

February 24 - March 31, 2012

Opening Reception: Friday, February 24, 6:30 - 8:30 pm

**Erik Waterkotte** received his MFA from the University of Alberta in 2005 and his BFA from Illinois State University in 2001. While completing his BFA he studied printmaking for a semester at the University of Wolverhampton in Wolverhampton, England. Waterkotte has exhibited in the United States and internationally. Some of his recent exhibitions include, *THENOW Contemporary Prints/ Historical Perspectives*, University of Minnesota, as part of the 2010 Mid America Print Conference, the *Hong Kong Graphic Arts Festival*, Hong Kong City Hall, *(S)edition, Prints as Activism*, Urban Institute of Contemporary Art (Grand Rapids, MI), the *2009 China Sanbao International Printmaking Exhibition*, and *The Edmonton Print International*, SNAP Gallery (Edmonton, AB). His most recent solo exhibitions were at Saltgrass Printmakers (Salt Lake City, UT), the Printmaker's Gallery (Arkansas State University) and the Hemingway Gallery (Boise State University, ID). His work is part of several university collections and he has participated in numerous print portfolios.

Erik is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Art at Minnesota State University Mankato teaching printmaking and drawing. He has also been a Visiting Assistant Professor in Printmaking at Indiana University (Bloomington, IN). Waterkotte has been a visiting artist at several universities throughout the USA and has been the recipient of a Minnesota State Arts Board Emerging Artist Initiative Grant. In addition he has been an editor for the *MidAmerica Print Council Journal*, and has contributed his writing to *CHOP*, published by Malaspina Printmakers (Vancouver, BC) and *Contemporary Impressions Print Journal* published the American Print Alliance (Atlanta, GA).

**Brandon Cooke** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Minnesota State University Mankato, USA, and has held positions at Lingnan University (Hong Kong), Auburn University (Alabama) and the University of Maryland at College Park. He received his PhD in Philosophy in 2003 from the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, and specializes in aesthetics and ethics. His recent publications include papers on the role of the imagination in art, metaphor, the logic of art criticism, and the ethical status of pornography and erotic art. He is currently working on the ethics of the imagination and artistic creation. He lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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## Erik Waterkotte: *Invocation*



*Invocation of Demons*, digitally printed transparent film in lightbox, 12" x 16", 2011

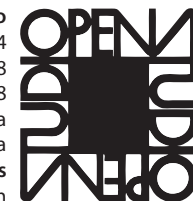
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EDITING Sara Kelly  
TYPESETTING Sara Kelly  
DESIGN Kathe Gray/electric pear

Charitable Registration No. 11906 8823 RR0001

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## Erik Waterkotte: Invocation

by Brandon Cooke

Erik Waterkotte is not a printmaker's printmaker.

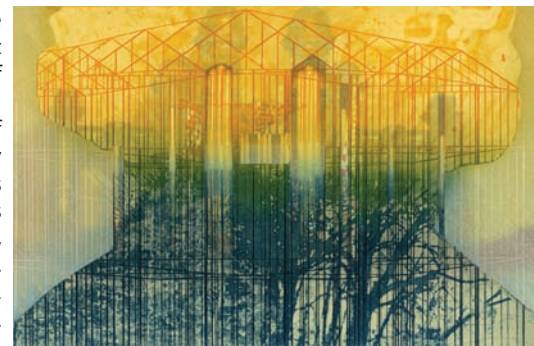
The printmaker's printmakers are working to identify and express printmaking's artistic identity. This is what serious printmakers do, or so it is alleged. These are important matters, because the answers arrived at will shape the now-embryonic critical discourse of this art. However, the downside of casting one's artistic projects in the role of asking and answering these questions is that the concern for the work as an object for aesthetic appreciation can fall by the wayside. Waterkotte's works are first and foremost objects for aesthetic engagement. They are not in the business of making manifest the essence of printmaking. Indeed, one might ask whether some of the works exhibited here should be thought of as prints at all.

That said, the subject matter that Waterkotte draws upon in his work does connect it to printmaking's dual status as both a fine art and mass art medium. He uses images from films such as *Woodstock* and *Gimme Shelter*, comic books and heavy metal album art. Many of those source images are representations of utopias and dystopias. Waterkotte's use of mass cultural representations here is significant because it reminds us of the pervasiveness of images of fantasy and its fearsome counterparts. From the outside, heavy metal music and its distinctive iconography are criticized as so much dross, but this attitude is a facile one, as we can see when we realize that metal is engaging the same duality of aspiration and fear that are at the center of human experience.

It matters, too, that the sensuous appearance of Waterkotte's works is often rich, colourful and pleasing, typically much more so than his source material. We are drawn in before we quite realize exactly what we are seeing, a nice epistemological analogue for the way that the initial steps leading to disaster can be pleasant and evidently worthwhile. The surfaces of the works invite us to view them as abstractions, but seeing into the works occasions a different sort of experience, one in which we are disoriented in our attempt to impose some order on the represented world, to cognize it as a coherent unity. What is given to us easily in that representation is often disturbing or terrifying—the image of a golden cathedral fronted by two outsized American flags, a theocratic fortress, growing from a dark organic mass of tree and stone. That organic mass is in fact taken from the cover of the eponymous first album by Black Sabbath. One needn't know this to get the sense of menace and foreboding that has been conjoined to the image of the luminous temple. Some other image might have been chosen to equal effect. The real importance of the Black Sabbath source lies instead in its functioning like an alchemical cipher, a coded formula for carrying out an arcane process of turning base materials into precious gold. It is a prop in the artist's performative act of generating the print.

When we see into the surfaces, we enter into spaces that overwhelm and disorient, and these are characteristic marks of the experience of the sublime. Natural phenomena—the vast starry sky, a storm at sea, a towering mountain range—overwhelm us with their indomitable power and fill us with awe at their might and incomprehensibility, and our comparative powerlessness and insignificance in the cosmic order. (In Waterkotte's work, social and cultural phenomena give rise to experiences of the sublime at least as often as natural phenomena.) If we are actually tossed about at sea in that storm, we cannot experience the sublime, only terror. We must also be removed from the possibility of destruction from those natural forces for the feeling of awe to

come. Only then can we experience the other aspect of the sublime, a feeling of the power of our reason and the undiminished value of our humanity. Strictly speaking, it is not the objects or phenomena themselves that are sublime; instead, sublimity is in our minds only. That is not to say it is trivial, or an illusion. On the contrary.



In *The Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant argues that there are fundamental connections between the aesthetic and the moral.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the possibility of one person's judgment of the sublime being valid for anyone else presupposes first, a recognition of others' rational nature, and accordingly, a recognition of their unlimited moral worth. Though his reference to the sublime is deliberate and important to understanding Waterkotte's work, this moral aspect of the sublime is not likely something he had in mind when he created his work. Indeed, he may disavow any such moral outlook. Perhaps Kant's way is not the most fruitful way to understand the sublime in the end. Still, there is a moral outlook implicit in these works that has to be acknowledged: that the pursuit of important human goods such as freedom, ambition, security and belonging can go off the rails, and that in the pursuit of these things it is possible to become the unwitting agents of our own destruction.

Two questions lie at the heart of judgments of artistic value: What is the value of the experience afforded by the work? What has the artist achieved? Much of what I've said already speaks to the aesthetic experiences Waterkotte's work opens up for us, but the artistic process and achievement also bear on the character of his works' experiential value. Although all of them make use of printmaking processes, none of the works are actually multiples (another reason for questioning whether the works are prints). Collage elements are incorporated and marks are made by hand directly on the printed surfaces. Other works make use of transparencies on lightboxes. The printed regions function here like apertures through which the other elements are seen; these elements are unstable between abstraction and representation. It is natural to think of a print as a kind of mediated experience, where the object of our attention (the print) is the link between the viewer and two things: the printer's matrix and the represented content. Since the works here aren't made purely by the characteristic techniques of printmaking, we must think differently about their generative processes. Looking at the finished work is a way to reverse engineer the artist's creative process, to understand the creative choices made and arrive at a judgment about their significance. In fact, the work is not quite the thing before us on the wall, but the creative performance that culminates in the production of that thing. Some of the techniques Waterkotte uses to create these works are obvious even to a casual observer, while others remain obscure and defy our attempts at discovery. Like the alchemical process that transforms the base into the radiant, the products dazzle and delight, though it's the achievement that truly merits admiration and wonder.

<sup>1</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*, Werner Pluhar, trans. (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).