

## Printmaking: Voice of Social Change

By Jessica Yap

The artist and the printing press are a truly potent combination. Art often functions as a reflection of social consciousness and while artists have sought to reveal socio-political truths in their work, prints have always been intended to engage the viewer, to share information or opinion, to be the voice for a cause or to inspire action. Through the times, artists and the printing press have worked in harmonious collaboration to generate powerful images that reflect our human condition.

Today artists disseminate their messages with unprecedented rapidity and reach, and printmaking provides an advantage over other artistic forms such as painting and sculpture. Printmaking is considerably cheaper, more versatile and can be rapidly created en masse thereby amplifying the voice and the message.

Migration first became a political issue in the Philippines when the Marcos regime began to 'export labour' in the 1970s as a source of revenue. Millions left their native land in the painful quest for opportunity. Artists like Benedicto Cabrera, better known as BenCab, led the Social-Realism art movement in reaction to the social problems that the policies produced, addressing change, migration, dislocation, servitude, exile and desperation – all embroiled in the great Filipino Diaspora.

During his printmaking residencies at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) in 2006 and 2010, BenCab adopted the printing press to address these themes, thereby becoming an impressively eloquent historian and social commentator – fewer words and more punch.

*Glimpse of the Past/ Present XIX 2010*

traces the evolution of some northern Philippine tribal minorities and the dying out of tradition as the younger generation moved out of the rural areas to the cities and possibly even out of the country, to find employment. The image of transformation and dislocation becomes the language of change and an emigration that is steeped in nostalgia. In this print, the same girl is rendered in two different ways. On the right, she is drawn in shades of neutral brown, a topless Igorot maiden with native adornments in her hair and hanging from her neck. On the left, she is transformed through the use of a rusty hue. She is the girl of today, clad in



*Glimpse of the Past/Present XIX (2010), Lithography and screen print on STPI handmade paper, 76 x 102 cm, © BenCab / Singapore Tyler Print Institute*

a collared T-shirt, her hair pulled back, arms crossed, looking rather defensive and insecure, despite the slight smile. BenCab's juxtaposition of "what was" against "what now is" has long been a personal artistic stamp, resonant with his message of nostalgia for the loss of the past in exchange for an uncertain future.

Similarly, Qiu Zhijie, who did his STPI residency in 2008, continued his explorations of China's changing cultural landscape with his printmaking and radical experimentation in various artistic mediums. Qiu explored the basis of nationhood and geopolitical and psychological attachments. He combined the imagery of ancient Chinese aesthetics, Taoist philosophy and Cultural Revolution symbols to create a conceptual map that questions the ideas that built a cyclical China.

In *Ataractic of Zhuang Zi*, Qiu recounts Taoist classics by injecting a dose of ancient philosophy to 'tranquillise' the strains of historical burdens and anxieties of contemporary life. Chinese gourds were a symbol of medicine, wine and magic – of happy intoxication or soothing escape and healing. But the voice of the artist echoes the reality of old ideals and philosophies being tipped over and inverted. The delivery method has morphed from a pleasurable welcome to a clinical, almost virulent application.

In response to a host of global challenges ranging from political repression to economic crisis to endemic poverty and human rights violations, artists still express a shared belief in the power of art to promote and effect social change, and truly the potent combination of artist and printmaking results in a New Realism.

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**Jessica Yap** spends her 'free' time as a docent at STPI and her 'conscious' hours as a wife and mother to Ariel and Joshua. In her 'unconscious' hours, she vacillates around in the world of numbers and finance.

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