

Wuon-Gean Ho

THE HEART'S SIGHT



Wuon-Gean Ho
in conversation with
Noah Breuer

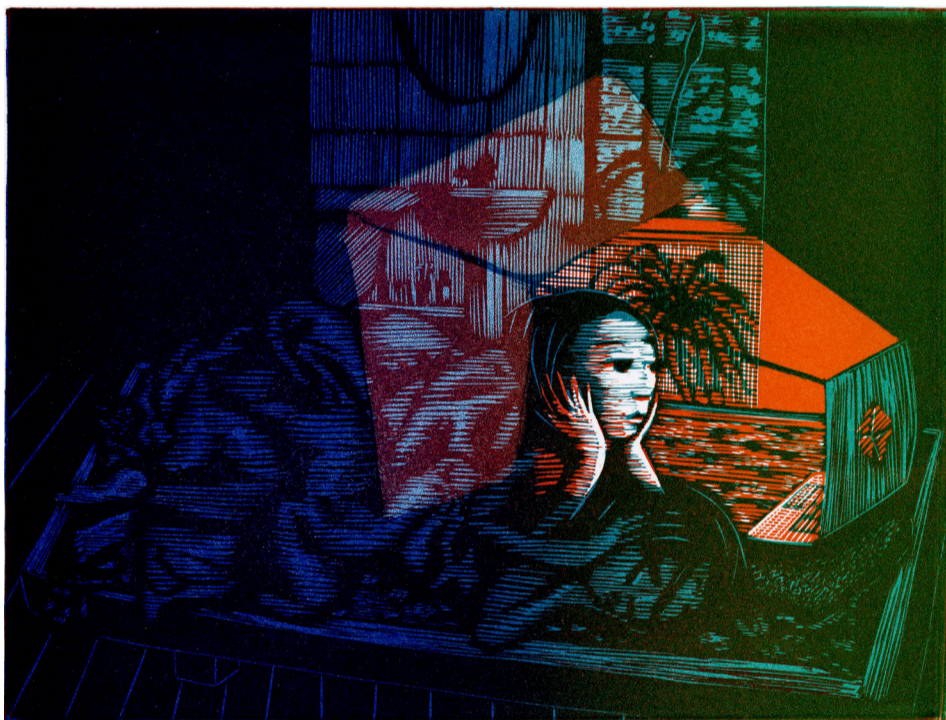
NOAH BREUER: We first met each other twenty years ago in Japan. I had traveled there as a graduate research student to study printmaking for one year at Kyoto Seika University, and you had the workbench next to mine. We were both drawn to study mokuhanga* with Professor Akira Kurosaki, who was a traditionally trained artist with a post-modern sensibility and an eye towards Western-style surrealism and abstraction. He was an absolute master of Ukiyo-e style carving and printing techniques, but also interested in harnessing his medium to reflect 20th century aesthetic movements.

Anyway, you became a real interlocutor during my time in Japan, not only because your Japanese was much better than mine, but also because you had spent time there before. I learned so much from you during that year. Would you tell me how you ended up sitting next to me on that workbench at Kyoto Seika?

*Mokuhanga 木版画 – literally: “woodblock print.” Japanese-style woodblock printmaking with water-based inks.

WUON-GEAN HO: I spent probably ten years trying to get to that point. I grew up in a family-run veterinary surgery practice and was groomed from a young age to take over the business, despite my passion for making art. I knew before I started my veterinary degree that I didn't want to be a vet as a career, so I spent all my time drawing the lecturers and making illustrations poking fun at the topics of study.

After a whole year of parasitology and pig farms and cow husbandry I thought to myself, "This is just terrible, I cannot bear it anymore," so I went to teach on the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) program for a year. While I was there, I saw Kurosaki's beautiful prints in a gallery and thought, "Wouldn't it be great to study with this amazing professor?" I was lucky to win a Japanese Government scholarship to study mokuhanga with Kurosaki, based on my self-taught portfolio of prints. I was also unlucky because in 1998 the Japanese economy crashed, and all scholarship students were transferred to state universities at the last minute. I finally got to Kyoto Seika in 1999 and stayed for six months as an independent student until I ran out of money. I went back to the UK, worked as a vet, and finally came back to do the second part of the year that I had always dreamed of doing.



Wuon-Gean Ho, *No Lake View No Cake*, 2021. Linocut and monoprint, 6 x 8 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

NB: Since we weren't in a degree program that year, the faculty allowed us to do pretty much whatever we wanted; to attend courses, or to create our own projects. So, it was really left up to us to pursue our compositional and thematic choices. That felt very liberating and exciting to me, and I just hit the ground running. How did that feel to you? Because from my perspective, you've never had trouble getting to work.

WGH: It was interesting because I didn't know how to study, so I think I learned a lot about how to study from you. I watched you start with a sketch, progress to making, alter your creation and then reflect on the outcome. I think the lack of intervention was a good thing from my point of view as well. But maybe I expected something different. I think I expected...

NB: More formal instruction or training or assignments?

WGH: Maybe, yes. Maybe I expected the technique would be explained in words. But now I realize it was technique explained *in action*. So, it was fascinating, and I think that was more holistic. Looking back and modeling best practice as if to say, "if you copy me you will succeed."

NB: Well, there's something very Japanese there, isn't it? There is an educational style which says, "Do as I do because I am the master, and you will learn. On the downside, you will learn to make things that probably look like the things I make. But on the upside, you will learn how to make those things very well." Now, if you're smart and creative, you will also take what you have learned and expand it into your own unique lexicon of visual tropes.

WGH: Yes, totally.

NB: I see a throughline between that time two decades ago and the work you make now. Like me, you've more or less given up traditional mokuhanga. However, you are still very much a relief printer. Can you tell me a bit more about the technique that you've developed with oil-based inks in which you selectively remove the ink by hand before printing? It allows you to achieve a broad range of colorful tones in a mokuhanga-type way, in what is otherwise a binary woodblock form.

WGH: Oh yes! It is a bit like a monoprint effect. On a relief block, the uncarved raised area can be inked up thickly to produce a 100% color. It can be inked thinly (say, with only one layer of ink) to produce a half tone. It can be wiped with a rag, leaving a small amount of ink only, to produce, say a 10% tone. And it can be carved away entirely to produce a white (assuming the paper is white). And then if I use a gradient or a color blend, then I get more colors from a single block. Of course, blended gradients can have color mixes too: you could have a red block with blue at the edges to make a muddy purple. If you were to print a second block on top which was a greenish blue, where they combine you might get an inky coffee tone. So you can play with this huge latitude using really basic color combinations. My main driver is speed. I have no time! But that's also why I'm not making Japanese woodblocks at the moment.

NB: That's so helpful. An under-appreciated fact about traditional Japanese printmaking is that it took a really busy populated workshop to make any of those old prints.

WGH: And a dedicated team of artisans.

NB: You told me in a previous conversation that your experience at Kyoto Seika had a deep impact on you, but not in the way that you had expected. Can you expand on that thought?

WGH: I learned so many things. One was that even if I didn't know what I was doing, simply turning up and trying to do something was a way of moving forwards. Another was finding out whether I was truly an artist (rather than running away from being a vet). I also learned the fundamentals of good technique, how to strive for material excellence, and what was the ideal tempo for mokuhanga.

NB: The *Diary of a Printmaker* series truly captures your sense of humor and is a manifestation of your sensibilities through a range of emotions. They are really successful! As we have discussed previously, your father broke his neck several years ago, ended up paralyzed and spent the end of his life in an assisted living home. You have told me that you began seeing this work as a way of continuing a conversation with him. I'd like to hear more about your mother who I know is also very funny and has this very fatalistic bent to her as well. Are some works that feel like they're for him and others that you make for her?

WGH: I really started out making work simply for myself, and the *Diary* series was the first time for a specific audience. My parents have a very goofy, slapstick sense of humor. They both trained in the medical field and were quite used to bodies and their embarrassments. However, a big driver for me was social media: it's like curating a sweetie shop with an ever-changing display. Suddenly I wanted to entertain this wider group.

Over the years the value of the images I have made has shifted, as I came to realize that my lived experience and the images I am making are not common at all. There aren't that many pictures of practicing veterinarians doing surgery on a guinea pig. Or how funny yet serious you have to be when you are threatened with an angry miniature pinscher whose penis is inflamed.

I have been really affected by recent world crises. You know, climate change and war and political meltdown. I can't really make anything that entertains right now. All I can say is how we are connected through the screen and that we consume images in new ways.

NB: You just made a very important point about the speed at which images come and go on the internet. The impressive rate at which you are able to manifest and post these linocuts and the double-edged-sword nature of online life appear to be connected. It seems like you're trying to reconcile the excitement and on-demand, serotonin-infused convenience of online life, with the more depressing aspect, which is that we are all consumed by our phones. And through them, we bear witness to global tragedies around the clock. Catastrophes everywhere. You know, you are part of a grand tradition of artists describing and reflecting on their contemporaneous surroundings.

WGH: I love how you describe the online world, but I have to say that my online presence is also a performance. For example, I have a big confession. At the beginning of COVID, I met this really lovely guy online. We're still together, it's been four years. I've made prints but I haven't posted them. You know, so there are some topics which are very, very hard to explain. Beautiful images of precious times might, in an online world, trigger yearning, resentment, shame, negative comparisons, despair in an audience. I do not want to enter that realm.

NB: During the height of the COVID era, which is to say 2020 to 2022, you made a lot of prints about your experience. You made a beautiful video about lockdown, being in the gilded cage of your apartment that you rather liked, but also your being stuck inside there among all your neighbors.

During that time, you also made work that dealt with the fear of getting COVID, and also dealt with the racism that you experienced firsthand as an Asian woman on the streets of London. I just found those prints so upsetting. In my case, it's a privileged position that I occupy where whatever grief I might get from rude strangers in my life, I don't experience someone saying, "Stay away from me!" because of the color of my skin. I think in that way yours is actually really important work to have made because it allows for insight into your personal experiences and provokes empathy.

WGH: Right, yes. The way I make work is from the mind's eye. I often start my prints closing my eyes and trying to draw how it feels to be in the middle of a situation. Then, like a film director, I can zoom around to a different point of view. My images are a *felt* rendition of something that was embodied. They are sort of a first-hand-mind's-eye-drawing, which has a power because it is from the heart. It hasn't been made in order to impress. It was made to communicate. I love the idea of an image that doesn't move but makes your eye move around it to view it. So I play with scale and eye line and who's doing what, where. What might happen before, what's going to happen after, and this type of conversation about time.

NB: That's a very good bridge to asking you about your video work and your larger prints that depict clothing. All of those contain a lot of movement. You have made animations using those prints and you also created videos in which you are running and jumping in a dress. Can you expand on those projects in the context of what you just described? Are they an attempt to manifest a visual motion dynamic that is harder to do in the

scale and clunkiness of what can be a very static medium in relief print-making? Where do you see bodies of work coexisting?

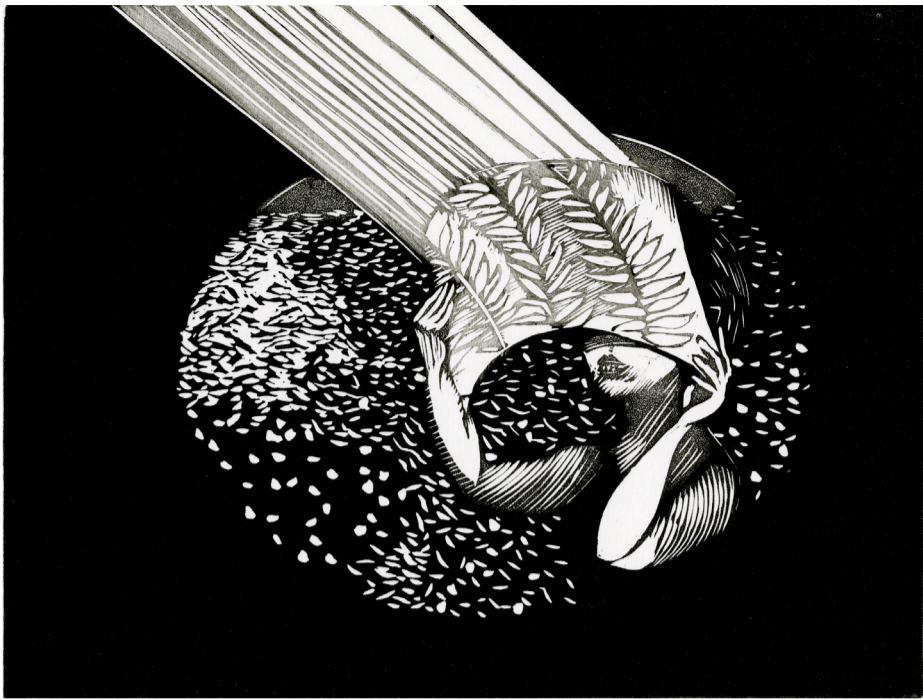
WGH: The project about the *Dancing Dress* connects to an experience in Italy. It happened in an old castle that belonged to the Malatesta family where I had been invited to teach. The print studio (Opificio della Rosa) was downstairs and you could climb the tower and see all the old rooms. I entered one of these and there was an incredible sense of joy and happiness in that room. So I started to do this little dance and take loads of pictures. And it turns out it was a bedroom for Costanza, the legitimate daughter of the Malatestan duke, who was married at 14, her husband died at 19. She got a German boyfriend, and he was assassinated when she was 26, and she disappeared thereafter. Back to the present day. The castle is in a small village with about 200 houses. So the kids in the village are smoking and drinking at the foot of the castle one Friday night. I asked them, "Do you know anything about Costanza?" They replied, "Costanza was a bitch!" And I thought, "Wow, this is such a patriarchal view of a woman who had a German boyfriend and you *still* think she's a bitch 700 years on, hold on, wait a minute!" I started to think about if you were assassinated and you became a ghost where would you want to be: would you want to be where you were killed or would you want to be where you were happy? And I'm fairly certain that that's her spirit in that room. So the dancing dresses are all about Costanza.



Wuon-Gean Ho, *Screen Overload*, 2020.
Linocut and monoprint, 8 x 6 inches.
Courtesy of the artist.

NB: Well, of course, I'm not surprised to hear that it is in fact, not light. You are commenting on the short life of this woman. But underneath it, it's a heavy and dark commentary on patriarchy.

WGH: Yeah, I think they can be read as a homage to somebody who didn't make it in the system. But it isn't overtly politicized at all, but the same with the *Shadow Dance* series, they're all inspired by archival photographs of Native Americans who were forced from three different tribes onto the Umatilla reservation in eastern Oregon. I thought the Western dress is such a dark parallel to how, by wearing new, Western clothes, you become a contemporary individual but lose part of your traditional culture in that exchange. In my films, as in my prints, and books, I always want to know what happens next.



Wuon-Gean Ho, *Dante – Shield*, 2023. Linocut and monoprint, 6 x 8 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

NB: That's a good segue into my last question—can you tell us about any new work or current projects?

WGH: Well, right now I'm doing a project on Dante with Dr. Rebecca Bowen and Professor Simon Gilson, both Dante experts. Specifically it's about some old printed texts from the 15th and 16th century in the Taylor Institute, Oxford University. These are illustrated with intricate and amazing woodcuts that hold medieval visions of a period with different priorities and narratives and a totally different way of looking. There are interesting paradigm shifts—like I imagine how hard it is to carve and the paper is extremely expensive, so if you have an area of image which is blank then you know that somebody spent a lot of time not putting any ink on that. There's a beautiful illustration of Dante and Beatrice going up to heaven by a ladder. And all these priests standing at the base of the ladder which reaches up to the stars, leaving a globe of the world. Underneath the world, down below, it's just blank paper. A huge bit of white nothingness. It would have been such a daring act to make an area with nothing on it.

I'm noticing these interesting things, but I haven't consolidated all my thoughts yet. I've been very inspired and the output is happening as we speak. The question is, how can we make this encounter relevant to our contemporary lives?

Cover: Wuon-Gean Ho, *Hide and Seek*, 2021. Linocut and monoprint, 6 x 8 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

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ABOUT THE EXHIBITION:

The Heart's Sight brings together a broad selection of works by Wuon-Gean Ho that spans the past 15 years. These prints, artists' books, and short films are united by strong narratives: driven by the idea of remembering and remembrance, and engaging with the notion of an inner vision.

The earliest series of *Mask* prints (2009) depict hopes, fears, and emotions on the surface of the skin. *Swallow Span* (2012) speaks about a fantastical dream when a girl takes off her shoes and enters a world where birds and humans collide. *The Dancing Dresses* (2013) form part of an animation about Costanza, a 15th-century princess whose ghostly presence can still be felt. A sequence of nine books make up the *Orchis Library* (2015) which plays with ideas of the book as a physical body. Their accordion-folded pages bring characters together in close proximity.

There are two short films in the show. The first, *Leaves, Leaving, Left* (2023), uses drawing as a way of tracing and connecting with the recent past. In contrast, the project *Looking for Dante* (2023–24) speaks about forging a connection with a text written some 700 years ago, and measures its relevance to political situations today. Finally, the *Diary of a Printmaker* series of linocuts (2016–2024) consists of meticulously carved, brightly colored pocket-sized tales. Intended for Ho's father, the topics range from joy to sorrow, and chart the human condition. They include absurd moments in swimming pools; the feeling of freedom and despair during lockdown; our overwhelming addiction to the screen; and the redemption of our animal companions.

The title plays on the spoken phrase "The Heart's Eye." Say the words aloud and you might hear *the heart's I* – an embodied desire. Say the words again and you might hear *the heart's sigh* – equally both lament and joy. Repeat them and you might hear *the heart's sight* – something sensed and the depth of that sensing. One last time and you might hear *the heart's side* – something made from the inside, from the heart. Ho's works are at times comical, tender, intimate, and bold.

WUON-GEAN HO was born in Oxford, UK, of Peranakan Chinese heritage. She graduated with a BA in History of Art from Cambridge University, and a professional license as a veterinarian, before taking up a Japanese Government Scholarship in 1998 to study Japanese woodblock printmaking in Kyoto Seika University, Japan under the tutelage of renowned artist Akira Kurosaki. She later completed an MA in Printmaking at the Royal College of Art, graduating with a distinction in 2016.

Ho exhibits her prize-winning works widely in the UK and abroad, most recently in a solo exhibition in 2023, *Before I Forget*, at the Hong Kong Open Printshop, SAR China. She lives and works in London, UK, where she is currently transforming her tiny living room into the very first studio of her own.

NOAH BREUER is an American artist originally from Berkeley, California. He earned his BFA in Printmaking from the Rhode Island School of Design, his MFA in Visual Arts from Columbia University and a Graduate Research Certificate in traditional Japanese woodblock printmaking and papermaking from Kyoto Seika University.

His creative work examines themes of family, identity, labor and diaspora. Exploring the fusion of traditional printmaking techniques and twentieth-first-century tools and technology is fundamental to his art practice. His recent research investigates early twentieth-century domestic textile design in Europe and the legacy of Jewish-owned textile printing companies in Czech Bohemia and their role within that economic and cultural landscape. Breuer is an Assistant Professor and Print Media Area Head at the University at Buffalo, State University New York.