

Engraving the Savage

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Michael Gaudio. *Engraving the Savage : the New World and Techniques of Civilization*.

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Taking up the materiality of engraving, Michael Gaudio explores “ethnographic” images that present early modern efforts at describing the native inhabitants of the New World in his recent book *Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization*. For Gaudio, these engravings reveal an inherent ambiguity and instability in the formulation of the North American “other”. While their representational schemes attempt to define the “savage” in opposition to the European experience and practices of “civilization”, the representations cannot mask their own failure to rise above “savage” base matter. As a result, Gaudio argues, the engraved image remains in proximity to that which it attempts to place at a distance. In acknowledging the materiality of engraving, Gaudio moves beyond iconographic treatments of the pictorial rhetoric of colonization and towards an account of the material remainders of production and representation that are present on the images’ surface. By looking at rather than through the engravings of early modern America that endeavor to image the “savage”, Gaudio effectively brings to light the unresolved anxieties confronting the Protestant engraver and viewer.

The focus of Gaudio’s study is Theodor de Bry’s *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1590), a volume of texts and images originally intended to present to Europeans the profitable and exotic world of conquest. A reproductive engraver, de Bry based his plates on a collection of watercolors by John White, an Englishman who accompanied the first, failed British attempt to settle present-day North Carolina. Translated into print, White’s “ethnographic drawings” (p. xiii) of the North American flora, fauna, and peoples served to forge a European conception of the New World “savage” that was maintained well into the 19th century. For Gaudio, this extended pictorial tradition serves to situate engraving as a “formative element in the production of ethnographic knowledge” (p. xii). To support this claim, Gaudio also examines later reproductions of White’s watercolors and the attendant changes in representational practices and cultural contextualization.

To introduce his subject Gaudio pursues a description of what he calls the “white pebbles” of the engraved “ethnographic” image. Borrowed from Michel de Certeau, the metaphor of the white pebble allows Gaudio to name that which disrupts access to the space of ethnographic representation by bringing to the fore, rather than disavowing, form and matter. In its materiality, the white pebble is also that which stands in between the viewer and the world of representation, simultaneously demanding and disabling a distancing of the object of representation. Similarly, it “represents both the desire for and the impossibility of unmediated access to origins” (p. xxi). In its ambiguity, the white pebble thus becomes a marker for a deferral of meaning in the mediated encounter between colonizer and colonized. Likewise, in its materiality, the engraved ethnographic image presents itself as a telling trace of the techniques and tools that were employed to shape both the “savage otherness” (p. xi) of the Algonquians of Carolina and the European response to this image.

In the course of the four chapters of his book, Gaudio attends to various ways in which engraved images such as those published by de Bry collapse the space between the “civil” and the “savage” and the ways their materiality shapes the response of the colonizer to the colonized. Although spanning three centuries, the multiple objects of Gaudio’s analysis are well situated within in-depth and informative discussions of their materiality. In each chapter, Gaudio weaves a web of historical, visual, technological, ideological, and theoretical threads in order to position the image in question within a remarkably comprehensive network of objects, ideas, and practices.

Gaudio's most explicit intersection with the civil/savage binary is carried out in the book's first chapter, "Savage Marks: The Scriptive Techniques of Early Modern Ethnography." Here Gaudio provides compelling substantiation for his claim that in de Bry's engravings of Virginia, the two opposing concepts of colonization are brought close. As his point of departure, Gaudio chooses an engraving from de Bry's Report that portrays a collection of Algonquian tattoo designs as well as a figure of a male warrior standing with his decorated back facing the picture plane. The significance and relevance of this image to Gaudio's project lies in the pairing of the marks of the "savage" with the symbol of European civility and authority: the alphabet. De Bry's use of the latter to index the former exemplifies, argues Gaudio, the attempt both to distance one "scriptive technique" from another and "to decode the savage, to translate the otherness of a New World body... into the familiarity of a European sign system" (p. 5). For Gaudio, the success of these endeavors is not unequivocal; in fact, it is consistently undermined by an interpretative ambiguity.

On the one hand, the letters of the Roman alphabet can be read as representative of a "transcendent authority", placed over and above the tattoo designs (p. 5). In this way, the engraved letters function as "a textual apparatus that, as the privileged site of knowledge, can now contain the matter of the image as the newly discovered object of its proto-ethnographic discourse" (p. 6). As Gaudio points out, however, this reading does not move us beyond the level of the civil/savage binary, for it holds that the knowledge and literacy of the "civil" dominates, contains, and distances the meaning-less marks of the "savage".

On the other hand, however, and in keeping with the ambivalence of the "ethnographic" engraving - an ambivalence Gaudio insists on, the plate of the tattooed warrior also provides an alternate reading. Moving away from, or collapsing, the colonizing binary, Gaudio also considers the markings pictured on the engraving in terms of their shared materiality; the tattoos are marks made into the flesh, just as the letters are marks carved into a copper plate. For Gaudio, this demonstrates that "as physical marks, the letters of the Roman alphabet are no less bound to matter and to a worldly temporality than tattoos" (p. 21). As a result, the emphasis placed on the letters by de Bry points not to a necessary dominance of the European mark-making technique over that of the "savage", but to an acknowledgement and consequent disavowal of this very lack of a "scriptive" authority. This absence of an absolute distinction further implicates the impossibility of picturing the "savage".

In his second chapter, "Making Sense of Smoke: Engraving and

Ornament in de Bry's America," Gaudio continues to explore the ambivalence that coincides with the failure to represent the "savage" in the engraved lines of de Bry's plates. Focusing again on the prints' materiality, Gaudio here draws attention to the disruptive presence of smoke and ornament in the representations of the New World and its inhabitants. In their amorphousness, both the smoke and the grotesque ornament serve as "a safe space to display the very irrationality that defines the savage as such" (xxiii). In its formlessness, the smoke is the site of deferred meaning; it "signifies all that cannot be contained by contours and orthogonals" (p. 68). As a remainder of perspectival representation, the smoke signifies the limits of the rational grid that attempts yet fails to define the American other.

In "Flatness and Protuberance: Reforming the Image in Protestant Print Culture," the author shows how de Bry's engravings of an Algonquian tomb and idol, as well as two 18th-century reproductions of these images, condemn the idolatry of the "savage" while simultaneously placing the "civil" Protestant viewer in the position of an idolater. Gaudio approaches these images by asking if and how "the ethnographic image was capable of framing the religious image as an object of empirical inquiry" (p. 88). For Gaudio, these questions are intimately associated with the Protestant anxiety over the body of Christ. For Protestants, notes Gaudio, the Incarnation of Christ was a tenet of Christianity that confronted their "antimaterialism" with a body made material. In the images examined by Gaudio, this tension is manifested by the interplay of "passive surface" and "sculptural presence" established by the perspectival structure of the engravings (p. 100). With its ability to both distance and bring near the object of representation, perspective functioned to both control and confront the Protestant viewer's desire for the sacred body.

In his final chapter, "The Art of Scratch: Wood Engraving and Picture-Writing in the 1880s," Gaudio attends to 19th-century wood engravings based on John White's original watercolors of Roanoke and its surroundings. Gaudio sets this discussion into his larger project by emphasizing the need to consider the engravings' lines and to "[come] to terms with their materiality" (p. 132). This need stems from Gaudio's claim that the lines make visible "the labor of making civilization out of a savage past" (p. 132). In his pursuit of how the lines function and signify, Gaudio carries out an investigation of the conflicting discourses on engraving recorded in the pages of *Century Magazine* and *Putnam's Monthly*.

Although confined to four chapters, *Engraving the Savage* is

a dense book that approaches from myriad sides the issues of early modern ethnographic representation and the materiality of engraving. Gaudio works to establish broad and deep foundations for his conclusions, and in most cases succeeds in impressing upon the reader the necessity of such an undertaking. For the discipline of art history, the book offers itself as a model for how to move productively beyond the limitations of iconography and towards the discursive potential offered by the materiality of representation.