or subject. You can't see wind but you can see the effects of wind. It's the same with my prints; you can't see the process but you can see the effects. There's an important connection between showing the effects of nature and using the image of a natural thing. I used the leaf or stone to portray the natural effect of the printmaking.

LB What about your new prints, which have no stones or leaves?

SI I didn't use those illusions of natural objects. Now I'm interested in a much more direct relation with the material. But I still wonder what illusions are. . . . The basic idea with my new larger work is control. I controlled certain areas but not others. I set off an area where people did not intrude, but outside that area any intrusion was left as it was. You can see the marks of all six people who worked on the print. And it's made horizontally; if someone picks up the paper a little bit, the ink naturally flows down the sides and that's also left on the print. So I'm combining the natural effect of the ink running and the effects of humans, the finger marks, the footprints. I used my fingers on the area of the print, too. It's all very direct.

LB So the finger marks aren't all yours?

SI No. When I got this very beautiful paper—which a friend of mine made for my new work—when I held it for the first time, I thought, "My God, it's so beautiful. Maybe I'd better not occupy it by myself, maybe I should share it." So I just left it on the floor in the studio, let people come to see how beautiful the paper was, and let them touch it. Sometimes people were really interested

in touching the paper. They weren't so interested in what I was going to do with it. Even little kids came in to play with it. Little kids were fighting over the paper—they'd never seen anything like it. Sometimes they drew right on it, so we took photos.

LB How do you feel if viewers assume that all the fingerprints are yours?

SI I'm interested in how I can slip in anonymously. People in the gallery can't tell which marks are mine—they get confused—so they have to think about what happened. I don't care when people write, "These must be Ida's fingerprints over here."

LB From the fingerprints I wondered whether you had an interest in Jasper Johns.

SI I've been using fingerprints for about ten years. Johns wants to occupy the paper. I want to leave it. I want to make something anonymous, but can't make something completely anonymous, so I try to by using lots of other people. His fingerprints are part of his image, part of his, what shall I say, ego. I can see how much he was involved, how much he used his own fingers.

LB Why did you go to America and Europe to work?

SI It's the same concept I'm using now— anonymity. In the States they all say, "You're a Japanese artist," so I very easily become anonymous, abstract. It's just like when foreigners come to Japan and everybody says, "Oh, *gaijin*, *gaijin*!" But I never got a strange feeling when people said, "Oh, you're a Japanese artist"—I felt very comfortable. Relieved. When using the materials for the first time, I felt safe.

LB Were there Japanese materials that you missed when you were in America?

SI Not really. I wasn't thinking that way then. I just used what was available.

LB What do you feel you got out of working there?

SI *Muzukashii ne*. . . that's difficult, that's difficult. Wherever you go, it's the same thing. . . . Sometimes I like being in India, sometimes in the middle of New York City. I like contrasts; they help me appreciate why I'm here. I'm still like a kid that way—always asking why, why. I drink because I like asking directly, but without a little alcohol it's difficult. It's a kind of shyness. I'm going to work for Crown Point Press in Oakland in February. I'm very excited about it. I don't know what kind of image I'll do yet, but I want to work with different types of people, different printers.

LB What happens when American artists come to work in Japan?

SI Helen Frankenthaler came to work at my studio a few months ago. She made a beautiful woodblock print. She titled it *Cedar Hill* because you can see a lot of cedars in Kyoto. I've been working with Crown Point Press on their project to bring American artists to work with traditional Japanese woodblock printers. They've already sent over six or



Shoichi Ida. Photo by Hashimoto Fumiyoishi.

seven artists. Chuck Close is coming in April. Francesco Clemente is coming, too, because he wants to work with Japanese poets. And Al Held. It's an interesting project, sharing spirits with the Japanese.

LB What do you think these artists are coming to Japan to find?

SI When they first came, every artist thought, "I'd like to make a Hiroshige print," or something like that. They had some romantic reasons to come all the way over here. But it's never like that. Even when you look at their new prints you never realize they're woodblocks. They're completely new. I never thought about the kinds of things that came out. They were shocked, too. Always. Shocked.

LB How do the American artists catch on to Japanese techniques?

SI It's very difficult, very different. But the prints come out beautifully. Some use 70 colors, 140 colors, the way we count them. Pat Steir did about 70 runs in one print. Wayne Thiebaud did a dark chocolate cake.

LB How strong do you think the Western interest in Japanese art is now?

SI In the States people are getting more and more interested in making woodblocks, and also in collecting them. Until now they liked slicker work, like Pop Art, the mass-produced look. That's how silkscreen got a position in the print field. But that's changing. They want more skill involved, a more human locus on the image, instead of a machine-made one. That's why they like hand-made paper, etchings, rocks. In Japan, though, prints have always been popular. We have a long history of prints—over 1,000 years—so the quality of printing is very good. For the Japanese it's very comfortable to make prints. It's natural for me, too. People always ask me why I like paper so much. I never even think about it. It's just in my

Shoichi Ida, *Surface is the Between—Between Vertical and Horizon: Between on the Paper and on the Surface—Complex Contact-Gravity*, screenprint (108x200 cm), 1983. Courtesy Gallery Ueda, Tokyo.

head. Paper needs water. When I look at the water, it makes me feel paper is there. When I use paper, I feel like I'm floating in the middle of the ocean.

LB Do you like to swim?

SI Yes. Maybe that's why I like using paper.

LB Do you think that people in the West understand your art?

SI In the beginning it was kind of difficult. It took over ten, 15, maybe 12...20 years. When people thought of Japanese art, they always related it to Buddhism, Shintoism, Zen, and some very obvious effects. Kimonos. Recently they started to look more deeply. I think the West lost something in the process of getting to today. They want something different now, so they've started looking far away. All over the world everyone is looking at Japanese art these days. The Japanese spirit is different. You can feel the differences.

LB Such as?

SI To talk about Japanese culture we'd have to spend our lives... Basically I think Japan is a garbage culture.

LB Garbage?

SI The Japanese accept everything. They don't like to throw anything away. If they want to throw something away, they have to throw it in the Pacific Ocean—nothing's left. This tiny island, this tiny, tiny island, had accepted everything from China, Korea, everywhere for thousands of years. When the Japanese looked at Western culture, they always picked up on particular things from a certain age. So, for example, if you walk through the Ginza today you can see very strange English signs. Sometimes they shock you, they're so different. New directions, things you never thought about in English. That's Japan, the middle of a trash can. I like garbage. That's why I like New York. It makes me feel good. The rushing, the smell. It's very sparkable.

LB But you live in Kyoto? Beautiful, quiet Kyoto?

SI Right, where nothing happens. Like the

middle of a desert. If I say, "I'm an artist, I'm here," they'll never care. They don't know if something new is happening. They've spent thousands of years building up the culture there. They're not interested in something new. That's why I can get more attention with Westerners. Inside Japan it's very different. I'm always being bounced in between.

LB What artists in the West interest you?

SI I'm not so interested in Western artists. For me the process is completely different.

LB What about Japanese artists?

SI I'm not so interested in artists. I'm still more interested in archaeologists and that kind of thing. It's more practical for human beings. We don't have to have art in our life. I think art is a pity.

LB Art is a pity? Could you please elaborate on that a little?

SI Art's like a TV set. If you have it, sometimes you can enjoy it—look at it if you're interested in seeing what's going on in your life. I like to see what's going on in *your* life, through your costume, your pose, movements, effects. Sometime you can show, through the canvas, those effects. Art is always inside you. Yourself. Ourselves. That's why I like archaeologists so much. They're always digging, digging for human beings. Artists can't be digging that way. If we dig, we might have to go to jail.

Leslie Brody is an English Fellow of the Japanese Ministry of Education in Shizuoka-ken. **Shoichi Ida** is a Kyoto artist well known for his prints.

Editors' Note: A handsome 154-page catalogue, *Shoichi Ida: Prints*, documenting 264 prints by Shoichi Ida from 1974 to 1983, was published at the time of his retrospective this past December at Gallery Ueda in Tokyo. With copious illustrations—264 in black and white as well as many color plates and installation shots—and texts in English and Japanese, it is available from Gallery Ueda, Asahi Building, 6-6-7, Ginza, Chuo-ku, Tokyo, Japan, for \$20 postpaid. Ida's work can also be seen at Soker-Kaseman Gallery in San Francisco.

