New Dimensions
Prints and Multiples from the Anderson Collection
Multipes at Gemini 1969–1972

When the Los Angeles–based Gemini G.E.L. relocated and enlarged its studio space in 1969, the artists’ workshop and publisher was able to extend its working practice to include the production of multiples (small-scale sculptures produced in editions). It also expanded its program to explore printing or unconventional surfaces, such as aluminum and lead. The use of new materials resulted from Gemini’s explorations in technological applications to fine-art practices, which sometimes led to advances in commercial applications as well. For approximately three years, Gemini printers worked actively in this vein, experimenting with any number of sculptural materials. All this came to an end with the departure of art fabricator and project manager Jeff Sanders from the shop in 1972; Gemini subsequently closed the sculpture workshop that it had operated in a rented building next to the primary studio. At the same time, the popularity of multiples was seemingly on the wane among art enthusiasts. As a result of personnel and financial changes, Gemini contracted all further sculptural projects with outside collaborators.

During the brief period when Gemini was making multiples onsite, many major art world figures of the day came to work at the press. Artists investigating the multiples format were often interested in breaking free from the expectations of previous art movements—specifically the physical evidence or “trace” of the artist as promoted by Abstract Expressionism—and Pop’s machine aesthetic was a perfect complement. Popular culture was a topic worthy of creative expression, and such iconic figures as Disney’s Mickey Mouse were subjected to independent artistic interpretation, as in Claes Oldenburg’s Geometric Mouse—Scale C (1971). The simple, geometrical form is far removed from the playful cartoon character, and the anodized aluminum material further distances the reference to the world’s most famous rodent.

Claes Oldenburg

Oldenburg is often credited with spurring Gemini G.E.L.’s decision to expand the workshop’s publishing venture to include multiples. When he explained his idea for a hybrid sculpture/print based on the 1937 Chrysler/DeSoto Airflow to Ken Tyler, Gemini’s master printer, Tyler was immediately curious. The two worked alongside Gemini’s technical team to find a material that would have the properties Oldenburg desired, “clear in color, transparent like a swimming pool but of a consistency like flesh.” Eventually a type of plastic was found, polyurethane, that seemed to exhibit all the necessary properties. It wasn’t long, however, before the transparent relief began to discolor. In true auto-industry fashion, a recall was placed on the entire edition of Profile Airflow (1969), and each was remade.

The original Airflow was conceived by Carl Breer, who drew inspiration from a squadron of Army Air Corps fighter planes that he mistook for a flock of geese flying overhead. Breer wondered why the design for airplanes was increasingly streamlined, while the automobile remained much as it had for decades. Breer subsequently designed the first “streamlined” car, which Chrysler produced from 1934 to 1937. In 1966, while working on a group of soft sculptures, Oldenburg had a chance to see one of the few surviving examples of this groundbreaking car and drew inspiration from its form.

At the time, Oldenburg considered the car to be one of the mechanical forms closest to the human body, a subject that had long interested him. The natural movement of the body served as an inspiration for Ice Bag—Scale B (1971), a variant on Oldenburg’s first mechanized kinetic sculpture: Ice Bag—Scale A, which was featured at the entrance to the United States pavilion at the 1970 World’s Fair in Osaka, Japan, and revealed to the world some of the creative manufacturing technologies that American companies were developing at the time. The slow, almost imperceptible undulating movement of Ice Bag—Scale B mimics the body at rest, lungs slowly breathing in and out.

Jasper Johns’s Lead Reliefs

Using motifs such as the American flag that were familiar from his painted and printed works, Jasper Johns focused his attention during his time at Gemini G.E.L. on new materials, experimenting with the properties of sheet lead to create reliefs that are both prints and bas-relief sculptures. Johns remembered his initial inspiration for his work at Gemini: “Ken Tyler told me that the shop was equipped to do embossing, and I thought to do in these reliefs what I had done in three dimensions, only suggesting a three-dimensional object in a not quite so three-dimensional way.”

To make the reliefs, Johns created the original models in wax and plaster. The team at Gemini then made molds of cast metal and epoxy. Soft, thin sheets of lead were placed over the molds and, with pressure applied from a hydraulic press, embossed with relief images (much like paper embossment). To support the thin lead and protect it from denting, the embossed sheet was subsequently affixed to a polystyrene backing and wood support. Finally, the layers were encased in a welded-aluminum frame made specifically for each work.

Bread was an anomaly in the Lead Reliefs series, not only in how it was made, but also in its depiction of a subject that Johns had not previously explored. Made of cast lead with rag paper embossed and laminated to its top surface, each bread slice in the edition was hand painted by Johns. The Gemini team chose this different method of production after the upper edge of the sheet kept fracturing when embossed with the hydraulic press during trials.

Roy Lichtenstein’s Modern Heads

During a visit to the Pasadena Art Museum in 1968, Lichtenstein saw an exhibition of portrait heads by the Russian Expressionist artist Alexei Jawlensky (1864–1941). Inspired by the modernity of the previous generation, Lichtenstein undertook to make his own versions of portrait heads using the latest technologies available to printmakers. He explained, “What interested me was—what in the world a modern head could be about”—I mean to make a man look like a machine.”
Lichtenstein integrated Pop’s machine aesthetic with industrial materials and processes in the design for his series. To create Modern Head #4, Gemini was assisted by Angell Manufacturing in Los Angeles in engraving the anodized aluminum surface. A hydraulic press was used to emboss the graphite surface of Modern Head #5.

In many of his Modern Head works, Lichtenstein incorporated a commercial graphic device: benday dots. Such dots were a time-saving device in the hands of cartoon printers, who used manufactured transparent celluloid sheets covered in this motif to add texture and shading to their compositions. Benday dots had played a large role in Lichtenstein’s painted and graphic works for nearly a decade, but in the sculptural forms taken for the Gemini work, their presence required sophisticated machine tooling eased by working at a publishing workshop like Gemini.

Robert Rauschenberg’s Cardbird Series

When Robert Rauschenberg moved from New York to Captiva, a small island off the coast of Florida, in the early 1970s, he noticed an abundance of cardboard boxes around him. He used this material as an inspiration for his Cardbird Series, in which cardboard serves as both the art image and the material. Referring to his medium as “a material of waste and softness,” Rauschenberg alluded to the disposability of his chosen material in a consumerist society.

To make the series of eight (the other seven are smaller, wall-mounted pieces), photographs of real cardboard boxes were taken, transferred to offset, printed, and laminated onto another piece of cardboard. Shipping tape, labels, dirt, and oil stains were then carefully printed onto the surface. Finally, Rauschenberg applied rubber stamps and bills of lading to give the “cardboard” an additional patina.

More Multiples

Many artists working in the multiples format were intrigued by its immense production possibilities, which, by applying commercial techniques and materials to fine-arts ends, theoretically made multiples an art form accessible to all. In reality, however, multiples production was not quite as seamless as its proponents supposed, and the price often proved prohibitive for the mass market.

For his untitled Gemini multiple—related to a small-scale bronze that he had made in Rome three years earlier—Willem de Kooning eventually chose cast pewter, a more inexpensive material that would put his work more within reach of the general public. Accessibility was not necessarily his primary concern, however (just one hundred copies comprised the edition). Before settling on pewter, de Kooning experimented with a variety of metals, including silver, which corresponded to the Gemini dictate to use materials that were most suited to the artistic concept.

Along with other artists, Mark di Suvero was interested in the philosophical implications of a multiple, where the “original” could exist in numerous places simultaneously. In the display of his untitled multiple of 1972, this interest comes to the fore; since there are many possible configurations of the interlocking parts, di Suvero’s work provides an opportunity for singularity through creative arrangement of its five torch-cut steel pieces.

Endnotes

Works in the Exhibition

Unless otherwise noted, all works are from the Anderson Graphic Arts Collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, gift of the Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson Charitable Foundation. Sheet measurements for prints are in inches, height preceding width preceding depth. When available, catalogue raisonné information is included following the medium description.

John Chamberlain (American, 1927–2011)
Le Moli, 1971
Polyester resin, aluminum, and silicon oxide
7 1/4 x 7 x 7 1/2 in.
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
Collaboration and supervision by Kenneth Tyler and Jeffrey Sanders, assisted by John Battenburg and James Robie
Collection of Mary Patricia Anderson Pence

Ellsworth Kelly (American, b. 1923)
Mirrored Concave, 1972
Chrome-plated steel with oak base
23 3/4 x 26 x 1/2 x 10 in. (sculpture)
28 x 26 x 1/4 x 12 1/4 in. (base)
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
Edition produced by Kenneth Tyler and Jeff Sanders, assisted by Lucius Hudson
Anderson Graphic Arts Collection, gift of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson 1999.134

Rou Lichtenstein (American, 1923–1997)
Modern Head 1, from the Modern Head Series, 1970
Color woodcut, C.91
24 x 19 in.
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
Printed by Richard Royce 1966.74.244

Modern Head 2, from the Modern Head Series, 1970
Color lithograph and line-cut with embossing, C.92
24 x 18 1/2 x 1/4 in.
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
Printed by George Page 1966.74.245

Modern Head 3, from the Modern Head Series, 1970
Line-cut with embossing, C.93
24 x 18 1/2 x 1/2 in.
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
Printed by George Page 1966.74.246

Modern Head 4, from the Modern Head Series, 1970
Color lithograph on engraved and anodized aluminum, C.94
24 x 17 1/4 in.
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
Printed by Joseph Stratman 1966.74.247

Modern Head 5, from the Modern Head Series, 1970
Embossed graphite with die-cut paper overlay, C.95
28 x 19 1/2 in.
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
Printed by George Page 1966.74.248

Modern Head Relief, 1970
Brass
24 x 17 3/4 x 1/4 in.
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
Collaboration and supervision by Kenneth Tyler and Jeff Sanders, assisted by Dean Barlow, Pete Hoefler, Robert McCullough, John Radcliffe, Don Takatsuka, and Herbert Tomkins
Collection of Gemini G.E.L.

Untitled Head I, 1970
Brass
25 1/2 x 10 x 4 x 1/2 in.
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
Collaboration and supervision by Jeffrey Sanders and Kenneth Tyler, assisted by Pete Hoefler, Obad Silverwood, and Herbert Tomkins
Collection of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson 1970.03

Claes Oldenburg (American, b. Sweden, 1929)
Geometric Mouse—Scale C.71
Enameled anodized aluminum
24 x 30 in. (face), 9 in. (ears)
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
Collaboration and supervision by Jeff Sanders and Kenneth Tyler, assisted by Frank Doose and Lou Faibish
Collection of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson 1971.055

Ice Bag—Scale B.71
Nylon and fiberglass with mechanical components
40 x 48 x 48 in.
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
Edition production by Kenneth Tyler and Jeff Sanders, assisted by Frank Arron, Frank Doose, Lou Faibish, Pete Hoefler, Myron Johnson, Paul Muff, and Bud Rogers 1966.74.354

Profile Airflow, 1969
Molded polyurethane relief over color lithograph, P.59
33 1/2 x 65 1/2 x 4 in.
Published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles
Edition production by Jeffrey Sanders and Kenneth Tyler, assisted by Timothy Ibsen, James Robie, and Jeffrey Wasserman
Collection of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson 1971.056

Catalogues Raisonnés:


