



TYLER STARR LOVER'S LEAP

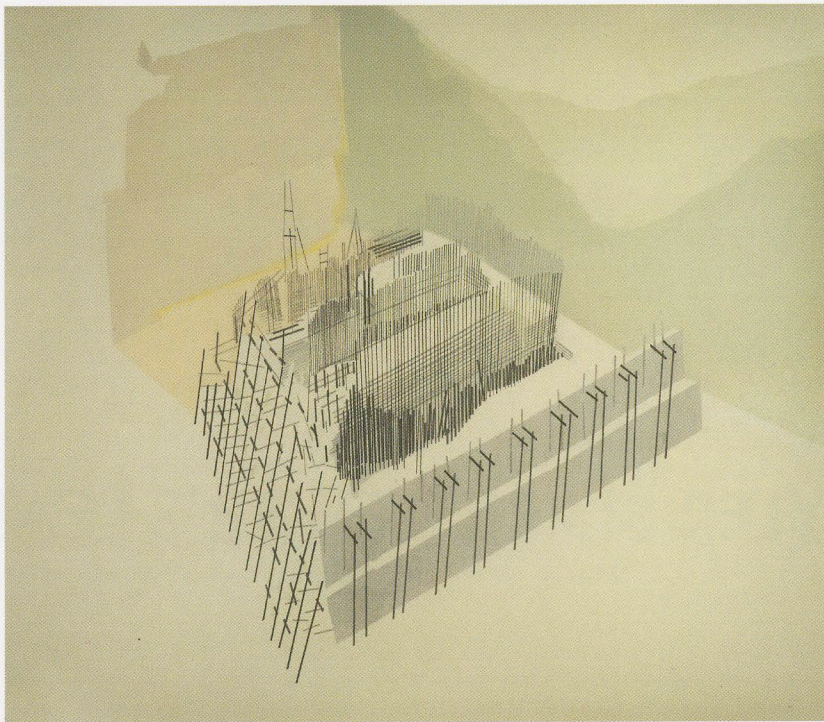
TYLER STARR LOVER'S LEAP

August 24 - September 21, 2012

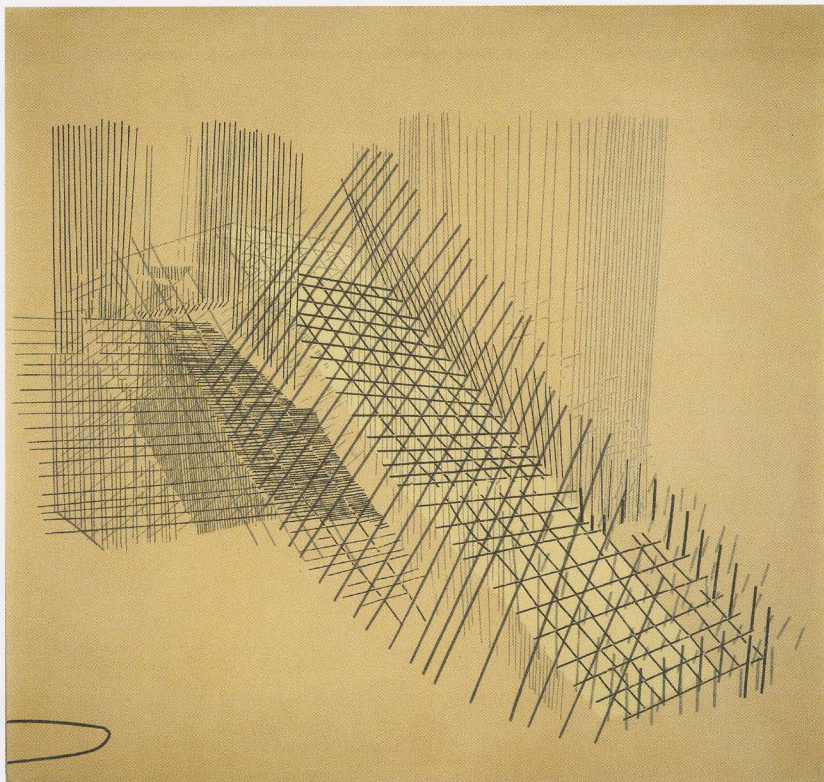
Cora Miller Gallery

York College of Pennsylvania





Tyler Starr: *Dam Survey: Key Part*, 2010



Tyler Starr: *Dam Prospect*, 2010

CONVERSATION WITH TYLER STARR

Interview by Matthew Clay-Robison, York College Gallery Director

MCR: Please tell me about your background and early influences.

TS: Growing up in Connecticut I spent more time with books in libraries and archives than I did in galleries or art museums. One of my early influences was printed information and among the main sources were diagrams of airplane engines that my father had laying around the house. He worked for Pratt & Whitney and his job was coordinating repairs of airplane engines, so he had diagrams of the electrical circuitry of airplane engines lying around. I saw these schematics as an example of human attempts to fix or improve things in the world. That theme of trying to fix things in the world and the ambiguous results of these efforts has been a central aspect of my own artwork. In high school, my art teacher had an etching press, so very early on I had my fingers in printing ink. From that interest I decided to go to Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) to study art. RISD starts with a yearlong foundation program, which was an exciting

experience. I was exposed to three-dimensional and two-dimensional design as well as drawing and art history. My classmates were a mix of students majoring in architecture, textiles, printmaking, painting, etc.; everyone just kind of jumbled together so there was a lot of cross-fertilization. That was a great year and then the second year I moved into my major, which was illustration. The first assignment was to come up with an illustration relating to an article we were given about the history of Tupperware. That is when I realized that I preferred washing dishes in restaurants to doing illustration work for a living. It was an epiphany. RISD is expensive and illustration seemed a practical path to earn some income upon graduating, but suddenly I realized I wasn't interested in that kind of work. I also was frustrated that the study of art was requiring so much money. I decided I was simply going to leave and I was going to draw what was around me, and that was people. I made drawings of people I worked with during my year-long break from college and self-



Tyler Starr: *Attempted Fix: Barricade*, 2010



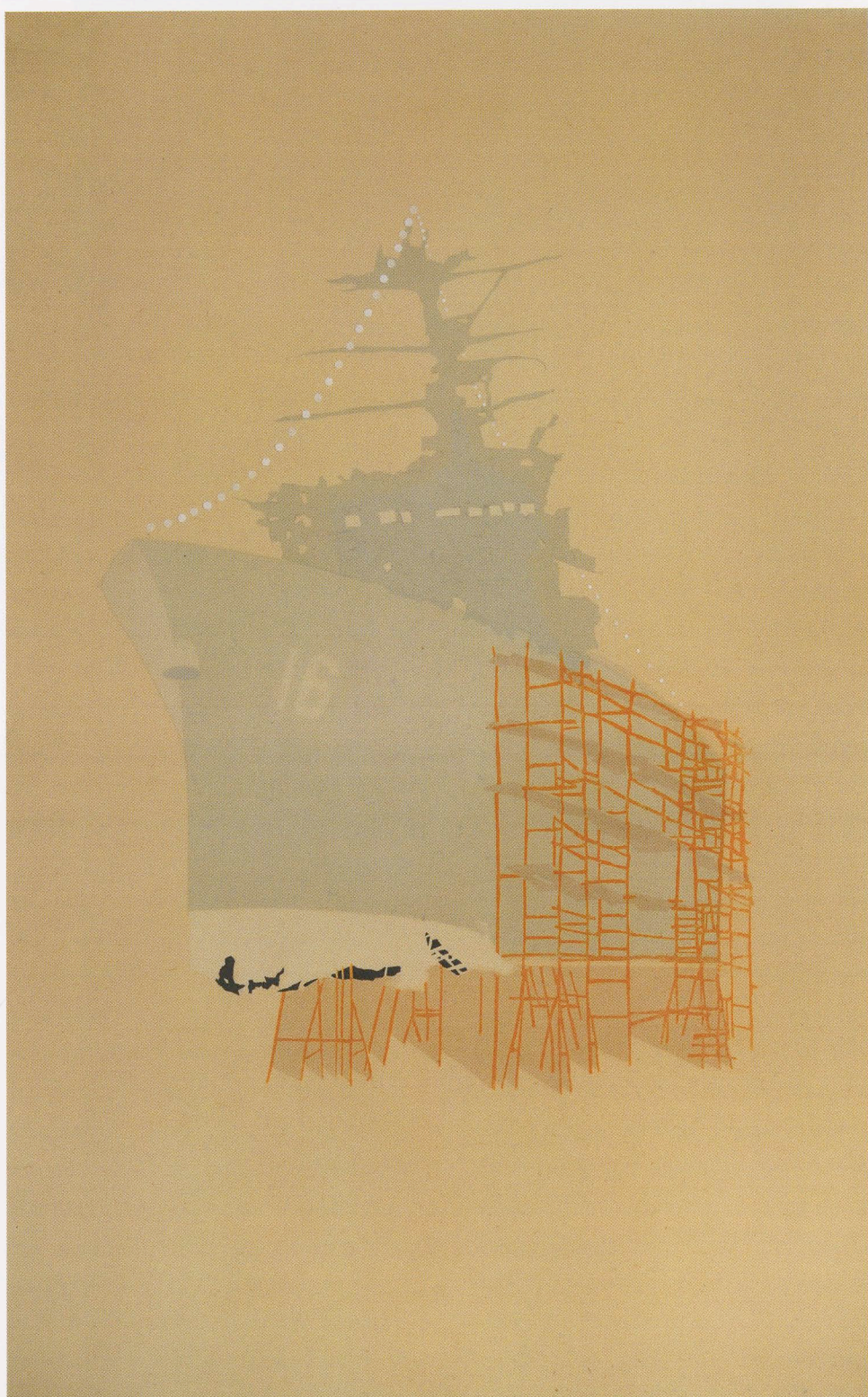
Tyler Starr: *Burning Police Box*, 2010

published them with stories in a zine called *A Buck in the Field*. I did house painting and part-time work in factories to earn money while I was getting my EMT certification, which I saw as a direct way to help people. I was interested in fixing things, so I thought I would pick up injured people and transport them to the hospital. I received my EMT certification and started to work on an ambulance and I found out pretty quickly that wasn't such a great career move for me. I am terrible with directions. Actually, I am probably not a very good driver in general. So you wouldn't really want me driving an ambulance. My heart was in the right place, but the results were pretty messy. I could do heart compressions, but I couldn't drive very fast safely. But I had experiences that were revealing about human nature and life. EMTs see people in their weakest, most vulnerable moments after they had jumped out of a second story window or been hit by a car. It was a powerful experience but not a smart career path, though it left me with some poignant images and I became interested in a journalistic approach to making pictures based on things that I had experienced directly and saw with my own eyes. A big influence at that time was Goya's

Disasters of War series where some of his titles were *I Saw This*. Also influential were old newspaper illustrations and other dramatic portrayals of everyday events where they took common events and made them more theatrical to entice an audience.

MCR: Was this around the time you decided to go back to school?

TS: Yes, but I began to realize that I wanted to make fine art, not illustration. I chose the University of Connecticut mostly just because I was from Connecticut. I went there with an interest in printed information and some experience with etching and ended up in the UConn print shop studying printmaking. I don't think UConn was all that well-known for its art department, but there are wonderful, devoted faculty there including printmaking professor Gus Mazzocca who exposed me to the world of Eastern European art. The human figure is at the foundation of Eastern European art and I was also drawn to the subtle, subversive narratives opposing the Communism that the Russians had imposed on them after World War II. There was a political edge to their work but at the same time there was



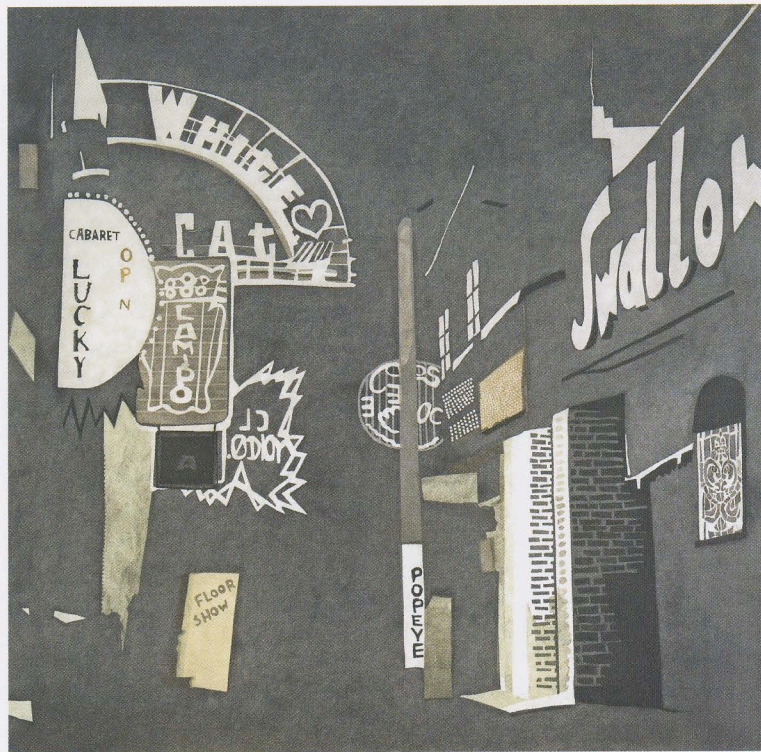
Tyler Starr: *Attempted Fix of the U.S.S. Leahy*, 2009

a visceral response to things seen on the streets and everyday people such as syphilis patients waiting in line in front of a clinic. You'll find this in Jerzy Panek's work. Mieczyslaw Wejman's *The Bicycle Rider Series* is another important example depicting a fellow having all kinds of mishaps while bicycling across Polish cityscapes. The cyclist has enigmatic encounters with riot police, detritus from factories, a god-like hand emerging from a cloud, and other calamities. Some of the imagery is apocalyptic, but there is also humor, which is something I have always responded to. There is a political edge but also layers of irony and humor that gloss over some of the harder edges. You see that a lot in Polish artwork; while it can be serious and dreary, there is often a little strange humor in it, whether it is in the title or the situation depicted.

MCR: Please tell me more about the influence of Gus Mazzocca.

TS: Gus made me excited about making prints. I made a lot of woodcuts and etchings while at UConn studying with Gus and Laurie Sloan. Through Gus and his connections in Poland, I received a Fulbright Scholarship and had the opportunity to study at the

Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, Poland. The experience of being submerged in a culture that has a completely different history than the U.S., an extremely violent history including being wiped off the map, changed my perspective of the world. There were still vestiges of communism, which ended in 1989 and I was there in 1997. My work became drastically influenced by this new environment where I studied the gestures of fishermen hammering carp on the head to stun them in order to put them in a bag, groups of factory workers smoking cigarettes and playing cards in their tiny Fiats or drunkards congregating in the town squares. I still had a journalistic approach, but I also started to look at the historical and political context of the gestures. That interest continued as I progressed through the MFA program at University of Minnesota and eventually ending up in Japan for the last seven years where my figures became progressively smaller as I panned back and began reflecting even more on political and historical context. I did a series incorporating U.S. military bases in Japan like Yokosuka where the *U.S.S. George Washington*, the only forward-deployed nuclear-powered aircraft carrier in the U.S. Navy, is stationed.



Tyler Starr: *The Honch: Bar Row*, 2010



Tyler Starr: *The Clubhouse Cabaret*, 2012

MCR: That has sparked some controversy. I think you also told me once that red light districts tend to pop up around the military bases?

TS: Yes, I surveyed the red light district around Yokosuka, a large naval base near Yokohama. The red light district in Japanese history is interesting. There have been peaks during times like the Korean and Vietnam Wars and a lot of insightful information can be found on the blogs made by the veterans about their time on the bases. The buildings had very elaborate neon lights back then. Lately they have quieted down. They still exist, but they removed much of the neon lighting so it is a little bit harder to locate them. There is a long history of red light districts in general in Japan and Kabuki Theater came out of the entertainment district and was closely associated with the prostitutes. So, there is a complex history that I became aware of and explored in my art.

MCR: What prompted you to leave Tokyo and move back to the U.S.?

TS: The earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster. I lived in Japan for seven years and had just finished my Ph.D. in February and then on March 11 the big earthquake struck

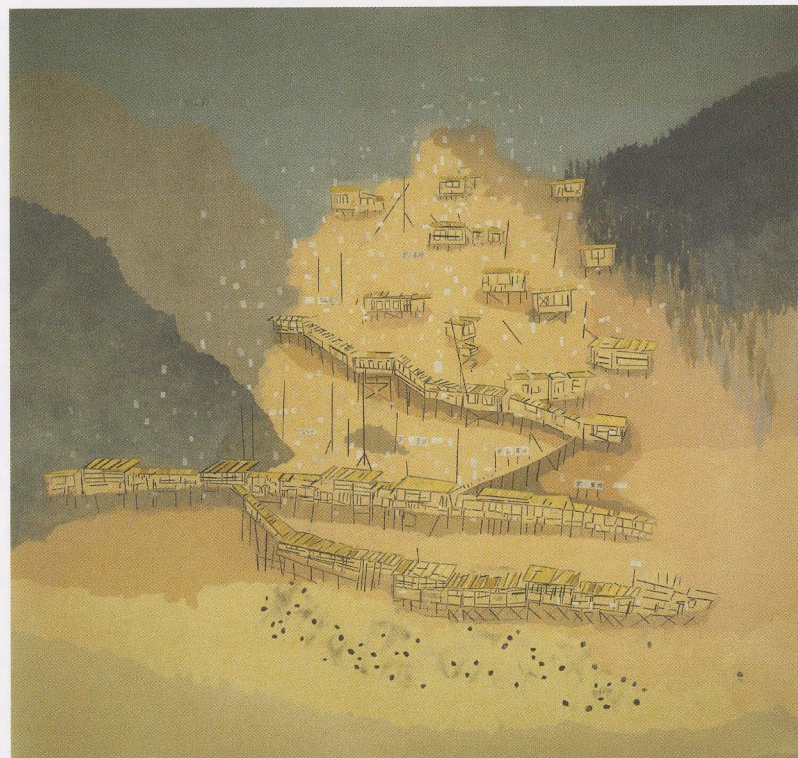
and we were concerned about the possible effects of radiation on our son. I wasn't going to just leave Japan with nothing lined up so I started to see what opportunities were out there and then the Grant Wood Fellowship at the University of Iowa popped up and I applied but I wasn't very optimistic about it, so it was really a surprise when they offered it to me.

MCR: How was your work affected by your time in Japan? Did people in Iowa tell you that your work looked Japanese?

TS: I get that a bit, and I value my time spent in Japan because I learned a lot about aggressive editing, simplifying and implying as opposed to illustrating every little detail. Another important thing that I learned in Japan was to appreciate the natural quality of the materials that I use so that even the nature of the paper fibers can be taken advantage of in the work. Now you will see a lot of empty areas in my work. I am still digesting a lot of lessons from Japan. I did some research about Grant Wood after receiving the fellowship in Iowa and one thing that interested me about him was that he traveled and lived abroad but then came back and looked specifically at his hometown



Tyler Starr: *Dam Survey: Village Approximation*, 2010



Tyler Starr: *Anti-Dam Structure*, 2010

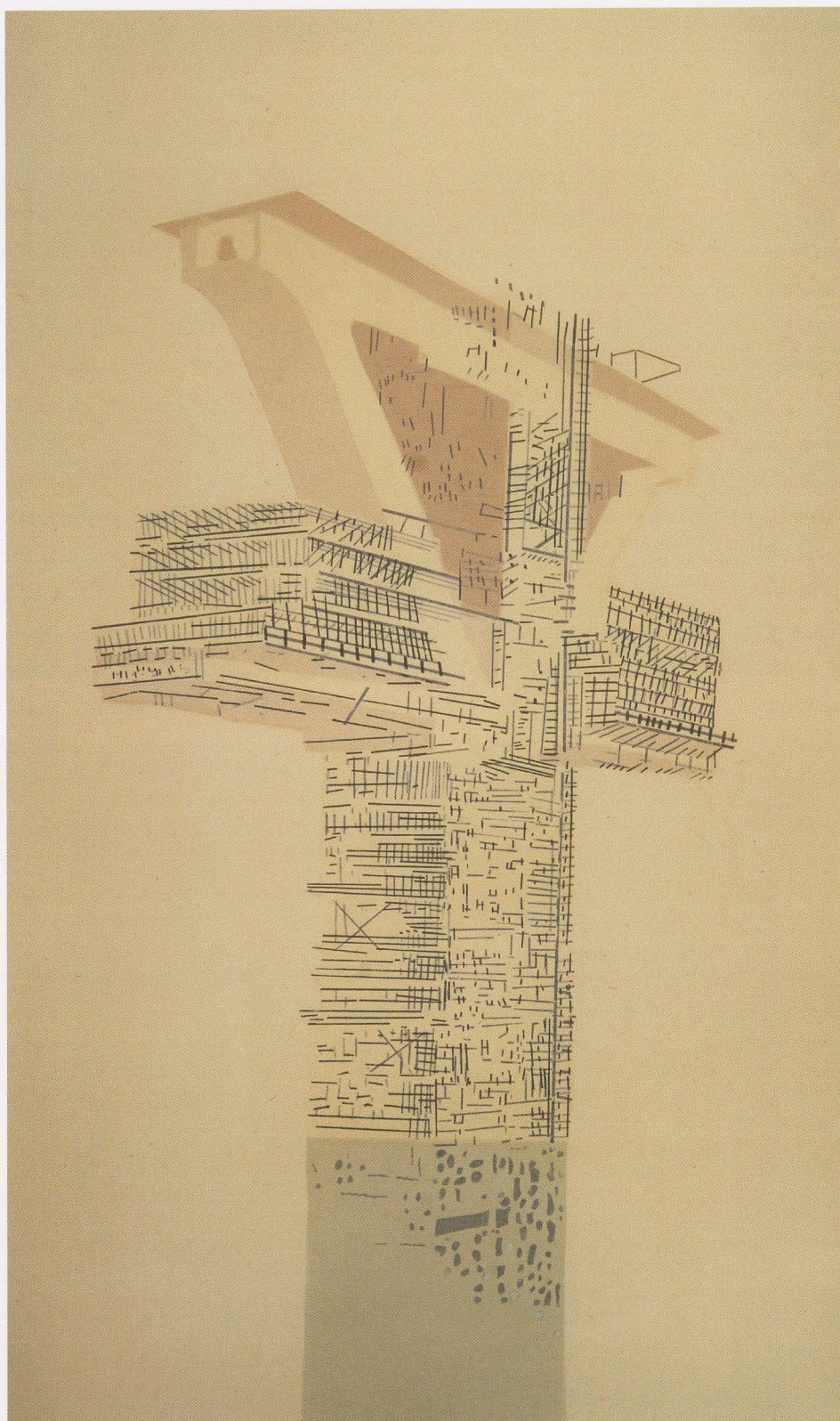
for subject matter, but he flavored it with reaction against the things that he was exposed to overseas. I think I am in the middle of that messy process; taking some of these lessons from overseas and applying them to things that relate to my own background.

MCR: I recall you having a similar experience with your process in Poland. At UConn the influence of Gus Mazzocca was apparent in your work; like Gus, the work was expressive, energetic and of a formidable scale, and like his work had an overwhelming variety of marks. While you were in Poland, how did Staszek Wejman's influence differ from the approach you learned from Gus?

TS: One difference was that Staszek would say that marks should be more considered. He told me that I should slow down and think about why I make each mark. In Japan there is a similar sensibility to Staszek's. The desire to boil things down to their most basic, essential components and get rid of anything unnecessary or ornamental. A great example of this approach is the work of Jerzy Panek, who Gus also admires a

great deal. Panek would get scraps of poplar from the carpenters who were his drinking companions. He would carve away at the block from both sides, whittling it away to the point where it had holes going all the way through the board leaving just a few delicate wire-like lines left. He depicted things he saw like hobo-looking characters on pebbly beaches, goats and conniving dogs. He was also a fan of Don Quixote. Staszek's assistant occasionally helped with the printing of Panek's work and they invited me to meet him. He lived in Kazimierz, which had been the Jewish ghetto but it was brutally liquidated during the Nazi occupation of Krakow during WWII and became a lively Harlem-like neighborhood with squatters after the war. Panek had also been interned for a time during the war and some of his earliest wartime woodcuts are portraits of people he worked with at a bootleg vodka distillery. He was a larger than life old world character.

MCR: Looking at your body of work there are noticeable shifts that correspond with your various moves. You have only been away from Japan for a year but I wonder



Tyler Starr: Attempted Fix of the Yanba Dam, 2009

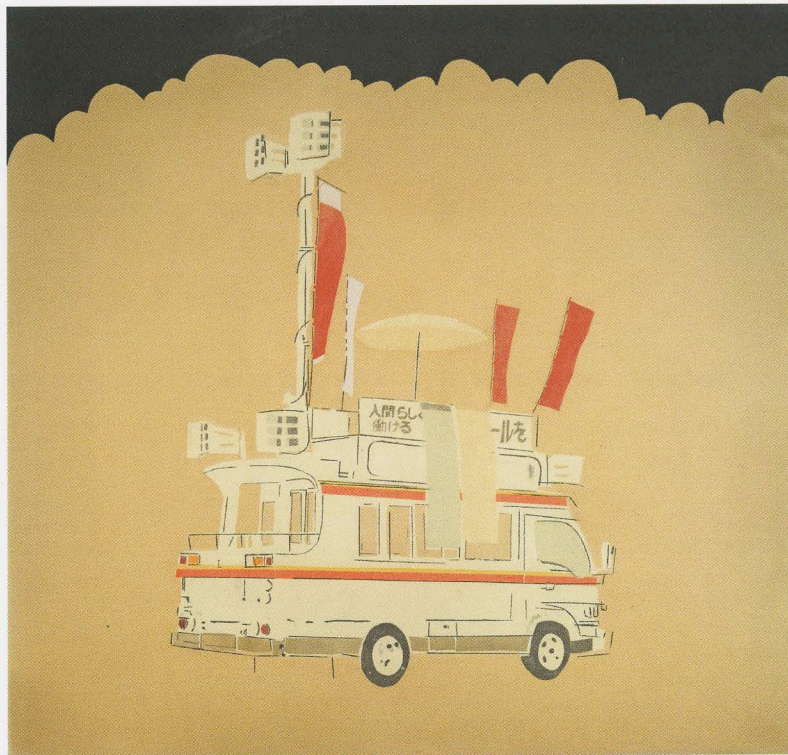
if that influence will have some permanence because when you think about your career as an artist, Japan is where you spent the most time, so it makes sense that would be your biggest influence.

TS: I try to incorporate new experiences as much as possible into my work. I don't resist new influences. I suspect that in five years my work will look quite different than it does now and in ten years it will look even more different. My approach is one that constantly changes based on new things I am exposed to and building upon the past, both from everyday life experiences and those that come from international travel. I think it is honest in a way, just letting these new experiences affect the work. One of the things I appreciated from Jerzy Panek's writing was the statement that if you don't move, you rust. I feel that way about my own work. If I am experiencing something interesting, there is no reason to not let that change the quality of my work. So I think that as long as I keep learning new things, my artwork will keep changing.

MCR: The biggest change I have noticed is your move away from creating multiples. Your work still has the aesthetic of printmaking,

but it is not technically printmaking. Why is that?

TS: My perspective on printmaking has changed a lot over the years and a big part was stepping away from printmaking as an institution and to focus on my own approaches. The first thing that happened to me was that the edition, the production of multiples, became obsolete. It didn't make sense at all to make two or fifteen prints of one particular image. I felt that I just needed one image and once I had that, I was done and could move on. As soon as I stopped the arbitrary editioning, which is an important part of contemporary printmaking, it didn't make sense to spend so much time making the matrix itself, whether it be carving a woodcut or etching a plate. So now I simply make works on paper that are greatly influenced by the legacy and history of printed information. When I was the Studio Manager at the Highpoint Center for Printmaking, which was a great experience, I realized how much of a technical consideration printmaking is. If you look at the history of Ukiyo-e woodcuts, the artist never touched the piece of wood, never carved or printed anything until 1904. That was the first time a Japanese artist, Yamamoto Kanae, directly created his own matrix, whereas before



Tyler Starr: Politician's Election Bus, But He Lost, 2010



Tyler Starr: Politician's Election Bike, But He Lost, 2007

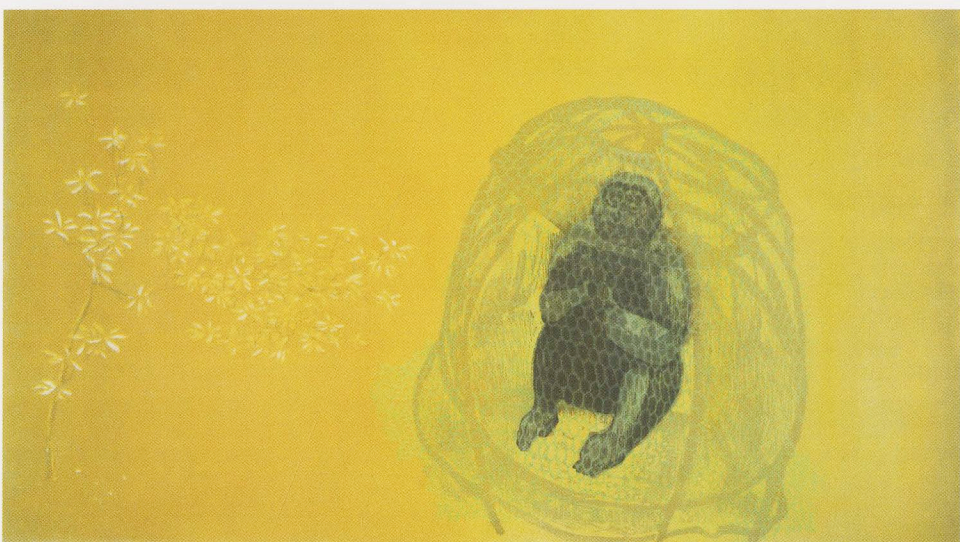
1904, artists in Japan would do an ink drawing and hand it to the print shop where printers and carvers would do the manufacturing of the print. It was very much about production. My artwork became more efficient when I cut out the editioning aspect. I still use many of the same materials like quality printing paper and ink. I still use chine-colle, a typical print process, as a method of collage. I use many of the skills that I learned in the print shop but I don't make traditional prints anymore. I think a lot about that because now I am teaching printmaking again and I will be stressing the traditional processes, but with the hope that the students will extract ideas to apply to all kinds of different artwork rather than hoping they will buy a small etching press and keep making prints after they graduate. Learning to engrave lines can improve drawing skills and the subtractive techniques of woodcut are about editing and can be applied to any kind of image making. I am interested in a mixed media, fluid approach to working rather than focusing on some of the craft involved with printmaking. I felt like I was getting mired down in things that weren't actually that beneficial to the work.

MCR: The newer work looks like you are incorporating the use of photography in a way that reminds me of some photo-transfer printmaking techniques.

TS: Yes, the use of photography came into the work especially during the last three years in Japan while developing my Ph.D. thesis show. I began using a digital camera and the camera on my cell phone on a daily basis and increasingly used these photos as reference material. I had the image in JPEG format and it was more efficient to find ways of working directly from the digital information. Sometimes it was important for me to filter or translate that imagery with my own hand through drawing, but I also became interested in the pixels themselves so I started to print things out that I then used to hand-cut stencils. This is another example of incorporating print methods. I was using a serigraphy-like approach that I studied in Japan used by craftsmen to create the dyed designs on textiles such as kimonos. I cut directly into the inkjet printed photos and spray paint through the back. It looks slightly mechanized which is something that always made sense to me with printed information.



Tyler Starr: *Meteoric Rise and Fall at the Lover's Leap* (detail) 2012



Tyler Starr: *Attempted Fix: Stone Monkey*, 2006

There is some presence of the artist, traces of my blade, but at the same time it almost looks like the hand of the artist wasn't directly there. That is something I continue to pursue in my work, but in addition to the hand-cut stencils I have also been drawing and painting directly on the paper. I am interested in the patina you find with old photographs and postcards from being in someone's scrapbook or in their pocket. I especially look at the relationship between the printed information and hand notations on it, so more and more my hands get into my work but as something responding to mechanized, printed information.

MCR: You mentioned earlier that you have become increasingly interested in political content in your work and one purpose of printed information and a reason that artists have chosen printmaking traditionally has been to "get the word out" about their political convictions. Rather than produce a single work and hope people come to it, they would produce many and distribute them or place them where people would see them. Would you say that your own interest in politics is not partisan or didactic enough to justify or demand this approach?

TS: First, I would say that nowadays images on the web might be a more effective way of getting the word out than a few hundred hand printed images on paper. This development has inspired some of my digital time-based works like the piece on exhibit *Meteoric Rise and Fall at the Lover's Leap*. But it is true that my politically inspired work is ambiguous. I am more interested in commemorating humanity rather than stating my personal opinions. I take a journalistic perspective of looking at things and try to figure out why certain conditions exist while pretending that my own opinion isn't in the work. Of course, journalism is always flavored by the author, so just by looking at the subjects I choose to explore, you may be able to discern some of my personal concerns. I learned to appreciate the subtleties in Polish and Japanese artwork where artists had to face censorship. Historically, artists tended to conceal the subversive nature of their imagery with humor or irony or by presenting things in oblique ways. The Japanese Ukiyo-e woodblock artists were not allowed to portray controversial contemporary events. If there was a rebellion against one of the Shoguns in some part of Japan they couldn't



Tyler Starr: *Attempted Fix: Downtown Stone Dog*, 2007

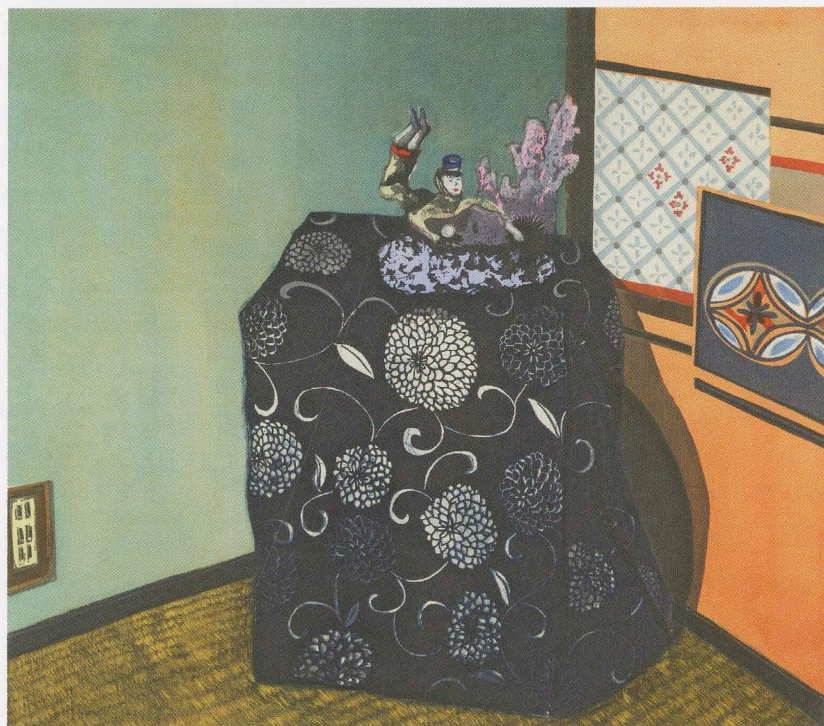
refer to that directly. Instead they might portray an ancient event or legend that in some way inferred the contemporary news but could get past the censors and an educated audience would be able to pick up on these clues. Or they would use humor and just make the people into frogs and with the addition of a couple little family insignias, you could pick up on the contemporary references. That is the way that I approach my imagery too, where I am not directly hitting things on the head with a hammer, but use poetic associations that hopefully relate in some ways to contemporary issues. I am sometimes reminded of my approach when I watch my son, Kai, pick up logs and look underneath for the bugs and search through the dirt and grime for the bugs. I am looking for insight and understanding into human behavior and I tend to look at the darker more convoluted areas of life like strip clubs or the red light districts outside of the military bases that shed light on the general structure of human society.

MCR: Of the work in your current exhibition, can you select some that demonstrate this interest in the ambiguity of human nature to talk about?

TS: The series *Caretaker Contraptions* shows interventions I saw around the neighborhood in Tokyo where I was living that were very simple examples of attempts to right wrongs. An old stone dog guardian at a shrine has eroded so the solution was to protect the sculpture with a rusty cage that protected the sculpture from abuse and also effectively prevented anyone from clearly discerning what the sculpture was. There is also an image of one of the many elaborate traditional bamboo support structures erected in the winter to protect ancient trees from collapsing under the weight of snow even though the climate in Tokyo has progressively warmed and now there is barely even a dusting of snow. I admired the craftsmanship of these things and wondered if there was success in these endeavors. With the *Attempted Fix Series* I was looking at situations that inspired large protest movements in post-war Japan and I tried to explain sources of the imagery in more detail in the form of an accompanying booklet. As an American I wanted to learn more about the anti-U.S. base movements and in the process learned of the anti-dam movements. There was cross-fertilization between the



Tyler Starr: *A New Wall in Euno*, 2007



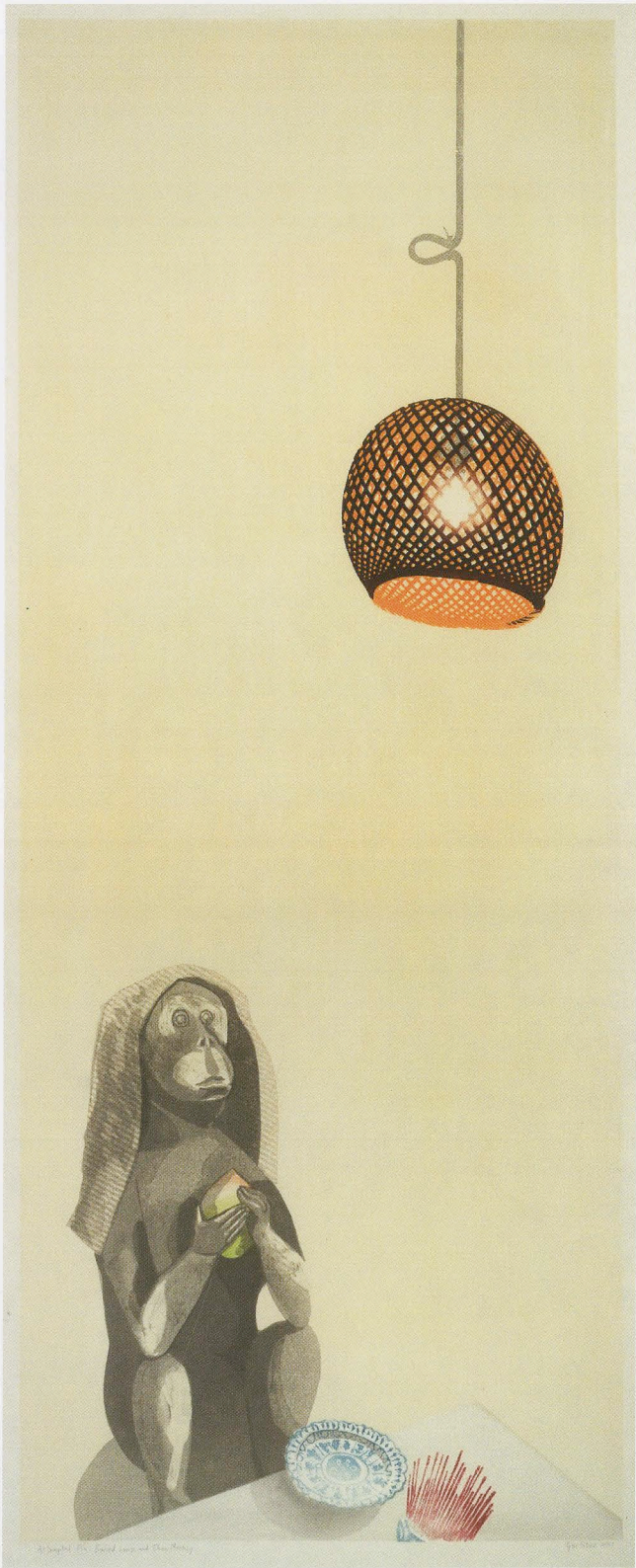
Tyler Starr: *Attempted Fix: Pearl Diver*, 2006



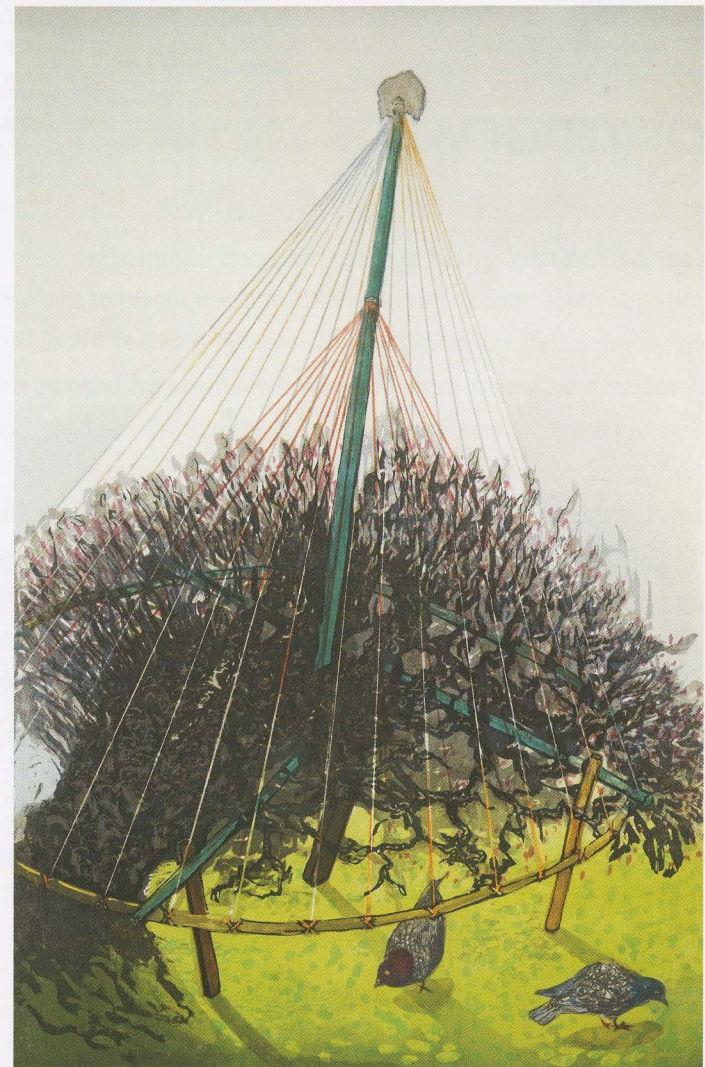
Tyler Starr: *Beginning Stone Fox*, 2007

two opposition movements and I was able to explore scrapbooks from the participants at Saitama University's Center for the Study of Cooperative Human Relations. I then visited the bases and dam sites to take my own photos and make sketches. Some of the dam imagery in this series relates to the Miyagase Dam which was built in 1965 but surrounded by controversy and protests because the resulting reservoir displaced a village which had been there for hundreds of years and the project seemed to benefit politicians with connections

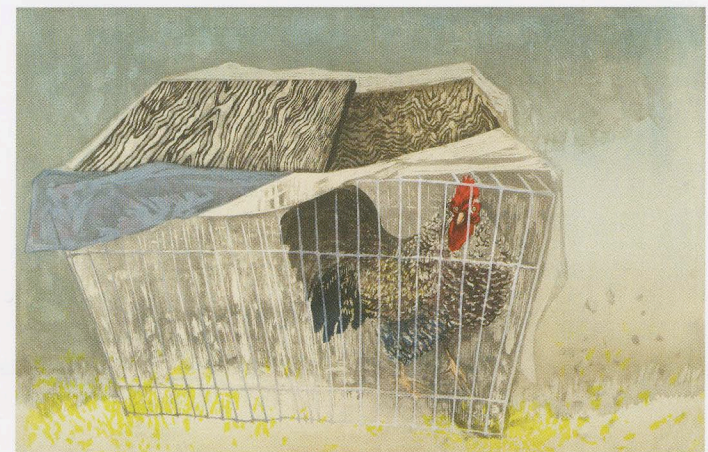
to cement companies more than the surrounding communities. I tried to commemorate the engineering of the dam as well as the techniques of dam protesters who built long mazelike structures used to prevent government surveyors from coming onto their property. Sources of energy and the resulting effects are of course a critical topic in the news again now that Japan is reconsidering nuclear power after the three meltdowns in Fukushima. I admire how, despite conundrums, people continuously strive.



Tyler Starr: *Raised Lamp and Stone Monkey*, 2007



Tyler Starr: *Attempted Fix: No Snow in Ueno*, 2007



Tyler Starr: *Shrine Caretaker's Rooster*, 2007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The York College Galleries are proud to present this exhibition of work by artist Tyler Starr. This exhibition would not be possible without the support of the York College of Pennsylvania administration, including Dr. George W. Waldner, President of York College; Dr. Dominic DelliCarpini, Dean of Academic Affairs; Dr. Thomas Hall, Chair of Communication and the Arts; and Professor Ry Fryar, Art Division Coordinator.

The conversation in this publication was transcribed by Becky Dippel, edited by Matthew Clay-Robison and Tyler Starr, and proofread by Colleen Adamy. Gregory Staley photographed the exhibition and provided the images for this publication. A big thanks to Dave Smith and Dave Krewson of the YGS Group for meeting tight deadlines. Many individuals contributed to the development of this exhibition and publication and we are very grateful.

Finally, a special thanks to Tyler Starr for sharing his work, speaking with our students about his life and work, and demonstrating traditional Japanese printmaking techniques.

- Matthew Clay-Robison, Gallery Director

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Photography: Gregory Staley

Design: Matthew Clay-Robison

Printing: The YGS Group