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**Gouging Tradition:
The Woodcuts of Tom Huck**
by Faye Hirsch

At a microbrewery in St. Louis, Tom Huck, woodcut artist, is talking to a local collector who has recently purchased Huck's portfolio *2 Weeks in August: 14 Rural Absurdities* (1995-98). Huck's got a Midwestern accent, with just a touch of Southern twang, and he's a short, lively, emphatic guy, gesturing and bobbing as he speaks. He's clearly someone who loves his own stories and could tell them a thousand times over.

"When I was a kid," he's saying, "one of my brothers found out that our Dad kept a stack of Playboys under his bed. So one day I snuck in to find them. He must have gotten wind of it, because there weren't any Playboys when I got there. Instead I pulled out this book *The Tower of London*, and opened it, and there was a George Cruikshank of Mary Queen of Scots being beheaded." He reflects for a moment on this primal scene. "I'll never forget it," he says—nor what he found on his next fishing expedition: a comic book by R. Crumb, who similarly sank his fangs deep into the gray matter of Huck's teeming artistic subconscious.

Huck is a man besotted with prints, especially with woodcut and with every artist who has ever carved a great block. "The king is Dürer," he declares in his studio a few days later. "When I was 13, we went to D.C., and my parents gave me 25 bucks to buy an art book. I found one about the woodcuts of Dürer, the one with the *Battle of the Angels* on the cover, and I just loved it—all that dark imagery." He pauses. "When I made *2 Weeks* I was the same age Dürer was when he made his *Apocalypse* woodcuts." He pauses again, for effect, and utters, in hushed tones, "Dad figured this one out: Dürer was born in 1471, and I was born in 1971, 500 years later." Out comes a sudden, manic peal of laughter, so I can't tell for sure how seriously he's taking the predestination business—though I suspect he means it.

Staking a claim in the genealogy of woodcut is one way Huck fuels the stupendous effort that has gone into (mostly) self-producing—cutting the blocks, proofing, and editioning—four very large, extremely detailed woodcuts a year, on average, since 1995, the year he graduated from Washington University in St. Louis. Or, more specifically, since he went on a graduation-gift trip to Italy and saw an

exhibition of Dürer's Apocalypse at the Uffizi. He returned home and (having kicked his sister out of her bedroom to make way for a studio) began feverishly to produce the 14 prints comprising *2 Weeks in August*, an epic account of his hometown, Potosi, pop. 2,683, located 80 miles southwest of St. Louis, and actually called, on one Web site, "hillbilly heaven." Of this tiny town, steeped in a violent and often bizarre history, Tom Huck has fashioned his own Yoknapatawpha County, replete with eccentric locals and gothic lore.

There are the two sisters, for example, whose "family tree has no branches at all," as Huck puts it, who show up for the annual greased pig contest dressed in formal ball gowns ("Martha and the Greased Pig"). There's the family who burned down, to collect the insurance, their own egg-processing factory; its demise caused the whole town to reek of fried eggs for a week. Then there's the escapee with a Catholic fetish, who broke out of the local prison (which once housed Jesse James), stole some vestments, and was apprehended directing traffic in the center of town, in full regalia ("The Crossing Guard"). ("I researched this guy," says Huck. "He was once arrested for holding a church full of worshippers hostage and making them strip.") Best—or worst—is the story of Freddy and Helen Wesler, who were found dead in their bed, surrounded by the decomposing and skeletal remains of years and years of pet dogs ("Bed of Bones"). In Huck's version a fiendish black hound, still alive and nestled between his masters, gnaws a rogue bone. The 14 incredible—but true!—stories are meant to take place in a sultry Missouri summer over a period compressed into just two weeks.

The stories are good—very good—but even better is their embodiment as woodcuts in the grand grotesque tradition. Here Huck is able to vent his fervor for storytelling by exaggerating details and embellishing the facts, but also by twisting and turning the compositions so they read like a good yarn sounds. Inbreeds grimace, curs snarl, packing barrels overflow with thousands of used dentures, which are tried on for fit ("Kohler City"). There are scary line dances and lewd gropings, super-tight T-shirts and monstrous big-wheeled trucks. At the annual NRA barbecue, members in Klan hoods hunt squirrels (okay, they are kinda big) with AK-47s. Siblings wed, hogs drown, and, through it all, Huck's cut is unforgiving, relentless, maniacal. Darks and lights blink like camera flashes, and every line juts out at an angle. Just about nothing is on the vertical or horizontal, it seems, except the block itself.

After Huck completed *2 Weeks in August*, a three-year effort "that nearly killed me," he says, he loaded some of the prints into his car and drove them around the country, plying them directly to curators. Gutsy rookies are not always welcome in museums, but several curators bought the prints on the spot, for a mere \$250 apiece. David Mickenberg, director of the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University (which will show two suites by Huck in 2004), was an early supporter. "I thought Tom was, in an odd way, a modern, Chicago-style Thomas Hart Benton," says Mickenberg. "His work appeared to be influenced by Joel Feldman and Ed Paschke and yet presented a rather ingenious look at aspects of American—southern American—culture. The work is technically superb with jarring, almost surreal images that speak to a long Chicago tradition." The portfolio in its entirety later made its way into some of the best print collections in the country—Marjorie Cohn acquired it for the Fogg Museum at Harvard, Roberta Waddell for the New York Public Library, and Stephen Goddard for the Spencer Museum at the University of Kansas. "I was immediately taken by the honesty and the passionate, driven handwork that they professed. I was also smitten by their in-your-face subject

matter," writes Goddard. "This was art that I felt at home with, and I knew we would have to find a way for the suite to stay at the University of Kansas."

But probably nothing pleased Huck more than the purchase of one of the portfolios by Jack Lemon, founder of Landfall Press in Chicago. Landfall later printed and published two splendid Hucks, *The Hog Scalders* (1999; see AOP 4/4, p. 68) and *Gateway Sexorcism* (2000). "When I saw 2 Weeks in August, I just had to have it," says Lemon. "First of all, the content was so bizarre: Missouri trailer trash—I really liked that. But also, the blocks are beautiful—just amazing. Then I met him, in Arizona, right after I bought it. 'Tom,' I said, 'do you think you can cut me a block for the Art Fair?'—and that was quick—just two months later. He had to cut it, and we had to print it." That was *The Hog Scalders*, and Huck was pure Landfall. "It's personal storytelling," says Lemon, "and Landfall has been doing that for years." In fact, Huck generally prefers to print his own editions in their entirety (he relishes his part in "spreading the filth and the weirdness," as he describes it). But he makes an exception for Lemon. "I mean, you see those pictures of Jack in the '70s," says Huck, star-struck, "with the big 'fro. The guy's a legend!" And Lemon is plotting. "I've told him the next thing to do is go into color," he says, which would be a new turn for the artist.

Since 2 Weeks in August, Huck has only gotten better, and bigger, sometimes making single prints like *The Hog Scalders* and other times working in suites. There was a trio of prints in 1999 depicting the activities of a creepy doll called "Snacktime Marcy," who could perform myriad functions—eat, yes, but also defecate and fly a plane. The same year, Huck was commissioned by Stichting Ondernemig & Kunst in Amsterdam to create a pair of linocuts, and although he had never worked in the medium, he produced *The Attack of the 50 ft. Yard Ornament*, in which a huge, rampaging flamingo is lassoed by a posse of bounty hunters, and *The Other White Meat*, a disturbing vision of the carnivorous impulse ("I love a pig," says Huck. "They are so smart-looking, and you can make them so evil"—though perhaps even more evil are the two humans, one in an S&M mask, who flank the beast). In all these prints, Huck has deepened the pictorial space by incorporating radical shifts in scale, rocketing from foreground figures who are sometimes merely big heads (*Gateway Sexorcism*) to clustered groups of small figures or even townscapes in the background (*Attack of the 50 ft. Yard Ornament*).

More recently, Huck has returned to local lore and the lure of producing another suite, 11 48x34-in. prints called *The Bloody Bucket*. It is named for a rough-and-tumble Potosi bar that existed for three years, from 1948 to 1951. During that time, dozens of people died in fights on the premises, not least the protagonist of "Death of a Sailor" (printed at and published by Frogman's Press at the University of South Dakota, 2000), who was killed with a pair of gardening shears. Huck places the scene of the crime in the Bloody Bucket's parking lot. The perp wears a "Barney Burgers" T-shirt (this was in fact a later Potosi burger plant that was shut down for reasons even Huck, fascinated as he is with the vagaries of meat, seems reluctant to disclose) as he gouges the sailor, whose eyes roll back in his head, who pees himself, whose mouth is torn at by a clothes hanger gripped in the jaws of a ferocious black dog, a bizarre detail flushed from the artist's own—apparently quite graphic—terrors. In "Dollar Dance," the pregnant bride does a table dance, bouquet in one hand and pistol in the other. Below, a drunk swoons, and a musician—straight out of a Flemish kermis—fiddles and leers. And still on Huck's easel—he carves his blocks, stained a transparent red for visual clarity, on the vertical—is a third Bloody

Bucket woodcut, "Beef Brain Buffet," showing a hungry family chowing down on a local delicacy, straight from the cranium of the beast.

On the eve of the exhibition of *2 Weeks in August: 14 Rural Absurdities* at the St. Louis Museum of Art (it is showing through July 8), Huck's just a touch nervous. The show's going to get press coverage, and already the people back home in Potosi are looking at him funny. When Francesca Consagra, the museum's curator of prints, was considering the acquisition of *2 Weeks in August*, she knew that she wanted it "partially because of its satire of Potosi—I believed it should belong to the region's leading art museum. We nonetheless had to consider the fact that most of the people depicted in the work live in the area and that some might take offense at his characterizations. I felt as if I was a curator in London during the 1730s ready to display Hogarth's work to the public!" And the comparison is apt. Though Huck presents no moral, he is, after all, a good Catholic boy from small-town America. He loves his wife, his family, his dog. He might insist that what he's doing is reportage, of a sort, but what we get is a sequence of cautionary tales about ignorance and excess. A chasm opens in the sugar-coated ideology of small-town America, and in slips Huck, outraged, astonished, and ready to gouge.

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