

Synchretism in Bonnie Baxter's Chi-chi doggie

by Christine Unger

1 – an introduction

i always thought of printmaking as taming many animals
with different and strong voices.
each element of the print (the paper, the ink,
the viscosity, of the ink, the color, the pressure, the overlays)
is an animal which must be compatible with the rest
to create a kind of balance which works and carries meaning

Bonnie Baxter

Bonnie Baxter's *Chi-chi doggie* print series marks a significant return in her artistic practice to printmaking as a primary means of expression after nearly 10 years of focusing on video, performance, public art contracts and collaborative community events. Sitting in her tiny, but cozy, downtown apartment (not to be confused with her marvelous – though equally cozy – home and studio in Val David), Bonnie talked about her latest print series, *Chichi doggie*, or rather, we talked around and toward it. Reducing Bonnie's output, verbal or artistic, to one track (or *trame*), is no simple task. Her interest in dualities and synchronicities characterizes her life as well as her art. Her prints are prepared and executed with foresight of a Bobby Fisher, while their content reveals a stream of consciousness that she dips into like a child fishing for tadpoles. Chi-Chi doggie's gaze is a fulcrum, an innocent, a steadying point of perspective for an artist who knows the uncertainty, the entropy, which can come from an open heart and an unguarded creative process.

2 – a little background

Since *The Chi-chi doggie series* marks a significant turning point in Bonnie's artistic process I feel it's only fair to find out at least a little about what brought her here. Bonnie grew up just across the border from Mexico and was surrounded in her home by the exotic "folk" artifacts that were her mother's obsession. Ironically, it wasn't until the 1980's when she learned about the Atame papermaking process and consequently the art of the Otomí Indians, that the art of South America made an impression on her art practice. She had been working in Val-David and Montréal on small black and white **small** etchings throughout the 1970s when serious health problems led her to rethink her practice. She began looking for alternatives to the angle, began papermaking, sculpting and discovered colour – art became a healing mechanism. She modeled her Spirit Figure series on the "primitive" forms of the Otomí Indians, creating order from chaos – incorporating psychologically based, autobiographical elements into surfaces made safe through symmetry and geometry. The spirit figure series continued from 1988 until 1993.

During the 1990s crisis once again propelled Bonnie to rethink her art practice. The Spirit Figures, so controlled and personal, seemed to have separated her from a critical art world dominated by postmodern dialectics, semiotics, feminist anti-dualism, and postcolonial appropriation paranoia. Bonnie began to explore mediums she thought would be more immediate, and more directly involved with the community. She plunged into video and performance art with unguarded enthusiasm, pushing the boundaries of her experience into unmapped territories – sensing the dragon (to use one of Bonnie's own titles). In an act of defiant self-exploration, she ritualistically set fire to much of her

existing work over the course of a winter – a controlled conflagration of the soul which she cast in digital frames for future reference. But while she maintained a print practice at all times (often creating images of her beloved companion dog, Bernadette) and experimenting with the tension created between the digital *trame* and hand quality prints, she felt her attentions were divided. The time required to technically process her video images was prohibitive and resulted in isolating her more than she had ever been before. What she particularly missed is a process in which letting go of certain physical controls opened the door to the emergence of sub-conscious imagery.

Several years ago, Bonnie picked up her little toy chichi: a small toy Chihuahua with an engagingly bobbing head. It has been a constant companion ever since. Chi chi is an innocuous, pocket sized, object. Bearing little scrutiny, it passes unnoticed into forbidden territories. It's like the 'coyote' that leads illegal aliens across the US/Mexican boarder – the coyote that takes its name from the far more ancient coyote figure whose trickster ways are said to create passageways to places far more mysterious than the United States. On a subconscious level, Chi-chi has become a kind of passport into troubled areas on Bonnie's mental map and since September 11, there have been so many world events whose implications hardly bear thinking of, Chi-chi has become her medium, allowing her to express the inexpressible.

As she re-immersed herself in printmaking Chi-chi's image appeared again and again, morphing with the layers of chaotic and disturbing images like a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Chi-chi lets her move forward and sometimes even seems to take the lead as she connects many layers of subject matter that form a syncretism in her current perspective of the world.

3 – Connections

Bonnie's work is saturated with mytho-historical and socio political references, her postmodernism is more than skin deep – her embrace of the collective, inclusive experience is not just part of her art practice, but is evident in every facet of her life. Life and art feed each other, growing fat and happy on an evidential feast of shared discoveries. No surprise then that, as it turns out, the little Chi-chi doggie is a more than apt choice for talisman. The Chi-chi (better known as the Chihuahua) is not only the smallest breed of dog anywhere, but may also be the only dog indigenous to America. Early images of a very similar dog called the Techichi – probably the Chihuahua's ancestor – appear in ancient Toltec art. From remains found at pyramids and in graves, it is surmised that the Toltecs believed the Techichi was a guide for the human soul. In a truly peculiar incidence of serendipity, it turns out that another ritual associated with the Techichi was the burning of a dog, a chichi, with a human corpse in the belief that the deceased human's wrong-doings would be transferred to the dog.

The Otomí Indian's whose art and craft have been such an inspiration to Bonnie's work, had as their nearest neighbors, the Chichimec people – an impoverished hunter-gatherer group that lived by raiding its more settled neighbors. As allies they rebuffed the Spanish forces of Cortes. When they failed to defeat the Spanish, the Otomí joined them instead and were among the first to convert to Catholicism while the Chichimec people eventually rebelled against the Spanish and were defeated. Before the Spanish arrived, the Otomí relationship with the Chichimec people may have been described as syncretic: their rituals were filled with man/beast metamorphic shamanistic practices that seem to echo their symbiotic (or parasitic) social system. In compromising with the Spanish, the Otomí embraced a new "syncretism" with Catholicism that retained not only their own culture, but also the culture of the Chichimec.

Using the dialogue of the Chi-chi as a medium, an unwitting assistant, Bonnie enters into

a larger dialogue on the nature of our day to day relationship to world events, and examines how we incorporate the "beast" of inhumanity into our ever-day consciousness and question to what degree our relationship with inhumanity is symbiotic or parasitic. What at first appears as serendipity could easily be interpreted as an example of the way cultural syncretism and the resulting iconology create a subconscious semiotics that is manifesting itself through art.

4 - Creating signs

digital noise is like static

hand stamping is like common labor,
poor or blurred,
it creates comprehension through a kind of
fog

wood is crude, imposes grain and texture,
has a mind or voice of it's own.

Screen-print can mimic anything

Bonnie Baxter

Marks, signs, icons – these are Bonnie Baxter's specialty. Her combination of printmaking techniques (in the case of *The Chi-chi doggie series*, woodcut, screen print, rubber stamp and digital print) and her fluent inclusion of other mediums, add layer upon layer of intrigue to her work where myth and reality work together in an alert and sometimes uneasy association. Her application of technique is not accidental, convenient, or limited by inexperience. It is in her content and through incessant joyful experimentation that she unleashes her subconscious or lets it gently rise to the surface, as the case may be. Each technique brings another layer of physicality to the work – each layer, applied in its unique process, provides its own sensual reality and emotive associations.

i compose a video the way i compose a print
- in layers.

what i loved about the video
was being in the experience (physicality)
my print images alive in light and movement.

but i will use anything i can to make an image -
technique is not really important for itself -

if i want a certain feeling or effect
i find a technique to do it.

Bonnie Baxter

Though relatively new for her, Bonnie's digital process is equally layered, equally concerned with the psychological effects of textural recognition. For Chi-chi she has taken scans of the little toy Chi-chi and worked on the computer to lay textures drawn from 18th Century etchings, dry points and burins, onto the image of the dog. These images output from the computer in black and white and then blown up as transparencies for screen print, add another layer, blending old and then new, each with different associations. Playing with layers of sensual reality and recognition she is able to create an entirely believable world from improbable elements. The immediacy of the

digital capture, particular with video stills, forms a base for the representation of subject matter and has allowed her to break away from the compositional devices of the highly contained, centered, and symmetrical spaces that marked her early work. At the same time she retains the intense physical interaction with her process through added layers of woodcut, screen print and rubber stamps. *The Chi-chi doggie series* synchronized Bonnie's skills as a printmaker, her experience with digital image processing, and her love of experiment. The expertise she's garnered with new medium and the perspective she's gained through involvement with more collaborative projects are translated through the expressive physicality of printmaking. Her time as a video artist has allowed her to see things from a new point of view (literally). It has opened up space for her in the translation of two-dimensional portrayal. And perhaps most important, it has tied her process to the medium of the media, creating a relational substratum of compositional tools that creates yet another psychological tram.

The Chi-chi doggie series has given voice to something that she, and I think most people, have begun to feel, that there is no difference between the mundane and the sacred, the personal and the political. The exotic, the primitive, the other, is on our doorstep, in our house, in our diet, for better and worse and it is time to find a synchronous voice for this new socio-political reality we find ourselves in. To make everything sacred and personal is the goal. To risk having everything become mundane and political is the fear.