Making Prints

by
Scott Schnepf
Foreword

The annual Gary Lindberg Award was established by the College of Liberal Arts in 1986 in memory of Professor Gary Lindberg of the Department of English. Professor Lindberg was an exceptional scholar and outstanding teacher whose dedication and service to the University of New Hampshire as well as the wider community exemplified the highest academic standards and ideals.

In memory of Professor Lindberg and as a means of publicly supporting superior faculty accomplishment, the College of Liberal Arts annually recognizes one truly outstanding scholar and teacher within the College. The award carries a $5,000 stipend. The recipient is invited to present the Liberal Arts Lecture to the public during the following academic year.

PLEASE NOTE: All images of Scott Schnepf’s artwork included in or linked to this publication are copyright protected by the artist.
Making Prints

My talk today will be composed of two parts. First, I would like to make a few generalizations about printmaking as a medium for making unique images. After that, I would like to examine the development and evolution of one of my recent prints.

When studying the history of art, and in particular of western art, one finds that printmaking is an important part of that history, although less prominent than painting, sculpture, or drawing. While I don’t want to sound defensive in talking about what I do, I do feel that there is a misunderstanding of what printmaking is and has been in the minds of many people.

When I was in graduate school at Kansas State University, a friend went to the art museum at Kansas University to see an exhibition of Rembrandt etchings. When he walked in the door he asked a guard where he could find the Rembrandts. The guard politely told him that they were on the second floor, but added “you are aware that they are just prints, aren’t you?”

I also recall a story my uncle, James Eisentrager, told me as I started to study printmaking in a serious way. Jim taught painting at the University of Nebraska for 35 years and had gone to graduate school at the University of Iowa in the late 1950s. This was a time when many American universities were developing studio art programs. Around 1945, Iowa hired an artist named Mauricio Lasansky to head its printmaking program. Lasansky is an important figure in the history of 20th century printmaking and my uncle enrolled in one of his classes. At some point during the semester, Lasansky told Jim that he should consider switching his concentration from painting to printmaking. He said that he (Lasansky) would guarantee that Jim would become one of the top 50 printmakers in the country. Jim said that while he was initially flattered by this, he later realized that he could only name three or
four living printmakers and being in the top 50 didn’t seem to be a very lofty goal, so he stuck with painting. I should add that Jim continued to make prints throughout his life.

It was during this time period in the 50’s that more and more schools added printmaking to their offerings. Along with Lasansky at Iowa, Rudy Pozzatti developed the program at Indiana (both my undergraduate printmaking professor and my mentor in graduate school had been students of Pozzatti), and Gabor Peterdi started teaching at Yale. One of the unfortunate results of having such powerful personalities as these establishing programs was that printmaking and painting became somewhat separate domains in many schools. This remains the case today in many locations.

My own belief is that printmaking is at its best when viewed as a direct extension of painting and drawing. When one examines those works considered to be the most significant in the history of printmaking, one finds that the overwhelming majority were produced by artists who worked extensively in painting, drawing, and/or sculpture, as well as making prints. Put another way, they were first and foremost artists/image makers and secondarily printmakers. I believe that this is important to realize. Printmaking as a process is much more indirect and technical than either painting or drawing. I do believe that this aspect of printmaking has certain positive consequences for many artists (I will talk more about this in a moment), but I also feel that it is important for one to have a more direct and intuitive means of working to balance this aspect of printmaking. I know from years of personal experience, from watching the development of students, and from discussions with other artists who work both in printmaking and painting, that the two processes can inform and strengthen one another in very positive ways. I am a different (and I believe better) printmaker because of my involvement in painting, just as I believe that my painting is strengthened by my involvement in printmaking.

I first started making prints rather late in what was a somewhat extended undergraduate career. I went into the process knowing absolutely nothing about it. (I enrolled in my first print class only because the painting course that I wanted was full). I quickly discovered that the process offered an effective antidote to problems I was encountering as a painting student. In making a painting, the relentless presence
of the painting itself, the fact that it was always there staring back at me as I worked, eventually prevented me from being able to see what I was doing in an objective way. I saw only an endless inventory of problems and whatever semblance of underlying unity had been there in the development of the image seemed lost. In intaglio printmaking I found that the indirect nature of the process, the fact that one does not truly “see” the image until it has been transferred from the plate to paper, allowed me to view the image from a totally new perspective on a regular basis. This indirect nature of printmaking was referred to by the artist Chuck Close as the “disorienting reversals of left and right, light and dark.” This sentiment was echoed by the painter Lucien Freud when he said that for him etching was like drawing but with an added “element of danger and mystery. You don’t know how it’s going to come out. What’s black is white. What’s right is left.” Both Close and Freud are painters for whom printmaking is an integral and constant part of their studio practice.

Earlier this semester a student in my beginning printmaking class was pulling a proof from one of her first plates while I watched. She said that this was her favorite moment in the process, that each time she peeled back the paper to reveal the printed image she felt that she was being given a gift. The scholar Richard Schiff in one of his essays wrote that in printmaking “you can’t be ‘held captive’ by your own nature, because the nature of the medium presents too much resistance itself.” I have always found this unpredictable and resistant quality of printmaking to be extremely liberating, although I will admit that many people, including many of my own students, find it to be more frustrating than liberating. I have always believed that this frustration stems largely from a misunderstanding of the actual aims of printmaking: namely, an erroneous belief that it is primarily a process by which one can reproduce, in multiples, images that have already been realized through another medium.

While there is a long and rich history of what can be termed reproductive printmaking as a means of more broadly disseminating preexisting images, I have always felt that this is best viewed as an entirely separate field, distinct from the history of printmaking as a means of producing unique and original images. The teachers I had ingrained in me a belief that printmaking should be approached as a way of making
images that cannot be produced by any other means. The types of mark, surface texture, value, color, etc. offered by the process are fundamentally different than those offered by painting or drawing. My first printmaking teacher used to say that every printmaker he knew who made worthwhile images would continue to use the medium even if one ended up with only a single copy rather than multiples. The process should be utilized for what it, and only it, can offer. The concept of publishing prints in consistent editions is an idea that originated in, and is driven by, commercial and not artistic concerns.

If we look at the work of Rembrandt, arguably the greatest and in many ways the most innovative printmaker who ever lived, it is almost impossible to find two copies of an image pulled from the same plate that are identical. He was constantly experimenting with different inks, different papers, different methods of wiping the plate, and often physically changing the image on the plate, in order to produce what are best thought of as variations on a theme rather than editions. It is also instructive to look at how Rembrandt’s approach to making prints changed throughout his life.

Here we have two early and ambitious etchings made by Rembrandt in the 1630s, a Descent from the Cross from 1633 and an image of Christ before Pilate from 1636. The Descent from the Cross is actually a faithful copy (although in reverse) of a painting of the same subject that Rembrandt made a couple of years earlier. These are both technically impressive and in many ways beautifully rendered images, but as he matured as a printmaker, Rembrandt’s approach to etching became more and more closely allied to his approach to drawing, more
fluid, more intuitive, with a far greater variety in the means of description and type of language incorporated. We can compare those first two prints to later versions of the same themes.

Here we have two later versions of The Descent from the Cross, one done in 1642, and the other in 1654. In these prints, one can see Rembrandt’s drawing style open up. This first Descent is an unfinished print and gives us a wonderful picture of Rembrandt’s evolving method of creating images directly on the copper. The beautifully fluid line is combined with marks that begin to structure light and tone in a manner that is closely related to Rembrandt’s mature drawing style. This is one of several unfinished Rembrandt plates that give us direct access to his working methods. The later version of this subject is fully rendered in light and shadow, but in a manner that is much more open-ended than the means used to construct the image from 1633. Detail is swallowed up in the dark passages and dissolved in the bright lights to a much greater degree than in the earlier print. The overall structure of the image is based on the tension between large masses of light and dark, again to a much greater degree than the earlier image.
Here are two versions of Christ Presented to the People from 1655. These are two different incarnations of the same plate. In the later version, Rembrandt has physically cut down the size of the plate and has radically altered the composition by eliminating a large portion of the foreground figures. Again, this simplifies and unifies the overall concept of the image. The etching plate, for Rembrandt, moved from being a surface for rendering preconceived ideas and images to a surface for the discovery of new and unexpected solutions to image-making.

These images by Rembrandt also show another aspect in which printmaking differs from painting. I remember reading something Jacob Bronowski wrote years ago concerning his thoughts on the relationship between research science and the visual arts. In his view, the research scientist and the visual artist had a great deal in common; they were both moving systematically from very general sorts of ideas towards a more specific conclusion. One of the major differences, in Bronowski’s view, was that while the research scientist meticulously documents every step so that someone else can follow the same procedure and arrive at the same conclusion, the visual artist is almost willfully covering his or her tracks as they proceed so that by the time they are finished even they are not quite sure how they arrived where they did. I have always liked this observation. In making a painting, in order to move forward, one is always giving up something that previously existed in favor of a new version. Every adjustment contains both something given up and something gained. In printmaking, one can have ones cake and eat it too. Prints can be pulled at any point and the image is preserved in that state and then one is free to make changes.
and arrive at a new conclusion. This is exactly what Rembrandt ex-
exploited so beautifully in many of his late prints.

At this time, I would like to move the focus to my recent work. I
am certainly aware that moving directly from Rembrandt to my own
work is not necessarily an intelligent move on my part and I ask your
indulgence with this.

Typically in my studio I will have at least two to three different
images in progress at any one time. One may be in its early stages, one
bogged down somewhere in the middle and one nearing completion.
At times these may be all prints, at times all paintings, and at times a
combination. I only mention this because by isolating a single image
and tracking its development, as I am about to do, one can be led to
believe that the road from start to finish is a bit smoother and more
logical than it actually is. In truth, progress on individual images is
spasmodic at best. I also think that it is helpful to have some sense of
previous images which, at least in my mind, are important for the cur-
rent work. Therefore, I will begin with a quick look at important steps
in the body of work that led up to my recent work.

The majority of my work for the past several years has used the
still life as its central motif. The objects which I use to construct these
still lifes are selected from an ever expanding and changing collection
which I keep in my studio. I select or reject objects largely based on
their visual interest to me. Most of the objects are everyday utilitarian
containers or vessels, like cups, bowls, bottles etc., along with a some-
what eclectic selection of toys or playthings. I use these objects much
like children use building blocks: to construct invented worlds. The
set-ups are heavily indebted to architecture, particularly the architec-
ture of Italian hill towns. I am attracted to objects which do not seem
to carry a great deal of baggage in terms of obvious iconography or
symbolism. While to some, I know that it seems that I am making vir-
tually the same still life over and over, I feel that my aims are constantly
evolving, even though those aims may be difficult for me to articulate
clearly. I think that one of my primary attractions to the still life as
subject matter is that it gives me a great deal of freedom to construct a
world that is both tied to the everyday and completely artificial at the
same time.
This first image is a print from perhaps five years ago. It is a woodcut and utilizes a process called reduction printing. This particular print contains nine layers of color or value working from light to dark. The image only gradually reveals itself during the course of building up these layers. It is this slow revelation or discovery of the image that has been of primary interest to me in recent years.

This image is an etching, again four to five years old. For this image, I first developed a linear drawing in graphite on acetate and then transferred this drawing to a photo-sensitized copper plate. This allows me to use a type of line that is difficult if not impossible to achieve working directly on the copper-plate. Another advantage to this process is that it is somewhat unpredictable (at least in my hands). Again this enables me to re-evaluate the image with fresh eyes once it has moved from the acetate to the plate and finally to the page. An engravers burin is used to create the more developed areas of the image.
This image again is developed in its final stages with the burin, but this time the understructure utilizes a process called white-ground etching. This process allows one to create an image that is more painterly in its tonal and textural structure. It can be even more unpredictable than the photo-emulsion process.

This print utilizes two separate copper plates. The first plate was developed using the white-ground process and was printed in a dark green ink. The second plate further refines the imagery using traditional hard-ground etching and was printed in black.
Here is another two-plate print. In this instance, both plates are drawn with the white ground. The first plate lays down an understructure in a yellow ink and the second plate is further developed with the burin and printed in a brown ink.

This print is fairly recent and again is a two-plate print. The yellow plate is made with white-ground and the second plate is created with a process called dry-point and printed in a dark violet ink.
This print was made in the early 1990’s. It was one of my first successful pieces using the white ground process. The image is composed on three plates: one printing yellow, one red, and one blue. This three-plate process is one I decided to revisit in the print that we will look at in more detail.

The image we will look at now is one of a series of five prints that I began working on a little over a year ago and completed this past winter. Each of the images I just went through contains elements that I hoped to incorporate in this series. The original idea for these prints was to create a set of images that used a series of frescoes by Pontormo as their starting point.
The Pontormos are located in a place called the Certosa at Galluzo just south of Florence. Pontormo went to this location in 1522 to escape the plague in Florence and he spent three years producing a series of five images showing scenes from the passion of Christ. Beginning on the left, we have an image of Christ in the Garden, next is Christ before Pilate, then Christ on the road to Calvary, followed by a Lamentation, and a Resurrection. The paintings were originally placed in the covered arcade surrounding an open courtyard in the cloister of the charterhouse. Because of this they were exposed to the elements and suffered considerable damage over the years. At some point they were relocated indoors where they remain on display.

While they certainly are not the same paintings that they originally were in terms of color and detail, I have always found them to be uniquely beautiful in their present state. It is as though the effects of time and weather have stripped the images down to their skeletal understructure. They have a wonderfully mysterious feel of an image that is either in the process of emerging or in the process of disappearing. This stripped down transparency has always reminded me of aspects of multi-plate printmaking.

With my prints I hoped to construct still lifes that in some way echoed the structure of each fresco. At the heart of each set-up I wanted an empty vessel, a bowl or a cup, and I envisioned the rest of the still life as an environment or a structure to contain that object. I was thinking of the still life as an offering or a shrine placed in front of the fresco, both revealing and obscuring the painting. I also was looking to dissolve, to some degree, the boundaries between the still life and the fresco.
Each of the five images began with a number of rudimentary sketches, like the one shown here. In this type of drawing, I am searching for an overall framework that will encompass aspects of the Pontormo (in this case the resurrection fresco) with some sort of still life structure superimposed in front of it. Exactly what the still life is composed of is not yet clarified.

Once I settle on a general direction to pursue I begin constructing the actual set up. This can take anywhere from a few hours to a few days. I like to live with the structure for a while before moving forward, making adjustments and tinkering with it in spare moments in the studio. This photograph shows the version of the set-up that I eventually came up with.
Once I am reasonably satisfied with the still life itself, I begin a series of analytical linear drawings. These drawings allow me to familiarize myself with the composition. Additionally, any final adjustments to the structure can be worked out in this stage. I prefer to keep issues of color, value, lighting, etc. to be worked out during the process of making the plates.

For this image the next step was to remake the drawing in white-ground on the first plate. Typically for the way I approach the multi-plate process, this first plate is intended to print in the lightest color (usually some sort of yellow) in the final print, so the drawing is not a direct transcription of the set up but an estimation of where and in what quantities I will need the yellow.

While I don’t want to spend too much time on technical issues, I probably need to explain a bit about the white-ground process and why I use it. In this process one draws, or paints, with a white paste that can be diluted with water directly onto the copper plate. The paste has the ability to resist the etching action of the acid used to process the plate, but only for a limited time. Where the ground is applied more heavily the plate will appear whiter and where the ground is applied in a thinner solution the plate will appear darker. Essentially one is making an image with white pigment on a dark surface. The areas with the thickest application of ground (visually the lightest areas) will resist the acid for the longest time and will thus print lighter than those areas which are more thinly coated. In theory one simply has to create a drawing that organizes the lights and darks in the desired manner, etch the plate in the acid bath for about 35-40 minutes and the image will be there. In practice it is somewhat unpredictable, offering what I consider to be a nice balance between control and chance.
This is a look at the white ground drawing on the plate just before it is etched. One can see the value range extended from opaque white to the color of the copper itself.

Here is the first proof off of this plate after it has been etched. At this point, unless there are significant changes required on the first plate, the image is transferred to a second plate.
Here is the first plate printed in a yellow ochre ink to give me an idea of what it will look like. I also use this proof to help determine how the next plate should be drawn. The second plate is then worked up with the white-ground, but this time the drawing is intended to reflect where the image will require the second color to be used (in this case red). Again the plate is etched and proofed and again, if it does not require serious reworking, the image is transferred to the third and, in this case, final plate.

This is a proof with both the yellow and the red plates printed. I use this image to help gauge what the final plate in the process (in this case it was intended to print in blue) should look like. During the creation of this series of prints there were several times when I was very intrigued with the combination of the red and yellow plates. I hope, in the near future, to explore the possibility of developing an entire image in this range of color. In this print, the two plates came together almost more successfully than I wished. I get a little worried when an image begins to get too concrete too quickly. The whole process is one which works best when it moves from general ideas toward more specific and
detailed conclusions. My third plate, however, dispelled any fears I had by throwing everything into a much more amorphous state.

This is not unusual in the creation of multi-plate images. I always tell my students that, until you actually see all the plates printed together, you are more or less groping in the dark. The real informed work and decision making begins at this point.

This version of the image had several problems that I felt needed to be addressed. The most basic of these was mis-registration of the blue plate in relation to the first two plates. This is not an unusual problem and can generally be solved with a little scrutiny and patience. I also felt that the blue was more pervasive than I wanted it to be. This required significant alteration, both deletions and additions, to that plate. Although the print in this state was not what I was looking for in this series, the nature of the blue plates interaction with the other two plates gave me ideas that led to two smaller images.
These two prints were made in response to that proof as a way of keeping busy while I debated over how to bring the Pontormo series to a conclusion. Oftentimes I find that this type of diversion can allow me to return to the problem at hand with more clarity.

This version of the print contains extensive changes to the blue plate, scraping away some areas, reducing others by various degrees, and adding some work with the burin to intensify some values. Both the yellow and the red plates have also been reworked, but to a lesser degree. There are several intermediate proofs in this final sequence which I am not showing simply because the changes are very slight. The closer I get to finishing an image, the more tentative I get in what I am willing to do. I can often spin my wheels by going through a number of proofs with very slight changes before I work up the nerve to really attack existing problems.
After another round or two of alterations, again to all three plates, this is the image in its final state. Deciding when an image is actually complete is certainly an inexact science, at least for me. I have always felt that my tendency is to overwork things so as an image nears completion I generally slow everything down. When I first pull a proof I may be initially excited or disappointed but I generally find that when I return to the studio after a day or two my reaction is different, sometimes more positive, sometimes less so. This also gives me time to compare the present state of things to previous proofs to see if I made a wrong turn somewhere. Once I decide that the image is satisfactory, I try to print the edition, usually no more than five to ten prints. This allows me to put that image behind me and move on to something else.
I would like to conclude today’s talk by taking a brief look at the five prints based on the Pontormo frescoes. These are all three plate etchings, developed mainly with the white ground process. On the left we have Christ in the Garden, followed by Christ before Pilate, the road to Calvary, the Lamentation, and the Resurrection.