

ADVANCING TRADITION

Advancing Tradition: Twenty Years of Printmaking at Flatbed Press



Suzi Davidoff, *Starlight* from the series, "Desert Suite", 2008, monoprint, 35 x 59 inches, private collection. © Susan Davidoff and Flatbed Inc.

From small-scale minimalist abstractions to enormous figurative scenes, printmaking reflects the diversity and technological changes that have shaped the contemporary art world. Since 1989, Flatbed Press in Austin, Texas, has actively participated in the printmaking revolution, inventing new techniques while improving on the venerable, older methods. *Advancing Tradition* features prints made at the Press by more than forty artists, all of whom have primary expertise in other media. Through this wide-ranging selection, the exhibition demonstrates three fundamental aspects of current printmaking: the uniqueness of the medium, the combination of new technologies with old, and the crucial role of collaboration.

Uniqueness and Diversity of the Medium

To make prints, artists must dedicate a similar amount of time and technical expertise to the endeavor as they would for drawing, painting, or sculpture. In the print studio, they create distinctive works with the choice of a wide range of techniques. Whatever the process or combination of processes, the artist's individual style and signature touch are expressed in multiple impressions. For this reason, original prints are relatively affordable, but also generally characteristic of the artist's larger body of work.

There is enormous potential for diversity in printmaking. Unique textures, such as those in Susan Davidoff's *Starlight*, are unlike anything that can be achieved in drawing or painting. The combination of

Billy Hassell, *Red-Wing Black Bird matrices*, 2007, copper, private collection. © Billy Hassell and Flatbed Inc. Image: E. G. Schempf.

What is an original print?

To make a print, an artist creates an image on a secondary surface—usually a plate, block, stone or stencil—called a matrix. The matrix is inked, transferred to the support (normally paper), and hand-printed, often on a hand-cranked press. The process is repeated to make multiple examples or impressions. The prints in *Advancing Tradition* were made in small editions on archival papers.



Some prints require several matrices. Each of the four matrices for Billy Hassell's *Red-Wing Black Bird* shows the reverse image of part of his design. Printers precisely registered the copper aquatint plates (black, blue, yellow, red) on the paper. The final print's green background was achieved by overlapping colors from the yellow and blue plates.



The four standard categories of prints are relief, intaglio, lithography, and screen printing. A popular fifth category, monotype, is represented by several works in the exhibition. *Advancing Tradition* features all five methods, frequently with several combined in the same print.

Billy Hassell, *Red-Wing Black Bird*, 2007, aquatint, 12 x 12, private collection. © Billy Hassell and Flatbed Inc. Image: E. G. Schempf.



Sandria Hu, *Wai-Kee-Cultural Passage*,
1996, polymer photogravure and inkjet with chine-collé, 21 x 16 inches, private
collection. © Sandria Hu and Flatbed Inc.

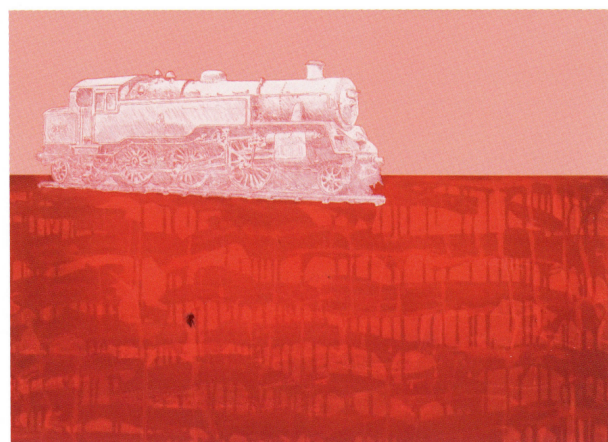
hand and machine work also contributes a distinct aesthetic. In Trenton Doyle Hancock's *Etchaege*, the deeply embossed plate impression left by the immense pressure of the etching press adds a sculptural element to the thick, handmade paper. In the case of Julie Speed's *Ad Referendum*, and Spencer Fidler's *Confrontation I*, the artists changed ink colors from one edition to the next, creating variations on a theme, or completely altering the print's mood.

New technologies meet traditional equipment and processes

Widespread technological advances of recent decades have had an impact on printmaking. These days, printmakers manipulate images with software programs or use digital photography, just as in other fields. Unique to printmaking, however, is its simultaneous retention of the old methods. The best color is still achieved through careful inking and hand-wiping of the plate. Hand-cranked presses, descendants of those used in the Renaissance, still offer the most reliable method of transferring the image from the inked plate paper.

At a publishing press like Flatbed, technologies merge fluidly. Sandria Hu's *Wai-Kee - Cultural Passage* involved time-honored processes of *chine-collé* (fusing tissue-like paper over heavier paper), and photogravure (creating an intaglio plate from a photograph), improved by new polymer plates. Hu also

Kenneth J. Hale, *Locomotive*,
2008, sugar-lift aquatint, soft-ground etching, and
relief, 29 x 41 inches, private collection. © Kenneth J.
Hale and Flatbed Inc.



used full-color inkjet printing. Combining old and new techniques serves as a metaphor for themes her print expresses about her contemporary life and ancestral history.

In other cases, artists gravitate toward etching or lithography, inherently akin to drawing. Following a period of dark, bizarre paintings, John Alexander sought visual respite by returning to drawing, the most traditional art form. He reconnected with his graphic skills in works like *Strange Fish*, yet he welcomed the newfangled drawing stick made of compressed copier toner. Although Alexander liked the expressive marks he could make with this material, it was highly fugitive, and could have potentially separated from the aluminum matrix for his lithography, *Strange Fish*. His printer, however, devised a special tent to contain the lacquer-thinner fumes used to fix or stabilize the powder on the plate.

Flatbed Press welcomes artists' unconventional notions and finds ways to bring them to life. For Liliana Porter's *Situation with a Dog*, printers glued a three-dimensional, dime-store plastic figurine to the paper near the old-style photogravure for an added surreal element. Teresa Gómez Martorell printed her etching of a dog on felt, an unusual support for a fine-art print, but soft like the animal's fur. Julie Speed's *Women's Studies* and *Ad Referendum* are like Chinese boxes of references and techniques. They are at once playful and serious, reproducing photocopied reproductions of previously reproduced printed illustrations from old books. Even Speed's drawing style emulates the hatching marks of traditional engravings.



Keith Carter, *Luna*,
1996, copper-plate photogravure with chine-
collé, plate work by Jon Goodman, 30 x 22
inches, private collection. © Keith Carter and
Flatbed Inc. Image: E. G. Schempf.

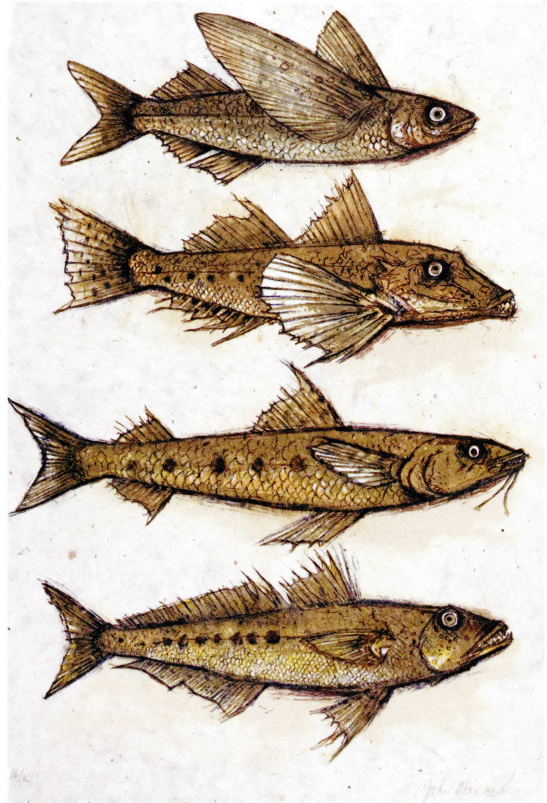


Julie Speed, *Women's Studies*
 from the series "Bible Studies Suite", 2005, polymer direct
 gravure with chine-collé and hand-coloring, 21 x 24 inches,
 private collection. © Julie Speed and Flatbed Inc.

Collaboration

None of these prints would exist without collaboration.
 Most career artists, regardless of media, have only a passing
 knowledge of printmaking and lack the equipment required.
 Some artists need a professional press to help them realize
 existing concepts; others rely on the intense collaborative
 process to generate new ideas.

John Alexander, *Strange Fish*,
 2003, aluminum-plate lithograph, 30 1/2 x 20 inches,
 private collection. © John Alexander and Flatbed Inc.



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