



Mokuhanga International

By April Vollmer

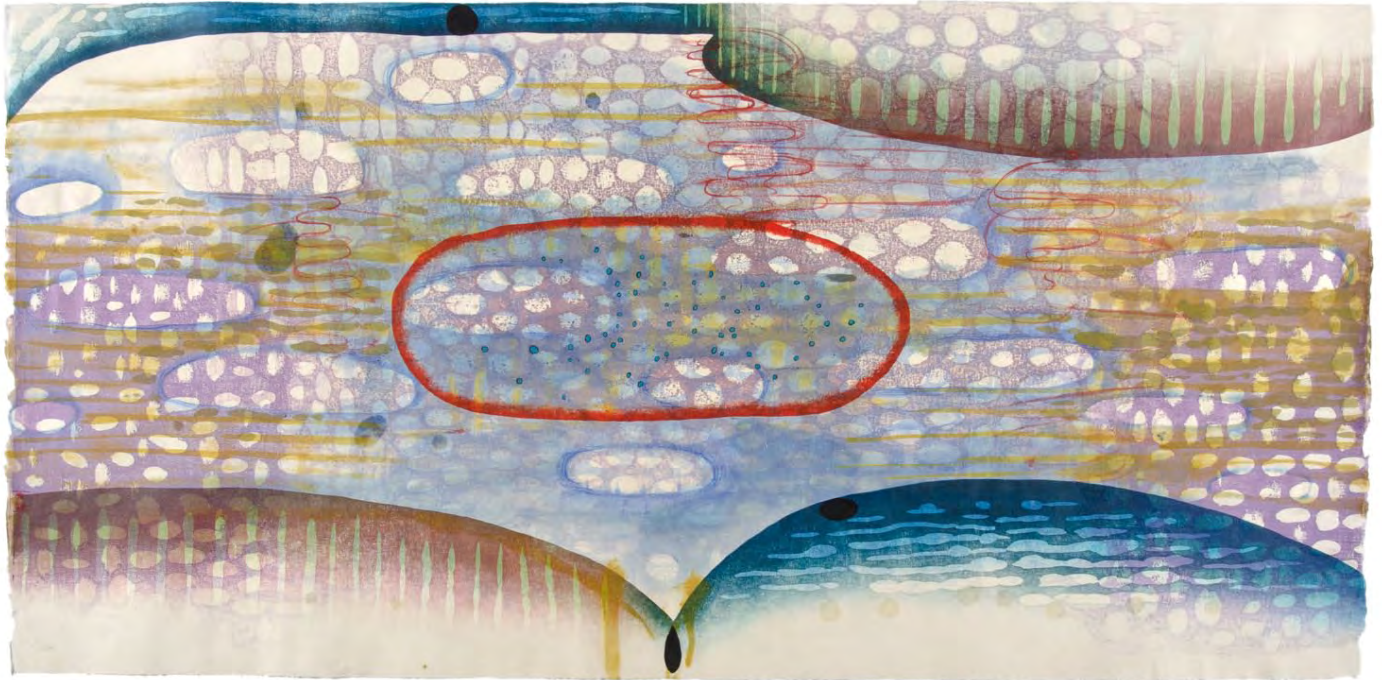


Fig. 7. Karen Kunc, *Ecolocution* (2011), woodcut, mezzotint, polymer relief & mixed media, 29 x 39 inches. Edition of 3. Printed and published by the artist.

The richly colored, visually dynamic woodblock technique perfected in Japan during the 18th and 19th centuries is known internationally by the Japanese term *mokuhanga*. The character for *moku* literally means wood, while *hanga* can be broken down into two concepts (each represented by a separate character), the first character being *han*, meaning print, edition or impression, and the second *ga*, meaning picture. The expression does not describe the act of printing so much as it refers to the resulting object, the print. *Mokuhanga* produced the *Ukiyo-e* masterpieces of Hiroshige and Utamaro; it inspired European artists at the end of the 19th century to throw over centuries of single-point perspective and its traditions; it was adopted in the early 20th century by American artists on both coasts as a tool of modernist aesthetics. After an eclipse during the first half of the 20th century, interest in *mokuhanga* as a tool of contemporary art has been growing since the 1980s. Today *mokuhanga* is being practiced alone or in combination with other techniques both inside and outside Japan, by professional printers as well as individual artists, to create challenging new prints that combine old and new ways of thinking about multiples.

The earliest Japanese woodblocks were black and white copies of Buddhist sutras

from the 8th century. The distinctive multi-colored woodblock technique that would become synonymous with Japan, however, evolved much later, during the two centuries of relative peace between the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1603 and the upheavals of the Meiji Restoration in 1868. *Mokuhanga* was used to reproduce books, advertisements, playing cards, signs, and of course pictorial prints. These popular images were called *Ukiyo-e*—“pictures of the floating world”—an alternative to the mundane, earthbound world and a tongue-in-cheek suggestion of religious transcendence. ‘Fine art’ in Japan was largely inspired by Chinese painting and usually displayed at intimate gatherings of the well-educated elite. *Ukiyo-e* prints, on the other hand, were mass-market products aimed at the growing merchant class that evolved during economic changes of the Edo period (1603-1868). Their subjects included Kabuki popular theater (which evolved from refined Noh plays during the same period), famous actors and courtesans, festivals and views of travel destinations that were newly part of the national consciousness. *Ukiyo-e* artists made many saleable *bejin-ga*, prints of beautiful women and explicitly erotic “spring pictures,” *shunga*. Art and commerce were equal partners in the production of *Ukiyo-e*.

After Japan’s ports were opened to European traders in the late 19th century, these prints arrived in the West where their compositional inventions, bright colors, black outlines, flat patterns and use of popular experiences as subject matter had a transformative effect on European art. The technique itself, however, did not travel: Degas borrowed *Ukiyo-e* ideas for his paintings, Mary Cassatt for her etchings, and Toulouse Lautrec for his lithographs, but it was not until the early 20th century that adventurous Westerners like Bertha Lum and Helen Hyde traveled to Japan to learn the *mokuhanga* technique itself. (Both were influenced by Arthur Wesley Dow (1857-1922,) who learned about Japanese prints from the art historian Ernest Fenollosa.) These artists employed Japanese techniques, and worked with Japanese craftsmen; their prints reflected a nostalgia for old Japan while remaining fundamentally Western “original prints”—autographic, hand-crafted, personal expressions.

In the classic Japanese publishing arrangement called *hanmoto*, a publisher coordinated the work of the artist who designed the print, the block-cutter, the printer, and other specialists, all usually working in different workshops. In the early 20th century, however, Japan adopted the Western preference for ‘original’ prints

directly made by the artist. In the *sosaku hanga* or Creative Print Movement, Japanese artists opted to design, cut and print their own work rather than to collaborate with specialists under the direction of a publisher. Kanae Yamamoto cut and printed his *Fisherman*, thought to be the first of this kind of printing, in 1904; he traveled to France and across Russia, returning with international utopian ideas. Koshiro Onchi (1891–1955) is considered the father of creative printmaking; Shiko Munakata (1903–1975), whose individualistic work was characterized by direct cutting and a special respect for his materials, was widely recognized in the West.

The *Shin hanga* movement ran counter to *sosaku hanga* by maintaining the *hanmoto* system of specialized labor. These prints were aimed largely at Western audiences and promoted a nostalgic view of traditional Japanese subjects such as beautiful women and landscapes in contrast to the individual expressions of the *sosaku hanga* printmakers. The tensions between these movements reflect the stresses within the Japanese art world. Hiroshi Yoshida (1876–1950) was the most influential of the *shin hanga* printmakers, and his carefully printed scenes of old Japan and his own world travel are well known outside Japan.¹

By the middle of the 20th century, however, the *mokuhanga* technique was widely considered old-fashioned and inappropriate for contemporary expression. German Expressionism had revived interest in the

European woodcut, and the unavailability of Japanese tools and paper in the West made it difficult to conceive of how *mokuhanga* was even done. In Japan, university art departments were more likely to support Western style lithography, etching and silkscreen than Japanese traditional woodblock printing. Japanese master printers and carvers survived by doing small jobs and printing reproductions of classic *ukiyo-e* prints.

In the early 1980s, Kathan Brown of Crown Point Press became intrigued by the possibilities this sophisticated technique offered contemporary artists. Crown Point had been producing eloquent etchings for 20 years and was looking for a new adventure. There were, at the time, a limited number of master printers in Japan whose level of expertise matched Brown's demands, and fewer still who were interested in working with foreigners on contemporary art. Tadashi Toda (1936–2000) fulfilled both these requirements, and his work with Crown Point effectively transformed the art world's perception of the medium.

Toda came from a family of woodblock printers in Kyoto that had made prints for generations and was expert in all aspects of *mokuhanga*. He was the first in his family to work closely with Western artists, and he studied their work in detail. Between 1983 and 1988 Toda made prints with 23 Crown Point artists, including Chuck Close, Helen Frankenthaler, Wayne Thiebaud, and Robert Kushner. The Crown Point prints were

made basically using the *hanmoto* system: Toda acted as printer and organized the work of other craftsmen, including his block carver Shunzo Matsuda. Brown would bring the artists to Toda's small studio in Kyoto, and their experience of Japan was an integral part of the printmaking process.² When the Crown Point project ended after ten years, however, no other major print publisher pursued collaboration between Japanese printers and international contemporary artists.³

Japanese artists interested in learning *mokuhanga* techniques in the late 20th century had two options. There are still workshops practicing the traditional *hanmoto* system, such as the highly regarded Adachi Institute of Woodcut Prints in Tokyo, that specialize in reproductions of woodcut prints, re-cutting old blocks and printing them using the same techniques as *ukiyo-e* craftsmen. These master printers pride themselves on preserving traditional carving and printing skills from the Edo period. Hiroki Morinoe, an important teacher of *mokuhanga* in Hawaii, studied with such master printers after receiving his MFA at the California College of Arts and Crafts; he has developed his sensitive, organic prints with a personal creative touch. Takuji Hamanaka also learned his craft from a traditional workshop that still operated within the *hanmoto* system. He has used his skills as the foundation for his non-traditional collaged prints (Fig. 1), and now works in New York, teaching *moku-*

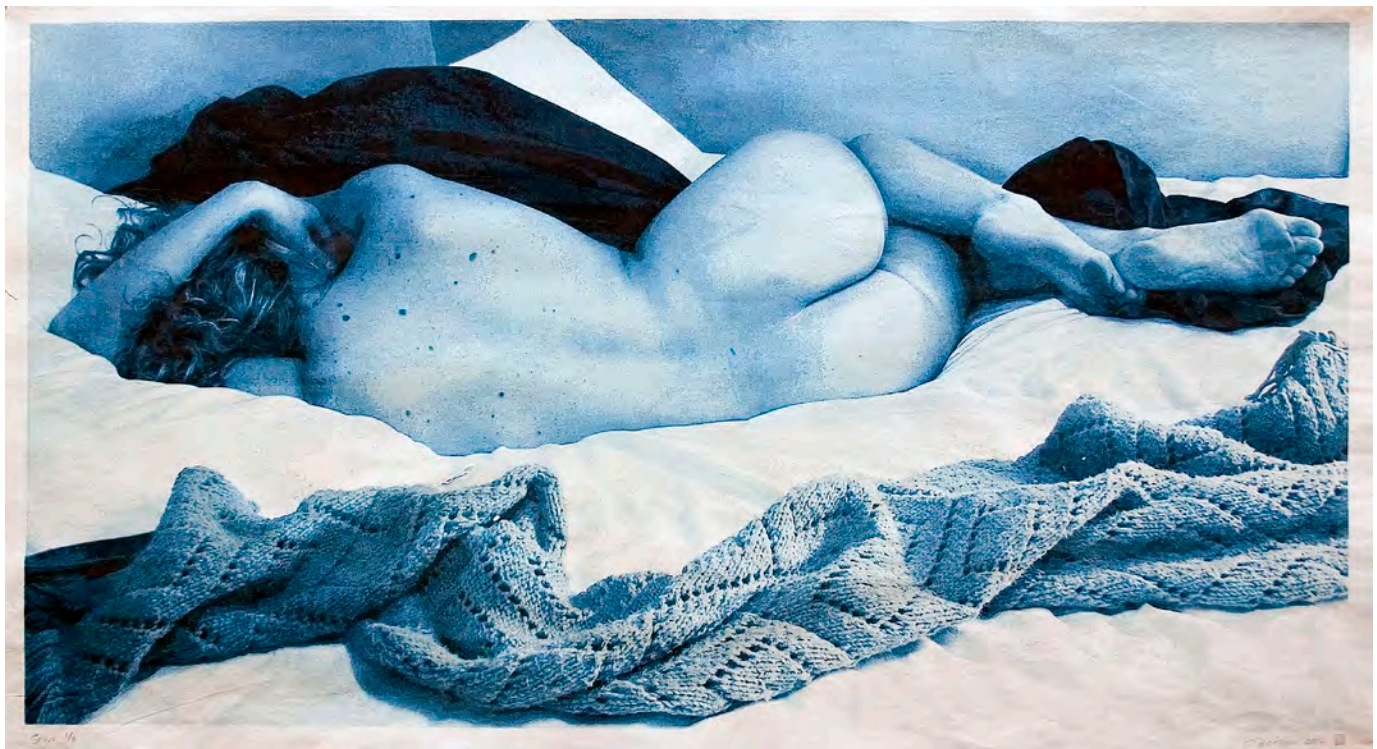


Fig. 10. Mike Lyon, *Sarah Reclining* (2006), woodblock print from 17 cherry plywood blocks, dry pigment and *neri-zumi*, 42 x 77 inches. Edition of 8. Printed and published by the artist.

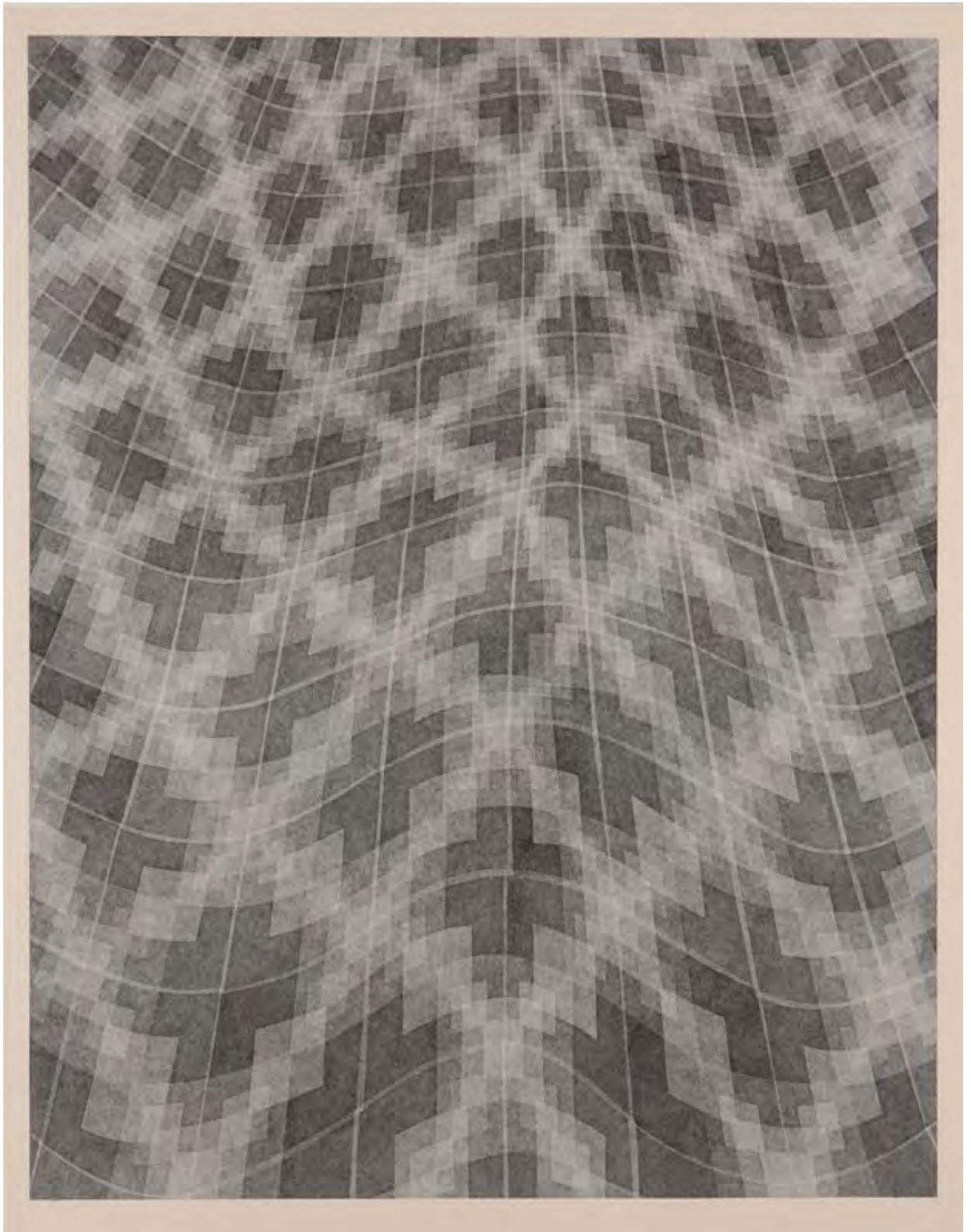


Fig. 1. Takuji Hamanaka, *Shimmering* (2010), woodblock, gampi collage, 28 x 22 inches. Edition unique. Printed and published by the artist.



Fig. 2. Tetsuya Noda, *410 Diary: Aug. 6th, '00* (2000), woodcut silkscreen, 20 x 31.5 inches. Edition of 25. Printed by the artist.



Fig. 3. Tetsuya Noda, *453 Diary: April. 2nd, '07* (2007), woodcut silkscreen, 24 x 37.5 inches. Edition of 10. Printed by the artist.

hanga privately. Only a few of these old style workshops survive, however. Today most art training takes place in universities, and two prominent Japanese artists—Tetsuya Noda at Tokyo University of the Arts (Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku) and Akira Kurosaki at Kyoto Seika University—are largely responsible for the new international wave of *mokuhanga* awareness.

Noda headed the woodblock department at Tokyo Geidai from 1991 until his retirement in 2007.⁴ Cultural exchange and the promotion of Japanese art forms are both part of the university's mission, and Noda spearheaded an innovative program in which traditional *Ukiyo-e* master printers came each year from the Adachi Insti-

tute to work with students, providing a link between the traditional workshop system and the modern university. He also nurtured contacts with the West, and his 2004 retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Asian Art clearly showed the influence of his study of Western art,⁵ combining *mokuhanga* backgrounds photo-screen-printed scenes of everyday life (Figs. 2, 3). In 1998 Noda came to Columbia University's LeRoy Neiman Center for Print Studies to teach *mokuhanga* to New York area printmakers. Many of the artists now teaching *mokuhanga* internationally studied with Noda, including Seichiro Miida (Fig. 4) (who has now taken Noda's place at Tokyo Geidai), Raita Miyadera (also at Tokyo

Geidai), Michael Schneider (Austria), Tyler Starr (US), Roslyn Kean (Australia), and others from Turkey to Korea to Pakistan.

At Kyoto Seika University, a prominent art school in Japan's most culturally conservative city, Akira Kurosaki also promoted traditional *mokuhanga* technique as a tool of contemporary art. Kurosaki, who was born in Manchuria during World War II and grew up in Kobe, worked in the US and England during the 70s. While his outlook is international, his contribution to printmaking has much to do with his revival of the *hanmoto* system in which specialized tasks were accomplished at separate workshops. In the face of the Creative Print Movement's emphasis on hand-facture by artists, Kurosaki sought to reconnect artists with traditional artisans. For his own ambitious body of abstract prints (Fig. 5), Kurosaki relied on master printers such as Keizo Sato (who has himself taught *mokuhanga* techniques around the globe.) Kurosaki also launched a papermaking program at Kyoto Seika as an integral part of the printmaking program, a commitment reflected in his own use of handcrafted papers as seen in his *catalogue raisonné*.⁶

Kurosaki's students include the virtuosic carver Shoichi Kitamura, who teaches in Kyoto and has worked with western artists such as Florence Neal, and many foreign students, who have often found it difficult to locate training in Japan. Rebecca Salter, a London-based abstract artist who studied with Kurosaki, has published a book on the history of woodblock, *Japanese Woodblock Printmaking*⁷ and has written many shorter articles about woodblock for the *Japan Times*. In 2011 her work (Fig. 6) was exhibited at the Yale Center for British Art. The American artist Karen Kunc (Figs. 7, 8) was Kurosaki's research fellow in 1993, and artists such as Wayne Crothers (Australia), Elizabeth Forrest (Canada), Ralph Kiggell (Thailand), Wuon-Gean Ho (UK), and Noah Breuer (US) have also studied with Kurosaki.

More recently, the Nagasawa Art Park Artist-in-Residence program offered a diffe-



Fig. 5. Akira Kurosaki, *Nekropolis 1, Winter Straits* (2006) woodblock, Korean kozo paper, 39.5 x 59 cm. Edition of 50. Printed by the artist. ©Akira Kurosaki by courtesy of Galerie Miyawaki, Kyoto, Japan.



Left: **Fig. 9.** Katie Baldwin, *The River Parcenta* (2010), installation with mokuhanga (people and snake), screenprint, felted wool, spray paint, cut paper and mica, 5 x 5 feet. Unique image. Printed and published by the artist.

Right: **Fig. 4.** Seiichiro Miida, *Image from a Floating Place 2* (2011), woodcut printed with Sumi and Graphite pigment on Washi paper, 24 x 24 inches. Unique image. Printed and published by the artist.

Below: Details of mokuhanga woodblocks.



Mokuhanga differs from western woodblock in three significant ways: it uses water-based *sumi* ink, watercolor or gouache brushed onto the block rather than oil-based ink rolled on; it is printed with a hand-held baren rather than a mechanical press; and it employs the accurate *kento* registration system, cut into the block, allowing for easy registration of multiple blocks. A fourth charac-

teristic is the *washi* paper made by hand from *kozo* (the inner fiber of the paper mulberry *Broussonetia papyrifera*); paper-makers process the strong, resilient fibers so they remain absorbent and dimensionally stable for printing multiple times while damp, as necessitated by *mokuhanga* printing. Refined techniques like *bokashi* gradation printing, *goma zuri* sesame seed texture printing and *kara-zuri*

blind embossing, are abundant, reflecting the flexibility of the technique and the ingenuity of the printers. One important reason for the appeal of *mokuhanga* is that its water-based color penetrates the paper without clogging the surface fibers of handmade papers. This evident physicality sets *mokuhanga* apart in a print world increasingly dominated by digital work on coated papers.

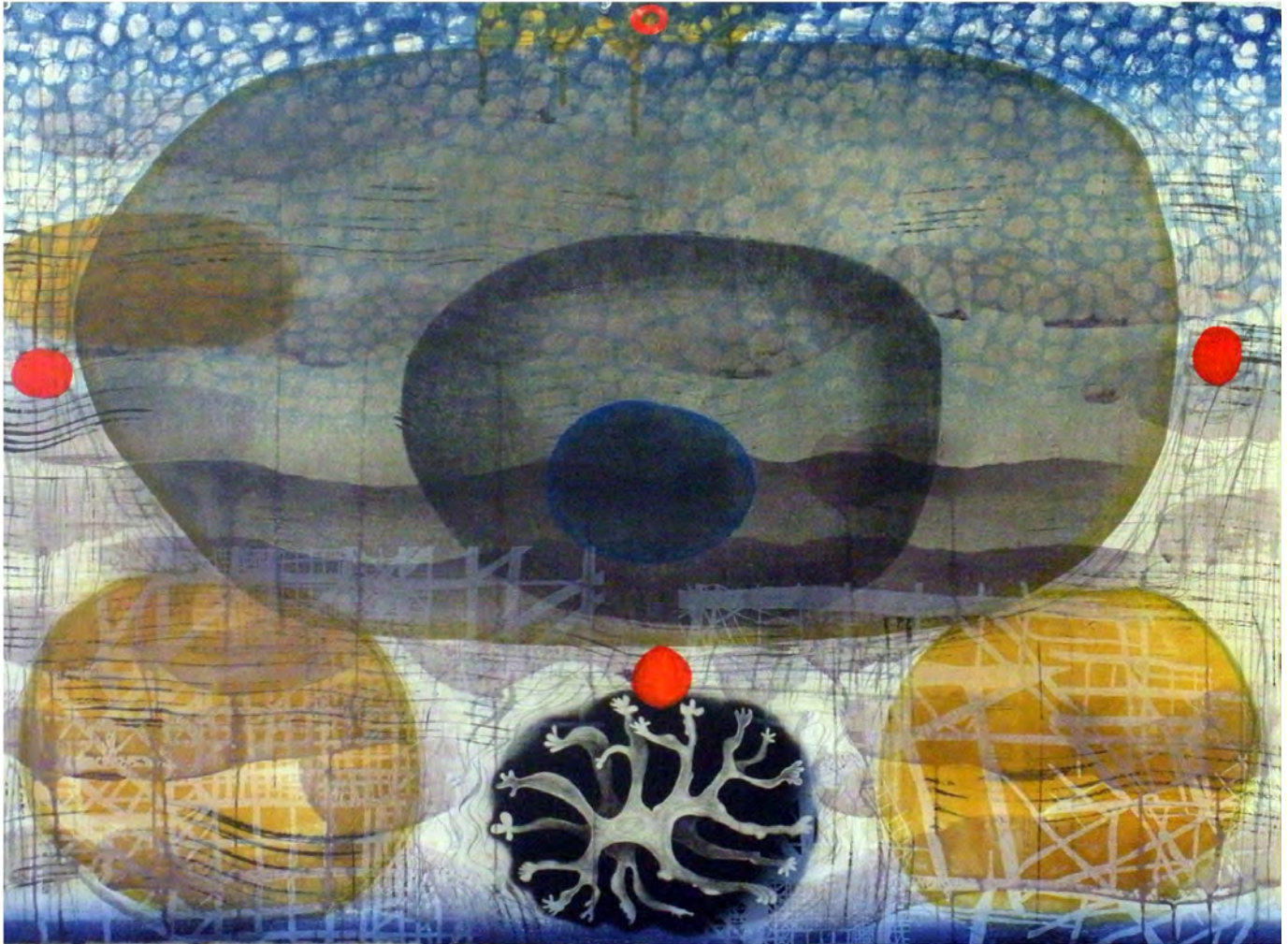


Fig. 8. Karen Kunc, *Ecolocution* (2011), woodcut, mezzotint, polymer relief & mixed media, 29 x 39 inches. Edition of 3. Printed and published by the artist.

rent model for artists and educators interested in *mokuhanga*. Founded by Keiko Kadota in 1997 with Japanese governmental support⁸ and the involvement of Tadashi Toda. After his death, the program continued with other eminent master craftsmen including carvers Shunzo Matsuda and Shoichi Kitamura, and printers Shinkichi Numabe and Toru Ueba. Located on Awaji Island in Hyogo Prefecture, a rural, rice-growing area now popular as a retirement community, the residence was an immersive experience. Parts of the island look much the way they did a century ago, with small terraced rice fields tended by individual families. Artists were housed in local accommodations and classes were held at a community center in a traditional *tatami* room lit through shoji paper screens, and suffused with the soft, raking light that is optimal for viewing prints on washi. Students were expected to sit on the *tatami* mat floor at low tables to carve and print, which was not always easy for Westerners. Residencies lasted several months, and participants alternated between learning from master printers and carvers and working on their own.



Fig. 6. Rebecca Salter, *Quadra 1* (2010), woodblock on Torinoko paper, 30 x 30 cm. Printed by Sato Woodblock Workshop, Kyoto.

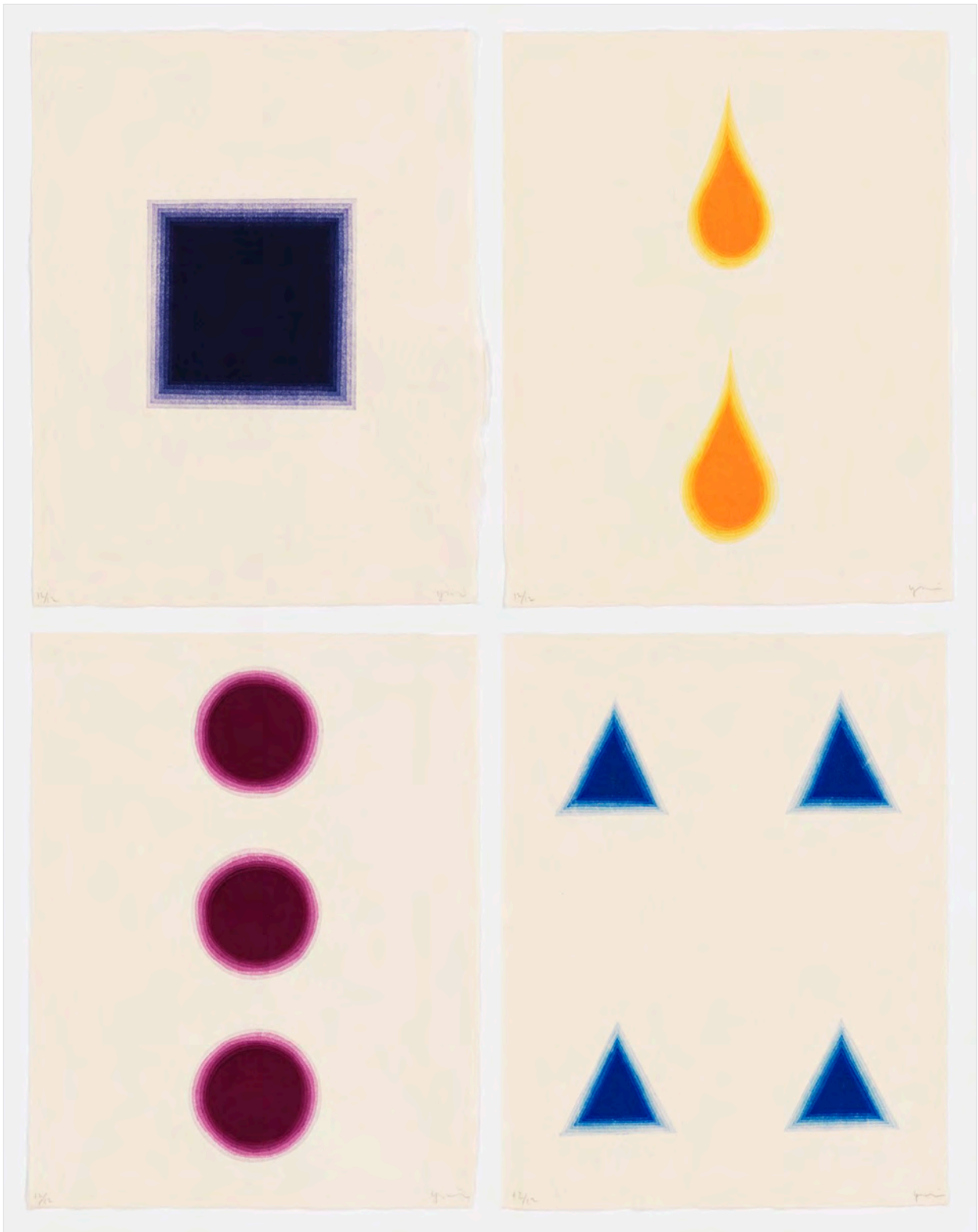


Fig. 11. Yasu Shibata, *Color Chart (3)* (2011), set of four Japanese woodcuts on Kizuki paper, each 11 x 8 1/2 inches. Edition of 12. ©Yasu Shibata, Photo: Pace Prints.

In the 12 years between 1997 and 2009, 83 artists participated in the program, including Katie Baldwin (Moore College of Art and Tyler School of Art) (Fig. 9), Henrik Hey and Nel Pak (Netherlands), Daniel Heyman (RISD), Dariuz Kaca (Poland), Karen Kunc (University of Nebraska), Elspeth Lamb (UK), Yoonmi Nam (University of Kansas), Eva Pietzcker (Druckstelle Workshop, Berlin), and Michael Reed (New Zealand.) Many more artists have been influenced by the ideas these residents brought back with them from Japan.

In 2009 government funding for the Nagasawa Art Park Program was discontinued, but Kadota's new Artist-in-Residence program, Mokuhanga Innovation Laboratory (MI-LAB), opened last November at the foot of Mount Fuji in Yamanashi Prefecture.⁹ MI-LAB offers a variety of programs for international artists, both beginners and experts, as well as training in related techniques such as paper mounting. The first artists-in-residence were Ralph Kiggell (Bangkok International University, Thailand), Hiroki Morinoue (Donkey Mill Art Center, Kona, Hawaii), Jacqueline Gribbin (Charles Darwin University, Australia) and Keiko Hara (Whitman College emeritus, US). Meanwhile, artists from the original Nagasawa Art Park program have remained in contact through conferences such as the IMPACT! meetings in Berlin, Tallin and Bristol. The First International Mokuhanga Conference (IMC) was held in Kyoto and Awaji in June of 2011 barely two months after the Tohoku Earthquake. Over 100 artists and educators from 22 countries met to exchange ideas, exhibit work and learn from masters specializing in mokuhanga and related crafts such as papermaking and baren making. Akira Kurosaki and Tetsuya Noda both served as an Honorary Board Members and their work was exhibited at the Art Forum Jarfo during the conference. The Second International *Mokuhanga* Conference is planned for 2014 in Tokyo.

The internet is also a critical purveyor of knowledge about this ancient technology. Artist Annie Bisset's informative blog¹⁰ is devoted to sharing news about *mokuhanga*, and David Bull's online encyclopedia has become an essential resource for many artists.¹¹ Bull, a self-trained woodblock artist with a studio outside Tokyo, offers stories about his own work, documentation from the many elderly craftsmen that he interviewed, and a forum for discussion that focuses on sharing information through print exchanges.¹² Sources like these have enabled artists like Mike Lyon (Fig. 10) to develop singular techniques for their own practice: Lyon, whose education also included a week long class with Hiroki Morinoue, has taught himself to print large-format images through his research and

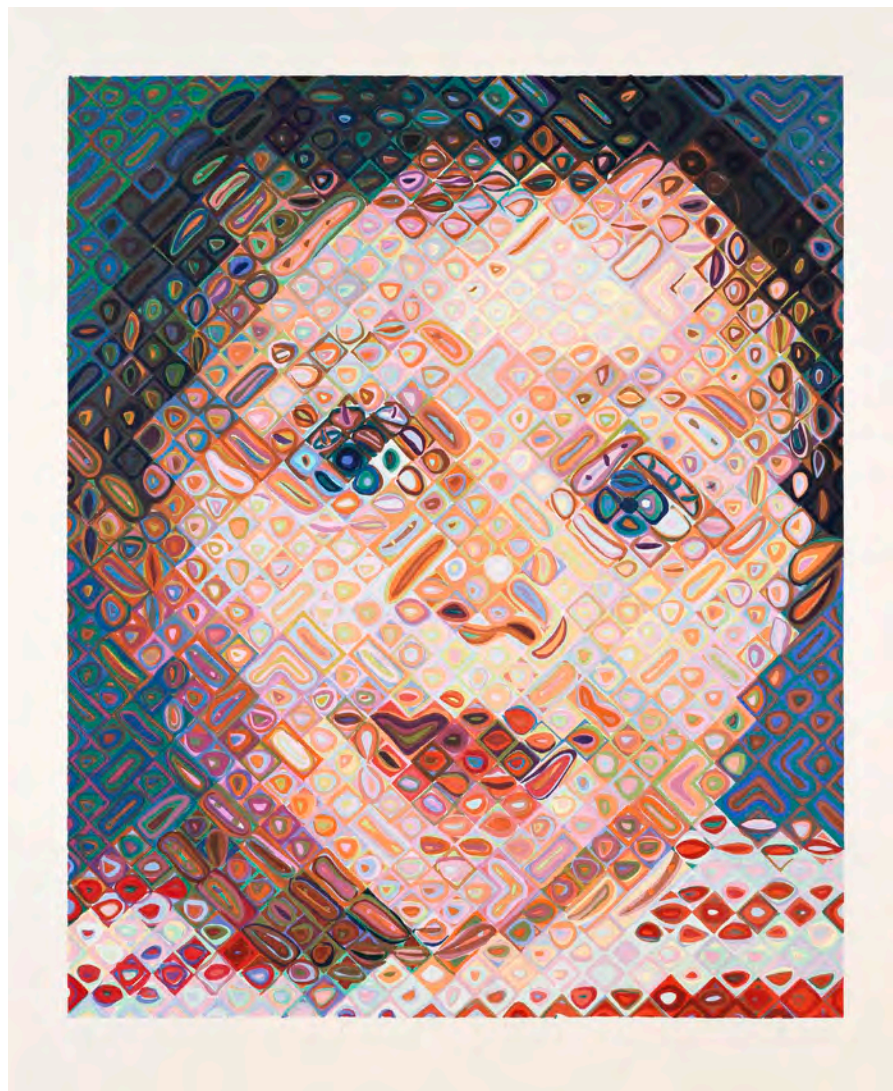


Fig. 12. Chuck Close, *Emma* (2002), 113-color woodcut, image 36 x 30 inches, paper 43 x 35 inches. Edition of 55. Printed by Yasu Shibata, Pace Editions Ink, published by Pace Editions, Inc. ©Chuck Close, photo courtesy Pace Prints.

careful practice in his own studio. His innovative approach combining traditional printing skills with computer programming is well-documented on his website.¹³

Around the world, artists have found ways to merge these techniques into new and innovative forms. Karen Kunc combines oil-based woodblock printing and *mokuhanga*, creating rich surfaces with stencils and cut marks, overprinting many layers. Katie Baldwin has incorporated *mokuhanga* in her print installations, and Michael Schneider has taken his Japanese training to a new level by performing his block making (using stones rather than standard cutting tools) to music in front of an audience. In my own work, I make large prints by rotating and printing blocks multiple times. Such varied approaches are illustrative of the new directions *mokuhanga* has taken outside Japan.

Noda and Kurosaki are now both retired from teaching (though they remain active as

exhibiting artists), but the diaspora of artists trained by them and by the Nagasawa program has spread around the world. The Finnish artist Tuula Moilanen trained with Kurosaki and became a woodblock instructor at Kyoto Seika. With Kari Laitinen and Antti Tantt, she wrote *The Art and Craft of Woodblock Printmaking* (sadly, out of print).¹⁴ Originally published in Finnish by the University of Art & Design (now Aalto University, Helsinki), then translated into English, the volume documents Japanese woodblock techniques for an international audience. Aalto University offers the most extensive *mokuhanga* training program outside Japan—a prime example of the way Kurosaki's influence extends through the work of artists he has taught.

The Kurosaki student who has taken the technique of *mokuhanga* the furthest, however, must be Yasu Shibata (Fig. 11), who now works as a master printer at Pace Editions in New York City. After receiv-



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HARLAN & WEAVER



Kiki Smith, *Escapades* (one of nine prints), 2011

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ing his BFA from Kyoto Seika in 1991 he printed at Tyler Graphics for a decade. An accomplished artist himself, Shibata has taught at Cooper Union since 1998. He has continued working with some of the artists who had been involved in the Crown Point Press project, including Chuck Close and Helen Frankenthaler. The blocks he cut for the Chuck Close baby portrait *Emma* (Fig. 12) were exhibited as part of “Chuck Close: Process and Collaboration,” the exhibition of Close’s prints that traveled the U.S. between 2003 and 2008.¹⁵ Most recently at Pace, Shibata has completed an edition of Yoshitomo Nara woodblock prints. Immersed in *anime* and pop culture, Nara’s child-like drawings of bad girls and bad boys, printed with extreme refinement, are exactly appropriate for the technique (Fig. 13). The scale is big and American, and the images are 21st century, but the new prints resonate with classic *Ukiyo-e* sensibilities—the fascination with fashion and commerce, the edgy attitude and great technical skill.

Yasu Shibata’s work with Yoshitomo Nara brings *mokuhanga* full circle to its Japanese roots, but that circle now encompasses the expanded world of the international art scene. From *mokuhanga*’s early function as a purveyor of protective Buddhist prayers, to its quintessential expression of idealized leisure amidst complex class change in Edo period Japan, it has always been responsive to the political and spiritual evolution of Japanese culture. Relations with the West are also embedded in these images. *Ukiyo-e*’s daring compositions, decorative vigor and popular appeal changed how the west thought about what art was, while Japan’s own 20th-century prints, adopting western pictorial conventions, illustrate the contradictions implicit in westernization. During World War II the *sosaku* print movement provided an identity that sustained Japanese artists in a complex modern world, at the same time as American soldiers took home copies of *ukiyo-e* prints that reflected an entirely different reality based on idealized visions of Japan’s past. The cross-fertilization of ideas was made possible by the easy portability of prints.

It was the persistence and dedication of many craftsmen that shepherded Japanese woodblock through the multitude of changes since the Edo period. The master printers who maintained small workshops during the decades of war and disruption from the Meiji era through the end of World War II, and through the benign neglect that followed, preserved a valuable patrimony. Those traditions were given new value by educators like Akira Kurosaki and Tetsuya Noda during their long university tenures, and by individuals like Keiko

Kadota who see how traditional techniques can serve contemporary art. Encouraged by interest from a newly global art world, with Crown Point’s Japanese print project as a crucial turning point, *mokuhanga* has retained a significant link to the past while recreating itself as a vital medium for expressive thought today. ■

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Notes:

1. His son, Toshi Yoshida, was also an artist who traveled widely, and the Yoshida family includes artists and educators who participated in the changes in the Japanese art scene up to the present day. Ayomi Yoshida is known for her installations that include *mokuhanga* printmaking.
2. Breuer, Karin, Ruth E. Fine and Steven A. Nash. *Thirty-five Years at Crown Point Press: Making Prints, Doing Art*, (Published in association with The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco), 1997.
3. Toda continued to pursue opportunities to work with international artists, however: in 1995 he worked with students from Whitman College brought to Japan by Keiko Hara, and from 1997 he taught international artists through the Nagasawa Artist in Residence program.
4. The university is known for its extensive printmaking program, which also offers etching, silkscreen and lithography.
5. Johnson, Robert Flynn. *Days in a Life: The Art of Tetsuya Noda*, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 2004.
6. Miki, Tetsuo. *Complete Works of Akira Kurosaki*, Catalogue Raisonné: Woodcuts & Paper Works 1965-2006, ABE Publishing, Ltd., Tokyo, 2006.
7. Salter, Rebecca. *Japanese Woodblock Printing. Printmaking Handbooks*, London, 2001.
8. Awaji City (formerly Tsuna Town) received financial support for an Artist-in-Residence Japanese woodblock program, called the Nagasawa Art Park Program. Keiko Kadota and her organization, The Center for the Science of Human Endeavor, created and ran the program.
9. www.endeavor.or.jp/mi-lab/.
10. <http://woodblockdreams.blogspot.com/>.
11. www.woodblock.com/encyclopedia.
12. www.barenforum.org.
13. www.mlyon.com.
14. Laitinen, Kari, Tuula Moilanen, & Antti Tanttu. *The Art and Craft of Woodblock Printmaking, Woodblock Printmaking with Oil-based Inks and the Japanese Watercolor Woodcut*, University of Art and Design, Helsinki, 1999.
15. The blocks can still be seen on the exhibition’s website: http://www.chuckclose.coe.uh.edu/process/emma_b_1.htm.



Fig. 13. Yoshitomo Nara, *S.O.S.* (2010), woodcut, 16 1/2 x 11 3/4 inches. Edition of 50. Printed by Yasu Shibata, Pace Editions Ink, published by Tomio Koyama Gallery and Pace Editions, Inc. ©Yoshitomo Nara, photo courtesy Pace Prints.