

Sean Caulfield is a Centennial Professor in the Department of Art and Design at the University of Alberta. He has exhibited his prints, drawings and artist's books extensively throughout Canada, the United States, Europe, and Japan. Recent exhibitions include: *Perceptions of Promise*, Chelsea Art Museum (New York, NY) / Glenbow Museum (Calgary, AB); *The New World*, The Centre for Modern and Contemporary Art (Debrecen, Hungary); *Imagining Science*, Art Gallery of Alberta (Edmonton, AB). Caulfield has received numerous grants and awards for his work including: Triennial Prize at the 2nd Bangkok Triennial International Print and Drawing Exhibition (Bangkok, Thailand); SSHRC Dissemination Grant; Canadian Stem Cell Network Impact Grant; SSHRC Fine Arts Creation Grant; Canada Council Travel Grant; and a Visual Arts Fellowship, Illinois Arts Council. Caulfield's work is in various public and private collections including: Houghton Library, Harvard University (Cambridge, MA); Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge, England); Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas (Austin, TX).

Heather Caverhill is an MA candidate in the History of Art, Design and Visual Culture at the University of Alberta.

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Artist Talk Friday, September 12, 6:00 - 6:30 pm

Opening Reception: Friday, September 12, 6:30 - 8:30 pm

Sean Caulfield

Floods and Shelters



Burning Cloud, 2013, woodcut on gampi, 213 x 182 cm.

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Floods and Shelters

by Heather Caverhill

For those fascinated with the monstrous, the traditions of the woodcut provide no shortage of fodder. The work of one of the most notable Northern Renaissance printmakers, Albrecht Dürer, frequently features hybrid monsters. Near the end of the fifteenth century, amid the unease stirred by the Protestant Reformation, Dürer's exquisite woodblock scenes featuring the beasts of the impending apocalypse were printed in a new edition of *The Revelation of St. John*. In the mid-sixteenth century, woodcuts were used in one of the first German world atlases, *Cosmographia*, to portray the terrifying and unfamiliar sea and land creatures feared to inhabit newly discovered continents. In the following century, the London print trade summoned both the woodcut and a monstrous figure to make sense of the entangled factions behind the "many-headed beast" of the English Civil War.¹ More recently, twentieth-century printmakers, including members of the German Expressionists and Anselm Kiefer, have employed the woodblock to come to terms with the monstrosities of the Great Wars.

Whether conveying the unease of a period of religious unrest, anticipating the uncharted new world, or attempting to comprehend violence and human conflict, historic woodblock prints embody the uncertainties of their own times. The monstrous scenes of the past simultaneously evoke the fears and hopes of their present. Sean Caulfield looks back to these images as he grapples with representing contemporary anxieties in his own work. Each of the prints in his recent series *Floods and Shelters* poses questions about the ways that humans relate to their environments. This body of work falls on the heels of Caulfield's involvement with *Perceptions of Promise* (2012)—an interdisciplinary project that brought together scientists, scholars and artists and resulted in a travelling exhibition of artworks that responded to social and ethical debates surrounding stem cell research. Through *Perceptions of Promise*, Caulfield was able to examine methods of specialized medical inquiry and the perceived isolation of science from everyday life. His focus has since expanded to consider the broader impact of science and technology on the natural world.

Caulfield's work is monstrous both in scale and content. In *Floods and Shelters*, the woodcut prints on gampi, approximately two metres in height, adhere seamlessly to the gallery walls. These massive scenes are populated with creatures fused from organic and man-made parts. The large wooden box in *Leaking Shelter* is inhabited by a number of tiny gnarled plantlets. A dense fog emanates from one of the saplings on the surface, while streams of dark liquid escape through the container's knots and cracks. The focus of *Burning Cloud* is a graceful arterial system engulfed by an inflamed, gaseous billow. The foreboding weather pattern is discretely tethered to an oblong apparatus that is partially submerged in an enclosed pond. Even the bleak terrain in *Signal Fire*, the third large-scale work in the series, suggests the presence of life forms. *Signal Fire* is a study for a much larger project called *The Flood*, a site-specific installation of a set of Caulfield's carved woodblocks, which will reside in the Art Gallery of Alberta for a year, starting in the spring of 2015. The dismal landscape in the image is dotted with smouldering stacks of timber. Caulfield's curious details and careful



manipulations of scale allow biological elements in the work to take on the characteristics of industrial forms.

The mutations and destruction in Caulfield's scenes are terrible and unsettling in premise, yet they are beautiful and

elegant in form. The harsh settings and grotesque figures in the images are rendered with precise lines, delicate textures and subtle gradations of shade and tone. To achieve the fine gestures, Caulfield carves maple blocks using traditional techniques that would have been familiar to the printmakers of prior centuries; however, to create the rough and random marks in the works, he employs present-day power tools. Traces of another contemporary practice, digital printing, are apparent in some of Caulfield's recent experiments. In these works, he acknowledges the trajectory of the history of print media by layering woodcut images with digital reproductions. Like the slick, digital images of today, woodblock prints were once valued for their ease of production and rapid distribution.

In the digital age, the nostalgia evoked by handcrafted woodblock prints is alluring. Woodcuts are art forms that also belong to the realm of print media, which for centuries has carried out the very practical task of disseminating information and communicating ideas. The prints in *Floods and Shelters* communicate doubt and unease about how technology has altered the environment. Certain visual elements in Caulfield's prints reference the landscape that he has watched transform over the course of his lifetime. Having spent many years in Alberta, Caulfield has experienced the complexity of living in a region where the extraction of resources from the natural world is so palpably entwined with the social, economic and political lives of residents. Rather than providing viewers with simple critiques or binaries, Caulfield's dark territories, hybrid creatures, and anxieties remain ambiguous, complex and unresolved.

Verging on apocalyptic, each of Caulfield's catastrophic scenes includes the suggestion of salvation and renewal. Even the most desolate environments in the series include life forms that have adapted or continue to persist. Like the woodcuts of the past, the prints of *Floods and Shelters* embody the uncertainties of the present moment. In Caulfield's monstrosities, which express both threat and survival, fear is always accompanied by a glimmer of hope.

¹ Diane Purkiss, *The English Civil War: A People's History* (London: Harper Press, 2006), 307.