

BETWEEN IMAGE AND OBJECT THE PRINTS OF ROBERT MANGOLD

Robert Mangold (b.1937) is best known for the paintings he has produced over the past forty years. Although he was exposed to printmaking during his earliest training at the Cleveland Institute of Art in the late 1950s, Mangold, like most painters, did not seriously engage the potentials of printmaking from the start. Printmaking crept into his work, insinuating itself into the more operative realm of making large-scale paintings.

When Mangold was a student at Yale University from 1960 to 1962, many artists were responding to the perceived excesses of much abstract expressionist painting, with its gestural strokes, painterly surfaces, and associational imagery, not to mention its romantic, emotional, and spiritual overtones. Young artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, working in the shadows of painters such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko, were reinvesting art with the elements of the everyday, bringing art down to earth and into the street. For example, in Johns' paintings of seemingly mundane subjects--flags, targets, and alphabets--and Rauschenberg's combine paintings that incorporated personal and cast-off items, the future of painting was conjoined to that of sculpture. Johns' subjects were simultaneously the objects they depicted--and sometimes included actual objects. With Rauschenberg, paint was the visual glue that unified seemingly irreconcilable materials. As Mangold remarked some years later, "At that time people said 'Well, painting is dead...'"¹ Yet Mangold, who had learned much from abstract expressionist art, particularly the work of Barnett Newman, believed that painting still had a life of its own, a life that was neither object (i.e., sculpture) nor illusion (i.e., as a window on the world), nor for that matter allusion (i.e., as in the elevated themes of abstract expressionist art). For Mangold, painting's most profound and intimate connection was to the wall itself, as manifested in the tradition of prehistoric cave painting and Renaissance frescos in which image is inseparable from surface. While Mangold's work has a distinct genealogical and visual affinity to the minimal productions of artists as diverse as Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly, his concerns were of a different order. IN the early 1960s, for example, Stella produced shaped canvases that functioned much like sculptural objects. Kelly's "abstract" paintings of the 1950s and 60s always took as their sources representational subjects such as plants, shadows, and architecture. Although Mangold's shaped canvases relied on Stella's example, he was interested in flatness, not three-dimensionality. And, although Mangold occasionally has referential elements in his work, rarely do his images derive from real-world sources.

Manifested in Mangold's paintings of the 1960s were questions that would concern him for the coming decades. How does one produce a work that can be experienced "all at once"? How does one maintain the unity of a work even if it consists of discrete pictorial and literal parts? How does one realize the fullness of a work through a seemingly pared-down vocabulary of color, line, surface, interior, and exterior shape? These are some of the issues that Mangold has come to embrace in his prints as well. This does not mean that his prints are simply equivalents of his paintings. While almost all the prints have counterparts in series of paintings, they have functioned variously in different periods and in diverse projects.

Although Mangold considers his paintings to be the "greatest fulfillment" of an idea, he does not see art media in hierarchical terms with printmaking as a stepchild of painting.² In fact, he admires the prints of some artists more than their paintings--among

them, Lyonel Feininger, Josef Albers, and to some extent Rembrandt. To Mangold's mind, prints must be "able to hold the [viewer's] interest in an equal way to what's on the wall in terms of painting and drawing." From the time Mangold made his first prints in the late 1960s and the 1970s, they possessed significance parallel to his paintings. For painting is ever bit "as much an illustration of an idea as a print or drawing." Ultimately, for Mangold, printmaking, drawing, and painting are ways of investigating process and visual ideas. Each medium is a separate way of getting to know an image, to inhabit an idea and make it his own. No doubt Mangold would agree with Barnett Newman when he wrote about lithography that "it is an instrument. It is not a 'medium.' It is not a poor man's substitute for painting or for drawing. Nor do I consider it a translation of something from one medium into another. For me, it is an instrument that one plays. It is like a piano or an orchestra; and as with an instrument it interprets."³

Mangold's prints of the seventies amplify, elaborate, and reconsider ideas expressed in the paintings. During this time he primarily produced small versions of paintings in preparation for large-scale works, and he viewed prints as extensions of the paintings. His paintings of this period echo the printing process in that a roller was used to apply paint. Like his paintings, printmaking offered the opportunity to work on multiple images, but gave him the advantage of being able to look at them all at once. In the 1970s, prints served the function of making his art available to a larger audience, as much as for the purpose of exploiting intrinsic qualities of the medium.

By the early 1980s Mangold began to use drawing and printmaking as a lead into the paintings. Ideas that he had previously tested in small-scale models for his paintings were rehearsed and explored on paper. "I do a lot of things in prints today which are ahead of the paintings, taking positions, trying them out in prints and drawings." Drawings, then and now, lead to prints rather than to paintings. In effect, prints become a final result as much as the paintings. Although in the 1980s drawings usually came first, followed by prints, and by paintings, in practice, Mangold intuitively shuffled the three media using each to leverage his art to the next stage.

Given Mangold's interest in line and his proclivity to work in series-both characteristic particularly germane to printmaking-it is a bit surprising that he did not wholeheartedly embrace printmaking from the beginning of his career. Perhaps the private, solitary way in which he works offers an explanation. Mangold has always preferred to work alone in his studio unencumbered by assistants. For him the studio is a sanctuary, the nucleus of production, analysis, and reflection. For this reason, since his student days, Mangold has frequently enjoyed making woodcuts that he could accomplish on his own without technical assistance. In contrast to the straightforward process of cutting into wood and printing it oneself without a press, other printmaking media-silkscreen, etching, and lithography (all of which he has now utilized extensively)-are collaborative processes in which the artist works with a master printer in a printing studio. In this situation there are more distractions and time constraints. Over the years, Mangold has developed a method that functions well for him, one that was made easier with the introduction of overnight delivery services. He first works on the plates with a master printer and then brings the proofs and plates to his own studio "to look at [them] in relation to his own world." He then works on the plates at his leisure and returns them to the printer to produce more proofs, until he achieves the desired result. Clearly, maximum concentration and control are as crucial to his printmaking as they are to his painting.

During the last three decades, Mangold has worked with no fewer than sixteen print studios in the United States and Europe; however, he has tended to work intensively

with one or two printers for extended periods: in the early years with John Campione and Crown Point Press, later with Simmelink/Sukimoto Editions, and most recently with Derriere L'Etoile Studios and Spring Street Workshop.

The number of prints Mangold has produced since he created his first published prints in 1968 has also dramatically increased. In the 1970s and 80s he tended to make fewer than ten a year, while in the last decade he most often produced ten and twenty per annum. The inventive and energetic publishers with whom he has worked, most notably Robert Feldman of Parasol Press, Brooke Alexander of Brooke Alexander Editions, and Richard Solomon of Pace Editions, have no doubt encouraged his printmaking. (In the 1990s he built a new, larger studio and now primarily uses his old studio for working on prints and drawings.) In all, Mangold has produced 179 prints as part of 68 projects. This exhibition is the first to provide a comprehensive view of them.

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Robin White, "Robert Mangold," *View I*, no. 7 (December, 1978), p. 3.
All subsequent quotes from the artist are taken from an interview with the author on November 10, 1999.
John P. O'Neill, ed. *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (1990; reprint, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 184.