

Phil Vander Weg Kalamazoo institute of Arts Docent Class Presentation
on
Robert Stackhouse, Michigan Swell, lithograph 2000

Potential Adult Questions:

What is your first impression about the color?

How would you describe the illusion of space?

Does this appear to be a balanced composition?

How does it seem he created this image, is it a drawing, painting, watercolor or print?

What clues do you notice that might give us an idea?

Does this work provoke questions for you? What are they?

Some background and backstory might help us better understand this image. Full disclosure: I know a lot about the print, the circumstances surrounding it and many of the critical creative steps along the way. It has been a more difficult task of editing down information for me than I had anticipated.

Michigan Swell is a lithographic limited edition print by Robert Stackhouse. Many have said all significant art begins with a question that can only be answered by making the art. There really is no greater compelling reason to make it. Without serious questions to resolve, there is no art. The question for Bob Stackhouse that started *Michigan Swell* that was put directly to me by him was "What if I had 100 telephone poles?" Really. That eventually led to the sculpture *Michigan Swell*. It is important for you to know that Stackhouse most frequently makes fabricated sculpture, large architecturally scaled objects. He does necessary drawings in advance to work out how he will make these things, how much material is needed and like details. The sculptures usually are not intended to last long, a few years, sometimes much shorter. He then makes two-dimensional images of these completed objects that he intends to be critical documentary evidence of the sculpture. These drawings, prints, watercolor paintings can be relatively modest in size, 20 by 30 inches, to very large paintings 8 by 14 feet. He claims to be thinking ahead to what he needs do with the 3- dimensional object while he is building it so that the final two-dimensional work will look and have the impact he envisions.

Trained as an abstract expressionist, shaped in part by the simplicity of minimalism during his early formative years, Robert Stackhouse the painter became a sculptor with a singular rule to guide him for more than forty years: keep it simple, keep it direct.

Directness for Stackhouse is a natural result of many factors such as his rather traditional choice of materials and techniques: paper, watercolor, pencil, charcoal, and wood. For him, be it sculpture of wood fabricated with basic carpentry, or monumentally scaled watercolor, it remains a hands on exercise throughout. It may also be found in the simplicity of his recurrent form motifs: the serpent and the ship. Of course these shapes have a multitude of meanings and associations for us all. They can be about comfort, aggression, enclosure, openness, exclusion, joy, fantasy, history and any number of conditions. Although we may never have encountered forms quite like Robert Stackhouse builds for us, they always have elements we are directly familiar with in some fashion. He rarely explicitly tells us directly of his specific ambitions for a particular piece, yet he has upon occasion confessed that these forms are none the less portraiture for him. The serpent becomes his inner self-portrait, while the ship signifies an outer self-portrait.

His sensitivity and ability to command scale is remarkable, going from delicate drawings of a few inches, to complex watercolor forms measuring nearly eight by fourteen feet like *Indigo Way*. The Western Michigan University Sculpture Tour work, *Michigan Swell*, measured just over one hundred feet in length and revealed a refined ability to control not only size, but to also maximize the variables of site to best advantage. *Michigan Swell*, the sculpture, was a blue-painted wooden deck structure that was supported on 50 telephone poles and seen from the outside appeared long, linear and horizontal. It sat on a rise that greeted students on their way from their dorms to classes and functioned in a lyrical manner. Those that ventured inside the sculpture discovered an irregularly sloped and slanted deck in the form of a long boat and felt a sense of closed space very different from that seen from the outside. The ambiguities and surplus of narrative meanings in Robert Stackhouse's mature work set him apart from most of his contemporaries. Although he is capable of entertaining one for hours with anecdotes and narrative tidbits, he never insists, or intrudes upon our individual interpretations. Put another way by critic Carter Ratcliff, "Since it is our responsibility to make sense of his works, the sense that we make receives no challenge from him."

True to form, the lithographic print *Michigan Swell*, fairly documents the ephemeral sculpture of the same name made from construction lumber and telephone poles that graced the Western Michigan University campus for over 8 years. The print presents us with a sense of enclosure, like being in a thalo-blue/green room, surrounded by water. The paper image could easily be mistaken for a watercolor at first because of the translucent brushwork and fluid apparent water marks. The drawing based on photographic records is well defined and faithfully details the sculpture. It is one glimpse of an ambiguous form that could appear closed, or very open, flat and stable, or rolling and active. There is a decided off kilter tilt to the vertical image of the sculpture, perhaps in keeping with the origins of the piece, or to better animate our reaction to it. Well over 400 students participated in the fabrication of the sculpture over ten days, many coming back additional days to work because they enjoyed what was taking place. Thousands of students came to interact with the sculpture during its time on campus. Additional students entered into the collaborative creative endeavor of making the documentary print. The lithographic print *Michigan Swell* speaks to both the sculpture and the activity. In the words of Bob Stackhouse upon completing the sculpture, "Lake Michigan is beautifully majestic and can have some serious swells. I sure had a swell time here in Kalamazoo too".

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