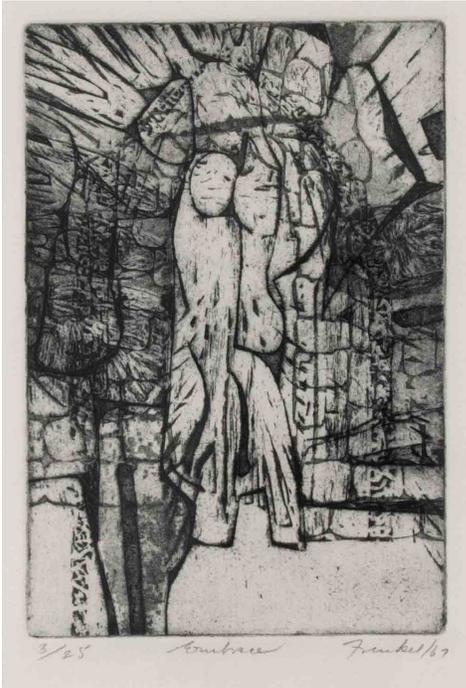




Vera Frenkel
***Embrace*, 1967, and *Vantage Point*, 1968**
Essay by Jean-Paul Kelly
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Left: Vera Frenkel, *Embrace*, 1967, etching.
Right: Vera Frenkel, *Vantage Point*, 1968, etching.



It is difficult to make sense of these two prints by Vera Frenkel. When looking at them our vision is fractured and distracted. The balance, emphasis, and temporal rhythm of the forms in front of us tend to erratically start and stop. The stasis of the printed surface—unmoving and flat—is simultaneously highlighted and thwarted by Frenkel. Any radical change of vision that happens with a subtle physical shift of position is, instead, implied and mediated. More than simultaneous vision, here, a human parallax error is accompanied by a partial blindness. The confusion is visceral, the disjunction generative, the nonobjective representative.

In *Embrace*, an intaglio print from 1967 incorporating line etching, drypoint, and aquatint with additional relief, two abstract bodies are held in a field of process-based pattern. These implied figures are layered beneath a gauze of fractured line. Frenkel creates a ziggurat-like mesh analogous to the optical anomalies experienced by sufferers of visual disturbance or disease of the eye, and these transparent fortifications impede the boundaries of form and spatial cue. Omnipresent and distinctly visible, these marks are the inverse interpretation of a central blindness—the kind of white blindness that one experiences when looking directly into the sun. Here, the result is an overwhelming blankness filled with line and pattern that is seemingly beyond the indexical, material world.



In *Vantage Point*, an etching with drypoint and aquatint from the following year, representation is very nearly obscured. Layered atop line and tonal forms that might otherwise be recognizable, two graphic swatches of black ink shroud the majority of the printed surface. Like the Op Art perceptual work that came to prominence briefly in the mid-60s, the strong contrast between positive and negative space along these graphic intersections destabilizes the expectations of our vision. Again, the push and pull of optics acts, without the need for our movement, to imply a change of position. Frenkel's practice has long included investigations into the restrictions of subjectivity imparted by the privileging of objective truth; she has especially focused on the collusion of media technology in these threats. Her substantial contributions to Canadian video art and video installation, in works like *Introduction to Some of the Players* (1977), *This Is Your Messiah Speaking* (1990), *The Transit Bar* (1992), and *The Blue Train* (2012), stand alongside her clairvoyant turn in *String Games: Improvisations for Inter-City Video* (1974), as vital inquiries into the nonobjective interpretation of the material residue of the world. However, it is during the production of the *Embrace* and *Vantage Point* etchings that we see the ascendance of her critical exploration.

Prior to the screen-based work that has brought her renown, Frenkel had garnered an international reputation as a printmaker with exhibitions at *Mostra Grafica* at the Venice Biennial (1972) and the National Gallery of Canada (1971-72). The move to works like *String Games*, which utilized conferencing and simultaneous video transmission to direct participation, to control narrative, and to ask questions of our senses in representation, occurred through technological change and access to the tools of that change but should also be thought of as a redirection of Frenkel's established interests. *Embrace* and *Vantage Point* are incubators for her later explorations of storytelling and memory, the ambiguities of voice and language, and the subjection of our senses to bureaucratic control through codified structure.

As Frenkel has recounted, you could not be an artist in Toronto in the 1960s without being profoundly influenced by the work of Marshall McLuhan. Texts like *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), McLuhan's analysis of the impact of movable type on culture and its prioritization of human senses to the visual, were significant to artists working with print-based and televisual media at the time. The more esoteric effects of *Embrace* and *Vantage Point* might be thought of paradoxically as analytical reflections on "the visual homogenizing of experience of print culture, and the relegation of auditory and other sensuous complexity to the background." (1) After all, our vantage point in these prints is obscured, but obscured only enough to suggest the space beyond, in the background, in order to understand the immensity of what we are prevented from seeing. Reflections such as this would subsequently permeate Frenkel's later work in time-based media through the foregrounding of the experiential resonance of voice, duration, and the effects of remembrance.

It is difficult to make sense of Frenkel's etchings. They are impenetrable, heady objects. And though it may seem a bewildering thing to have our senses obscured in this way, it is crucial to substantiating what is knowable. Any system of representation conforms the imaginable to a regimen and therefore includes the potential of barring being seen or heard. This is the fundamental challenge of all representation—that which is depicted is always a barrier to what it depicts. As in much of Frenkel's work, *Embrace* and *Vantage Point* propose that, through the contradiction of a representational form and the abstraction of subjective experience, sense can be made in the world.



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(1) Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 125.

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