

EDITION REVIEW

Marking Marx: Jim Dine's History of Communism

By Susan Tallman

Jim Dine, *A History of Communism* (2013)
Suite of 45 stone lithographs with etching and hand-coloring on Zerkall 400 gm white paper. Sheet 37 x 28 inches each; image dimensions variable. Edition of 10. Lithography printing by Keystone Editions, Berlin; etching printed by Julia D'Amario, Kathy Kuehn and Aurélie Pagès, Walla Walla, WA. Published by the artist. Price on request from Alan Cristea Gallery, London.

A History of Communism

By Jim Dine, with an essay by Gwen Sasse
Published by Steidl Verlag, Göttingen, Germany, 2014
80 pages, fully illustrated, €24

Jim Dine describes *A History of Communism* as “the culmination of sixty years of my love affair with intaglio.”¹ It is also his most ambitious and inventive print project in decades: 45 prints, each more than three-feet high, consisting of an anonymous East German lithograph made sometime between 1946 and 1989, amended by Dine's freshly etched responses, elaborations and modifications. In contradiction to the title's suggestion of five-year plans and centralized authority, the prints are testament to what can happen when serendipity joins forces with obsession.

The story starts in Monbijou Park in the historic, Hohenzollern heart of Berlin—the part of town occupied by the Soviet army at the end of World War II and later rebuilt as the capital of the German Democratic Republic. The bomb-damaged Rococo palace that once stood in the park was torn down in the 1950s to make way for a children's swimming pool and a studio building for East Berlin's main art school, the Weißensee Kunsthochschule. Among other facilities, the school's lithography workshop was housed there before it relocated to the main campus in the 1980s, a few years before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the GDR. In the two-and-a-half decades since reunification, the gritty neighborhood around the park has become increasingly chic. Real estate



Jim Dine, from *A History of Communism* (2012). Courtesy Jim Dine and Alan Cristea Gallery, London.

pressures being what they are, in 2011 the shabby atelier building was slated for demolition.² This much is history.

Serendipity enters with a phone call. In February 2011, Johannes Witt, the litho shop manager at Weißensee, rang two Tamarind-trained printers, Sarah Dudley and Ulrich Kühle, to say he had found a storage room full of old litho stones in the basement of the Monbijou building, and they were up for grabs.

Most litho stones have been in use since the 19th century—two-to-three-inch-thick slabs of fine-grained limestone, they can be used again and again because the tusche drawings that transform them from a chunk of rock into a printing template occupy only the top-most microns of the surface. Once the printing of an image is finished, that top layer can be ground down (“graining”) to prepare a new, clean surface for the next

Marking Marx: Jim Dine's History of Communism

Page 2



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artist. Used stones tend to be stored until a change of technology or location makes them redundant. These stones had been superfluous for decades.

Dudley and Kühle had recently set up a new lithography atelier, Keystone Editions, in Berlin. Litho stones are expensive—something the size of a sheet of foolscap can easily cost a hundred dollars and poster-sized stones run into the thousands. So when Witt said they could have the stones for free if they removed them by the end of the week, they hired a van, enlisted a friend and hauled away 89 stones ranging from 10 x 16 inches to nearly 2 x 3 feet.

A few days later, Dine arrived at Keystone for his first project in the new shop. He and Dudley had worked together when she was at Tamarind, and the two had reconnected at the institute's 50th anniversary celebration. Berlin was also familiar territory: Dine had lived in the city in the early 1990s when it was Wall-free (though not yet quite "unified") and had also known it before, when the Wall was up.

At Keystone, the recently acquired Mombijou stones had been piled wherever there was room (89 litho stones could

pave a comfortable patio). Because stones are usually only grained when needed, nearly all carried images on their surfaces that had been drawn by students and professors at the art school, which had been founded in 1946 three years prior to the East German state. The stones had gone into storage before the Wall came down, so like the comatose mother in the movie *Good Bye, Lenin!* they had stayed eerily frozen in a world that no longer existed.

"I spied the stones in the corner," Dine says, "and I thought: this is the greatest found object. It was a gift."

The stones had been sitting in a damp basement for decades; they had mold on them and were full of scrapes and scratches. "But that is what Jim likes," Dudley says. "It shows the history of the stone and the 'life experience' of the images." Dine asked if they could bring the images back to printability.

He picked two-dozen stones to be printed in 20 to 30 impressions that would be shipped to Walla Walla, Washington, where for two months every year Dine works with etcher Julia D'Amario.

Many of the images fulfilled clichéd expectations of a communist art school

in the second half of the 20th century: a carefully rendered view of Red Square; happy workers on the march; a portrait of the East German actor Erwin Geschonneck, a rather feral Karl Marx. Some could be dated easily—the hard-hat heroes with the "XX JAHRE DDR" parade banner must have been drawn in 1969 and the Iranian Students Conference poster probably postdated 1979—but most were difficult to place. This is partly due to the stylistic stasis of official East German art (the tendency toward slab-like formal simplification that was a staple of Stalinist public monuments in the '50s can still be seen in Ludwig Engelhardt's 1986 *Marx and Engels* statue), but it also is simply the nature of art school. The stiff nudes, awkward horses and carefully observed, nondescript faces could have come out of any lithography classroom in the past hundred years. Some of the drawings are fetching (there is a lovely elephant) and some are dreadful, but that too is just normal.

In Walla Walla, Dine began creating etched responses to the lithographs. When he returned to Berlin in November, more stones were recovered, one bearing a sharp portrait of the com-

Marking Marx: Jim Dine's History of Communism

Page 3



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munist martyr Rosa Luxemburg. In the end, 45 stones from the Monbijou storage room were editioned in Berlin, then fitted with etched responses to the individual character and visual properties of the lithograph: some are light and winsome—delicately drafted tools that fall like spring rain around the underlying forms; others went through as many as 15 states as marks built up and multiple plates were added. It was a massive undertaking—the final edition alone consists of 900 prints, each printed at least twice.³

The History of Communism is intended as a single, 45-part composition. Only the colophon is signed; the individual prints bear just a number on the back to indicate their order in the sequence. The portfolio opens with the head of Marx framed by

two shaggy paintbrushes and ends with a naked woman gently drawing a curtain, but the flow within is governed not by any overarching narrative but by sequential visual relationships—how each one looked against the next. The opening Marx “just landed there,” Dine says.

The tension between ideology and history on the one hand—the meanings we have learned to attach to things—and flat-out visual experience on the other is at the core of this work, collectively and individually.

Dine understands etching's tactile seductions and visual depths—its pathos. The plates are scarred with broad gestures made by power tools, marked with spit-bite stains as nebulous as cirrus clouds, and adorned with furry thickets of dry-



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point that peter out at the edges like moss. Etching has a density that lithography—thinner, quicker, more pragmatic—lacks, and this distinction plays into the repartee Dine develops between the abandoned artifacts of a vanished country and his own hacksaws and hammers. In one print, triumphant black tongue-and-groove pliers rise above a scratched and stained landscape like Godzilla over Tokyo.

Most of the etchings work with the vocabulary of tools that Dine has used since the early 1960s. A tent of twin ballpeen hammers frames a young East German soldier, binoculars in hand, introducing themes of building and looking, both benign and oppressive. A delicate girl gazes out with startled eyes through a finely drawn array of axes, adzes and mallets. A male face is barely recognizable beneath a sea of handprints and hand tools; a Dremel rotary tool floats lazily across his forehead. Most of the tools are arranged to fit the underlying image: handles offer support or frame the edges of a drawing; a cat gazes into the maw of a crescent wrench; pliers are inserted into a preexisting clenched fist.

Dine has long acknowledged that his tools and brushes are stand-ins for himself as a person who makes things, and for his family history in hardware-store proprietorship. In a communist iconography, of course, tools were not the intimate instruments of identity that they are for Dine:

Marking Marx: Jim Dine's History of Communism

Page 4



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they were public emblems of a decidedly impersonal sort. The East German mallet and compass were the equivalent of the Soviet Union's hammer and sickle, adorning the nation's flag and currency. In the Workers' Paradise, tools were instruments of the state, not of the self, which raises the stakes for Dine's hardware-store actors. It endows them with a historical complexity that earlier iterations—for all their quirky grace—rarely had.

Dine's best work has always taken the form of conversations with things plucked from the past—the tools and ties, the bedroom wallpaper and the bathrobe—objects that, as memories do, acquire meaning out of all proportion to their objective worth. His art has often conveyed a poignant bafflement about where the self leaves off and the things

we acquire to buttress the self begin. Through found objects—things that exist on their own without him—he captures the ambivalent questioning of identity at the heart of “trying it on.” People try on clothes, they try on ideologies (whether from free will or external pressure), and artists—especially young ones—try on styles. These negotiations between inside and outside, found and amended, are clearly the subject here.

“I wasn't commenting on the art. I wasn't commenting on the grand experiment that failed,” Dine says. “I was responding to images. Finding ways to fit around them.” He is aware that the portrait of Marx, like the etching of a skull, comes with a backstory and emotional freight. The meaning of a skull, however, doesn't change much. In the case of Marx,

that freight is different for today's viewer than it was for the unknown East German lithographer. On the morning of November 10, 1989, East Berliners were whipped from their world into the West's, in art as well as in political and economic culture. It is easy to be condescending about the art of the GDR or to assume that all the good artists (Richter, Penck, Baselitz) got out. But Dine is intriguingly respectful of the absent artists' works. Though he writes in the colophon that he “wanted a black view of the image and a sense of Berlin in the East as I knew it when the horrible wall was still up,” for the most part he doesn't obliterate, he ornaments; he doesn't deface, he frames; most importantly, he doesn't mock.

In one print, midway through the portfolio, the tools take a break, and we see the artist's anxious visage, glowing in the sky like a worried Oz. Below him, lithographed masses huddle in shadow. The idea of the artist as architect of all could not be more clearly articulated. And yet uncertainty reigns.

Not far from Mombijou Park is the Berlin TV Tower, built in the late 1960s as a symbol of the GDR's technological might. In the sphere at the top is a restaurant that slowly rotates, offering vast views of the city, east and west. There is also a souvenir shop where in the 1980s you could buy a pamphlet with photographs of the view that had been retouched so that West Berlin appeared an undifferentiated mass of greenery. You could look out the window and see the reality, while being sold a document that unapologetically asserted something else entirely.

The tongue-in-cheek didactic confidence of Dine's title is a ruse. History is a mess and communism a failure. The victory pictured in *The History of Communism* is not that of democracy or capitalism or individual liberty. It is the triumph of doubt. ■

Susan Tallman is the Editor-in-Chief of Art in Print.

Notes:

1. All quotes from Jim Dine and Sarah Dudley are from conversation and email correspondence.
2. As of this writing, the building is still standing.
3. Subsequently two of the stones have been grained and reused for new projects. Some are not good enough to be reused and one broke during printing (Keystone pulled a print from it on Mylar, which they used to make a photo plate to complete the edition).