



PRINTMAKING AS PERFORMANCE

The history of printmaking in Europe begins 600 years ago, around 1410, that is, if we're thinking about it under that elusive rubric "printmaking as a fine art." But then it's also a fine art initially meant for the public at large. Today the notion that printmaking centers around the production of relatively small, accessible and inexpensive multiples that can be lined up like post cards on a wall, that history is being pushed to new limits. Major exhibitions in Boston, New York and Philadelphia have enlarged this view of the print—prints come off the wall, are hung in mid-air, displayed at odd angles or heights, run in strips down walls and around corners, and are printed on plastic, cloth and all manner of papers and sizes. Techniques are not just mechanical, they are increasingly digital. The new works coming from the Zea Mays Printmaking Studio are a provocative confirmation of this spirit of our time. What does this imply for the history of printmaking past, present and future?

Without meaning to deny the novelty of much contemporary printmaking, we can also say that, in many ways once again, the more things change, the more they remain the same. Technical variety and innovation have always been an integral part of fine art printmaking. The early techniques of woodcut and copper plate engraving were quickly and continually supplemented by etching, drypoint, aquatint, mezzotint, lithography, silkscreen and so on. The use of environmentally friendly, non-toxic resources employed at Zea Mays thus represents the latest in a long line of printmakers' search for new and exciting ways to ink a firm surface and then watch the intriguing transformations that take place when that inked surface is pressed against another receptive material such as paper. Already in the 16th century images were printed on silk and satin. By the 17th century artists were experimenting with delicate Japanese papers. Prints have always ranged in size from tiny decorative niello engravings to multi-panel broadsides. As with the wide audience for which prints were intended, the works' subject matter has also been traditionally and still today quite varied, political, social, religious, meditative or strident, book illustrations with or without texts. And since the late 19th century images have been produced singly, as monoprints, or in multiple editions.

Although printmaking has often been considered a popular, lower form of artistic expression, prints have always depended on a "smart audience," potential buyers attuned to the artists' self-conscious use and simultaneous extension of printmaking conventions. There is fresh evidence for this in the production of prints for the current Zea Mays installation. Found here is both a reflection and intensification of the traditional tactile appeal of prints, the viewer's desire to touch and to hold, to imagine the print as a fabric, taking on a three-dimensional life of its own. A series of images made by printing can be inherently thoughtful and temporal, following the course of life or feeling, human or animal, over time—and it can be fun, too. In line with the printing process itself, the images can emerge clearly or faintly, be boldly graphic or surface only through transparent layers of ink, wax, paper or cloth. Prints now make increasingly palpable, through the subtlety of the techniques themselves, the layers of consciousness with which we approach any work of art.

The Zea Mays artists and their works do raise the bar for audience awareness—they need a smart viewer—as they provide vivid demonstrations of creative license alongside convention, printmaking as on-going performance, even one with little or no ink. One might wonder if these two elements, artist and audience, will keep pace with each other, or if they at all times need to. The history of printmaking thus far says yes—which has meant that artistic freedom in printmaking was not absolute. What now?