

Teaching Printmaking:

America

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"How did you do that?" This is the most common question in the print shop. It recognizes an innate characteristic of the printmaker's mentality: a curiosity about technique and process. Nowadays, in the conceptual art world, this seems to be a shameful admission. Effort is made to hide, excuse or redirect this natural inquiry. But the question expresses the print student's desire to know the mysterious mixtures, the arcane terminology, the stages and processes of order, how to make surprises. These tools of the trade are the hook often used to tantalize students—to introduce them into the "black arts" of printmaking.

The teaching of printmaking across the United States is, like the country, varied and impossible to categorize or cover. Instead of focusing on a few exemplary programs and individual teachers, I want to talk about common development in printmaking programs. I will describe the current climate and articulate my own concerns and

perhaps even biases about the experience of teaching printmaking. I feel that I am a good spokesperson for the many colleagues and friends similarly engaged in academic posts around the United States. I represent a middle, common ground—both literally and figuratively. Not only is my location in the centre of the country but, conceptually, I span the old and the new with what I think is a healthy perspective. My relative isolation has fostered both scepticism and independence. This has been balanced with intense travel, meeting printmakers, a variety of teaching experiences and the experience of being a guest artist. This has enabled me to collect a sense of the value of printmaking in each place, the variety of approaches, and even peculiarities. With over twenty years involvement in printmaking, I have absorbed so many experiences—both from the sidelines and in the fray. I now hope to articulate what has been happening in the realm of printmaking education.

What is the persona of the printmaker? Though difficult to generalize, perhaps there are common characteristics. Among them, an innate visual attraction to graphic contrast, a mind-set for self discipline, a tolerance for repetition, patience for obsessive minutiae, and a willingness to collaborate. Introductory printmaking classes are meant not only to entice new printmakers, but to winnow the field, leaving the devotees to continue. But current changes in art departments everywhere have adopted a more expanded attitude. The intent is to make printmaking more inclusive and relevant to all art students, to remove printmaking from the sidelines and recognize and promote print media consciousness as a core component of post-modern practice.

A nagging question persists about whether we are watering down printmaking in order to attract students. There are the temptations of the monoprint, little or no editioning, the promotion of mixed media and the allowance of quick fixes with painting and drawing additions. This could only be an academic issue that pales in the light of reality—the need to do what the image demands. And, with that demand in mind, solutions of any kind are equally valid in the borderless, expanded print field of today.

So much of today's printmaking buzz is about adapting. This means including and expanding printmaking with new technologies, whether digital media or computer-generated output. I see this recent enthusiasm as part of a continuum. Printmakers have always adopted the latest thing in the communication arts. Centuries ago they were quick to adjust to etching from engraving. More recently printmakers have

expanded and invented intaglio variations. There was also the search for the autographic mark which led to the invention and refinement of lithography into a highly technical field. Commercial screen printing has been adapted into a fine art medium and commercial offset presses brought into the print studios. High tech methods have been combined with photo-mechanical techniques. There has always been a flow back and forth between printmaking and commercial innovations.

The use of today's new tool, the computer, is actually very natural for our students. It is technically easy and accessible. This has recently been expanded to include the use of Xerox transfers, photocopy lithography and emulsionless photo silkscreen. Apparently, high tech looks are easier and safer to accomplish than ever. Computer-generated design and images, appropriated sources, and photo-mechanical processes and translations have become part of the printmaker's graphic language. Yet even these new methodologies require "fixing" from transitory media into etched metal plates or grained litho stones in order to allow for further manipulation by hand. The potential for a greater interface between traditional printmaking and contemporary technologies is only growing. Printmakers continue to be innovators and tinkerers, adapting concepts and skills from one thousand years of tradition.

196 Yet the teaching of printmaking still generally follows a technical timeline of hand processes to more complex "transformational multiplicities," from low tech to high tech, from traditional to contemporary printmaking processes and thought. The goal may be to present a printmaking smorgasbord which ultimately allows students to follow their own interests. Admittedly, there is the stereotypical American implication that new is best, more is more, that one must push the conceptual and technological envelope. At one time to be known for using day-glow inks, inventing whiteground or creating innovations with collagraph, pushed the artist to the forefront. This has evolved into experiments with ink-jet, advertising production modes and installation strategies using the matrix itself.

The most recent innovation is the invention of an "artspeak" for prints. Printmakers everywhere have become adept in the use of the latest buzz words and critical lingo. It is a welcome evolution towards more sophistication and analytical rigor that is the contemporary de-constructivist, post-modern stance. Dialogues at printmaking conferences and in journals reflect efforts to elevate the status of printmaking. Artists are seeking to stake a claim to issues that originated with printmaking issues but are now pervasive in the larger arena of the art world. With startling regularity,

printmaking approaches are left unidentified or misrepresented with a deliberate avoidance of the "P" word. A veritable and pervasive "print denial" has been taking place while the wider community capitalizes on print's abilities to repeat, make variations and appropriate sources.

Print theorists are saying these issues were "ours" first, have always been part of print culture, and that the pervasive influence of print media concepts have coloured the post-modern art scene. It would seem that the use of this language for the current discourse which analyses our own practice creates a legitimacy for printmaking within the larger context. This has been a great strategy. Exciting and intellectual efforts have created the basis for a historical framework of the print and the effects of communication media on culture. The issues of the democratic print—its social and revolutionary functions, prints as the repository of visual and textual knowledge, the issues of dissemination and repetition, sequence, originality, and the construction of meaning—are now recognized as the basis for print theory.

It is now common for the critical dialogue on printmaking to be so elevated as to be incomprehensible. This pseudo-intellectual approach has, however, encouraged the printmaking dialogue to emphasize ideas and issues and to move away from formulas and tech talk. It has also enabled artists to share in the critical discourse we have envied in other art fields. This boosterism, this printmaking renaissance, has fuelled a new momentum in teaching programs and philosophies. It has also served to turn attention away from the dated and negative discussion of printmaker complaints. These have centred around the issue of printmaking's minor art status, concern about the print market, publisher barons, unfair competition and lack of exposure. All of this has been a very calculated and smart move by intellectual printmakers. They have stirred things up and created new issues to discuss and teach. As a result, the field has been revitalized.

The drive to "take back the night," which acknowledges the primacy of print and communication media in our visual culture, has led to work by faculty and students that is appropriationist. This includes the use of photo and computer-derived images, textually-based material and, by looking at society, drawing from popular sources of inspiration. Here the printmakerly obsessiveness fits naturally into the post-modern practice of cataloguing and collecting. Cross-cultural referencing, with multi-layered meanings, create prints with attitude. This work is witty, experimental, and often generic. Personal expression is subsumed and few characteristics of the hand are in

evidence. Meanwhile, there continues to exist a parallel world where printmakers persist with anachronistic technologies. Intensely laborious work is still being done. This includes engraving and mezzotint and the hand cutting of wood. All of the work, with its slow hand processing, shows evidence of skills and draftsmanship. This work references the history of printmaking through nuance and the refinement of obscure, specific aesthetics. This is the drama of personal compositional decisions. These resistant practitioners (living treasures?) are equally valid in today's post-modern world. In the current climate of printmaking it is correct and important for all artistic options to co-exist. While in apparent opposition, the varying approaches co-exist within a sophisticated system which allows for the personal evolution of all artists.

Teaching involves other skills. Of particular pleasure, for me, is hands-on technical training—teaching how to use a tool, realising the physical exertion of carving wood, and exploring sensitivity to materials. So much of the teaching of printmaking is emulating how you were taught, following a school of practice and thought. The model is that of the mentor and student, master and apprentice, with the benefits of time and concentration. The Japanese say it takes a minimum of ten years to learn a traditional art—with most of that time spent sweeping the floors! The student becomes absorbed in the life. This ideal is given great lip service in the academy but the reality, in our fast-paced society, is a rushed experience. Both teachers and students are increasingly pressed for time. I work with graduate students for three years and undergrads often for only two semesters. And throughout this time they are pulled in a million directions by other, equally demanding, areas of school and life. The advantage of our modern system is the integration of ideas and that it encourages multi-track conceptualization. Things and ideas happen quickly, and the pulse of our time is carried over into our teaching institutions.

Students also become part of an interconnected print world. Classic approaches include the exchange portfolio, working with visiting artists, field trips and attendance at symposiums, conferences and exhibitions. Today more opportunities exist for international study and foreign student numbers are high. A variety of residency programs and internships are also available. Many teachers take up exchanges and travel, renewing connections at conferences. We have all learned from the experiences of the alternative arts organizations, where it is important to create your own opportunities and network. The print world naturally reflects the great variety among printmakers—artists on the cutting edge, joiners, doers, and also those who choose

more quiet connections. But the exciting atmosphere is large scale and inclusive. We can still operate from our diverse locations yet bring the continuum of printmaking to all parts of the print world.

Printmaking in the United States could probably be mapped out like a family tree. It would show a mobile and legendary cast of characters, with stories of influence, longevity and interconnectedness. This "map" would be about knowledge not yet available in the conventional history of art. Rather, the history of printmaking is largely oral and ageing and reflects regional dynamics, the influence of particular programs and personalities. Somehow, largely by absorption, this culture is being transmitted to students. It's a subtle initiation, where students acquire the history while talking over the presses with their faculty mentors. For students, this telling of the family history instills a desire to become part of the group. The print world represents a tangible future, one that is more attainable than dreams of success in New York or of joining the ranks of the mythologized painter superheros. In printmaking the legends are represented in the latest portfolio exchange box, arriving as guest artists to work next to you, expressing a willingness to talk and share at the next conference. This makes the possibilities of the printmaker's life real.

Have I been a successful teacher? I know I have grown and continue to be challenged and excited in my quest to keep up with the field. I often can't see the forest for the trees and dwell on the frustrations of the daily grind and delayed rewards that are part and parcel of teaching. But I know what makes a healthy program—an ongoing revitalization of theory and practice, the establishment of connections, visibility and valuation of student work, recognition of a variety of approaches, working within a supportive system, and enjoying a critical mass of excited people. These are the elements common to print shops and artists working from Arizona to Wyoming, Massachusetts to Oregon, Minnesota to Florida, with Nebraska, and my own shop in the middle of the country.

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