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Anton Würth, *N-Predella III* (2012) and Robert Nanteuil and Gilles Rousselet, *Louis XIV, en buste, au centre d'un composition allégorique* (1667).

focused his attention on the various visual devices employed to frame it.¹ The clothes, in this case, had no emperor.

Line, ornament and structure operate on their own terms; his goal was to lead "the (engraved) line from being an exclusively subordinate part of representation to a self-referential independence." These were portraits of portraiture, a system rather than a subject.

In his new *Predella* engravings (three states of the same plate,) Würth continues his *tête-à-tête* with Nanteuil in the most literal of ways: creating a new addendum for a portrait of Louis XIV from 1667. The original engraving was itself a collaboration between Nanteuil, who did the portrait, and Gilles Rousselet, who was responsible for the folderol of ermine and eagles, scorpions and spears, that crowd around it. Once upon a time, the sheet continued below the

portrait with a banderol, a dedication and the conclusions of a philosophical thesis by Cardinal de Bouillon. It is into this now vacant space that Würth has inserted his *Predella*.

The symbolic conventions of 17th-century ornament embody a particular and nowadays alien mode of representation. So does engraving. Unlike legions of appropriation artists who have been content to play with the easily reproduced aspects of pre-existing images, Würth commits himself to the rigors of Nanteuil's original method. Engraving is charitably described as "unforgiving"; it requires focus, precision and thousands of hours of practice to do well, and all it gives in return is line.

Würth offers one long looping line that slides from one end of the paper to the other like marks left by a languid (though very accomplished) skater on clean ice. In the

first state, a light scattering of floral motifs and two columns of tiny Latinized oppositions ("*Inferior superior*," "*Minor major*," "*Laetior tristior*"), are the only allusions to the contents of the missing original.² In the later states, tassels that start at the bottom of the old print are continued at the top of the new one, as is the banderole, and the wide open line of the first state is augmented by parallel lines and even cross-hatchings.

In focusing on the workings of line, Würth elucidates how the presentation, not the portrait, marks Louis, with his silly band-leader mustache, as a metonym for the state; and furthermore, how the engraved line itself functions as a metonym for public power. Ivins disapproved of Nanteuil's "deliberately contrived net of rationality," noting that it "was invented for the purpose of portraying the masks that did

duty for the faces of the men in high places under the King." Precisely. ■

1. See: Robert Nanteuil and Anton Würth, *Kupferstiche / Engravings*. New York: C.G. Boerner, 2007.
2. The words, both businesslike and elegant, were engraved in Vienna by a specialist in business cards, Wolfgang Schön.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

Siskin (2012)

Hard ground etching, 17.5 x 21 cm. Edition of 25. Printed by Ian Steadman at Arcane Studios, published by Chisenhale Gallery, London. Sold out.

Fly (2012)

Set of 20 hard ground etchings, 6 7/8 x 8 1/4 inches each. Edition of 15. Printed by Ian Steadman at Arcane Studios, published by Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY. Price on request.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is a British figurative painter who began working in etching for the first time this past year. I interviewed her over the summer and discussed her initial foray into prints, *Siskin*. In this small hard-ground etching, scratchy and attentive lines articulate the head of a man in profile, gazing wide-eyed at something beyond the frame. As in many of her recent paintings, the figure is wearing a wide collar of bird feathers suggestive of some not-quite identifiable origin. Whether from an exotic or extinct species or perhaps merely the synthetic plumage atop an elaborate ensemble, the significance of these adornments can be deduced only from the viewers' own assumptions. The artist aims less to capture the specific essence of a real person in an actual setting than to suggest characteristics and traits that ultimately require viewers to bring their own projections to bear.

After completing her first print she teased, "I've conceived *Siskin* as the first in a group or series. I've made four more but the public may not ever see them." Happily, *Siskin* was followed by a suite of 20 further etchings, published under the collective title *Fly*, each of which similarly depicts a single, expressive, beautifully drawn male head that terminates in a feather ruff.

Siskin is typical of Yiadom-Boakye's figures—amalgamated from life, memory, books and magazines, individual yet somehow incomplete, present and commanding yet just out of reach. Her subjects are most often black and any insertion (or assertion) of black figures into the history of art, where they have been so conspicuously absent, bears cultural and political weight.

The artist, however, is matter-of-fact about how little bearing racial specificity has in her work: "Blackness to me isn't odd or other. It just is." Though Yiadom-Boakye's figures are not drawn from life, they feel as if they could be. The imperfections—the slight asymmetry of facial features, the hatching on the plates suggestive of a sitter that won't keep still—help the viewer understand these characters as complex, imperfect individuals rather than immaculate, untouchable archetypes. They aren't named—simply numbered i–xx.

For Yiadom-Boakye, the individual images work like paragraphs in a larger, undefined narrative. One can seek out possible affinities between the individual prints: are detected family resemblances real or imagined? What are the relationships between the figures? Certain faces are really rather handsome and the eye returns again and again to their kind eyes and chiseled cheekbones (I recall *Fly viii* in particular).

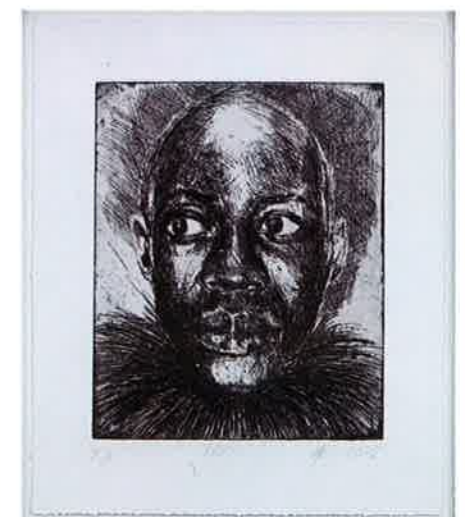
While *Siskin* came easily, Yiadom-Boakye acknowledges that printmaking is more labour intensive than painting. Working in reverse, it's harder "to assess the look in the

eye, the curve of the lip. If I get it wrong, I put the ground back and start over... one may be the wrong execution but his expression is just right—though it's too dark and the head's the wrong shape. Sometimes there's a tiny detail, an expression that's too passive. I realized it has to do with the lip and the eyebrow, the glint of light in the eye. I make several different plates at once, paying attention to different aspects; varying scale, details in dark, light, outline and tonality. I concentrate on different things with different plates. Then I run off five and can assess them aesthetically." (This echoes her practice in painting, where she works quickly on several canvasses concurrently, destroying those that are unsuccessful and living with others in the studio to adjust and fine tune them.)

Siskin and *Fly* are continuations, on a more intimate scale, of her recent large paintings inspired by English birds, in which she gives her human figures feathered collars but few other defining accessories. Critical comparisons have been drawn between Yiadom-Boakye and painters such as Walter Sickert, John Singer Sargent and Diego Velazquez, most recently in Okwui Enwezor's illuminating essay accompanying her solo exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, "Any Number of Preoccupations." To my mind, the plumed ruffs summon art historical precedents from Dürer's *Wing of a Roller* (1512) to Rembrandt's wide-eyed self-portrait etching with its prominent folded collar (1630) to E.H. Tuttle's 20th-century bird etchings.

Her lightness of touch makes the significant appear insouciant and the studied appear effortless. The artist's recent turn to etching feels like a logical and unforced next step in her ongoing exploration of line, form and process. Like her paintings, these recent prints just are. ■

—Zoe Whitley



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, *i, x and xii* from the series *Fly* (2012).