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CONSTANCE JACOBSON

1951–

CORMORANT WITH HEAD, 1993

Woodcut, with drypoint, on cream Rives BFK wove paper
100.00 x 73.2 cm (image)
100.00 x 73.2 cm (sheet)
Boston Public Library

Constance Jacobson's engaging prints evoke the frontiers of human perception, understanding, and interaction. They are often unique works of art, combining the ideas and facture of drawing, painting, and printmaking. The artist was born on January 21, 1951, in Washington, D.C. She grew up on an Army base in Heidelberg, Germany, where her father was Director of Civilian Personnel of the Department of the Army in Europe. Her family members were avid museum goers and visited museums across Europe. These experiences helped make Jacobson aware of the dynamics of human perception and expression. In 1968 she attended Chatham College in Pittsburgh, where she studied painting with Joseph Shepler. At that time the work of Willem de Kooning, Richard Diebenkorn, and other painters influenced her to construct layered images, obscuring some elements while elucidating others. After receiving her bachelor's degree in 1972, Jacobson taught in the language lab at the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. She moved to Michigan in 1974 to begin graduate studies at Cranbrook Academy of Art, where she learned the process of lithography. Over the next decade the artist would learn the full range of printmaking techniques and become so skilled that the etching needle and wood gouge became her drawing tools.

When Jacobson moved to Boston in 1976, she relied upon her expertise and empathy with the deaf community to establish herself. At the Jackson-Mann School in Allston she began an after-school program for low-income deaf children. Later she developed tours and workshops at the Museum of Fine Arts, producing guides for deaf and blind audiences.¹ She worked for the Artists' Foundation in 1981-82, where she developed an arts and culture news service for the hearing impaired. She also served as an accessibility advocate for disabled artists. At that time, Jacobson began working in graphic design to support herself. She was a freelance designer for several different Boston-area firms on a wide range of design projects, from the layout of children's books to exhibit design for aquariums and zoos. As an antidote to the precision and polish required by graphic design, the artist pursued greater spontaneity in her creative work. By this time she had access to a print shop as a member of Experimental Etching Studio (EES).² She taught lithography there in 1982, the year Chatham College presented the first solo exhibition of her work, which included paintings, drawings, and prints. The artist exhibited her work widely in the 1980s, in EES group exhibitions, in the national exhibitions at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, the Print Club in Philadelphia, as well as the Boston Printmakers' shows. Jacobson created her printing blocks and plates in a creative, improvisational manner. She freely combined images from different matrices, layering and interweaving, making many of her creative decisions impulsively at the press. The artist pulled unique monoprints rather than editions of identical multiples. In 1988 an artist's travel grant enabled her to share her ideas and techniques at the Estampe du Rhin in Strasbourg, France.

Cormorant with Head is one from an extended series of monoprints that reflect Jacobson's reactions to the Exxon Valdez disaster. On March 24, 1989 an oil tanker was carrying crude oil from the Alaska pipeline terminal to the continental United States, when it ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound.³ The Exxon Valdez disgorged its thirty million gallons of oil into the ocean, slowly killing millions of animals, from microscopic plankton to seals and orcas. Rescuers hastened to capture animals and birds, taking them to centers where the oil could be washed from their bodies with detergent. Television news and newspaper photographs showed these heroic, often vain attempts. For Jacobson, the repeated image of an oil-soaked bird came to symbolize the disaster, and she employed variations of its form in several works. In the present

print, the exhausted body of a cormorant is silhouetted before a yellow-red glow like an oil rig's burn-off. Its slumping form is quite different from that of a healthy bird, a strong swimmer, formidable fisher, and graceful flyer. Jacobson began the image by printing the colored background from an aluminum plate painted with the silhouette of a human head and patterned with drypoint scratches. Then she overprinted the cormorant, carved from a plywood block, as if the exhausted bird was trustfully perched on the head instead of a rock or tree. She scrubbed the plywood to emphasize its grain, placing a knot in the wood with its radiating cracks in the center of the bird's body, like a heart strained to breaking. In order to reemphasize the human head, Jacobson superimposed another image, carved in a sheet of plywood and printed in gray. Some of her works of the period include radiographic images of the human body to reveal similarities between all vertebrate animals. This profile head, however, has lost its skin as if exposed by some chemical or nuclear burn, revealing subcutaneous muscles of its face and neck. In this image of interdependence, the human is just as helpless as the bird.

During the 1990s Jacobson was visiting instructor at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, at Wheaton College, and at the DeCordova Museum School. In 1998, she joined the faculty of the Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University. At that time the artist audited a course at the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School, a program started and directed by her husband, Nobel Laureate Dr. Eric Chivian. The course, "Human Health and Global Environmental Change," considered the effects of human populations on water, land, and air, with specific discussions of problems like global climate change, infectious disease, and habitat degradation.⁴ Over the coming years, concepts of biology and biodiversity influenced Jacobson's work even more. Biological motifs mingled in her work with themes of outward fragility coupled with internal strength. She began to alternate her teaching with intense periods of graduate study, and in 2002 she received her MFA degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. In graduate school the artist began to incorporate digital imaging into her creative work, employing computer skills she had used in graphic design for many years. For example, she assembled odd objects on the scanning bed, in a manner parallel to placing objects on photosensitive paper in a darkroom to make a photogram. Jacobson scanned paper scraps, twigs, latex gloves, and other objects, sometimes through sheets of vellum to obscure the identification. In other paintings and prints, Jacobson explored her fascination with the microbial world, creating images reminiscent of bacteria, archaea, viruses, fungi, and protists, the earth's oldest and most genetically diverse life forms. Undetectable with the unaided senses, these organisms are powerful symbols of the importance of respectful human coexistence with nature.⁵ Jacobson created these hi-tech images of scientific fantasy while she continued to work with simpler traditional media. The solo exhibition of her watercolors in 2006 at HallSpace Gallery in Boston included works from her large series of watercolors called *Tome*, a reference to the axial slice of the human brain, which provided the identical stenciled composition for each painting.

