

HUCK!

By Bill North, Senior Curator, Beach Museum of Art

Huck makes woodcuts. Big woodcuts. Considered on their technical merits alone, these prints are remarkable achievements in the medium. The large scale, complex compositions, accomplished draftsmanship, and intricate carving place them among the most skillfully executed and ambitious works in woodcut being produced today. But, the power of Huck's images does not reside solely in technical virtuosity. Tom Huck's prints are thoroughly steeped in the 500-year-old tradition of printmaking in the West, and he looks to this abundant history for inspiration in matters of technique and content. At the same time, his work belongs completely to the present. Huck's prints are powerful responses to many of the issues, concerns, and features of life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. They are rich in content, dense with manifold layers of meaning, and speak volumes about the state of American culture at the present moment.

Ostensibly, Huck's prints take as their subject life in Potosi, Missouri, the artist's boyhood home, and the surrounding area. Approximately eighty miles southwest of St. Louis, Potosi has a population of 2,662. Like many small towns in rural areas of middle America, Potosi is characterized by below-average levels of income, employment, real estate values, and education. It also has a history replete with bizarre tales and colorful figures. Chronicling the local legends of Potosi, Huck creates extraordinary images packed with narrative and visual interest. Collectively, these prints constitute a compendium of Potosi lore. Huck's titles, such as [*Chili Dogs, Chicks, and Monster Trucks*](#); [*Fried Eggs and Arson*](#); [*Party 'til She's Cute*](#); [*Ultimate Cock Fighting*](#); and [*Possum Promenade*](#), underscore the darkly satirical character of his subjects and images. As the artist has written:

My work deals with personal observations about the experiences of living in a small town in southeast Missouri. The often strange and humorous occurrences, places, and people in those towns offer a never ending source of inspiration for my prints. I call this work 'rural satire.'¹

Huck's predilection for satirical graphic art dates to his youth. The artist fondly recalls that as a boy of eleven or twelve he found an illustration from William Harrison Ainsworth's historical novel, *The Tower of London* (1840), under his father's bed.² Illustrated with etchings and wood engravings by George Cruikshank (1792-1878), one of England's leading political cartoonists of the nineteenth-century, Ainsworth's book traces the ill-fated nine-day reign of Lady Jane Grey and her subsequent beheading by order of Queen Mary I. Among Cruikshank's images in the book is *The Execution of Jane* (fig. 1). This depiction of the moment before Jane's beheading shows the doomed former queen, her blindfolded head on the block as the wild-eyed executioner's axe is drawn high above his head just before its deadly descent. Huck's response to the Cruikshank image was immediate and powerful. This

experience proved to be a defining moment for the artist, opening up the possibilities of the graphic arts as a vehicle for expressing his highly personal and satiric vision of the world around him.

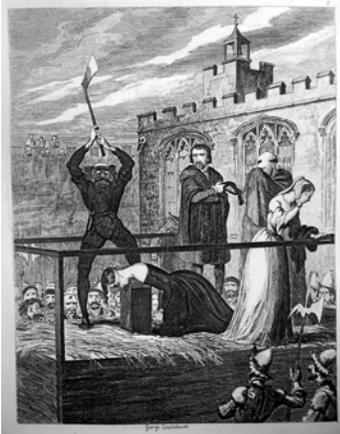


fig. 1

Huck's pantheon of printmaking heroes spans the entire history of the medium. Among the printmakers he cites as important influences are Martin Schongauer (Germany, died 1491), Albrecht Dürer (Germany, 1471-1528), Lucas van Leyden (Netherlands, 1494-1533), William Hogarth (England, 1697-1764), Honoré Daumier (France, 1808-1879), and José Guadalupe Posada (Mexico, 1851-1913). Although the work of artists such as Daumier and Hogarth has provided Huck with fine exemplars of satire, it is

the work of artists associated with the Northern Renaissance, particularly Dürer, that has most deeply influenced his technique. When Steve Goddard, curator of prints and drawings at the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, queried Huck in 1999 about his debt to Dürer, the artist responded:

Listen, the sole reason that I cut wood is because of Dürer. When I was 13 my mom and dad took me to DC, and at the National Gallery there I was allowed to buy one art book. Not even knowing what a woodcut was or what a print was for that matter, I saw BATTLE OF THE ANGELS [from *The Apocalypse*] (fig. 2) on the cover of Kurth's THE COMPLETE WOODCUTS OF ALBRECHT DÜRER and that was it.³

Huck feels a profound kinship with the German master and is quick to point out that he was born in 1971, 500 years after Dürer's birth in 1471.⁴ Huck's study of Dürer has been relentless and includes a pilgrimage to Nuremberg, Germany, Dürer's birthplace, where he immersed himself in the artist's work. Shortly after completing his MFA in printmaking at Washington University in St. Louis in 1995, Huck went to Italy. While visiting the Uffizi in Florence he saw an exhibition of a major monument in the history of printmaking, Dürer's *The Apocalypse* (1498), a series of fifteen large woodcuts of biblical subjects culled from the Book of Revelations. On his return from Italy, Huck commandeered his sisters' bedroom in Potosi, where he set up a studio and carved the first three blocks for [2 Weeks in August: 14 Rural Absurdities](#), his first major series.⁵ He carved the balance of the blocks in his former studio in Columbia, Missouri.



fig. 2

2 Weeks in August embodies Huck's vision as an artist. It is big in scale, content, and ambition. As Huck explains, he found the example of Dürer and other Northern Renaissance printmakers particularly inspirational:

In these works [Dürer, et al.] I found everything that interested me visually: complex compositions, technical virtuosity, and biting dark humor. It was only natural that I

create work about my hometown of Potosi, Missouri. That place is loaded with bizarre tales and local folklore, as most small towns are. Hell, every town big and small has that stuff. Some of us just might look a little harder than others.

I wanted to create a thematically unified body of work in the form of a print portfolio. All of my heroes, Dürer, Beckmann, and Grosz, created at least one of them. I am a HUGE fan of all that stuff and I wanted to be part of its history.⁶

According to the artist, each of the fourteen prints composing *2 Weeks in August* depicts: "a single day's bizarre but **TRUE** occurrence over a two week span in Potosi. **ALL OF THE STORIES ARE TRUE AND THE PEOPLE ARE REAL.** None of the names have been changed to protect privacy."⁷

Huck's technical and stylistic debt to Dürer can be seen in prints such as [*Chili Dogs, Chicks, and Monster Trucks*](#), a record of the first monster truck rally he attended. The print's complex and dense composition and Huck's deft handling of the multiple figure groups populating the image recall any of a number of Dürer's woodcuts from *The Apocalypse*. Huck creates a compositional dynamism by placing most of the image's elements on the diagonal, imbuing the print with a frenetic, zig-zagging energy. In Huck's prints, Faye Hirsch has observed: "Just about nothing is on the vertical or horizontal, it seems, except the block itself."⁸ Huck's vocabulary of line looks back to Dürer as well. For example, his treatment of the exhaust issuing from the monster truck's motor suggests Dürer's cloud forms. And, his use of tightly-carved parallel lines to render form evokes Dürer's printmaking style.⁹

Although the lessons of Dürer and other old masters inform Huck's prints significantly, it would be a mistake to ascribe the artist's work to a revivalist impulse. Huck and his work are, above all, concerned with the present. The artist has said that "this [the present] is the time to make big woodcuts."¹⁰ For Huck, making big woodcuts is urgent business.

Contemporary society's boundless appetite for ever-increasing velocity in all aspects of life is one of the defining features of culture in the digital age. This lust for speed and its corollaries--intensity and miniaturization--informs our daily lives in profound ways. We want our electronic devices to be smaller, faster, and more capacious. Nanotechnology (the science of miniaturization) has become an enormous industry. In advertising and marketing "Extreme" has become the new "New" and is deployed to hawk everything from breath mints to caffeine-laden soft drinks to recreational sports.

The shift from the industrial to the digital age (analog to digital) has resulted in a literal and figurative flattening in the aesthetic, social, and cultural realms. Consider, for example, the difference between analog and digital audio recording. The former has a physical matrix, the latter's is electronic. An LP produces sound resulting from the vibration of a needle as it travels along the spiral groove on the surface. The LP is the aural equivalent of a printing matrix such as a woodcut block, and the resulting sound is an impression of the sonic image embedded in the matrix. The sound an LP produces and the image a woodcut block yields both result directly from the physical features of the matrix. Thus, we have the expressions "cutting a record" and "cutting a block." By contrast, the information constituting a digital

recording contained on a CD is not physical in nature, but electromagnetic. Every CD has the same smooth and shiny surface. And indeed, many audiophiles have decried the somewhat featureless sonic character of digital recordings. These same qualities characterize a great deal of digital photography, in which the background and foreground elements often appear to occupy the same plane. This flatness and relative lack of dimension parallels the flat character of digital audio recordings. The aesthetics of graphic design have been similarly transformed by the supplanting of hand-wrought layout and typesetting methods with computer software. This dematerialization and loss of relief extends to the larger social, political, cultural, and philosophic spheres. Consider, for example, the inadequacy of geographic location to define identity and the loss of place wrought by the onslaught of electronic communication, the proliferation of numbingly similar shopping malls, and MTV.

Huck's big woodcuts are antidotes for this condition, providing relief, literally and figuratively, for an increasingly unmodulated and homogenous culture. Relief printing, the technical family to which the woodcut belongs, is the most basic and direct type of printmaking. The artist carves the image on the block without any chemical or electronic intervention. By virtue of their very nature, woodcuts temper considerations of velocity. Carving a woodblock, especially of the scale Huck employs, is a time-consuming and labor-intensive process. In Huck's case, a five or six-inch square area can represent an entire day's work. And wood, the material used, is many years in the making, from seedling to milled and finished board.

Huck's relationship with contemporary popular culture is complex. He is at once documenter, critic, and participant, mediating this potentially troublesome mix with extraordinary acumen. For [*Bed of Bones*](#) from *2 Weeks in August*, Huck mined the annals of Potosi lore and the stock of American popular television to create an image that is as compelling as it is repulsive. *Bed of Bones* is the story of Freddie and Helen Wiesler who, according to Huck, "were a German couple who lived in a shanty in the woods."¹¹ The Wieslers, reputed to have a gag-inducing stench, were discovered to have been living among decaying dog carcasses after local authorities removed Freddie's body following his death. This gruesome image presents us with a view of the nuzzling, grizzled couple sharing a bed with a dog and piles of skeletal canine remains. The bedroom and adjacent room are awash in dog carcasses which nearly fill the entire composition and appear on the verge of spilling into the viewer's space, a result of the print's oblique perspective. Our unease is heightened on learning that Huck's source for the depraved couple was a cover of *TV Guide* showing Ross and Rachel, characters on television's wildly successful situation comedy *Friends*.¹² In prints like *Bed of Bones*, Huck plays to our perverse voyeuristic appetite for the grotesque, thereby calling contemporary popular culture into question.

In *The Classic American Head Job*, Huck assays contemporary American politics. President Bill Clinton's scalplless head occupies the lower left quarter of the composition. Issuing from Clinton's cranial cavity and populating the image is a cavalcade of figures from contemporary politics and popular culture, all references to the scandalous and the unsavory. The characters in this parade of turpitude and moral equivocation include United States Senator Jesse Helms wearing a Ku Klux Klan Imperial Wizard's hat and holding a copy of *Swank* magazine; a fully-erect and flying Ross Perot, clutching his engorged member like a witch's broomstick; an Arkansas State Trooper and Paula Jones (seen holding a "Penile ID Kit"),

Clinton's accuser in the now infamous alleged incident of sexual harassment; and Hillary Clinton clad in a spike and leather S & M outfit and holding a riding crop. In what might at first appear an excessive and overindulgent image, Huck has given us a powerful critique of twentieth-century American political life. And, on reflection, his over-the-top approach seems quite apt given the subject. *The Classic American Head Job* accrues a portentous character when we consider that it was created in 1997, the year before Monica Lewinsky's name first entered the American public's consciousness.

Huck and his work have been linked to the world of alternative comics and underground comix. The artist is quite comfortable operating in the realm between observer and producer of popular culture. As a youth, the work of R. Crumb, the legendary underground comix artist, was a powerful source of inspiration for Huck. His interest in Crumb's work has been an abiding passion, and, in recent years, Huck and Crumb have developed a friendship. In 2003 Huck was commissioned to produce six linoleum cuts for an issue of *BLAB!*.¹³ This cutting-edge comics, illustration, and graphic design annual published by Fantagraphics Books regularly features such alternative artists as Gary Baseman, Sue Coe, Joe Coleman, Camille Rose Garcia, Gary Panter, and Chris Ware. The six prints contained in Huck's series for *BLAB!, Vintage Junk '04: Fair-y Tales from the Mississippi Expo*, all deal with a Missouri subject, the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. Among the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair's contributions to American culture was the popularization of the hot dog and the ice cream cone, subjects that Huck treats as orgiastic and gluttonous episodes in *Weinermania: The Birth of Frankenskank* and *The Early Days of Soft Serve*.

Events surrounding a bar outside of Potosi and in operation from 1948 to 1951 provided the inspiration for Huck's most recent major series, [*The Bloody Bucket*](#). The history of this bar, the Bloody Bucket, is full of the kind of depraved incidents to which Huck is drawn. Established three years after World War II, the Bloody Bucket was a popular gathering place for veterans and was the site of a number of violent acts perpetrated by the bar's patrons. [*Death of a Sailor*](#), for example, depicts in excruciating detail a murder committed with garden shears in the parking lot of the bar. *The Bloody Bucket* also includes scenes of degeneracy such as [*Dollar Dance*](#), which shows a pistol-wielding, pregnant bride dancing for small bills, much to the pleasure of the bar's lecherous male customers.

As of this writing, Huck has completed eight of the eleven prints that will constitute the series. The artist began work on *The Bloody Bucket* in 2000. Both in scale and technique, it is his most ambitious project to date. All of the prints in the series are of uniform dimension, fifty-two by thirty-eight inches (by contrast, the largest block in *2 Weeks in August* is just under thirty by twenty-six inches). Technically, these prints are virtuosic. The intricacy of Huck's carving is eyeball-popping, and the range of surfaces, textures, and tones he achieves in these blocks are feats of control and mastery. With *The Bloody Bucket*, Tom Huck has delivered on the substantial promise shown in *2 Weeks in August*, confirming the critical esteem the latter series generated after its appearance. In the years following *2 Weeks in August*, Huck has steadfastly continued to refine and sharpen his vision and technical prowess. This, combined with his study and veneration of the traditions of the great printmakers before him, has set the artist on the path leading to a rightful place of his own in the history of printmaking.

NOTES

- ¹ Tom Huck, "Artist Statement," Evil Prints, <http://evilprints.com/statement.html> (accessed February 3, 2005).
- ² Recounted in Faye Hirsch, "Gouging Tradition: The Woodcuts of Tom Huck," *Art on Paper* (July-August 2001): 58. The subject of the Cruikshank print is incorrectly identified as the beheading of Mary Queen of Scots. The first edition of Ainsworth's book is: William Harrison Ainsworth, *The Tower of London. A Historical Romance* (London: Richard Bentley, 1840). Huck found the reproduction of Cruikshank's etching in what he describes as "a cheesy *Newsweek* [magazine] publication about the Tower of London" given as a premium to subscribers of the magazine. (Tom Huck, e-mail to the author, 10 February 2005.)
- ³ Quoted in Steve Goddard, "Dürer's Echo: Five Centuries of Influence," Explore: Thought and Discovery at the University of Kansas, <http://www.research.ukans.edu/explore/v1n2/durer.html> (accessed February 3, 2005). See also: Hirsch, 58. The Kurth book is: Willi Kurth, ed., *The Complete Woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer*, with an introduction by Campbell Dodgson (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1963).
- ⁴ Hirsch, 58.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Tom Huck, untitled and unpublished typescript, ca. 2000. Beckmann and Grosz are: Max Beckmann (Germany, 1884-1950) and George Grosz (United States, born in Germany, 1893-1959).
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Hirsch, 59.
- ⁹ This is also noted in Goddard.
- ¹⁰ Conversation with the author, 28 June 2004.
- ¹¹ Tom Huck, exhibition label copy for *2 Weeks in August*, untitled and undated typescript, ca. 1999.
- ¹² Conversation with the author, 28 June 2004.
- ¹³ Tom Huck, "Vintage Junk '04," *BLAB!* 14 (Autumn 2003): 2-8.