Claes Oldenburg: Prints and Multiples
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In his essay for the recent catalogue raisonné of Claes Oldenburg’s prints, Richard Axsom identifies three distinct periods in Oldenburg’s forty years of printmaking: “an initial ‘anti-print’ phase of posters and mimeographed publications”; “a second ‘experimental’ period highlighted by the high-tech Gemini editions”; and “a traditional period, extending to the present” in which Oldenburg has collaborated with major American presses and experimented with all print media. These periods have been marked by challenges, or problems as Oldenburg sometimes refers to them, that are directly related to printmaking processes and techniques. They have not conflicted with his embrace of the print as an effective artistic metaphor for the multiplicity of images prevalent in modern commercial culture. Moreover, Oldenburg has identified as practical his concerns related to printmaking protocol that conflicted with his way of art making. He cited particularly the challenge of creating art with printers in a print workshop environment (an experience that is very different from solitary work in a studio) and also the technical problems involved in translating his crayon and wash style of drawing to printed media. (Oldenburg has long maintained that, for him, printed images are a special class of drawings.) These concerns have eased considerably over the years with solutions being found through Oldenburg’s sustained and prolific activity in printmaking. The works in this exhibition are testimony to these challenges successfully met by the artist and his collaborators.

Oldenburg showed little interest in traditional printmaking in the early 1960s. The printed works that he did make at this time were usually mimeographed or commercially printed materials that related to his performances and installations. By the mid-1960s Oldenburg was championing “multiples,” small-scale editioned sculpture produced in large editions. His first effort was Baked Potato (1965) for the Tanglewood Press portfolio of multiples, 7 Objects in a Box. Invited to work in lithography for his first visit to Gemini G.E.L. in Los Angeles in 1968, Oldenburg insisted on producing a kind of multiple or hybrid print for his first project. The result was Profile Airflow, made of a cast polyurethane relief mounted over a lithograph. His first major printmaking project, Notes, came afterwards, and likely because of the technically inventive and accommodating attitudes of...
Kenneth Tyler and the Gemini G.E.L. shop. For the Notes project, Tyler devised a paper holder and a special pen filled with lithographic ink that enabled Oldenburg to work wherever he chose and later transfer the drawings to lithographic plates in the workshop. In much the same way, Kathan Brown introduced Oldenburg to the traditional techniques of soft-ground etching and aquatint during a three-week period at Crown Point Press in 1975 that Oldenburg used to successfully translate his crayon-and-wash style of drawing into print. Brown also helped Oldenburg create a workshop environment at the press that was akin to his studio where he was able to work with great intensity. With positive experiences such as these, Oldenburg found that his art could actually be stimulated by collaborations in the print workshop. It certainly also encouraged him to work on a larger scale. Monumental prints became a hallmark of his production in 1976 with Floating Three-Way Plug, made at Crown Point, and the prints in the Soft Screw series produced at Gemini. For the Soft Screw prints, Oldenburg did not work directly on the lithographic plates but instead drew on large, especially prepared sheets of paper that were transferred directly to the matrix. This pleased Oldenburg, who observed that with this method his drawing was more spontaneous and direct.

In this exhibition, the examination of Oldenburg's prints ends in the late 1970s, a time that coincidentally also marked the end of his prodigious printmaking activity. During the 1980s, Oldenburg and his wife, Coosje van Bruggen, concentrated on producing large-scale public sculpture, also producing a few traditional prints, many of which were posters and book covers. With a burst of activity in the 1990s, Oldenburg returned to printmaking. At the decade's end, it remains an important creative activity for him.


Colossal Tea Bags in City Square, 1976

Checklist of the Exhibition


Lithograph (left) and color lithograph (right) on two sheets of paper, 16 1/8 x 22 13/16 in. (overall), P. 28.1 and P. 28.2

This is number 33/100 from the Special Paris Edition

Printed by Maurice Beaudet, Paris 1996. 74.1

Flying Pizza. 1964, from the portfolio New York Ten, 1965

Color lithograph, 17 x 22 1/8 in., P. 33

Printed by Irwin Hollander at Hollander's Workshop, New York

Published by Tanglewood Press, New York Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts Gift of Gump's, Inc. A025607

Baked Potato, 1966, from Seven Objects in a Box

Molded aluminum, fiberglass, and polyester metal handpainted with synthetic polymer color paint on a white Shenango china plate, 7 1/4 (height) x 10 7/16 (length) x 5 1/8 (width) in.


Published by Tanglewood Press, New York Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, gift of Allan P. and Lenore B. Sandler 1988.1.199.4

Untitled [ice cream cones], 1968, from the portfolio Notes

Color lithograph, 22 11/16 x 15 3/4 in., P. 55.3

Printed by Robert de la Rocha

Published by Gemini G. E. L., Los Angeles 1996.74.352
Strawberry Skull Bike Seat, 1975
Color sugar-lift and spit-bite aquatint on white paper collééd and embossed on Farnsworth handmade paper; 24 1/8 x 18 3/8 in., P. 128
Published by Multiples, New York, and Castelli Graphics, New York
Crown Point Press Archive
Museum purchase, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard W. Goss II
1991.28.977

Tea Pot, 1975
Lithograph on Balinese handmade paper tipped onto brown Moriki Japanese paper; 18 1/4 x 26 in., P. 129
Published by Bill Goldston and John A. Land at Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip
Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts
Gift of Linda Unrad Gore
1996.148

Soft Screw as Balloon Ascending, 1976
Lithograph, 67 1/2 x 45 in., P. 144
Published by Charly Ritt
Gift of Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
1996.74.365

Soft Screw in Waterfall, 1976
Lithograph, P. 145
Printed by Anthony Zepeda
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
1996.74.362

Arched Soft Screw as Building, 1976
Lithograph, 67 1/2 x 45 in., P. 146
Published by Charly Ritt
Gift of Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
1996.74.366

Butter Pat in Berkeley Hills, 1976
Color soft-ground etching and aquatint, 26 x 20 in., P. 150
Printed by John Silvon at Crown Point Press Oakland
Published by Multiples, New York
Crown Point Press Archive
Gift of Kathan Brown
1991.28.985

Colossal Teabags in City Square, 1976
Color: aquatint and etching, 22 x 26 1/2 in., P. 151
Published by Multiples, New York
Crown Point Press Archive
Gift of Kathan Brown
1991.28.1060

Study for Steel and Lead Ashtray, 1976
Color: aquatint and soft-ground etching, 21 7/8 x 25 7/16 in., P. 153
Printed by John Silvon at Crown Point Press Oakland
Published by Multiples, New York
Crown Point Press Archive
Museum purchase, Earthquake Fund
1991.28.249

Floating Three-Way Plug, 1976
Color: spit-bite aquatint and soft-ground etching, 49 5/8 x 38 3/8 in., P. 154
Printed by John Silvon at Crown Point Press Oakland
Published by Multiples, New York
Crown Point Press Archive
Gift of Kathan Brown

Ice Bag—Scale B, 1971
Programmed kinetic sculpture, yellow nylon, fiberglass, and mechanical movement, 40 in. (height), 48 in. (diameter)
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
Fabrication supervised by Kenneth Tyler and Jeff Sanders, assisted by Lou Fabrush, Frank Doose, Pete Hoefler, Paul Muff, Bud Rogers, Frank Arnott, and Myron Judson
1996.74.354