

With a Capital P

by Shelley Thorstensen

Artists mark. They've been marking a long time. They've been marking for as long as there's been time. As a matter of fact, they're marking time.

The history of printmaking, with a Capital P is the history of an art and a history of art. And it's the short course - in marking the time of our lives.

That history begins as far back in time as hand print against the cave wall. In the exhibits tonight we are privileged to views of our past and present.

In a time certainly before paper, in a time almost before time, we found a way to mark our times, to shake hands so to speak with our futures. The hand against the wall, a mirror that is not a mirror that attests to external reflection as well as internal, of the duality of body and mind, from which stems our unending sense of this and that, the me and not me, the us and them.

From our earliest, we have been bilaterally symmetrical and standing. Tall. Bemused. Degraded. Forlorn. Despairing. Horrified. Longing. Balanced. Frivolous. Joyous. Unencumbered. Questioning.

Our mark recording and recoding the splendor around us as well as the uncertainty of our existence, the relations between us, the disasters of war.

The print today, as it was in the past, is the zip of the freeze-dried moment, artifice on a supple yet fragile paper - the juxtaposition of labor (on a plate, on a stone) with the (almost) instantaneous nature and feel of the printed surface.

I read an interview once of an artist named Hunterwasser who described printmaking as the making of "art around the corner" in that one really never knew the outcome.

The Society of American Graphic Artists (SAGA) represents a long standing tradition of men and women who have dedicated their time to making this art from their own.

SAGA represents a specific segment of the world of printed work. The members of SAGA tend to make small editions. They generally do not ascribe to the tradition of the split between artist and printer, the longstanding tradition of collaboration between artist and artisan. They make their mark, then print it.

Their history lies in the making, often in the progress of the technique. In the trenches. And often, but not always, in the margins.

What once was the domain of a medium, the mark made on matrix then delivered in a

perceptibly seamless manner, just below our visual threshold for recognition of duplicity and duplicate is now only one possible outcome.

There is new license and we've agreed to the terms. The results are brilliant, brought to us here in the later works of the historical exhibit starting with a giant like Rauschenberg.

We layer now, everywhere - in fashion, in furnishings, in meaning, in prints, and most notably in Photoshop. In all walks, we have all begun to speak a language once the territory of the "traditional print".

We speak the language of the separate and specifically non-linked nature of shape vs color vs contrast vs saturation vs placement vs texture and so on, now each with seemingly endless permutations.

This basic binary code is the structural core of Printmaking (black and white, here or not here) in both the perceptual and conceptual. While all around us may feel like chaos, like the concurrent theory of our time, printmakers still record, marking existence in relative bit by bit, on the scale of the individual marking time.

Bit by bit. Whether it is line by engraved line, or pixel by pixel, this is no simple draughtsman's tool. Prints have always changed the way we depict and the way we perceive. Nowadays, in this age, it may be that our hands no longer move as our eye moves, in a tactile way. Now, we might be moving in constructs.

We move through the idea of moving. Now, we can no longer consider in the same way the fall of light on a surface, or description through line-weight alone. We're not jaded to our past, we're just different.

And to compound issues, currently there is has been a proliferation of the purely digital print – where the output is inkjet from Epson.

"Traditional printmaking" with the inclusion of the digital within its traditional output of intaglio, lithograph, silkscreen, now stands in the cross hairs.

All new technologies are first and foremost of our making and then make things complicated, gloriously difficult. It begs question of the printmaker and taunts that one better know what one is doing.

For example, it asks to know this difference: there is Hayter's push of the burin to engrave, and the sweep of the Dremel that is reminiscent of the everyday mouse. They may seem subtle differences. But, these differences are about the feel of things.

So, once again technology begs feeling. This is our new generations' mottled concern over less recent arguments of integrated space vs cutouts as even now collage and cut paper both become layered cut and paste.

Of the very newest in printmaking, the wallpapered collaborative installations, the incongruous object in space, the floating bedazzled impossible figure, these are the embodied realm of the digital construct.

When “detail” in pre-digital terms meant a closer look and Pop Art harkened the halftone we see now in real terms that the enlarged “detail” of the pixilated image is a blur, not a pre-echo of the fractal but the true chaos like an Impressionist gone mad.

And yet, nothing marries more seamlessly than digital manipulation and “traditional printmaking”. Here, digital imaging may remain “hidden” but is undoubtedly and undeniably present, incorporated into the depth of an etching plate, the surface of a lithograph, the stencil of a silkscreen as these processes, once a kind of virtual, now posses the feel of tactility itself.

We still make our mark but it’s like a myth, like this idea of a live feed, but it is real - because it’s (always) bits on the continuum. It is this visceral see saw of the temporal no matter you cut it. It is camera cell shots of gun battles, videos of Burning Man.

It’s punctuated equilibrium because it seems no matter – we are alive, we live and breathe breath into what we make even when we wish otherwise.

In the art school are hallowed walls where charcoal black is chamoised but above the air is a rarified Windows blue. The tides always turn, washed ashore, leavings of another age.

Therefore, Ladies and Gentleman, get out your magnifying glasses; the fleas are about to hop, the floppys to skip, the vinyl to spin. The pen lurches, a thought pulls up, the world of ideas collides and somehow it all feels new.

Contemporary memory only goes so far and it’s here we are once again and we’re destined and we’re destined to borrow it all.

Some of us really believed Marshall McLuhan. We agreed. The medium can really be the message. This makes for some exciting printmaking, in the right (literal)hands and (virtual)heads. In all its permutations, from dry-point to digital, the layers of print are as real and as mutable as our world. The college course and the direction called Printmaking is the archetype with the capital P, the paradigm that we feel shift.

Our primal beginnings continue in a handprint and a handshake, now ours to wonder and ours to preserve as we’ve enlisted curators and amassed audience. Ages pass but something remains constant – that of the persistent marking march of time, engineered to tell our stories to each other.

November 9, 2006