

Overview



Markus Raetz, *Gaze*, 2001. Color spit bite aquatint. Paper size: 29-1/4 x 36-1/2"; image size: 13-1/4 x 22-1/4". Edition 60. Printed by Case Hudson.

Markus Raetz

In 1929 the Belgian artist Rene Magritte painted a picture of a pipe with a brown barrel and a black stem. It was a familiar accessory for men in those days, and Magritte wrote these words neatly above it: "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." This is not a pipe.

In the future, pipes as objects probably will become nearly unknown, but Magritte's pipe won't be forgotten because it defines art's central area of inquiry in the twentieth century. Magritte's pipe is not a pipe. It is a picture of a pipe. That's the issue: the difference between illusion and reality.

As the century progressed, some painters tried to give up illusion. They thought of their paintings not as pictures of things, but as objects in themselves. Others put real objects into paintings, along with painted ones. It turned out that anything could be framed, and placed in an art context, and in

that way human bodies, mounds of earth, refuse, and other unlikely things became objects of art.

Once something is identified as an object of art, people tend to see it in isolation, independent of its surroundings. We look at it for itself, its form, its metaphorical significance, maybe its beauty or lack of it. But sometime around the late 1960s and early 1970s some sculptors and conceptual artists (still dealing with the issue Magritte defined) turned the idea of isolation inside out and began to concentrate on the interactions of people and things.

Markus Raetz did this in ways that are direct and fairly obvious. His drawings of Mickey Mouse in 1969, for example, show various aspects of the cartoon character's face, some of them recognizable only as abstractions. Then in 1974 he made



Markus Raetz, *Silhouette*, 2001. Photogravure and water bite aquatint printed in blue and black. Paper size: 21 x 17-3/4"; image size: 9 x 11-1/2". Edition 60. Printed by Case Hudson.

a wall sculpture of wood and wire that was clearly Mickey's head when seen from one angle, but from any other spot it was abstract. The subject was so familiar that it startled people when they saw it coalesce out of what seemed like pure form. Since the mid-sixties Raetz's work, clear and graceful, has continued on that path.

He has made a free-standing sculpture of Magritte's pipe, with its brown barrel and black stem. "Nichtpfeife" he calls it, Non-Pipe. As you move around it, you see that it is a somewhat flat, twisted piece of cast iron. Not only is it not a pipe, it is not even an illusion of a pipe except from one particular spot. Still, once you see the pipe you don't forget it, and there's a kind of delight in walking around, putting it together and taking it apart in your mind. "I am doing things everybody can understand," Raetz says. "It is not complicated work. I can see that in the reaction of children."

Raetz was born in Buren, a small town near Bern, Switzerland, in 1941. He grew up there, worked as an assistant to a local artist during school vacations, took teacher training in Bern, and worked as a teacher from the ages of twenty to twenty-two. He has had no formal art training, except "half a year studying etching in Amsterdam." However, he knew, he says, from the age of ten that he would be an artist. "My father liked to draw. He saw that maybe I would do something he had wanted to do." Raetz still lives in Bern. Since he began showing his work in 1966, he has had exhibitions in many galleries and museums, including all the major Swiss museums and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Kolnischer Kunstverein in Germany, the Serpentine Gallery in London, the New Museum in New York City and, in 2001, the Arts Club of Chicago. In 1988 he represented Switzerland in the Venice Biennale.

His Venice exhibition was partly made up of seascapes, a surprise for the Swiss Pavilion, but plausible for Raetz who, with his wife and daughter, spends every summer in France near the sea. The seascapes originated there, but Raetz did not go out with his easel to paint them. He calls them "invented," and the essayist for the Venice catalog speaks of "fields of vision" and "continuity in constant flux."

Flux is especially evident in a work of sculpture that is simply a piece of sheet metal cut into binocular "eyes" and hammered to produce a horizon line and other marks that reflect light differently from one point of view to the next. It is, as the essayist says, "an instrument on which any psyche and spirit can play." At Crown Point Press, in the winter of 2001, Raetz produced two etchings on a similar theme.

The first of these, titled *Gaze*, is done traditionally, with spit bite aquatint. Raetz painted acid in long irregular strokes across a series of plates prepared with an aquatint ground, then printed them one over the other in the colors of ocean and sky. The gaze is wide and serene, and Raetz has focused it by cutting the plates into the shape you would see if you were looking through binoculars.

The second, called *Binocular View*, is done with photogravure, although no photograph was used. In the darkroom, Raetz and printer Case Hudson exposed film under the light of an enlarger using stencils that they moved during the exposure. For a third print, *Silhouette*, the artist's profile provided the stencil. He pressed his cheek against a sensitized plate, and the sun shining through our studio skylight exposed it. Once the plate was made, it was printed sideways, and the addition of a graded aquatint water bite on another plate created a sky behind a small distant mountain—"Nose Mountain" Raetz said with a smile.



Markus Raetz in the Crown Point studio, 2001.



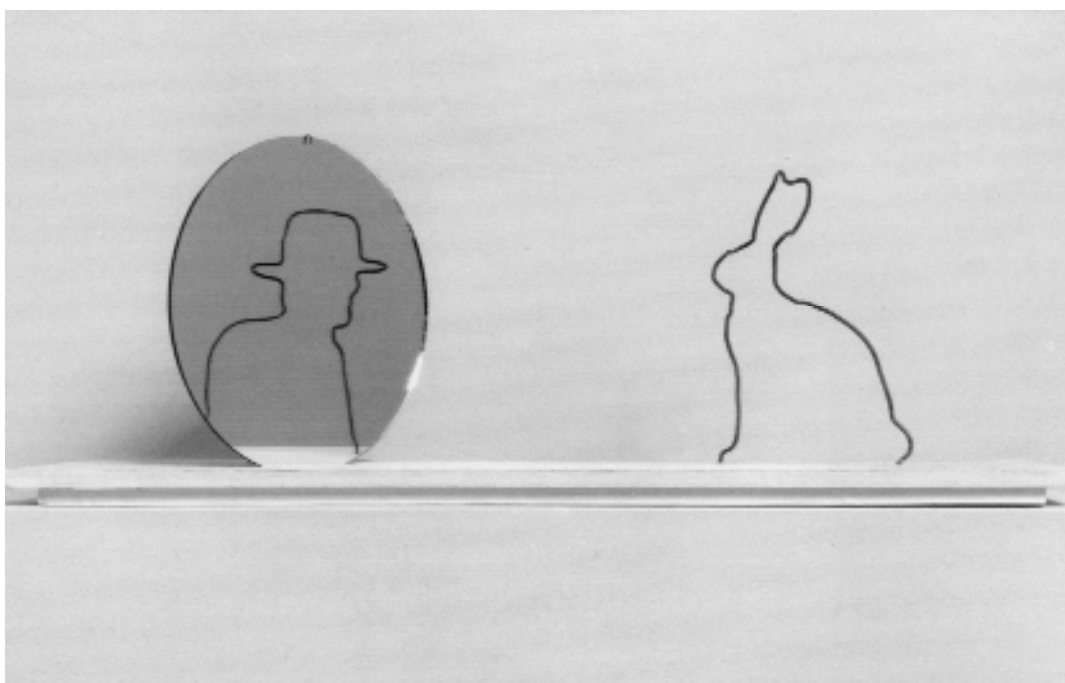
Markus Raetz, *Nichtpfeife*, 1990-1992. Two views of the same sculpture. Cast iron treated with acid and linseed oil, with base. Casting: 64-1/4 high x 14" diameter; base: 13-1/2 x 18 x 9". Edition 6. Courtesy of Brooke Alexander, New York.

These images are intended to be completed inside the viewer's own head, and in that way they can be seen as exercises in perception and fit into the way Raetz's work is usually described. But the issue is actually more complex. I think that Raetz taps into human consciousness in some way. For instance, one of our staff members at Crown Point told me about a dream she sometimes has in which she is flying and looking down on the earth as if through binoculars. And I, myself, was surprised as I thumbed through a catalog of Raetz's work to see a drawing in which I recognized a dream of my own. In the dream I run/hop, rabbit-like, touching the ground with my hands. The drawing is of a crouching woman, hands flat on the earth, who seems to be moving (hopping) in an alert, animal-like way.

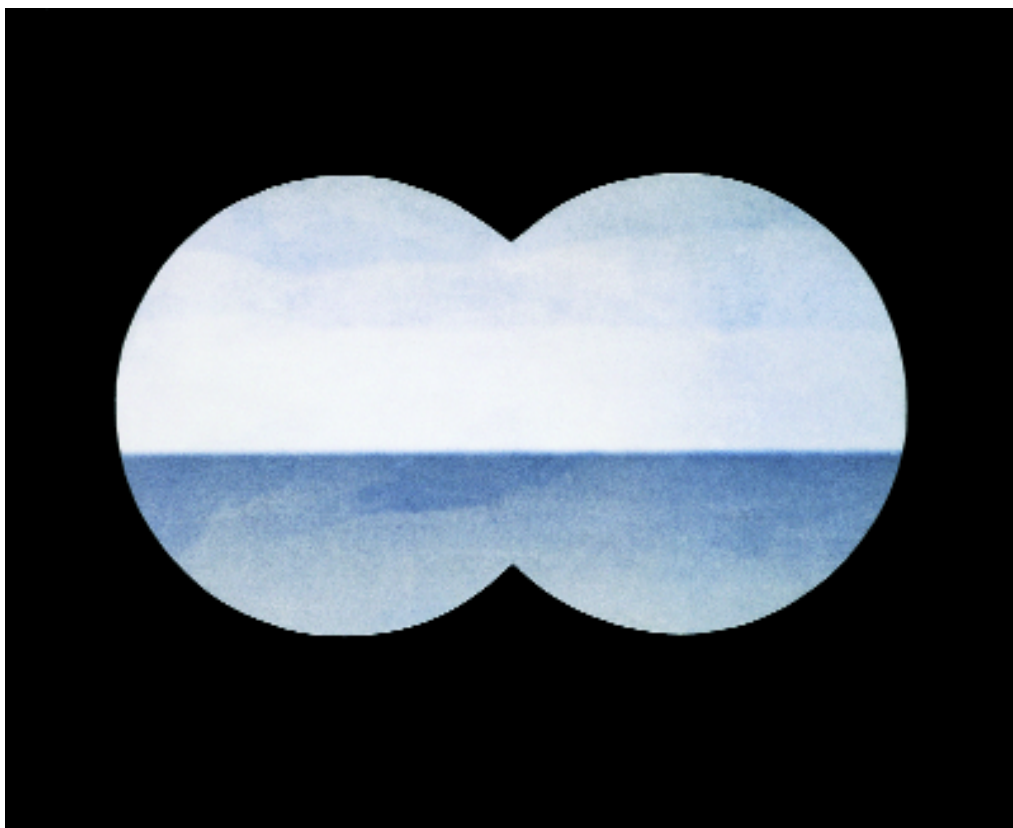
Raetz is fond of rabbits, or hares as they are called in Europe. "Hares have eyes on the outside of their skulls and

they can see 360 degrees," he told an interviewer. "That's why they are so afraid. They see everything." One of Raetz's sculptures is of a rabbit made of twisted wire, looking in a mirror. In the mirror image the rabbit becomes a man wearing a hat. Some people, knowing that the hare was an alter ego for the great German artist, Joseph Beuys, will see his portrait here.

Wire is a favorite material for Raetz. He uses it to present forms in outline, and also as an armature for most of his cast metal works. "I construct what I call a 'corner box,'" he explains. "It is a box like a corner of a room: a floor and two rectangular walls. ...I fix the wire on the floor plane and then I can shape it and look from both sides." That is how he has managed to make the word "todo" (all) turn into "nada" (nothing) and "si" (yes) into "no." And (in several different works) to turn a rabbit's mirror image into a man.



Markus Raetz, *Hasenspiegel (Hare Mirror)*, 1988. Iron wire, zinc plate, mirror, acrylic gesso on wood. 8 x 23 x 7", edition 6. Collection of the artist.



Markus Raetz, *Binocular View* 2001. Color photogravure. Paper size: 22-1/2 x 27-1/4"; image size: 20 x 25". Edition 60. Printed by Case Hudson.

When Raetz walked into our Crown Point studio on September 24, 2001, the first thing he asked for was some wire. He twisted an odd shape, not a rabbit, not a word, nothing we could recognize. Then he asked if we could find a copy of Laurence Sterne's 1759 novel *Tristram Shandy*. We found the book and we found the image in it. "Shandy" is an old word meaning "half-crazy," and *Tristram Shandy* is full of fragments of language and other anomalies, including a few blank pages and a few odd drawings. The book was revolutionary in its time, the first "modern" stream-of-consciousness novel. James Joyce was among the writers it influenced. The image Raetz used is embedded into the text. It describes the arc of a walking stick pointed into the sky as the characters speak:

"'Nothing, Trim,' said my uncle Toby, musing.

"'Whilst a man is free!' cried the corporal, giving a flourish with his stick thus. ...My uncle Toby looked earnestly towards his cottage and his bowling green."

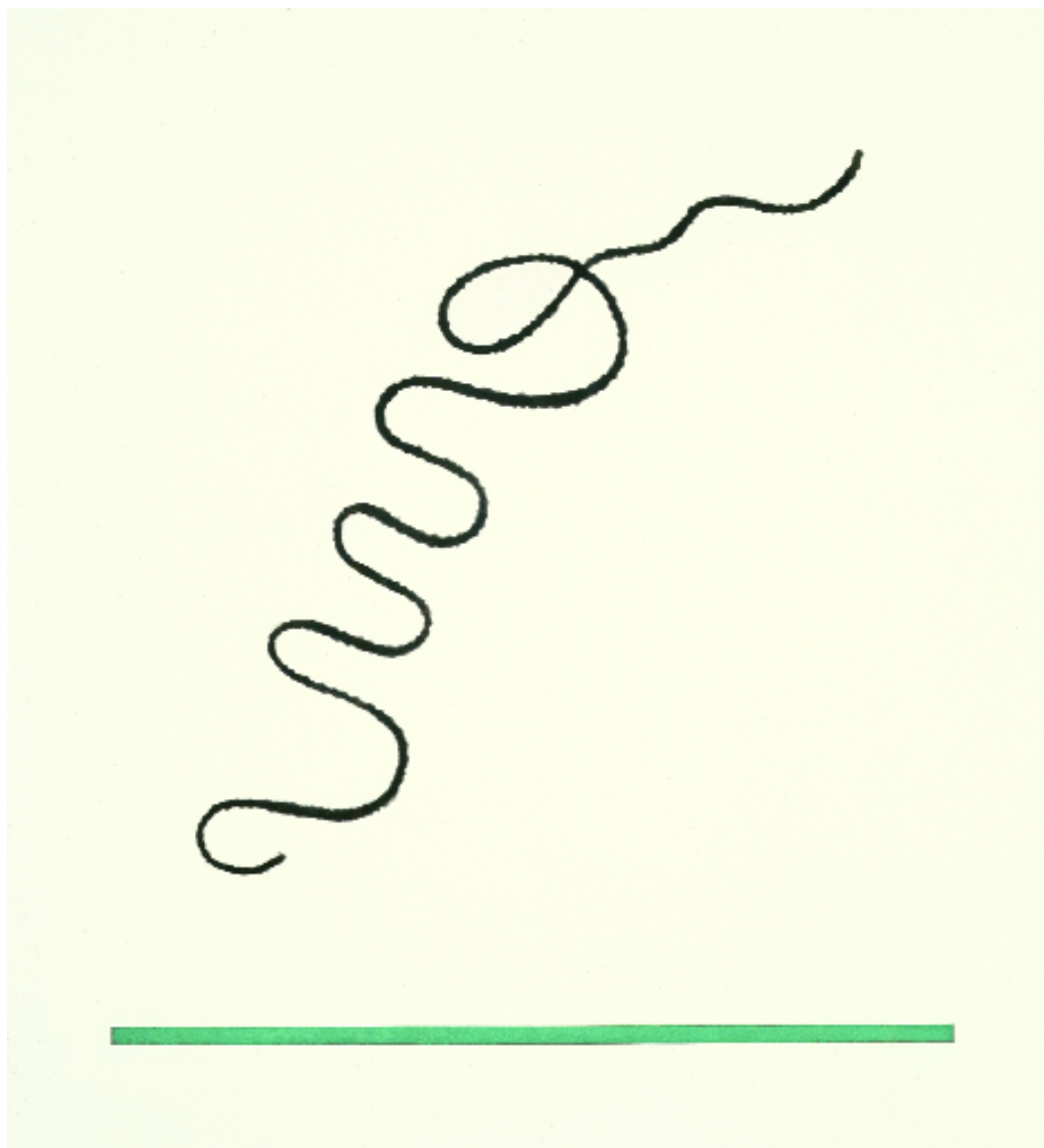
Raetz had flown to San Francisco from the East Coast eleven days after September 11. He had been in Amherst installing an exhibition at the University of Massachusetts and he shared the shock we all felt when the towers went down. So when the printers and I read the passage in *Tristram Shandy*, the twisted-wire Flourish suddenly seemed to be about *our* freedom: our cottages and our towers, our

bowling greens and whatever else we care about. The two etchings Raetz made using that image *are about that to us*, and always will be. To other people, especially people in another time, will they be about that?

Probably not. "All art is necessarily created in its own time, and either disappears with it or emerges as something else," writes Jack Hitt in a *New York Times* article (12/24/01) on the subject. He points out that hardly anyone who reads "Paradise Lost" today knows, or cares, that Milton wrote it about the change from the Reformation to the Restoration in England. Hitt asked critic Dave Hickey's opinion, and Hickey replied that "Art is not journalism." Hickey doesn't think that current events, in the end, affect art at all.

He may be right, in the end. But in these *Overview* essays, my emphasis is on the beginning, since I am lucky enough to be involved with artists when they are working. I believe that the best artists are especially attuned to their times and consequently respond surprisingly quickly and deeply to current events. This ability to tune in is the same one that brings about pictures in which we recognize something we have dreamed. It takes precedence over issues like those of reality or illusion.

Issues are easy to talk about, however, so we, the public, may end up thinking they are what the work is really about. Raetz has said that his "inquiry into perception" has been



Markus Raetz, *Trimis Flourish*, 2001. Spit bite aquatint and aquatint printed in black and green on *Gampi* paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 35-1/2 x 32-1/2"; image size: 26 x 23-1/2". Edition 60. Printed by Case Hudson.

"overstated in catalogs and texts" about him. "The subject is mostly a way for myself to do the sculptures, to have a method in order to work precisely."

Before September 11, Raetz had already been fascinated by *Tristram Shandy* and had done several drawings of the Flourish in his studio. It was obvious to him that he should use it as a beginning for his work with us this year.

Eventually (maybe soon), it will be obvious to us that artists have gone beyond the twentieth century issues of illusion and reality that Magritte's pipe defined. I think there are new issues, but right now I can't make out what they are. Recently I heard on television an interview with Billy Collins, the new poet laureate of the United States. "A poem is like a ride," he said. As the poet, he is "the first one to take the ride."

Raetz's ride is a quiet one, but it makes the shifting sand we

stand on tolerable, even pleasurable. We are moving. There are many points of view. But we hold our binoculars and gaze at whatever is out there.

—Kathan Brown

Most of the quotations from Markus Raetz are from an interview with Constance Le wallen, 1992.



Markus Raetz, *Flourish*, 2001. Photogravure printed in black and red on *Gampi* paper *chine collé*. Paper size: 31 x 27-1/2"; image size: 22-1/2 x 18-1/4". Edition 60. Printed by Case Hudson.

In the Crown Point Gallery:

Markus Raetz: New Etchings

January 15 - March 7, 2002

In addition to the new prints, the exhibition will include several works of sculpture. **Please join us in the gallery for a reception for the artist on Tuesday, January 15 from 6 - 8 pm**

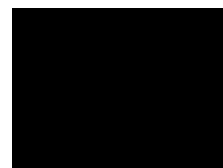
Visit Crown Point Press at the San Francisco International Art Exposition 2002, Booth A107 at Fort Mason Center, January 18 - 21.

In New York:

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