

PART TWO of OUR SERIES
Celebrating Printmaking Studios

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Master Printers Comment . . .

Printmaking Trends & "Behind the Scenes" in Studios

by Cynthia F. Weisfield

There is endless wonder in a print. Artists get the admiration, as they should, but their work took breath from the skills of master printers. Devoted to their craft, part teacher, part technician, part chemist, part mind reader, part counselor, master printers guide the hands that realize each artist's unique vision.

To find out more about these creative professionals and how they work, "Journal of the Print World" convened a long distance "round table" of distinguished master printers, each of whom represents a facet of their world. **Renée Bott of Paulson Bott Press** in Berkeley specializes in intaglio and relief as does **Marjorie Van Dyke of VanDeb Editions** in New York. **Bill Lagattuta of the Tamarind Institute** in Santa Fe works in lithography. **Bruce Crownover, Joe Freye, Jason Ruhl and Andy Rubin of Tandem Press** in Madison work in all of those techniques plus photogravure, while **Norm Stewart of Stewart and Stewart** in Michigan devotes himself to screenprinting.

They may work in different media, but their similarities outnumber their differences. All are highly credentialed academically; most have master's degrees. They all "apprenticed" at other noted studios where gifted teachers inspired them. All are skilled enough to have worked with such renowned artists as Jim Dine, Sam Gilliam, Richard Bosman, Betye Saar and Richard Diebenkorn among many others. That's heady company.

In this article we'll explore what happens when master printers produce a print. We've asked each master printer to look into the future and illustrate their points with an example.

Cynthia Weisfield: How do your unique skills support the artist? (Each master printer has provided a .jpg of what they consider to be one of their more complex pieces.)

Renée: We try to facilitate rather than direct the process. Our goal is to provide the most comprehensive instruction that we can while maintaining the artist's vision. I often regard my role as a 'translator' of the artist's thoughts.

Marjorie: The interaction between the artist and the printer is a very complicated and intense affair. Artists have to open themselves up to leaving sometimes familiar techniques behind and to develop a new vocabulary with the printer, which can be quite terrifying. I think it's really difficult for an artist to switch techniques, particularly if you are spending your time in a studio painting and suddenly to walk into a room with foreign equipment.

Norm: Screenprinting is a little different. Everything is right reading. The range of colors is pretty vast with a palette that is much like what you have in painting. They (the painters) can use inks that are opaque or that are transparent and anything in between which allows them to build images just as if they were painting them. You can get a lot of achieved colors. Two colors gets 3 colors, while twenty colors results in a permutation on the order of over a million. Our most complex print involved 32 colors.

Example from Norm Stewart of Stewart & Stewart:



The Steven Sorman screenprint publication titled "When Only" (and its companion edition, "Only When") was one of the more complex projects created at Stewart & Stewart. The two editions were printed concurrently, sometimes using the same screens but different inks and having to clean the screens while in perfect register on the printing bed. Other factors contributing to the complexity were the large printed areas of metallic gold ink requiring aggressive solvents to adequately clean the screens for subsequent printing of different colors; and issues of holding perfect registration during dramatic swings in Michigan's relative humidity when these prints were printed. 100% cotton rag printing paper absorbs moisture in the air and expands and contracts relative to the humidity in the printing environment causing issues with exact registration.

Bill: "They (the artists) know what they want. Your job is to get from A to B."

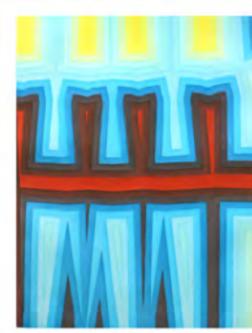
Tandem: Each artist brings his or her unique vision to the studio and we try to make it happen. We see ourselves as facilitators of the artistic ideas.

Occasionally there are roadblocks within these open environments, but typically the artist will recognize when an approach isn't working and discuss options with the master printer. Sometimes a suggestion is all that's needed, but the impetus of finding a solution does drive innovation. Solutions can be a new technique, a new "invention," a new way of working with standard materials, or even a new process.

Cynthia: How do you handle unusual requests or situations? Have they led to something new?

Renée: We needed a sugar lift mixture that was stiff enough to paint with when the plate was standing vertically, but wouldn't "run" unless it was misted with water. Up to that point we had been using Karo Syrup with black India ink but this mixture was too loose to work for Donald Baechler's project. We developed the perfect mixture by mixing Lamp Black pigment with denatured alcohol thus rendering the pigment water soluble. We mixed in some water and Karo Syrup for the desired thickness, added a dash of soap to break the water tension, and discovered a great solution to the problem.

Example of Renée Bott of Paulson Bott Press:



What made her print so challenging was first, coming up with a solution to how to transfer the image on to the copper plates and then the exacting patience it took to ink and pull the print; a total of 12 pristine colors on two plates, inked with only a half-an-inch between each color. We spent days, watching Tauba fold sheets of paper. Once folded, we sliced the folded compositions in parallel strips keeping track of each slice and numbering the tiny pieces of paper in the order they were sliced off. We unfurled the tiny sliced off pieces of paper and reassembled them like a puzzle on top of prepared copper plates. We decided to wet the paper in order to flatten the fold/slice compositions and the water served as an adhesive to the copper plate as well. Carefully removing the odd numbered slices and using paper towels to absorb excess water we were able to spray paint over the flattened wet paper composition on the copper plate, creating a resist. This is how we made our first key image. From there we aquatinted and etched the plate. We then made a negative plate from the key plate offset. Tauba designated a color to each "slice" resulting in a perfect re-cording of the folded paper. Tauba Auerbach, Topological study of folded paper re-assembled on top of a copper plate, Somerset white paper. "FOLD/SLICE TOPO II," 2011, Color Aquatint Etching, paper 45" x 35" image, 36" x 27"

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Marjorie: Almost everyone I have worked with has pushed printmaking in a new direction for me, because the way that each artist works is completely individual. Take, for example, sugar lift. One artist may want to use it in a lavish painterly way, another dab and sponge around. It is my job to keep myself open to the necessities of each artist.

Example from Marjorie Van Dyke of Van Deb Editions:



"Exit In Light," 2011 etchings & aquatint plate size 21 x 28.5 inches paper size 29 x 41 inches Rives BFK white

This a large three color etching, aquatint, and soft ground, drawn with a bone folder on copper plates. When you are working on large copper plates, every aspect of every technique becomes a challenge. Putting a plate in the aquatint box is complicated, burning an even aquatint is complicated, pulling plates out of a 3' x 4' acid bath is difficult, not to mention how to envision how to successfully print three plates on register with colors that are mixed at the right transparencies so that one does not end up with a print that looks like a mud puddle. Mark Mullin,

Norm: We work with special frames that allow you to tension the screen tight as a drum. Keiko Hara wanted to do wood rubbings across the screen to get the textures. We knew that the screens might pop. Fortunately, it worked.

Bill: Painters or sculptors don't think in terms of inks. Issues with transparency of inks, the order of doing them, not the color, may arise. I might suggest to put this color over the other, it might brighten things up. I don't take over the print, just give suggestions. I'm not their art teacher.

Tandem: Judy Pfaff has helped us see printmaking in a new light. By combining techniques, pushing scale, creating complex collages and combinations of approaches and incorporating pasting, folding, bending, scoring, weaving, dying, painting, dripping, and even burning.



Example from Tamarind Press:

Digitally printed collage elements hand cut and hand painted with multiple layers of amber shellac; woodcuts on Kozo paper that have been painted with amber shellac, hand cut and folded back, woodcuts on Kozo paper that were hand, painted with shellac and then hand cut using a wood burning tool; all woodcuts and collage elements are mounted onto backing board that has first been treated with a spray amber shellac prior to mounting on the other layers.. Judy Pfaff, "Year of the Dog #10," 2008, Woodblock, collage, digital with hand painting, 38 1/2 x 86 1/2" Varied edition of 20

Ms. Weisfield: What effect has technology in general, and computers in particular, had?

Renée: Computers and new printers are making it possible to print on a wide variety of surfaces.

Marjorie: Pure etching is a little more tactile, you have to be working in the plate. although computers make it easy to search images.

Norm: Computers help us capture an initial image that the artist is going to work on. From that we can get pigment prints but that's about it.

Bill: A lot of artists that we work with make films to shoot on photoplates so that involves using Photoshop and getting those films made. Many times, it's a combination of photo plates and hand drawn plates that make up a print.

Example from Bill Lagatutta, Tamarind Press:

Jim Dine, "Double Diana with a Poem," cream Rives BFK Composite paper size and printed image size: 44 x/2" x 55 x/4" 13.0 x 140.0 cm. A three-



color lithograph being a composite on two sheets of cream Rives BFK hinged together. Left side of the image: Black stone with lithographic pencil and crayon; aluminum light ochre; wooden panel was inked and impressed on clear Mylar, which was subsequently exposed onto a positive-working plate in an arc table. Aluminum dark grey with felt pen on clear Mylar, which was exposed onto a positive-working plate in an arc table. Right side of the image: Aluminum light ochre, wooden panel was inked and impressed on clear Mylar, which was subsequently exposed onto a positive-working plate in an arc table. Black stone, lithographic pencil and crayon. Aluminum dark grey with felt pen on clear Mylar, which was exposed onto a positive-working plate in an arc table.

Tandem: More and more we are seeing artists use their computers as a sketchbook. While this isn't something that will generate a "new printmaking" idea, it is shaping the way that we work with our artists. By removing the steps of color mixing and clean-up from the proofing we save time and streamline the process.

Ms. Weisfield: What do you see on the horizon that may be the next "new thing" in printmaking?

Renée: I think we will see larger scale installation based printing designed for public spaces. There was a show in Philadelphia where steamrollers were used to print. (moore-philagrafika, http://www.thegalleriesatmoore.org/site/exhibitions/PGKA_Artists)

Norm: It's a big issue. It's big to be big. It does bring the print medium into the area of painting.

Marjorie: I wouldn't call it a trend. I would say that it's something that people do when they are young. It's a temptation. It's fun.

Ms. Weisfield: So it seems as if computers are a tool, but have not effected a revolution, while we'll have to wait and see about large scale printing. Is there anything that strikes you as a seismic shift? What about upcoming artists and printers?

Marjorie: A whole generation of young people are quipped with a full panoply of digital skills . . . but long to do something with their hands.

Bill: Artists always like to experiment with new techniques. But over the years, they've tried the digital, they've tried the giclée. Lately we've been using a lot of stones. It's kind of like they don't get their hands dirty, they don't really draw anything, they want to get their hands dirty again and draw on a stone and scrape away the image with sandpaper and razor-blades.

Tandem: We also feel what's old is new. People continue to appreciate classic printmaking techniques and love of the handmade object will continue to propel printmaking into the future.

Ms. Weisfield: So there's a sense of coming full circle, having strong ties to the past.

Renée: By and large, we end up printing the same way Rembrandt did. We still take a glob of goey ink and smear it all over the place and then use a tarlatan and hand wipe it and run it through a press. We use more techniques, but the method is not much different from what he did.

We, as collectors, dealers and curators, have two levels on which to admire the print: what we **see** plus **how it got to be**. And it's all due to a beautiful, creative pas de deux between artist and the irreplaceable master printer.

Art Historian, Cynthia Weisfield, has a degree in Art History from the University of Chicago. She and her husband have been collecting abstract art for many years. Cynthia writes for several publications from her home in Pittsburgh, Pa.

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