

## Donald Baechler

*Tantric Feet* (2015)

Woodblock print, 15 1/2 x 24 1/4 inches.

Edition of 12. Printed by Takuji Hamanaka, New York. Published by Baron/Boisanté Editions, New York.

\$1,400.

The two white footprints, extending almost the full height of the black ground, initially read as impressions of human appendages. But the splayed toes, the disproportionately large forefoot and the odd wobble of the contour soon begin to conjure something less tame—a yeti or the European wild man of the woods described so vividly in the prints of Dürer and Schongauer.

Donald Baechler has been making drawings of feet for years (along with hands, telephones and flowers), but this print marks a return to a long and productive collaborative partnership. Thirty years ago Baechler was among the first artists invited by Mark Baron to make etchings, and it was the production of Baechler's first portfolios *Subjects* and *Objects* (both 1986) that convinced Baron of his own limitations as a printer. He brought in master printer Donna Schulman, and set up business as a print publisher instead. Over the next 22 years, Baron and his wife, Elise Boisanté, produced 77 prints with Baechler, including, at the end of their long run, *Diamond Snake* (2007) and *Hunan Palace* (2008). But by 2008 Baron and Boisanté had become disenchanted with the increasingly commercial flavor of what had once been an intimate collaborative process and stepped away from publishing to concentrate on the 19th- and early 20th-century Indian popular lithographs they had been collecting and selling.<sup>1</sup>

The current print is the result of Baechler's enthusiasm for producing a new project the old way. In his drawings the feet were always single, drawn in blue ink on sheets stained with coffee or tea. But for Baron, they called to mind the Hindu and Buddhist tradition of a pair of footprints, used to suggest the absence of the deity (Vishnu or the Buddha). "For the first hundred years

after his death," Buddhist scholar Stephen Batchelor explains, "the Buddha was remembered as an emptiness. In the fragments of stone friezes that survive from the time, he is represented by an empty seat, a tree with no one beneath it, a pair of footprints."<sup>2</sup> This marked absence further evokes the dissolution of the self that is essential to enlightenment. Though Baron is far more seriously interested in Buddhism than Baechler is, he has traded Tantric drawings for those of the artist—and it was in a spirit of amicable generosity if not spiritual commitment that Baechler furnished the title for this print.

Baron and Boisanté already had a suitable block, made of antique Japanese wood, purchased for some forgotten reason. Coated in black lacquer and measuring 14 x 22 inches, it might once have been used as a base for an altar or flower arrangement. Baechler painted the paired footprints on paper and Baron brought the block to the woodblock artist Takuji Hamanaka, who cut and printed the image. The lacquer had been sanded off, but Hamanaka reported that the surface was still so uneven it had to be inked from all directions. Some of the block's damages appear in the print—notably the white line created by a crack running across some of the toes and a scattering of white specks from tiny surface abrasions—but Hamanaka's meticulous printing minimized the textural interventions. They wanted to avoid the kind of self-conscious primitivism that sometimes appears in German Expressionist prints, for example. Further, as Baron notes, too much visual evidence of the printing matrix can look contrived.

Ultimately, the splayed feet in the austere white-on-black image and the tiny, star-like flecks of light in the ground subvert the more obvious visual convention of black footprints in white snow and suggest the footfalls of some mythical figure (whether Western wild man or Eastern deity) lumbering mysteriously around the night sky. It is more than a little peculiar—and quite magical. ■

—Catherine Bindman