

Synchronism in Bonnie Baxter's Prints

By Christine Unger

i always thought of printmaking as taming many animals with different and strong voices. each element of the print (the paper, the ink, the viscosity of the ink, the color, the pressure, the overlays) is an animal which must be compatible with the rest to create a kind of balance which works and carries meaning

Bonnie Baxter

Christine Unger works in Montréal as a visual artist and writer. Her work is increasingly directed toward interdisciplinary events in which research is a strong component. In 2000, she began a series of collaborations with her husband, composer Michael Oesterle; most recently she has collaborated on multimedia installations for Montreal Biennale 2004, Het Muziekgebouwaan 'tj (Amsterdam, 2005) and Fondation Derouin's International Symposium 2005. She is currently working on an opera with Queen of Puddings Music Theatre Company and a book exploring visual metaphors in astrophysics.

Bonnie Baxter's *Chi-chi doggie* print project marks a return in her artistic practice to printmaking as a primary means of expression after nearly ten years of focusing on video, performance, public art contracts and collaborative community events. Reducing Bonnie's output, verbal or artistic, to one track or frame is no simple task. Her interest in dualities and synchronicities characterizes her life as well as her art. Her prints are prepared and executed with the foresight of a Bobby Fisher, while their content reveals a stream of consciousness that she dips into like a child fishing for tadpoles. *Chi-Chi doggie's* gaze is a fulcrum, an innocent, steadying point of perspective for an artist who knows the uncertainty, the entropy, which can come from an open heart and an unguarded creative process.

A LITTLE BACKGROUND

Bonnie Baxter was born in Texarkana, Texas and has had a studio and residence in Val-David, Québec since 1969. She is a printmaker and multi-media artist who has maintained an extensive exhibition record both nationally and internationally for almost four decades, with work ranging from public art installations to large-scale pieces in print, sculpture and digital imaging.

She earned an MFA degree from Vermont College, Norwich University and has lectured extensively, giving workshops in Canada, Mexico, the U.S. and Turkey. She is the founder of the Atelier du Scarabée and has been its director since 1985. She currently teaches in the Fine Arts department of Concordia University. In 2005 she was awarded the Prix à la création artistique from Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec.

Since the *Chi-chi doggie* series marks a significant turning point in Bonnie's artistic process it's only fair to explain a little about what brought her here. Bonnie grew up just across the border from Mexico and was surrounded in her home by the artifacts of other cultures that were her mother's obsession. Ironically, it wasn't until the 1980s, when she learned about the Atame papermaking process and subsequently the art of the Otomi Indians, that the art of South America made an impression on her art practice. She had been working in Val-David and Montréal on small black-and-white etchings throughout the 1970s when serious health problems led her to rethink her practice. She began looking for alternatives to the rectangle, began papermaking, sculpting and discovered color – art became a healing mechanism. She modeled her *Spirit Figure* series on the "primitive" forms of the Otomi Indians, creating order from chaos – incorporating psychologically based, autobiographical elements into surfaces made safe through symmetry and geometry. The *Spirit Figure* series continued from 1988 until 1993.

*The artist sincerely thanks
Concordia University's Part Time
Faculty Association for its support.*

During the 1990s, crisis once again propelled Bonnie to rethink her art practice. The *Spirit Figures*, so controlled and personal, seemed to have separated her from a critical art world dominated by postmodern dialectics, semiotics, feminist anti-dualism, and postcolonial appropriation paranoia. Bonnie began to explore mediums she thought would be more immediate, and more directly involved with the community. She plunged into video and performance art with unguarded enthusiasm, pushing the boundaries of her experience into unmapped territories – *Sensing the Dragon* (to use one of Bonnie's own titles). In an act of defiant self-exploration, she ritualistically set fire to much of her existing work over the course of a winter – a controlled conflagration of the soul which she cast in digital frames for future reference. But while she maintained a print practice at all times (often creating images of her beloved dog, Bernadette) and experimenting with the tension created between the digital frame and hand-made prints, she felt her attentions were divided. The time required to technically process her video images was prohibitive and resulted in isolating her more than she had ever been before. What she particularly missed was a process in which letting go of certain physical controls opened the door to the emergence of sub-conscious imagery.

Several years ago, Bonnie picked up her little toy Chi-chi: a small toy Chihuahua with an engagingly bobbing head. It has been a constant companion ever since. Chi-chi is an innocuous, pocket-sized object. Bearing little scrutiny, it passes unnoticed into forbidden territories. It's like the "coyote" that leads illegal aliens across the U.S.-Mexican border – the coyote that takes its name from the far more ancient coyote figure, whose trickster ways are said to create passageways to places far more mysterious than the United States. On a subconscious level, the *Chi-chi doggie* series has become a kind of passport into troubled areas of Bonnie's mental map. And since September 11, there have been so many world events whose implications hardly bear thinking of. *Chi-chi doggie* has become her medium, allowing her to express the inexpressible. *Chi-chi* lets her move forward and sometimes even seems to take the lead as she connects many layers of subject matter that reconcile her current perspective of the world.



Bonnie Baxter, *Andalusia / Fall*, 1991. Cast paper print, 47 x 35.5".

As she re-immersed herself in printmaking, *Chi-chi's* image appeared again and again, morphing with the layers of chaotic and disturbing images like a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

Bonnie Baxter, *Chi-chi tears: rose*, 2004. Color woodcut, screenprint, 48 x 24".

Bonnie Baxter, *Chi-chi tears: feet*, 2004. Color woodcut, screenprint, stamp, 48 x 24".

CONNECTIONS

Bonnie's work is saturated with mytho-historical and socio-political references, her postmodernism is more than skin deep. Her embrace of the collective, inclusive experience is not just part of her art practice, but is evident in every facet of her life. Life and art feed each other, growing fat and happy on an evidential feast of shared discoveries. No surprise then that the little Chi-chi doggie is a more than apt choice for talisman. The Chihuahua is not only the smallest breed of dog anywhere, but may also be the only dog indigenous to America. Early images of a very similar dog called the Techichi, probably the Chihuahua's ancestor, appear in ancient Toltec art. From remains found at pyramids and in graves, it is surmised that the Toltec people believed the Techichi was a guide for the human soul. In a truly peculiar incidence of serendipity, it turns out that another ritual associated with the Toltec was the burning of a dog with a human corpse in the belief that the deceased human's wrong-doings would be transferred to the dog.

The Otomí Indians, whose art and craft have been such an inspiration to Bonnie's work, had as their nearest neighbors, the Chichimec people – a poor hunter-gatherer group that lived by raiding its more settled neighbors. As allies, they rebuffed the Spanish forces of Cortés. But when they failed to defeat the Spanish, the Otomí joined them instead and were among the first to convert to Catholicism, while the Chichimec people eventually rebelled against the Spanish and were defeated. Before the Spanish arrived, the Otomí relationship with the Chichimec people may have been described as syncretic: their rituals were filled with man/beast metamorphic shamanistic practices that seem to echo their symbiotic (or parasitic) social system. In compromising with the Spanish, the Otomí embraced a new syncretism with Catholicism, retaining not only their own culture, but also the culture of the Chichimec.



Bonnie Baxter, *Chi-Chi tears*, no-see-em, 2004. Color woodcut, screenprint, 48 x 24".

Bonnie Baxter, *Orange*, 2003. Color woodcut, screenprint, stamp, 47 x 35.5".



In a dialogue with Chi-chi as trickster-companion, her medium and unwitting assistant, Bonnie enters into a larger dialogue on the nature of our day-to-day relationship to world events, and examines how we incorporate the "beast" of inhumanity into our everyday consciousness. She questions the degree to which our relationship with inhumanity is symbiotic or parasitic. What at first appears as serendipity could easily be interpreted as an example of the way cultural syncretism and the resulting iconology create a subconscious semiotics that manifests itself through art.

digital noise is like static.

*hand stamping is like common labor,
poor or blurred,
it creates comprehension through a kind of fog.*

*wood is crude,
imposes grain and texture,
has a mind or voice of it's own.*

screenprint can mimic anything.

Bonnie Baxter



Marks, signs, icons – these are Bonnie Baxter's specialty. Her combination of printmaking techniques (in the case of the *Chi-chi doggie* series, woodcut, screenprint, rubber stamp and digital print) and her fluent inclusion of other media, add layer upon layer of intrigue to her artwork, where myth and reality already work together in an alert and sometimes uneasy association. Her application of technique is not accidental, convenient or limited by inexperience. It is in her content and through incessant joyful experimentation that she unleashes her subconscious or lets it gently rise to the surface, as the case may be. Each technique brings another layer of physicality to the work – each layer, applied in its unique process, provides its own sensual reality and emotive associations.

i compose a video the way i compose a print - in layers. what i loved about the video was being in the experience (physicality) my print images alive in light and movement. but i will use anything i can to make an image - technique is not really important for itself - if i want a certain feeling or effect, i find a technique to do it.

Bonnie Baxter

Though relatively new for her, Bonnie's digital process is equally layered, equally concerned with the psychological effects of textural recognition. For *Chi-chi doggie*, she has taken scans of the little toy Chi-chi and worked on the computer to lay textures drawn from 18th-century etchings, drypoints and burin engravings, onto the image of the dog. These images, output from the computer in black and white and then blown up as transparencies for screenprint, add another layer, blending old and then new, each with different associations. Playing with layers of sensual reality and recognition, she is able to create an entirely believable world from improbable elements. The immediacy of the digital capture, particular with

Bonnie Baxter, Chi-chi bleu royale, 2003. Color woodcut, screenprint, stamp, 47 x 35.5".

video stills, forms a base for the representation of subject matter and has allowed her to break away from the compositional devices of the highly contained, centered and symmetrical spaces that marked her early work. At the same time she retains the intense physical interaction with her process through added layers of woodcut, screenprint and rubber stamps.

The *Chi-chi doggie* series has synchronized Bonnie's skills as a printmaker, her experience with digital image processing and her love of experiment. The expertise she's garnered with this new medium and the perspective she's gained through involvement with more collaborative projects are translated through the expressive physicality of printmaking. Her time as a video artist has allowed her to see things from a new point of view (literally). It has opened up space for her in the translation of two-dimensional portrayal. And perhaps most important, it has tied her process to the medium of the media, creating a relational substratum of compositional tools that creates yet another psychological frame.

The *Chi-chi doggie* series has given voice to something that she, and probably most people, have begun to feel: that there is no difference between the mundane and the sacred, the personal and the political. The exotic, the primitive, the other, is on our doorstep, in our house, in our diet, for better and worse. It is time to find a synchronous voice for this new socio-political reality in which we find ourselves. To make everything sacred and personal is the goal. To risk having everything become mundane and political is the fear. *

Bonnie Baxter, *Virtual Eye*, 2004.
Color digital print, 40 x 30".



A similar shorter essay appeared in **Rewind: Bonnie Baxter**. Catalogue by Christine Unger, Pascale Beaudet, et al. Musée d'art contemporain des Laurentides and Galerie Simon Blais, published by Éditions d'art Le Sabord, 2005. ISBN 2-922685-41-1. Paperback, 8.5 x 8.5", 64 pp., 55 color illus.

Bonnie Baxter's *Chi-chi doggie* series has been exhibited in Trois-Rivières at the Centre de diffusion Presse Papier, and at the Galerie Le Sabord. A retrospective of works from this series and other print and multimedia series from the past ten years, **Rewind: Bonnie Baxter**, curated by André Matte, is touring under the auspices of the Musée d'art contemporain des Laurentides, where it was shown November 20, 2005 - January 8, 2006. Travelling to venues in Newfoundland, Tennessee and Florida, it will conclude in 2009 at the Istanbul Museum of Graphic Arts in Turkey. For a prospectus, please contact Christine Unger at christine.unger@sympatico.ca.