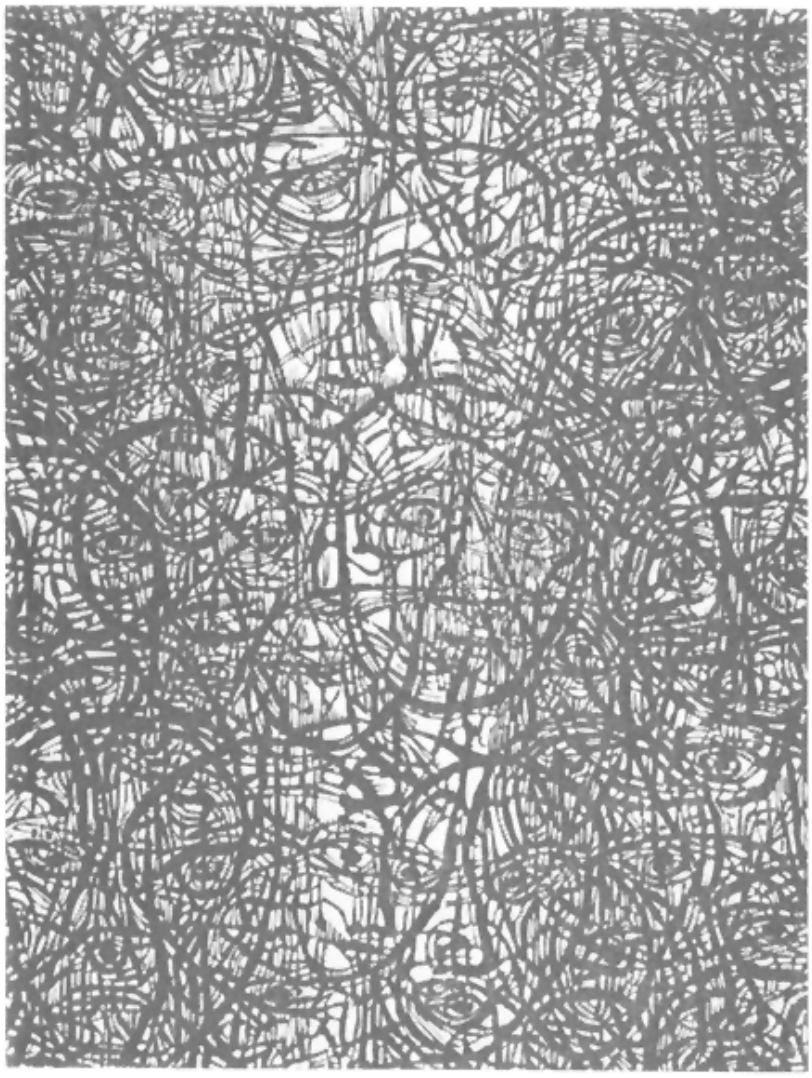
Gene Chu

The Printmaker's Eye



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Introduction

"Creativity changes and transforms, in order that everything might attain its true nature in accordance with the will of Heaven. Great harmony can then prevail... By acting in accordance with the rhythm of the universe one's aspirations are fulfilled; great achievements are only possible when the right time has come." ("Creativity," I Ching)

The *I Ching*, or *Oracle of Change* as it is called in the West, is China's most profound book and one of the oldest in the world. The ancient oracle pronounces on the essential aspects of life and provides guidance for its events. One of the principal aims of the book is to direct us so that we may live more in harmony with nature's laws and better understand its mysteries. To view Gene Chu's work is to be quietly reminded of the oracle's advice regarding perhaps the central mystery of creativity. Chu's pursuit is one that focuses on the cadences of life, on change and transformation, made visible through his art. He considers themes that are ever present, ones that deal with the eternal pull between harmony and discord and that ultimately affect our perception of the world with its manifold pleasures and pains. His exhibition gives us the opportunity to pause and reflect on one of the central objectives of life as stated in the *I Ching*, namely on the revelation of the "rhythm of the universe."

Chu is an artist who specializes in printmaking. He works primarily with lithography; this exhibition is a retrospective of his lithographs from the mid-1960s to today with a sampling of his woodcuts and watercolours. The show investigates his technical and stylistic development and highlights his consideration of some of life's most compelling themes. For Chu, technique and style are indissolubly linked. Process is for him an intimate and vital part of the creative impulse. Most contemporary artists who deal with prints view them as a secondary activity. They are content simply to design their images and then to leave the complicated business of the actual printing to fine art printers, thus separating invention from execution. The sad results are all too often obvious as one visits galleries and museums. Chu is, however, exceptional in that he devotes the bulk of his energies to printmaking and follows the age-old tradition of completely controlling every step of the process from the first quick sketch to the final pull of the press.

This show eloquently documents Chu's leading role in Canada as one of our most inventive printmakers. His commitment to the entire process means that he is able to experiment with a wide range of technical ideas that directly bear upon his stylistic development. He early on grew dissatisfied with the physical limitations that are imposed by the lithographic stone and began to employ metal plates (mostly aluminum) as an alternative. He found that he could work in substantially larger formats and could consequently consider a new series of complex issues relating in part to matters of size and scale. The exhibition contains examples of his early work, which is book size and can be held in one's hand. Around 1970, Chu started enlarging his prints; from 1975 on, he has worked in very large-scale formats. More than one-third of the thirty-seven works on display are his more recent large-scale wall pieces.

Chu works extensively in colour. Through experimentation, he has discovered that by cutting the metal plate into smaller shaped

sections, he can ink them separately in several colours before reassembling them for one pull. This process — long used by woodcutters but unique to lithographers so far as I am aware — Chu finds to be an exciting advancement of the traditional methods, for it releases him from the problems that normally attend the manufacture of multi-coloured lithographs. As he more successfully comes to control the tonal elements of his colour prints, he sees them becoming comparable in form as well as size to paintings. Chu's dedication to all facets of the printmaking process leads him to the invention of new and fascinating techniques that enrich his striking imagery.

The themes of Chu's art speak movingly of the relationships between man and nature, of inexorable change, of tragedy brought about by the senseless stupidity of war, and of eventual reconciliation. Chu expresses the rhythms of the world through the selection of subjects that range from the apparently trivial meanderings of the insect kingdom to the silent serenity of the landscape. Seriality is a governing principle upon which Chu constructs his images and is at the very heart of his creations. Before the twentieth century, artists usually made series of prints to be read one after the other in book form. One thinks of Durer's memorable Christian works and of Goya's illustrations. In the past twenty years, American artists such as Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol have radically altered our perceptions of serial imagery. Chu's early works are meant to be read in book fashion; his later prints can be experienced simultaneously. His images recur in and are connected through time and space, confirming at once the traditional uses of the print and pointing the way to new painterly possibilities.

The exhibition includes three series, and two groups that Chu sees as forming coherent unities — the war pieces and the metaphysical pieces. Two series — The Spider Series and The Ants Series — are the earliest examples of Chu's explorations and establish many of the compositional and thematic concerns that can be traced throughout his work. The subjects themselves, along with the third series devoted to The Flies (watercolour), seem at first to be insignificant; if most contemporary urbanites even dimly acknowledge the existence of these tiny creatures, it is undoubtedly with disinterest or academic contempt. Chu asks that we become acquainted with the rhythmic movements of these insects and that we come to recognize in them a metaphor for our own existence.

The Spider Series (nos. 8-11) is meant to be read from right to left; The Ants Series (nos. 1-7) is consulted like a book with its seven prints bound together so that a him Westerner inspects them looking from back to front. This overall serial pattern immediately obliges the viewer to reorient himself so that he may begin to comprehend the meaning of each set as Chu envisages it. The spider follows its daily routine, building its web, capturing its food, dispensing with the inedible portions, and retreating finally to its nocturnal state. The four prints are characterized by a unified treatment of the compositional field with its spherical object on which the spider spins its web and on the rich contrasts between the white paper (whose colour defines the gossamer threads) and the blacker spider and sphere. Colour and line intensify the silky horror of the encounter of the spider with its prey. And space is sensitively rendered through the counterpoint of white and shifting blacks, the web and the paper, and the use of cast shadow. Read as a whole, the series illustrates not only the times of day but also symbolizes the four seasons and the stages of life itself, The seemingly trivial thus takes on a powerful

meaning, ceaseless ebb and flow of life's struggles at their most By keeping to their place, these insects remind us of the elemental level. Seriality is combined with extremely delicate drawing to create and magnify our awareness not only of these creatures but also of ourselves,

A recurring motif in the insect series is survival of the fittest. The spider and the dragonfly, the ants, and the other miniscule anthropoids that inhabit the world, engage in a remorseless struggle for being. This struggle becomes, in Chu's later two groups, an overarching concern whose significance is intensified in direct relation to the increase in size of the prints and to the thematic shift to mankind. Chu saw that the replacement of the lithographic stone with the metal plate would result in the formulation of a new set of problems, and he combined this technical transformation with a thematic one that led to his confrontation with human tragedy.

The largest selection of prints in the show, even if not organized as a specific series, is nevertheless an organic evolution of Chu's preoccupation with war. His war pieces, which number twelve, indicate by their titles the major thematic considerations that came to occupy throughout the 1970s: *The Cloud* (no. 12), *Desolation* (no. 21), *Captivity* (no. 22), *The Hero* (no. 20), *The Womb of Despair* (no. 14), *The Cage of Eternity* (no. 15), and *No Man's Land* (no. 23). The confrontation of the insects, which reached a crescendo in The Ants Series where colonies engage in bloodless battle, metamorphosed into the blood-curdling horror of man destroying his fellow man. The absurdity of war is a leitmotif of the war pieces. The actuality of this absurdity is underscored by the introduction of another technical device that Chu used exclusively for this group of prints — namely, the photograph. The photo became, for Chu, an instrument to stress the unalterable reality of the theme depicted. Desirous of achieving the stark impact of war's most gruesome black and white photographs, Chu invented a light sensitive solution that made possible remarkably subtle variations of tone. This enabled him to print the actual photograph, using it to accentuate the hideousness of war. The war pieces are introduced by *The Cloud* (no. 12) with a commentary on the destructive forces of modern warfare. The awesome grandeur of the atomic mushroom dominates the image and rises in a flaming ball out of the inky black sea. The skeletal forms that are caught up in the explosion defy the cloud's might as they slip into their watery grave. The universal shape of total annihilation hovers before us. Turning to *The Staircase* (no. 18), one senses the formal reiteration of this shape and wonders aloud, with those few sad souls who slumber in its vortex, How can man be so bestial in the name of civilization?

The photographs that are an integral part of the other prints in the pieces, underline the fascinating revulsion that accompanies the documentation of modern war. *In Desolation* (no. 21) and in *The Ruins* (no. 19), both of which employ a horizontal format, the photographic image of the hopeless youths with all its pathos, is counterbalanced by the suggestively elongated which reach out to engulf the viewer. In recent years, the artists have made extensive use of the photograph in their prints but mostly for formal purposes. Chu incorporates it in his war pieces to accentuate war’s repugnance, which is recorded forever by the objective photo.

Gradually, as we move through he war pieces, we notice that the format becomes larger. *The Hero* (no. 20) of 1975 represents a liberation of the print from its traditional function as hand-held object to wall piece. For the first time, the print

grows to the size of a large painting and invites the viewer to contemplated its technical and thematic concerns accordingly. The shaped plate, which made its entrance in *Last Stop* (no. 17) of 1974, becomes a means to the magnification of the searing imagery. *The Hero* is perhaps both the most complex and the most dramatic of these pieces, for it combines a difficult technical process with an elaborate compositional design. Photographs are used for the central figure of the hideous corpse, whose body has been mangled leaving the skeletal remains so graphically displayed, and for the soldiers and basketball players in the lower area of the print, who remain eternally suspended in time. *The Hero* appears to be affixed to a cross-like form that also serves as a bier. He is crowned by a formation of three bombers and a rainbow. And his winding sheet is the strands of barbed wire that curl around the right side of his mutilated torso. One thinks of the spider's web which, with its silky threads, is just as lethal. The complex handling of the space is matched by the iconic forcefulness of the image. We grimace with the hero, recognizing in his portrait that of all mankind should war finally have its way.

The barbed wire continues to entangle us as we look at the remaining pieces. The disgusting immediacy of *The Hero* is complemented by the nobility of *Captivity* no. 22) where the disembodied hands, tied together and strung up on the fence with bits of wire, become a universal image of man's inhumanity to man. Imprisonment has been a subject or artistic meditation in our century, as war has become ever more savage; one remembers Käthe Kallowitz's haunting visions. Like them, Chu's *Captivity* is a transcendent image of the condition which need not be merely physical. In *The Cage of Eternity* (no. 15), as in *No Man's Land* (no. 23), the prickly spines of the wire entrap their victims. *The Cage of Eternity* is possibly the most poignant of the war pieces; one cannot but be deeply moved by the hopelessness of the youth who is being strangled by the entwining strands of the deadly wire.

No Man's Land is a code to the pieces, yet is poetically presents the horrors of war. One is invited to meditate on being absorbed by the land. The human element is reduced to a small are of the composition and our attention is directed to the formal gracefulness of the barbed wire that cuts diagonally across the left-hand section of the field, casting its shadow over the sandy ground. We sense that the earth will finally overcome and bury these horrors and that nature will once more control destiny.

"*the existence of man is dependent upon many things; only by placing one's trust in the way of the universe can success be achieved. Only by total dependence on the natural order can the world be changed for the better." ("Brilliant Beauty,"* I Ching)

Man is, Chu tells us, capable of living harmoniously with his neighbour and of achieving lasting peace. Chu's final group of prints, the metaphysical pieces, celebrates this potential and recognizes the central importance of nature.

The repugnance of the war pieces gives way, in the final set, to hope. *The Falling Angel* (no. 29) was conceived after Chu saw an exhibition of Rodin's work and was particularly struck by *Eve.* In the angel, we may see man moving beyond his animalistic state. The angel metamorphoses before us from the spectral form to the living female, whose outstretched arm reaches down to touch the earth. The descent is accompanied by an intensely spiritual recognition of earth's regenerative powers. In his majesterial woodcut, *The Sounds of Silence* (no. 31), Chu sums up the Eastern

Philosophy of oneness. The whole image is an enormous face whose individual features are made of countless smaller physiognomies. The dominant force of this cosmic form is achieved by the incredible interlacing of individual elements. As we stare into this visage, we feel that we are looking into the body and soul of Buddha, whose presence is felt. Body and soul become one, reinforcing each other just as the intricately rich structure of human life and its relationships animate the universe. In the face, Chu finds an essentially formal and thematic quality that speaks of salvation, a salvation in which all men are united in touching embrace that encompasses nature's universal laws.

Landscape, whose emergence was first seen in *No Man's Land* (no. 23), comes to dominate the latest prints. Seen collectively, *The Rainbow III* (no. 35), *The Muddy Road* (no. 32), *The Gate of Mysteries* (no. 34) and *The Silent Water* (no. 37), proclaim the peacefulness of nature touched but not transformed by the passage of man. It is fitting that the regenerative powers of nature are trumpeted in these most recent works. In *The Gate of Mysteries* (no. 34), the archetypal woman, who is descended from the founding mothers of civilization, rises out of an immense sea. Her fecundity and the fertility of the ocean are present in the embryo she cradles in her arms, as she looks toward a new beginning. She is the modern incarnation of all those ancient mothers who gave birth at sea and whose culture saw in the ocean new life. *In The Rainbow III* (no. 35), the fetal form glides through space, resting at the end of the rainbow road and waiting to come into a happier world. Lastly, in *The Muddy Road* (no. 32) and *The Silent Water* (no. 37), the complementarity of man and nature is addressed. *In The Muddy Road*, the conflict between man) and earth is noticed in the tire track that obliterates the land but is in turn gradually washed away by the water that flows from some undisclosed source. In The Silent Water, the rhythm of the universe is manifest in the water's ripples, which agitate and hold suspended the dead leaves with their autumnal splendor. The surface reflects the naked trees — the natural source of life in the next cycle. As we look down into the pond's world we feel that we have come full circle, back to the beginning and to the spider's web, which is spun around the globe in accordance with its own ineluctable rhythm.

Chu's voice is throughout a clear and teaching one, whose message in our own deeply troubled world echoes that of the oracle:

"He who attains stillness does not allow himself to be distracted from contemplation and the following of high principles. But he is not a recluse who keeps himself apart from others; his inward gaze is so steadfast that he is the same whether he is alone or in company." ("Stillness," I Ching)

W. Chandler Kirwin