

100 Years of Freedom
Monoprints by Erik Bakke
Printed at Smith Andersen Editions, 2009

Each print in Erik Bakke's 2009 monoprint series "100 Years of Freedom" starts with a diptych of the figure of Ishi. Ishi is depicted as he was in August of 1911 immediately after leaving his solitary life, in a nature no longer inhabited by his people, and coming into the culture of 20th Century America, where by law, as a Native American, he had no rights of citizenship. Ishi's image, repeated in the diptych, comes from a drawing made after a photograph documenting Ishi's arrival in Oroville, CA. Ishi stands facing the viewer. His posture reveals little. He wears buckskin strips in his ears of his own making and a calf-length smock. Today's scholarship and increased sensitivity to the multi-faceted, ever-linked histories of Homo sapiens puts Ishi's story in many different lights, but the media of Ishi's day eagerly called him the last "wild" or "stone-age" man.

The prints are approximately three feet by four feet in dimension. Each print begins with the printing of the double image of Ishi from a master plate and may be either simultaneously or successively manipulated with stencils, chine-collé, lithographic style image transfer, collage, hand drawing with graphite and ink, hand painting with watercolor and gouache, and spray paint. The prints may offer ornate and dense patterning or simple iconic forms and, similarly, may be laden with visual and textual information or focus on a single image. The series can be divided into three main color schemes: 1. rich, full blues and light blues; 2. bright green and dark, natural greens; and 3. warm, dark greys and yellow and brown earth tones. Metallic gold, copper, silver and aluminum and touches of other color are used throughout.

The title "100 Years of Freedom" refers to the years between August 1911 and August 2011. These prints, and related series of paintings, put Ishi in the context of the world history of the end of his lifetime (while he lived in San Francisco from 1911 until his

death in 1916) and the world history over which his memory presides (up to the present moment). The works referencing 2010 and 2011 will be completed as events of those years unfold.

The subject matter of the works follows no didactic path. The history mostly spools out from California but references to far off wars, national legislation or scientific discoveries of international import, or less weighty global occurrences, are easily included. Themes related to water, suffrage, human suffering, and the individual's position within or against society come to the fore.

In conjunction with the images of the two silhouettes of Ishi, a calendar wheel appears in a number of the prints. It forms a unifying pattern within the prints and between the prints when they are hung together. The twelve month wheel is broken into quarters, of three months each, and the quarter wheels are arranged around each individual Ishi silhouette as a framing motif. Each Ishi image then becomes associated with a particular twelve month year.

In turn, each month of the calendar wheel is associated with a drawing. These drawings fill the calendar wheel and depict images of events or places or personages. A block of text explains the images. The text is hand printed, in the form of standard word processing fonts, and centered on each single silhouette of Ishi. The calendar drawings are labeled and the viewer can then find the label reference in the text. The text lays out month by month and in simple language the sources for each of the images -- "Mount Whitney" or "Annie Besant" or "Campfire Girls at Hetch Hetchy Valley." Each text starts with the title of the series "100 Years of Freedom" and the dates from which all the years' imagery is taken "August 28, 1911 to August 28, 2011."

A background patterning of silhouettes of poison oak leaves occurs in most of the prints. Many of the prints go through the press multiple times and most, in addition, are hand worked. As the subject matter and the patterning of the work is at times structured and at others free-form so is the application of media. A carefully stenciled leaf may be set off by a hands-on manipulation of the plate or brush applied paint. A final linking device in and between the prints is the spray painted image of a chain. A metal chain, used as a stencil, is hung at points outside the paper's surface and its silhouette is rendered in metallic paint as a true catenary curve across each work's surface. The chains link the works visually and conceptually. The chain immediately brings to mind bondage, but, hung in the air and bowed naturally by gravity, as a catenary curve it can refer to natural law and the use of such laws in the development of culture and civilization--in architecture, for example, an ideal arch has historically been formed after a catenary curve. These thoughts in mind, the chain hanging in front of the images of Ishi begins to suggest other things--the chain in front of a night club or in front of a particularly precious object in a museum (an object the viewer is not supposed to approach). Perhaps, in the end, the prints of "100 Years of Freedom" will suggest to the viewer that what seems unapproachable historical memory, even an inanimate object, might step out of time and place and directly into the viewer's contemporary moment.

In the prints Ishi's silhouette is about three feet high. Part of the effectiveness of this size image is that a three foot high image of a man seen from five feet away fills the viewer's vision in the same way a real five to six-foot-tall man standing about ten feet away would fill the viewer's vision. At a perceived ten feet away, Ishi is very much in the room.

The diptych form and the redoubling of the double through the printmaking process, in addition to Ishi's form being associated with each of the years from 1911 to 2011, creates a conceptual cascade through which we can understand how one moment in history, one person, can have incalculable influence. As many art historians have

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rejected describing linear paths of artistic influence through history, this series explores the notion that history continuously explodes outward in all directions and echoes back onto itself as countless points of influence exponentially multiplying, diverging, rejoining, forever splitting off, or traveling backwards and forwards in time.

Coming back to the earth and Ishi as a man that stood on it, the constant of the poison oak leaf patterning in "100 Years of Freedom" points to the hills of California as locale and also points to a wisdom these prints may reflect--the wisdom of taking note of your surroundings as your surroundings take their own kind of notice of you.

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