

A Lasting Encounter: Leonard Baskin and Skulls

Artist SARAH HOROWITZ was a post-graduate student in her mid-twenties when she was taken to meet the iconic Leonard Baskin just weeks before his death, in 2000. The talent he saw in her work helped get her recruited to assist in the printing of *Skulls*, one of two posthumously published books featuring new art by Baskin. Sarah recounts those experiences, and how they shaped her own work as a book artist.

The TV room just off the kitchen was hung with paintings and decorated with dried pomegranates and lemons in bowls. To one side was a desk holding assortments of coloured pencils and pens. Leonard Baskin's armchair, where he sat, was in the middle of the room facing the desk. My memories are rather vague on the peripheral details that day; the interactions stand out mostly. I had recently graduated from Hampshire College, Massachusetts, and was encouraged by my new acquaintance and Baskin's then etching printer, Michael Kuch, to show him my etchings. Baskin leaned back in his armchair and held up the large etching. He was quite ill at the time and passed away a few weeks later. He looked, nodded, and said, "I'm glad you didn't use any colour." That was it—a tacit approval. It was an enormous encouragement. (My lack of colour had been a point of contention with Michael on the drive to the house in Leeds. He felt that if I were seriously going to be an artist, then I would need sales, and for sales one needed some colour.)

The following year Michael offered me the opportunity to print etchings for Baskin's book *Skulls*, one of the last in a long line of stunning books produced by Gehenna Press. Baskin had left the blocks, plates, and a mock-up of roughly watercoloured proofs and photocopies with notes pasted next to text on bond paper. Woodcuts and etchings of various animal skulls accompanied poems by Jonathan Maslow. Leonard's wife Lisa Baskin was posthumously publishing the remaining Gehenna books. They would be printed and bound according to the designs Baskin had left for them.

I flew to Northampton for 10 days in September 2002 to print at Michael's studio at the Old Felt Factory on West Street. The routine involved drinking coffee in the morning, printing etchings all day and then continuing after dinner until late. The colour etchings were printed by stencilling ink

onto a traditionally wiped plate or by *à la poupée* wiping—neither of which I had ever done before. I received a lesson in selective wiping. The first one I printed had crisp lines and bright whites. It looked anemic in comparison to Michael's more gently wiped plate with more intense areas of dark. The rhythm of editioning leaves one with time to think; in this case it was more of a dialogue with Baskin. His faces came creeping out of the lines, both human and other.

I don't actually remember the first time I saw an artist's book. It must have been quite early, because I was already familiar with the early *livres d'artist*, some of Leonard Baskin's books and medieval manuscript books. I had already completed my own first folio book of pomegranates. In my ignorance, I was not aware until afterward that Baskin used pomegranates as the primary symbol for Gehenna Press. In fact, he had created drawings for a future pomegranate book with imps emerging from the ripe fruits. The *Skulls* plates were heavily drawn skulls including baboons, birds and a lion, and though based on relics, they still held the feeling and character of the animal portrayed. He'd drawn the skulls from his skull collection. I'd seen them neatly arranged together in one of his workrooms just off the library. I had also spent a good deal of time at the Smith College Rare Book Room the year previous to meeting Baskin. Some of my most crucial lessons came from Baskin's books, working on *Skulls*, my friendship with Michael and my subsequent friendships with Baskin's family. I learned how to conceive, follow through and create a book, as well as how to expand those thoughts to other media.

Three or so years later, the Baskins' library, unchanged, continued to be a place of vast inspiration. It held the acquisitional interests of both Leonard and Lisa—books of botanical drawings and etchings, books about women by women. Bronze sculptures decorated the

POEMS BY JONATHAN MASLOW

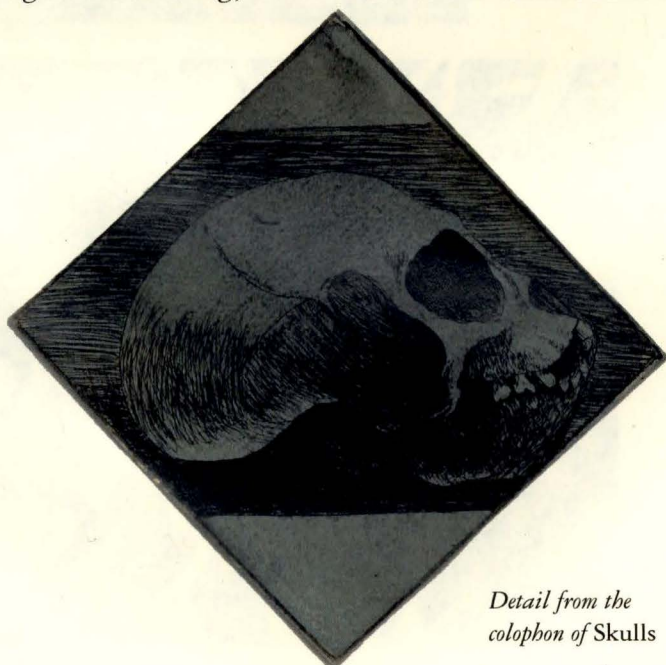
SKULLS

ETCHINGS & WOODCVTS BY LEONARD BASKIN · THE GEHENNA PRESS · MMIII

few remaining open spaces. Leonard Baskin's ability to inspire others through his work is almost limitless if one is open to it. I might have been too impressionable had I actually had the chance to study with him in my twenties. I continue to appreciate his use of line and mark in his drawings and prints, the humour and darkness in his human-animal figures, and his comfort with diverse media that I feel is lacking among many contemporary artists. His complete immersion into his work expresses itself through the thoroughness in which he examines the human psyche. Being a night person myself, and having a very difficult time waking in the morning, I was

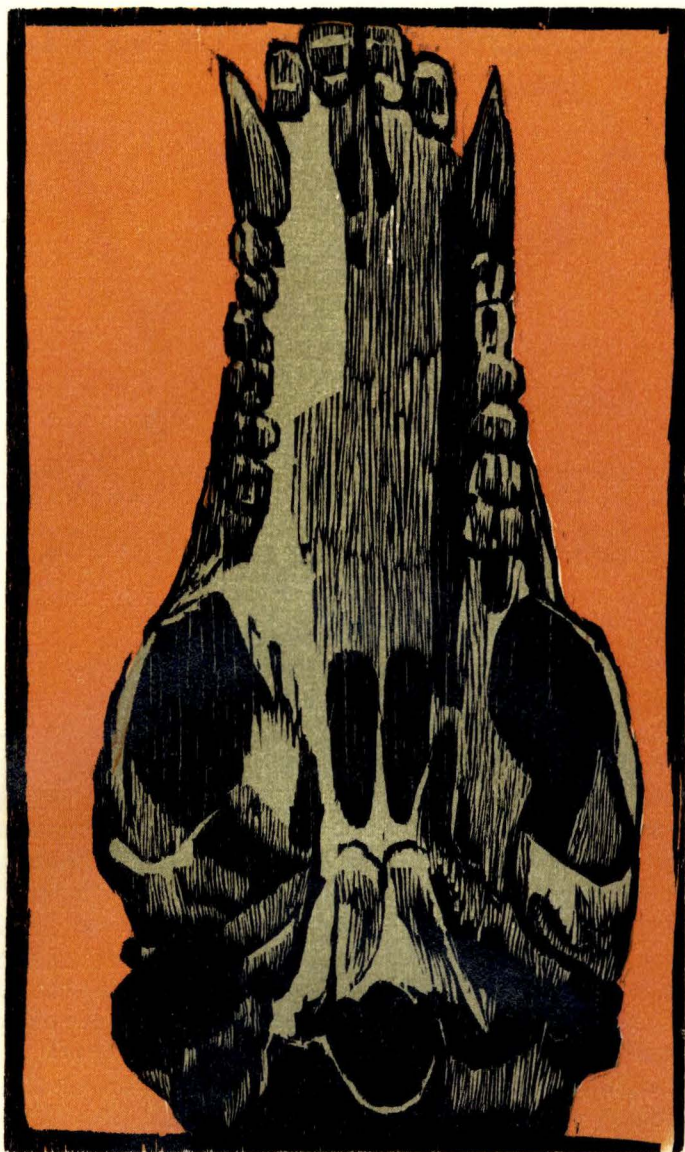
relieved to hear that most days he woke at 10:00 or 11:00 in the morning to work all day on larger prints, drawings and sculptures, then drew at his desk until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning while he watched late-night westerns and kung fu flicks.

Since that first meeting I've had the privilege to revisit his and Lisa's home. In the barn, partially completed plaster bird-men stand watch over reams of paper packages. Tea in the library with biscuits is treasured for every moment of poring over fantastic etchings and books. I feel like the narrator of Jorge Luis Borges' story "The Book of Sand," wherein he discovers an infinite book and becomes lost in



*Detail from the
colophon of Skulls*

A LASTING ENCOUNTER



Production details for Skulls, featuring woodcuts and etchings by Leonard Baskin, had been fully planned out by the artist prior to his death in 2000.

its pages. As I continue to create artwork in various media I have several friends who pay me visits on occasion. I hope Leonard Baskin will continue to do so.

Leonard Baskin passed away in 2000. *Skulls* was posthumously published in 2003 in an edition of 34 copies, signed by author Jonathan Evan Maslow and Lisa Baskin. Gebenna Press does not have a Web site, but Web searches will turn up a wealth of information about the artist. Michael Kuch's Double Elephant Press can be explored at www.michaelkuch.com.

Sarah Horowitz is an artist and printmaker who currently teaches printmaking at Portland State University in Oregon. After receiving undergraduate degrees in math and physics from Hampshire College, she did post-graduate work in printmaking at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She issues limited edition books incorporating original prints under the imprint Wiesedruck (www.wiesedruck.com), a name that combines that of her grandfather's printing press in Switzerland—Schudelldruck—and the Wiese, a stream along the border of Switzerland and Germany near her family home.

Horowitz is a rigorously trained printmaker and devoted drawer. Her books, etchings and drawings reflect a passionate interest in biology and explore the nuances of organic form, poetry and mem-



The Hebrew and English title pages from Sarah Horowitz's new book of wood engravings, *Alpha Botanica* (Wiesedruck 2007, edition of 45 copies).

LEONARD BASKIN

ory. She will be issuing her third limited edition book, *Alpha Botanica*, this fall. The book weaves each of the (26) Roman and (22) Hebrew letters with botanical wood engravings. The book has a dos-a-dos structure, with the Roman alphabet starting from the left and Hebrew from the right, the two meeting in the middle. *Alpha Botanica* was the book Chris Stern was working on when he succumbed to cancer in the fall of 2006 (see *Amphora* 145). Printing was completed by Art Larson of Horton Tank Graphics in Hadley, MA. The book (45 copies, 5 by 4.75 inches, bound in full leather and boxed by Claudia Cohen) is on display until January 2008 at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, MA.

The first Wiesedruck publication was *Mohn* (2003, 20 copies, OP), presenting the poem "Corona" by Paul Celan in the original German, along with an English translation by John Felsteiner. The eight etchings were pulled by Horowitz; the hand-set Centaur type was printed by Inge Bruggeman at *Textura*

Letterpress Printing. This was followed by *Paper Towers* (2005, 25 copies, US\$1,800), in which Horowitz's engravings accompanied five poems by Yiddish poet Kadya Molodowsky, with translations by Kathryn Hellerstein. The book was also printed by Bruggeman, and cased by Claudia Cohen.