



Dog Days

We're having an extremely hot summer this year in Japan. Every day the newspaper brings an update on places that have set records for 'hottest day', or 'longest streak of days over 40 degrees', etc. etc. This is all being blamed on climate change, but whether or not that is a factor I cannot say; I seem to remember some pretty long and hot summers back in my early years in Japan too.

Whatever the 'cause' though, the problem facing us in the workshop is the same - how can we get our work done in such an inhospitable environment? Woodblock printmaking - the printing part, anyway - is inherently a winter type of job, for a number of reasons. The printer sits vigorously rubbing at the paper all day long, and the hotter it gets, the more unpleasant that work becomes. The increased temperature also makes the development of mold much more likely, and we are constantly battling this, by keeping our papers in the freezer overnight, and with a fan keeping the air constantly in motion in our pigment cupboard.

Back when I was working here alone I would simply strip down as the temperature went up, and would sit at my printing bench in nothing more than a skimpy pair of shorts (if that), but with a group of women now also working here, that has become impossible. For some reason, they refuse to accept my 'suggestion' that we should all print that way, even when I describe a summer visit I made some thirty-plus years ago to a printer's workshop in Tokyo where the three members of the family (husband, wife, son) were all working side-by-side, with none of them wearing anything above the waist.

So the staff here are now really putting the pressure on - "Dave, do something! Install an air conditioner, please!" - but I really do not want to do that. Their obvious reaction is that I'm simply trying to be cheap, to save money at their expense, but that's actually not a prime factor in my thinking, as I suspect that increased productivity would more than make up for the expense of running air conditioning. My resistance stems from other considerations.

I have written elsewhere in these stories about how much I enjoy the turning of the seasons; so much that I gladly accept an amount of discomfort - chilliness in the winter, and sweating it out in the summer - in order to properly 'feel' the environment in which I live. I couldn't bear to live year round in a climatized building, with every day exactly the same. When I try to explain these feelings to them though they simply reply, "Upstairs in your own room, you do what you want. Down here we're trying to get work done!"

Another factor *is* actually related to the costs; there is no electricity supply in the new workroom that we have constructed in the space we rent from our neighbour; we are currently 'stealing' juice for the lighting from my own workroom. But the main breaker panel of my own building (60 amp total) is not capable of also supplying the electricity to run an air conditioner down there. I would need to contact the electricity company to upgrade my entire system, contract with an electrician to provide the special circuits necessary for the system, and then begin drilling through the concrete walls to install the conduits, etc. that are necessary. It would actually be quite a stunning expense for us.

But over and above all these things is the wider question of air conditioner use in general. Whatever your views on climate change, most people I think pretty much agree that our current system of energy supply, based on digging stuff out of the ground and burning it, is a ridiculous and non-sustainable way to do things.

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Now of course I too use this sort of energy - I am doing so as I type this little story - but all my life I have tried to minimize my personal impact on that system. I have never owned a car, nor would I have ever considered using something like an air conditioner.

And if those factors weren't enough, on top of all this comes the consideration that here in Japan these days, in the aftermath of the tsunami disaster, we are desperately short of energy. We *can't* just keep mindlessly buying new stuff and plugging it in.

So the upshot is that I have ended up spending many days of the past couple of weeks working here alone. Most of the crew (not everybody, and not every day) have 'booked off'. All I can do is wait a few weeks until the worst is behind us and they all return to work. I've always quietly enjoyed hearing the first autumn insect sounds; this year I'll be cheering loudly when they come!

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