

# ARCHIVE

## ALAN MAGEE • MONOTYPES



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“ICONS FROM THE BEYOND

The Culture of Remembrance:

Alan Magee’s Dreamfaces”

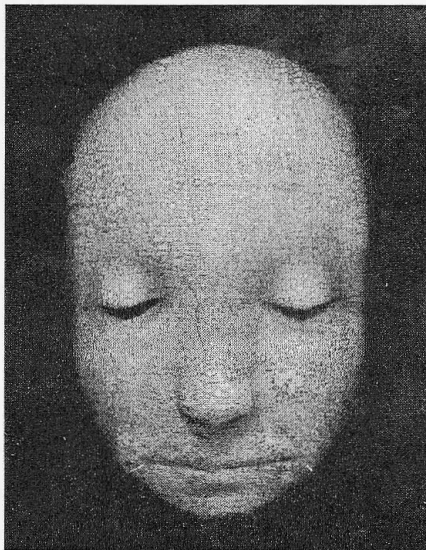
by Nikola Richter, for the *Berliner*

*Morgenpost*, November 14, 2000

Translated from the German by

Herbert Peters

In the current debates about *Leitkultur*, globalization and Americanization, Alan Magee, a native of Pennsylvania, has taken a quiet and earnest stand against all standardization. Instead, the 53-year-old American draws his creative energy from an unusual constellation of sources, among them the German film, theater and painting of the twenties and thirties, the literature of Eastern Europe, especially the Czech Samizdat, and from Polish poster art. “What really inspires me, are artists who have managed to do extraordinary work with limited resources, and often with limited support,” says Magee. He admires the German artists Hannah Höch, Käthe Kollwitz and Otto Dix, as well as the Czech animator, Jan Švankmajer, and the Polish graphic artist, Franciszek Starowieyski. Magee builds a bridge between Europe and America, between visual art and literature and, swimming against the tide, he searches for, as he says himself, the “essentially human.”



bombardment of Iraq in the months before the 1991 Gulf War.”

With their elemental blacks and textural gray tones, Magee’s pictures are disturbing. Lit as if by a fleeting, distant light, the strange, oval faces stare out at the observer. One feels that they could just as suddenly disappear into the darkness again. They carry scars, wounds, abrasions and the record of their tears. The face which carries the title *Silence* has its mouth sewn shut. The faces seem to be wrapped in a mournful silence—an atmosphere in which one finds not only accusation and despair, but also meditations on patience, eternal silence and

forgiveness. Magee, indeed, does not accuse, but rather tries to unearth the “concurrent presence of multiple generations, their suffering, their courage and resilience—the great collage of civilization.”

Although he is known primarily as a realist painter and draftsman, Magee finds the technique of monotype best meets his objective in this series. Black ink is applied to the print plate, which the artist then selectively wipes away with a cloth, often incorporating his hands or other tools in the process. Digging the visage out of his paint like an archaeologist, Magee imitates the process of remembrance in the physical handling of his materials. “The result is always a surprise,” Magee writes in the exhibition catalog.

The estranged faces don’t communicate with language, or with overt facial expressions, they communicate through their singular dreamlike presence. They could be death masks, though they are not waxen or cold—but organic and raw. They are icons from the beyond. With these works, Magee makes his contribution to the timely German discussions on *Erinnerungskultur*, the culture of remembrance. Instead of giving them names, he gives the forgotten-ones a ghostlike presence.

These pictures pick up many topics in current discussion in the New Germany. While they look back on the suffering of the century, they do not align themselves to, or portray, any given time or place. “This series of images was born out of a great disappointment,” says Magee. “I graduated from college in 1968. Many among my generation assumed culture, in some fundamental way, to be progressive, we were idealists and believed, perhaps naively, that society could be changed by our collective efforts. The catalyst for this series, as distinguished from its ultimate meaning, was the imminent