

Of Things Human

Prints by Denis Keogh at DIVA.

Printmaker Denis Keogh, whose recent work is currently displayed at DIVA, studied with one of the most accomplished American etchers of the 20th century, Moïse Smith (1929-1993), and was once his personal assistant. But where Smith rendered landscapes and scenes in most realistic detail, Keogh's prints, most of them monotypes from Plexiglas plates, communicate a deeply personal vision. His most direct references to the world are not representations but comments on the state of things human, political or environmental. Such comments are often articulated by way of poetic, highly idiosyncratic, visual metaphors that irresistibly conjure narratives in the mind of the viewer.

Figurative elements and human forms emerge out of dark, enigmatic settings. A majority of the prints have been hand-colored discreetly with watercolor, but even then the predominance of black ink creates a somber mood. Subject matter may lighten but not exorcise this mood entirely, and it invites viewers to brood on what they see.

Such is the case in *Waterjump*, in which a ribbon of water falls down a slope and jumps over a trapeze. This is a delicately expressed visual pun. In providing a new literal meaning for the steeplechase water-jump obstacle, Keogh creates an alternative world to remind us of the possibilities of imagination. *New Season* also lightly alludes to a possible world — and to the poetry of imagination — as a scaffolding of colored poles, strings and blue sail stands poised at the edge of a cliff.

Space Junk Dish and *Space Junk* similarly belong to the realm of poetic fantasy with serious overtones as intimated by the double meaning of the punning titles. On the one hand, junk refers to a Chinese flat-bottomed ship, and Keogh's delightfully low-tech space vessels, rimmed like rafts, come equipped with masts, sails, ropes, poles, flags, and a ball in a net. On the other hand, we're reminded of the trash that litters space as well as earth.

Arrival and *Entrance* are both examples of Keogh casting new light on ordinary concepts with superb economy of means. *Entrance* combines chiaroscuro and a sober but exquisitely balanced composition to dramatic effect. Out of the darkness, a plank materializes, and above it, a corridor of light. Colored ropes hang from the plank in loose loops, holding a dangling pole. This is a stark, arresting piece that keeps the viewer on the brink between mystery and revelation, shadow and light, as if we ourselves, stood suspended on the edge of the thin plank. Keogh intends for us to come up with our own narratives and interpretations.

Keogh's use of chiaroscuro to increase dramatic tension is present in most of the colored print, as in *Magic*, with its dark figure delineated by a halo of light spinning planets in a dark universe, and is crucial in his black-and-white prints. Among the latter, two large monotypes stand out.

Colossus is a modern version of, and homage to, Goya's painting (*Colossus*, 1808-1812). Both works express a nightmarish view of war. "It's a fairly overt commentary on power, abuse, power relationships, etc.," says Keogh.

Modern warfare is ever more devastating and Keogh's colossus looms not over people and animals on a battleground but in a lifeless space filled with smoky, dirty air. The giant no longer assumes the natural form of naked man. He has become a maimed creature with stumps and a monocular vision (a cyclopean laser beam), yet is still in the grips of primitive aggressive urges and lust for power (see his club and swollen codpiece). The piece conveys a sense of oppressive atmosphere with ominous strength.

Flight is equally dramatic but harks back to a more romantic — and biblical — view of the struggle between the forces of light and darkness.

Drama is reinforced in both works by the movement and apparent spontaneity of ink-marks so characteristic of Keogh's monotypes. Residual texture left over from the work process contributes to the expressiveness of the prints. Keogh in general makes great use of fingerprints. In *Waterbug*, it's a whole hand-print, with its fine skin-texture, that makes a crab-like creature come alive.

Among the monotypes, only *The Sands Between Us* and *Where the West Commences* seem less successful to me. Murky colors replace Keogh's usual judicious use of chiaroscuro and composition is less felicitous, in great part because of an incongruously bright tepee-shape that remains structurally unintegrated.



Colossus, Monotype by Denis Keogh

Keogh's etchings, also combined with watercolor, possess a lighter character than the monotypes. In *Cortez Enters Mexico*, Cortez and his horse, both equipped with a blue horn, seem to issue forth from the lichen on a rock. Keogh's *Hero With a Wing* also appears to step out of a stone patterned with lichen. These two etchings make one wish to see more of Keogh's intaglios.

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