

1.

Scrub. Scrubweed. Scratching the paper. The gaze is drawn to the object depicted: a tree, branch, bush, leaf. Curiously trackless scrub. Weed. But also to the paper's surface, a surface finish which asserts its own texture, its own structure. A woodcut shows a tree, a black-and-white pattern of stems and branches. Hard-edged outlines. White branches on a pitch-black ground, resembling gleamingly bare winter boughs in the merciless glare of car headlights. But discernible within the white of the boles is the grain of the wood plank into which the print design was cut. Not simply an iconic subject, a motif, or something which, external to the picture, is merely conjured in our minds, the wood is also a self-referential trace, an imprint. Pressed down onto the soft paper, wood-free cotton paper, the block does not simply mediate contrasts between its inked up areas and the colourless voids – the grain of the wood itself shows up. The wood inheres in the picture – is its very substance. Medium and motif are one and the same. Even in those areas of the picture bereft of printing ink, such was the pressure of the wood upon the receptive cotton paper that the pattern of grain is incorporated there too – looking like the diaphanous shadow of the wooden block into which the motif was cut. Elsewhere, black and white copperplate minimalist landscapes depict with quite other, blurred delineations, micro-universes of scrub, a fretwork of branches, roots and boles. Or equally arguably, strokes, lines and blotches. For demarcations between motivic and graphic elements are fluid: a stroke transmutes into a branch, a bole becomes a thick line, roots mutate into blotchy tangles. The image itself is a landscape, the graphic elements scrubland, oscillating between flat, one-dimensional strokes on paper and an appearance of depth, conjuring two-dimensional illusions of space and distance. In any event, we seldom advance beyond the scrub, in whose enveloping world we crawl around, never attaining to the perspectives afforded by picturesque landscapes – vast, unbounded expanses, fathomless depths. On our knees, we are enmeshed in the scrub's ecological microcosm, observing it close to; adopting the beetle's eye view, scoping out a propinquitous, all-encompassing, cosmic totality. A world unto itself, which we cannot see beyond, only inhabit. A colourless world where the contrasts between brightness and murk, light and dark, suffice as reference points; where difference knows no nuance, and so inversions are readily achieved. Black becomes white and white becomes black: the contrasts are constant. The printmaking technique's peculiar transformations from negative to positive are mirrored in this motivic universe, where the colour of a bole – black or white – is a distinction that makes no difference.

Rune Gade, Denmark

2.

Weeds proliferate. Rampant, rambunctious – resisting all efforts at eradication. Like some demonic, mad-paced, self-proliferating phenomenon, which in a self-destructive monomaniacal euphoria, cancerously consumes its host. Art is the antithesis: the apotheosis of singularity, uniqueness. Unrepeatability. And yet we find 21 oil paintings meticulously repeating the same motif – leafy twigs, rendered in alternating black and white silhouette, negative-positive, against a background which fades gradually from a saturated pink at the top to a white at its foot. The at once graphic and brightly coloured motif is repeated a score of times, almost identically, but on varying scales. The same but different. Although executed by hand, the subject is no longer unique but reverts to the logic of its starting point, that of the (photo)graphic original, which is the antithesis of the hand-rendered and the singular: reproduction, repetition, potential infinity. Exact replicas, uniformity and seriality. The motif becomes a variable formula that lends itself to a gamut of dynamic permutations without ever forfeiting the sense of a whole to which the parts are subordinated. The repetition of the motif across varying scales creates a sequence that structures our perception of it. Most palpably, we find ourselves having to engage with the significance of scale: the motif's transformation from a twee, miniature landscape, where we can dreamily dawdle, to a vast, boundless landscape, a wall of colour where figuration threatens to morph into pure abstraction. Moreover, grasping the significance of repetition requires that the preceding image be held in the mind, acting as a lens through which we view its successor, so that different but identical pictures are imbricated, as it were – each individual picture reflecting meaning back onto that just seen or forward onto the next. On the one hand, repetition creates connectivity between the individual pictures, and on the other, distance, inasmuch as their singularity is eliminated. If we perceive them as individual pictures, they come off as replicas, whereas if we consider them as a single work, they transform into a coherent visual unity, an ornamental pattern. In actual fact, no such disjunction is available to us. We are obliged to oscillate between the two conceptions, between the parts and the whole, serial repetition or ornamentation, whose essential thrust is the frequently symmetric, decorative structure that transcends the parts, the infinite continuation of a figure or a motif. Unaccustomed to displays of sameness, we begin looking for small inaccuracies – 'five faults' in the motif. However, the deviations are not 'faults' but displacements, demonstrating that repetition is a species of invention, that the copy is a variant of the original.

Rune Gade, Denmark

3.

In the visual culture of late modernity, with its media-mediated images of everyday life, the weeds are talking heads, spouting off on political issues – disseminating their views in pithy, rhetorically tailored sound bites, as were they incontrovertible truths. The totemic image of talking time is the microphone, with the individual television company's colourful, eye-catching logo slapped onto it. Thrust in the face of the politician, expert, sports star, and others who make the cut for speaking time, the microphone is the conduit for sound and speech. As an isolated motif, abstracted from customary contexts of use and bereft of differentiating logos, microphones transmute into flowers, a carpet of blossoms, filling the picture plane – erect, bursting vibrantly upwards in photosynthetic response. Unless, instead, they are frenetic tentacles, quivering in a submarine world of unpredictable currents, media feeding frenzies, where the leap from one story to the next occurs with unpredictable, mind-boggling abruptness. Mute and inarticulate, the mikes are metonyms of the hushed attention reserved for a select few. Here, however, cut free from any communicative context, there are no words or speech to relay. Merely an empty space where they become iconic props in a mass-mediated reality, swished up from their humble bit parts to the status of principals. Likewise with medals, when their function as a symbol of hierarchical authority, a literal emblem, is destabilized by their visual decontextualization. While medals and decorations routinely assert the hegemonic status quo – partly through the award ceremony, partly through the recipient's proud wearing of them – the meaning of their display in these pictures is more ambiguous. No one parades medals and orders for fallen regimes. Their symbolic value drastically diminished, they end up as curiosities in antiques markets, purchasable for a peppercorn sum. These badges of power and honour, the sole intrinsically masculine ornament, are here lifted out of the meaning-conferring framework that lends them their legitimacy – thereby becoming oddly irrelevant. Mildly comical relics, with all the quaintness of a long abandoned fashion fad. No one knows any longer what the faded metals were supposed to represent, what the coloured stripes might mean. What heroic deeds and endeavours they recognized, what sacrifices they sought to compensate. They are now reduced to vacuous emblems, the tramp's parodic decorations: a cornucopian excess that effectively mocks society's authority figures. For the tramp takes the logic of medals – the more the better – to absurd lengths, to the point where his person becomes a wandering pillar displaying gaudy, resplendent emblems of power, now signifying nothing. They are vehicles, receptacles, that enshrine a variety of meanings, both negative and positive: from lofty distinction to utter vacuity. Sometimes, in the manner of picture puzzles, both at once.

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