

TIME TO TAKE OFF

Summary

The graphic artist, draughtsman and teacher Ondřej Michálek is one of the most renowned representatives of contemporary Czech graphic art. He is praised for his novel approach to graphic techniques and the intellectual merit of his work. From 1965 to 1970, he studied at the Philosophical Faculty of Palacky University, Olomouc, where he graduated in Czech language and art theory and education. At the time of the Prague Spring political thaw he studied under the most outstanding teachers. These were Zdeněk Kudělka, Eduard Ovčáček, Miroslav Štolfa and, especially, Václav Zykmond. He graduated with the graphic series *Games – Roads* (1970). He chose linocut intaglio as his characteristic technique, enabling, apart from traditional engraving, also the application of recyclable material (the branding of book printing blocks), half-tone drawing (using varnish on roughened areas) as well as work with a text (ironing aluminium foil with a typescript in a matrix).

Ondřej Michálek draws upon contemporary tendencies, such as a return to figure and pop-art poetics in general, processing the visual materials of advertising, however, even in his very first presentation he eludes their dictate. Although he uses the "most democratic" technique, he does it in a most unorthodox manner (at that time linocut was not commonly used for intaglio) and endows the visual part of his work with sophisticated philosophical messages and stories. This is something that was then labelled with contempt as literary. Despite this, he imperturbably went his own way.

Michálek's work developed in cycles of graphic art characterised by innovative techniques and refined humour: the cycles *Untitled /La vie est belle/* (1970), *Have a Rest, Darling* (1971), *Accessible Gardens* (1972) and *Time to Take Off* (1972). This series was completed in 1974 by the cycle entitled *My Folk*. He inhabits his compositions with figures resembling series characters, representing them in stiff poses or with a stiff smile. The absurdity of the situations is emphasised by the titles of the cycles. Nevertheless, Michálek does not attempt social criticism, he does not want to reflect on the social issues. He is rather an ironic commentator on the course of the world we all live in. His figures resemble Miloš Forman's characters, or characters from Fellini's *Sweet Life*. These are the aspects that along with the novel techniques characterise the artist in the context of the figural graphic art of the late 1960s. Similar issues were for some time also dealt with by Naděžda Plíšková, who was involved in the Surrealist movement, or Jiří Balcar, whose technically perfect works of figural graphic art are orthodox representations of Pop Art principles.

Michálek's interpretation of the grotesque culminates in his relief linocuts with the experimental use of colours, such as *Arrival of Famous Singers* (1978), *Decoration* (1980), *Landscape with Billboards and a Volcano* (1980). In them he shows *theatrum mundi*, where instead of real figures there are large billboards representing them. The background is formed by street frontages adding to the bizarre grotesqueness of the picture. A similar tone can be found in his pencil drawings, where Ondřej Michálek asserts himself as an excellent draughtsman following the tradition of the phenomenon of Olomouc drawing (*Gallery of the Best*, 1979, *Large Aviary*, 1979 and *Agreeable Listening*, 1981). The figures in the drawing *Gallery of the Best* resemble victims cornered in a cul-de-sac who are waiting anxiously to meet their fate. The drawings and linocuts that Ondřej Michálek created in the late 1970s and early 1980s complete his first period which is dominated by figures with their stories against a background.

In 1982 Ondřej Michálek changed his conception of relief linocut. In his works *Morning Greeting* (1982) and *Hop!* (1983) he still applies the attributes he used in the 1970s – the background of an urban landscape and outlined figures. Nevertheless, the colouring achieved by registers of multiplied white overprints on a black substrate heralds the development of the artist's work in the subsequent years. While the figures disappear from his prints for several years, the stories remain. The stories are now told through mysterious forms, clusters of peculiar structures, irradiated and illuminated by light. The metaphysical nature of the stories is emphasised by a sophisticated technology for the preparation of the print matrix. Lino is prepared by cutting and strips of metal master are soldered to the matrix body. Later on, he also combines the printing plates with the structure of wood. This first, intimate stage of the creation of print – the preparation of the matrix relief – remains concealed to the public, but for the artist it is the adventure of the search for the final form.

In the 1980s, Michálek's graphic art became known to the knowledgeable public. Since 1984 he has been taking part in international exhibitions of graphic art at which he has won a number of prestigious

awards. In 1990, Michálek was appointed lecturer (in 1994 senior lecturer) in graphic art at the Department of Fine Art of the Faculty of Education, Palacky University, Olomouc.

In the middle of the 1990s, the theme of Michálek's graphic art is transformed. Now there are bowls and goblets – representative symbols and a means of exploration of the models of human behaviour both in solitude and interaction. The existential feeling aroused by these works with vessels anticipates the latest stage of Michálek's work that commenced at the start of the new millennium. It relates to his interest in architecture and the sensitive apprehension of space. It opened up with a series of linocuts combined with woodcutting entitled *Refuge* (2001). These prints evoke feelings of anxiety and the need for shelter. Although the following graphic cycles preserve a certain fragility and intimacy, they gradually tend to more compact and lucid forms. The cycle *Resting Places* (2002–2003) represents models of open dwellings on high constructions that arouse a feeling of instability, while on the other hand they are settings with a detailed interior reflecting our inner world. The works *Travelling Exhibition* (2002) and *Observing New Pictures* (2003) are a slightly ironic artistic self-reflection focussed on artistic practice.

Ondřej Michálek has completed the stories of houses and shelters by several linocuts called *New Houses* depicting buildings mostly inhabited by stylised figures. They are excellent examples of mastering light which is created by adding registers of white glazing paint on a black background. The mastering of a certain technique or method is for the print artist always a stimulus for a search for a new way. This is now opening up in large format monochrome gravure prints with the motifs of aqueducts and other constructions. His stylised human figures again tell a story which is characteristic of all Michálek's work.

The work of Ondřej Michálek forms an integral part of the current renewed interest in graphic art and linocut in particular. It needs to be pointed out, though, that he is one of those to be credited for this revival. His technical invention and permanent search for innovation make him a living example of the topicality of graphic art as a medium.

Ivo Binder