World Symbolism

John Zarobell
University of San Francisco, jzarobell@usfca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.usfca.edu/international_fac
Part of the Art and Design Commons

Recommended Citation
After a recent visit to Andrew Schoultz’s studio, I was walking down Potrero Street towards the bus stop and I spotted some familiar imagery on a wall I was walking by. The mural was on the long side of a building, bordered by a parking lot and was not immediately visible to passersby. The work was Schoultz’s, I could see in a flash, but it appeared to be an early collaboration. His signature imagery was there but there was another hand as well and a profusion of visual forms. As I stood on the asphalt adorned with weeds pushing up through the cracks in the pavement, I could not help but think that the artist had invaded the city with his imagery when he became one of its denizens. As he moved into San Francisco, he made the city part of his domain. This worked not only in the manner of tagging, laying claim to turf through signature visuals, but in the way that Schoultz’s imagery seemed to be both about and embedded in the texture of the city. I thought of all the murals, interior and exterior, that he had produced in this urban fabric and how he had literally woven himself into it, reflecting the city to the point that the city reflected him. What had started as a visit to his studio became a visit not only to his neighborhood, but to his world. And the remarkable thing is that Schoultz’s world overlapped with my own and his vision of the city had imbued my experience of it without my realizing it. Though in recent years his work has moved primarily into the studio, and from there to galleries and museums, there is a remarkable presence of his work in public, marking and forming the urban environment I know and love.

Schoultz is an artist who is committed to maintaining relations between his art and the wider world it seeks to engage. Beyond his ambition to make a more democratic art by bringing his work to the streets, current events weigh heavily upon him. In his studio, public radio is always on and the issues of our collective life hang in the air. Camouflage and cannons have recently proliferated in his work and brick walls now enclose once open-ended forms. Schoultz’s imagery is at once immediately recognizable and richly symbolic. It passes, like an electric charge,
the accumulated energy of repeated iterations. When a viewer sees a battle horse, a pyramid with an eye, or a hacked tree in one of Schoultz’s drawings or murals, she has a memory of seeing this image before. There seems to be a direct reflection between his stylized imagery and the current developments to which they refer. A battle horse suggests the multiple armed conflicts around the world, one-eyed pyramids stand for the shoddy mysticism of the Holy US Dollar, tree trunks with severed limbs telegraph a sense of creeping environmental catastrophe.

The directness of these symbols flies in the face of the highly ironic and theoretically infused work so common the art world today. In this era, it may seem that his imagery is too direct to penetrate fully the complexity of the crises he wants to address. His oeuvre is neither self-consciously cosmopolitan nor addressed to an emergent globalism. But Schoultz succeeds through accumulation. By constantly processing and reprocessing his identifiable imagery, it multiplies and divides, expanding like a parasite on the undersides of the enchanted apples that fairy-tale witches offer naïve youths.

Elaboration is crucial to Schoultz’s practice. The recurrence of certain symbols is not repetitive because each work brings forth new characteristics, new sensations related to one of his core symbols. In art school, he studied printmaking and was fascinating at the myriad possibilities for making marks and recasting the same image in multiple guises. Further, the way textures and forms could be developed through process was crucial. This process-based approach complemented his training as an illustrator and his ability to conjure a characteristic picture through individualized marks. A fitting analogy can be made with the work of Edvard Munch, who reworked a handful of subjects for some fifty years and continued to discover new subtleties and powerful expressiveness in each new incarnation. He could change the arrangement of forms, or the color of a dress, and an unprecedented element would emerge from an oft-repeated work. Unlike Picasso, Munch did not need
to continually reinvent his style or conquer emergent artistic movements. Instead he consistently reconsidered the work that he had already done and imagined how it could be different, how it could suggest more.

As in the work of Munch, the corpus of Schoultz’s imagery is consistent, yet constantly in flux. In his early days, there were elephants and birds, cities twisted into sidelong corkscrews. These symbols have receded and now we see walls of bricks, cannons, and broken bridges. All of these metaphors have appeared before, but they gain new prominence in the recent work and the once explosive combinations of symbols veer towards increased clarity. Looking at and studying the works of Paul Klee to prepare for “Images in Dialogue”—the exhibition I organized at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art that combined works by Klee and Schoultz—he pared down his imagery and seemed to perceive anew the power of its formal qualities, such as the effect of repeating parallel lines, or the way that masses of lines enmesh the viewer in a fictive pictorial space. Perhaps the most important discovery concerned negative space. Since Schoultz is in the habit of filling every square inch of his compositions, it may come as a surprise to find in some of these new works but a single symbol whose visual identity is framed by lines in emulation of Klee’s habit for finishing drawings by mounting them on another sheet and inscribing edges around them. The result feels like a distillation, a pronounced increase in the weight carried by each line to carry the meaning of the image.

How does Schoultz continue to develop his own symbolic vocabulary? On one hand, he expands the forms of his work, moving from drawing to installation, sculpture, murals, and wall painting. By doing so he reinvestigates the nature of his symbols and their interactions as he contends with the process of recreating his work and even instructing others to aid him in this endeavor. On the other hand he has also begun a process of appropriation that doubles the complexity of his practice. By
finding historic prints upon which to work, he repositions his symbolism outside of his own epoch while marshaling the forces of history to his cause. The hybrid art that results transforms the currency of his imagery from a vivid depiction of the present to a contemporary reconfiguration of the art of the past that employs and reveals its delicate strength and its unaccountable ellipses. Dipping into this past art adds switchbacks to Schoultz’s own artistic path. Watching him traverse it, it is hard to know where it will lead exactly but it is certain that he’s climbing.

- John Zarobell
Andrew Schoultz
Up In The Air
Designer: Ian Johnson

Photography Credits
Randall Dodson, pages: 5-9, 12, 14-25, 27, 34, 36-41, 58-62
Alex Decordoba, pages: 28-33, 35, 48-49

Installation fabrication assistance by Howard Hung and Muki Designs
pages 28-31, 50-53, 58-61

Artist assistants: Gian Luca Franzese, Alex Lukas, Hilary Pecis and Andres Guerrero
pages 6-9, 12, 18, 56-62, courtesy Marx & Zavattero, San Francisco
pages 14-15, 19-25, 36-39, 50-53 courtesy Morgan Lehman, New York City

Published by Paper Museum Press
Copyright ©2011 Andrew Schoultz
All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced
without the permission of the artist or publisher.

Park Life / Paper Museum Press
220 Clement Street
San Francisco CA 94118
www.parklifestore.com

Morgan Lehmann Gallery
535 West 22nd Street, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10011
212-268-6699 / art@morganlehngallery.com

Marx & Zavattero
77 Geary Street, 2nd Floor
San Francisco, CA 94108
415-627-9111 / info@marxzav.com / www.marxzav.com

First edition: October 2011
Printed in China