"What will it look like?"

JULES OLITSKI AS PRINTMAKER

by Judith Stein

“What’s so exciting about making a print, any print?” Jules Olitski asked rhetorically in a 1989 letter. “It has to be that dizzy-making moment—call it terror?—that comes with the pulling of a proof,” he reflected. It is easy to understand why that moment would have exhilarated, even terrified, Olitski: it is at this point that an artist gets a first glimpse of what the print actually looks like.

Inherent in the process of printmaking is the element of suspense. During that gap of time between setting down an image and pulling a proof, the artist works on faith, envisioning—but not seeing—the print. Olitski was an artist thrilled by actions with unpredictable outcomes, by the tension of not knowing just what would happen as a consequence of the movements of his hand. He approached printmaking as he did painting, inviting chance to participate in his process. When asked “Why paint?” in an early interview, he commented:

Why do it unless there are kicks in it, and the risks to take chances? I think this is the way you find out what you’re about, why you want to do [it] . . . I find it very exciting and irresistible to go that further step, to see, well, what will happen . . . What will it look like? ²

Painters can survey their work continuously during the course of creation, immediately able to assess the effects of their actions. But printmakers toil on an intermediary surface, which does not represent their final intention. Finished prints, with the exception of silkscreens, are transferred images that reverse the marks laid down by the artist. The process of printmaking, then, in comparison to painting, is not unlike the fancy footwork of Ginger Rogers—who did everything Fred Astaire did, a wag once noted, but backwards, and in high heels.

Olitski, a brilliant painter and an inspired printmaker, embodied Fred and Ginger. At times he could see the direction his art was heading; at other times he stepped into the dark. Curious about the potentials of a variety of art and nonart materials and techniques, he embraced an ethos of playful experimentation. As a young painter, he once painted several figurative canvases wearing a blindfold, the better to discover his body’s natural rhythms and impulses.

He began making etchings in 1956 when, at age thirty-four, he organized the first art department of the recently founded C. W. Post College of Long Island University. “I took it in my head to teach a course on printmaking,” the artist told me a half century later.³ He described how he went out and bought an old printing press, staying a few steps ahead of his students as he explored various techniques, beginning with copper plate etching.
To make his etchings, Olitski coated a copper sheet with an acid-resistant layer of wax called the ground. He then laid down the image by drawing pointed tools across the ground, peeling away the wax to reveal the surface of the metal. When he dipped the plate (also called the matrix) into an acid solution, the caustic liquid ate away, or etched, the areas of exposed copper. The longer the sheet sat in the acid bath, the deeper the acid’s bite, the greater the revealed copper’s capacity to hold ink, and the darker the impression on paper when it was printed under pressure. Regarding his first prints, Olitski recalled, “It was a little scary with the acids—I’m not too handy with these things—but it was very exciting.”

Olitski created two cycles of etchings that first year, one abstract, the other figurative. These earliest prints are testimonies to his spirit of inquiry. We can picture him scanning his studio for anything with a point, wondering to himself as he dragged or scratched it across the waxy ground on a copper plate, “What kind of printed mark would this make?” If artist Paul Klee famously described his method of drawing as “taking a line for a walk,” then Jules Olitski took it for a test drive, here tapping the gas to create a minute linear grid, there gunning it for the more graphic passages.

Unfortunately, the etching plates he worked on are not extant. But we can deduce something of his method and mindset by examining the succession of proofs, or states, that have survived. The medium of etching permits artists to revise the image after printing each progressive proof. They accomplish this by reworking the plate, adding details
with fresh drawings; preserving others with "stopping out" liquid, which prevents further deepening of bitten areas in subsequent acid baths; or subtracting details by scraping and burnishing areas of the plate to bring it back to its flat starting point.

When artists portray themselves, they often elide self-observation and self-inquiry: "How do I look?" merges with "Who am I?" Olitski's etched Self-Portrait series (1956) paced responses to these interrogatives through successive states, taking the measure of his medium as he went. I asked Olitski why he had chosen to etch depictions of his own face when his paintings of that period were predominantly abstract. He replied somewhat facetiously: "Well, that is what was there!" He continued: "Rembrandt did the same thing. I had to serve as my own model." Not surprisingly, some of Olitski's first paintings in the forties had been self-portraits. In the fifties, the art of Rembrandt held particular interest for him, especially the Dutchman's virtuoso handling of light and shade.

Olitski held himself and his materials up to scrutiny in the Self-Portrait series, as he explored the techniques for tonal nuance. The granular passages found here and there in his prints of the fifties are prophetic of the atmospheric mists of color that constituted his signature painting style in the sixties. In State One a squall of densely massed strokes moves in across the right half of his face. The deeper shadows of State Two bespeak a longer immersion of the matrix in the acid solution. His rendering of the eyes to express inward thought survives in State Four, but the mood of the private monologue has darkened further; assertive, tarry islands of texture partially mask his face and mass at the sheet's boundaries, creating a fragmented inner frame.

Olitski first explored the compositional device of multiple borders in his earliest nonrepresentational paintings (1951–53), which were inspired by the happenstantial patterns of rectangles that collect on drawing boards after repeated use. In the three iterations of Drawing Number One (1956), these compounded lines partially fence off, and define, a central terrain. While some may see in it an evocation of landscape, others may associate its horizontal registers with the sea, foretelling the nautical references in the art of his last years, for example — Silent Sea Scape, a juicily stroked monotype from 2007.

The conversation between center and periphery visible in Drawing Number One fascinated the artist for the next five decades. In the sixties he gravitated to color lithography, a printmaking technique with the gestural freedom of drawing. Wavery inner frames cozy up to— but don't always touch— the papers' contours in the Anna series. In 1970, not long after he created these prints, Olitski talked to an interviewer about drawing around the edge in his paintings:

"The one place where drawing is inescapable is [the] edge . . . the one place where it exists and you cannot get away from it is where you decide, "This is where the painting ends; this is where it exists on its boundaries" . . . I tend to draw along the edge . . . It's a way of introducing other color."
Expanse of specked color outweigh drawn elements in his prints of the sixties and early seventies, reflecting the tonal discoveries of his Color Field paintings. In two related suites of silkscreens from 1970, delicately particulate pinks, yellows, mauves, blues, greens, purples, and oranges engage in whispery tête-à-têtes. These prints, with their shimmery colors bled to the paper’s edge, are arguably among the most exquisite expressions of visual delight created in the last century.

Bodily rhythms reassert themselves in the loopy shapes and quavery boundaries of Olitski’s silkscreens of the 1980s. *The Grey* (1988) and *Original Can Can* (1988), printed at Philadelphia’s Brandywine Workshop, seem almost danced into being, in the manner that Jackson Pollock choreographed his paintings. Generous, unpredicited brush strokes and melting expanses of color characterize Olitski’s prints from then on. In the next decade, he painted on glass sheets to create a series of extraordinary monotypes, executed with a confident hand at the Hartford School of Art.

“Few artists had Olitski’s near magical ability to get all the information down in one pass of a monotype plate,” notes Kim Hartman Colligan, the artist’s master printer for many years during his last decade. Hartman Colligan played a collaborative role in the creation of these prints; the printer’s decisions directly affect the image, akin to the importance of darkroom work to the appearance of a photograph. Hartman Colligan has a kinetic understanding of the transfer of color from the plate to the paper during the printing process of a monotype, altering the pressure, for example, if a peek at the print reveals pigment left on the plate.

At age eighty-two, Olitski returned to the self-portrait. His ethereal, disembodied head emerges from a void with the texture of animal hide in *Memory* (2004). Rembrandt’s portrayals of old age come to mind, as do Titian’s. A meditation on mortality, *Memory* is also an elder’s summing up. Ever curious to see how things turn out, Olitski depicted himself with inquisitive eyes and creased brow, plumbing the future with the unspoken question, “What will it look like?”

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3. This and following quotations from Jules Olitski, interview with the author, November 17, 2006.
