"THE EVOLUTION OF A PRINTMAKER"

by

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B.S. Florida State University 1985

A Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art
Of the University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
Of the
Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
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Upon entering graduate school, my artistic background consisted of several different factors. My educational experience was in painting and drawing as an undergraduate, I was very comfortable in the use of pen and ink and watercolor to illustrate my concepts. I considered myself a draftsman, and used color to enhance the black and white mark. I was looking at artists such as Alan Cober and Jack Unruh, both nationally acclaimed illustrators in their own right. Life, National Geographic, Time magazines were amongst some of their clients. I studied under Alan Cober in a summer workshop at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. Jack Unruh and I knew one another on a personal level after having met in Dallas where I am from. Both men used pen and ink as a mark-making tool, and both had their own personal signature when they made “that” mark. Color in their work was truly secondary, and not entirely used throughout but as spot color. I felt that this allowed the viewer a hint of the possible, without giving them the full color spectrum. Both mark making and the limited use of color became very important elements in my own work. In my studio practice, during this time, I assigned social, moral and religious beliefs to humans and animals. This anthropologic concept involved characters, emotional landscapes, and raised the consciousness of the viewer concerning personal issues that were present in their own lives, or issues that may pertain to someone they knew.

About this time, I was introduced to printmaking. After talking to a friend who was getting her Master’s degree in painting at Southern Methodist University, she advised me to speak with two fellow professors at the same institution about my work. This was more of a critical analysis of where I was and where my art could go in my artistic career. After discussing my work with the two professors, I was asked to participate in a continuing education course in printmaking. They felt that a lot of my work would translate much better as a print due to the mark making that I was creating with pen and ink. After a year of etching experience, mostly in hard ground and aquatint, I built a
portfolio of prints that reflected not only my conceptual concerns, but transformed my pen and ink mark making into a much bolder, more defined mark on the printed page.

With these factors in mind, I had a strong conceptual and technical direction going into my first year of graduate school. Even though I had experience in etching, there were other elements of printmaking that I was unfamiliar with or that I hadn't used in over twenty years. One of those elements was lithography. The very first litho print that I did was a small dog drawing entitled, "Let Sleeping Dogs Lie," that I literally sketched on a stone in a few hours. This was a totally different experience than working with a stylus on a metal plate. The kind of tonality that I was used to getting with aquatints was very different in stone litho. Tones could be made to be very subtle and pleasing, with the look of hand drawing. This was a process that I could really delve into, given the time. The problem was the time issue. Lithography isn't as instant to me as intaglio was, and took more work to get a decent print. In hindsight I wished that I had more time to give, but I was very satisfied in the prints that I did pull. In subsequent editions I learned multi-color registration, and experimented with color, which I hadn't done thus far in printmaking.

Another major influence was book arts. My first course launched my mind set into a more sculptural realm, especially later in my graduate career when I began working with metal fabrication and iron casting. Working with paper seemed a logical extension of printmaking. I have always been interested in structural books and what they convey to the reader. Not only in the written word, but the design quality, the structure of the book, and the various resources of paper and binding techniques that can be used. Professor Margot Ecke effectively taught me all facets of book arts. Professor Ecke challenged me to make the best work I possibly could in and outside of her class. Making boxes was perhaps the highlight of the course, and was a stepping off point to
making three-dimensional sculptural work. In total, I made five boxes, most of which were reliquaries of animal remains. These boxes contained animal remains such as antlers, skulls and bones. “Deer box” was one such box. Antlers came out of either side of the box, while the skull was hidden inside. The viewer had to lift the lid of the box to expose the rest of the horn, skull, and acorns that littered the bottom of the box. I also put a hunting smell, called “fresh earth” that gave the viewer the smell of the woods as an extra sensory sensation. In the next year and a half and beyond school, my interest lay in that conceptual realm. From davey board, to decorative paper, to steel and fur, I saw numerous opportunities in the creative field of box making.

In terms of etching, I continued to make images that invoked narratives of metaphoric and allegorical characters and environments that in some sense became surreal. “Fear of Retribution”, and “Recycle Animals” were two works that emphasized this conceptually context. As far as technique, I was still working only with line using hard ground etching, and avoiding all sense of tone in the image. Not until the end of my first year did I incorporate any type of tonal value using aquatint; mainly because my imagery needed a more brooding atmosphere to heighten the intensity of the scene being played out. The first etching that made use of this type of atmosphere was “Domestic Tranquility.” It was a large plate, wherein I related a personal experience that I had recently been involved in. Dark blacks using heavy aquatints, obese and naked characters, and an ominous household room environment set the stage for a group of three large prints that would carry on into my second year. This series of prints made up two levels of a home, the ground floor and the basement. The basement diptych, “My Oppressor, My Love,” had an even darker environment than the ground floor prints. The light source used were lit torches, causing deep shadows and highlights on the figures in the room. The characters were portrayed in a more darker, sinister environment. This new imagery also reached a new level of macabre. Dungeon like
qualities were represented in brooding, ominous aquatints. I wanted the figures to be a part of the landscape, instead of being front and center on the picture plane, making the figures literally melt into the walls. After several critiques it was mentioned that my application of aquatint was too deliberate, that it wasn’t applied in a spontaneous, dirty enough manner. Taking the plates, I went back and applied the aquatint more randomly, using larger brushstrokes in a large sweeping motion, not caring if I covered up details of figures. I also used open spit bite in the process, creating a greater overall darkening effect. I might also mention here that I continued to use very large etching plates, mainly 22” x 30”. I had only done one larger plate in the past, feeling more comfortable in an 11” x 14” range or smaller. The decision to go larger was based on the work of a fellow graduate student, Janie Askew. Janie’s raw application of line, gritty blacks, and her ability to burnish and scrape large areas to create a beautiful visceral feel to the plate and paper surface, pushed me to explore new ways of obtaining the same types of mark making. I believe that both plates were very successful in their ability to show the dark, ominous appearance of the dungeon like basement that I had envisioned. I learned that concept was only “skin deep”, and that the etching technique truly made the characters come to life. It also made the viewer stick with the piece, inviting them to investigate the characters and what they were physically doing amongst the heavy blacks and grays that the aquatint and spit bite created.

In having created four very large prints in this spontaneous etching method, I felt more confident in my abilities as printmaker. In this technical vein, I would like to discuss another plate that I had been working on simultaneously with the larger plates. I feel this is an important discussion, because it was a landmark piece in my graduate career, in how I responded to and worked with a technical mistake. “Pet Cemetery” was about half the size of the larger plates. Methodically, I spent several weeks producing the line work in hard ground. Having finished this part of the process, I put the plate into acid to
etch for an hour and a half. As I took the plate out of the acid and began to wipe off the hard ground I noticed that the plate was not as well covered as I thought. The layer of hard ground was too thin, and a false bite was created. The spit bite left large black streaks in my image area. I debated over whether I should start over, burnish and scrape areas, or leave it alone the way it was. I took the plate to my major professor, Jon Swindler, for advice. That advice was to work with the accident. Embrace it for what it was and what affect it created. I realized that at this time that it was the best advice I could have gotten, and will stay with throughout my artistic career. In my case, this accident created a visual breakdown of the image, as though it was decomposing. Burnishing and scraping away the affected areas would only enhance the mistakes that were made. By leaving it, a menacing aura was created in the image. The character of the little girl burying her pets left even more question marks about what she was doing. Again, I believe the wisdom that I received was pivotal in my training.

Also in the fall semester of my second year of graduate school, I broadened my ability to not only work two dimensionally, but to expand my interests to three-dimensional sculptural pieces. Previous to this, I had already been making sculptural pieces out of davey board and decorative paper, along with animal remains to create reliquaries. But I could only go so far with the materials that I was using. All of my book arts boxes started to look the same, and conceptually started to look very stale. I needed to find new ways to fabricate different types of materials, meaning metal. With a background in construction, I felt very comfortable taking a course in metal fabrication. I had also wanted to learn the art of welding and what direction that could take me in my artistic endeavors. Part of my career and graduate school philosophy has been to assemble as much knowledge as I could from a variety of resources. As I put it, “more tools in my tool belt.” Learning metal fabrication was one of my goals. As I learned the processes of metal working, my mind shifted from printmaking and what it had to offer me
conceptually to what sculpture, in this case metal, could bring to the table. There was never a thought to replace printmaking with sculpture, but to bring to life the characters and environments on paper to a new level by using them in a three dimensional manner. It was exciting to have a new way of expressing an idea or concept, without just looking at a printmaking or book arts as a solution to the problem. It made me realize that I could combine mediums to make a more cohesive work of art. I did this on several pieces, including a box “Remains of the Day,” in which I combined an etching of a deer on Japanese paper, a Davey board box covered in deer fur, and a steel outer box that was cut, fabricated and welded. The staleness that I had felt with the book arts boxes was now transcended into a piece that was more tactile and visually exciting. I proceeded to make two other reliquary boxes out of metal and mixed media, as well as thirty foot long installation entitled, “How to Kill a Bug.” This piece was constructed out of fabricated metal, wood, rope, and found objects, mainly a tricycle, jump rope and an antique pulley.

In considering found objects, I would like to inject another pivotal moment in my graduate school career. This moment was a fifteen-minute private critique given by Paul Kos in my studio. At that time I was merely scratching the surface of book arts boxes and metal fabrication, figuratively just getting my feet wet on what the possibilities were or could be in my sculptural work. Only knowing Paul in passing, I asked him to come to my studio for an informal talk about my work. At that time I was very proud of the work that I was producing, but humility soon set in as we talked. He admired the craftsmanship and what was incurred conceptually, but felt a real void in its solution. He pointed to the use of “found objects” instead of making the actual objects themselves. I was familiar with Joseph Cornell, Rauschenberg, Duchamp, Beuys, etc., and knew what the possibilities were with the right combinations of raw man-made material in the right artistic context. This sensibility had eluded me, mainly because I was in a mode of
handcrafting, and couldn't see beyond the delicacy and detail of making it myself. Once I stepped outside of that world into a world of collecting objects I started seeing another resource that I had omitted. Found objects and their use will become an important topic later on in this paper as I speak to my MFA thesis and the thought process that went into its conceptual construction. Without argument, this short critique became the basis for new explorations into the eventual combination of print and sculpture.

My thirty-hour review was scheduled in Spring 2009, for a gallery space in November 2009. I split the gallery space with Janie Askew, whose work I felt mirrored mine in both in conceptual content and in the visceral feel of mark making. My thought process in devising what I would show in the space, was to show all of the technical resources that I had engaged in up to this point. This included ceramics, sculpture and prints. I also believed that even though there was different mediums represented, that they would come together in a cohesive, conceptual body of work. In my mind, I wanted to show my audience that I was able to cross over into other areas of artistic concentrations, combine them, creating a bridge between printmaking and sculpture. I ultimately showed seven prints, and eight freestanding sculptures, which were situated on pedestals in front of the prints. On the day of my review, Jon Swindler, Melissa Harshman, Larry Millard, Mark Callahan, and Margaret Morrison evaluated my work and how I presented it in the gallery space. To be honest I was shocked and humbled by their critical response to the work. As an artist, you are proud and biased by what you have put into your work, and unrealistically expect every comment to be a positive one. As the discussion escalated, a number of reservations came to the surface as they reviewed my work. Mainly, that the bridge that I thought that I built between print and sculpture was non-existent. In their opinion, the prints stood on their own and the sculpture did the same. The cohesion that I felt conceptually was not apparent to the viewer. This obvious warning sign, made me rethink how I could link print with
sculpture, and how to make that clear conceptually. The word “installation” was also injected, which pertained to the way presented my work in the space. I also realized as well, that I needed to curate the amount of pieces and the quality of pieces that I was showing. Less is more. Even though I passed my review, I still felt reservation from the panel on what my next step would be in order to solve these problems. In addition, I was hoping to work on completing my MFA thesis show in the next 3 months. So for me, the major questions that lay before me were; first, bridging the gap between print and sculpture; second, gallery presentation pertaining to installation; and third, curation. However, my biggest concern continued to be how to bridge the gap between print and sculpture.

With my review behind me, and my MFA thesis show looming in the near months ahead, I started looking at how I would proceed with a lot of question marks dotting the landscape. Initially I thought of doing four or five individual sculptures that would combine both print and sculpture qualities. All of which would either be free standing sculptures or would be arranged on pedestals. As I was sketching out ideas and formulating the materials needed to make the pieces, I found myself collecting a number of different objects from various Internet resources, as well as shops and flea markets. My studio was already lined with skulls, bones, fur, and man-made trinkets, and other unusual artifacts that I had collected over the years. So, this type of collecting process was not new to the way I worked. In the past I collected objects that not only had a visceral and formal qualities, but also the narrative story behind them. Usually I would take individual pieces and mold them into a piece that I was creating. As I began to acquire these objects I realized that I was working on a small scale. I began to consider that perhaps I shouldn’t see each object as an individual item, but see the objects as components of an entire collection. I soon started to see that the individual sculptures that I was contemplating for my show were not acting as the whole that I envisioned.
They needed to look like a collective unit. But the question remained how could I merge print and sculpture, create an installation that would make these pieces appear as one entity without it appearing visually chaotic. I started looking at artists such as Mark Dion, Joseph Cornell, Robert Rauschenberg, and Joseph Beuys, most of whom I had mentioned earlier in this paper. Their assemblage of collected items had a visual attachment to one another, not necessarily in a thematic way, but in a formal reverence. Each piece was selected for its shape, form, color, and tactile and visceral quality. All collections were presented carefully in a some type of housing that created structure and unity to their collections. Dion’s wooden cabinets were very formal and institutional, where the other artists used found objects, such as frames and boxes to encase their objects. All of which had validity to their given collections, but I felt that mine had to be more unique and speak only to my own personal collection. Type of objects and how they were to be installed and shown in a gallery space were the two most highly considered objectives when approaching this project.

The first step was sketching out how the collection would be housed. Looking around my studio I noticed that most of the pieces already assembled were put on various shelves around my workspace. Mechanically I drew up a system of shelves that I would create using angle iron as the structural web, and then use wood for the shelves themselves. All would be carefully welded so that no seams would be visible. Certain objects were taken into consideration when designing the shelving unit, but most spaces were left to chance, and would be filled in as the collection developed. I will state at this point that the entire installation was not conceived as a whole unit. Ideas appeared as the piece took shape. Even during installation, pieces were moved and curated to make a more dramatic effect.
In the collection process, one void that I did see as I analyzed other artists, was the lack of a thematic approach to the process of collecting and the eventual installation of the piece. Considering that my prior work contained inferences to animals, both scientifically and spiritually, I felt this would be a logical step in acquiring objects for the collection. These acquisitions also served as a social voice to the spiritual reverence of animals, and a tongue and cheek attitude to the act of killing, consumption, and death. I wanted the collection to have an underlying sense of nostalgia, to bring to light how we as humans deal with the sanctity of life and how precious it really is. The collection must also consist of prints or the act of printmaking, a vital piece in connecting paper and three-dimensional designs. The prints could either be found or made in a traditional printing process. Color was also considered. Neutral colors were the predominant tonal range, while reds were consciously splashed throughout the installation to create better eye flow as the viewer studies the piece.

I started in several different directions. Part of my time was spent in the sculpture department welding the shelving unit, while the other half of my time was spent collecting items for the installation. This was done by scouring Internet auction sites, frequenting flea markets and antique shops, natural history museum, scientific illustration collection, and just finding organic material in wood. A large part of the installation was a taxidermied elk mount that I had bought on eBay from a man in Tulsa, Oklahoma. This piece was a major item in my show because it directed the viewer's eyes back into the bigger installation, due to the fact that the elk's head was turned inwards. Two weeks before the show opening, I drove two thousand two hundred miles to Texas to pick it up and returned to Athens. As I collected the items I was solely going on the idea of form, shape and visceral quality that the item had. I also liked the fact that some objects came with their own unique stories. So, I collected items for almost three months, and in that time, had no idea of how they would fit on the shelves as a unit, if I had to
much or to little, and was their a narrative link between them all. A lot of it would be left
till the time of installation. At that time, I would gather all of the objects, curate them,
and then assemble them in a strong conceptual arrangement. In my mind, it would be a
complete success or a huge failure.

I began installing two weeks before the show, allowing myself plenty of time to see the
collection as a whole on the shelving unit, and giving me time to pick and choose what
actually be in the installation. Along with the shelving unit, I also produced a number of
prints of dead birds that I digitally printed on different types of printmaking paper. The
prints were hung on the wall with masking tape and also inserted into a hand-made
portfolio that was located on a podium that I had sculpted using a railroad tie and steel
fabrication. The use of letterpress and darts were distributed amongst the prints.
Antique Sears targets were enlarged to 38” x 50” on Stonehenge paper and hung under
the dead bird prints. Another important facet to the installation was specimen tags that I
had letter pressed. These were scattered on the shelves with their corresponding objects.
Each tag told the story behind the object. These were either historical, educational, or
collection types of stories. In my mind the whole installation came together, and every
question that I had initially asked, and was asked of me in my thirty-hour review was
answered.

The day of my gallery opening, I invited my oral exam committee to the gallery to
critically talk about my work. Having my thirty-hour review only a few months earlier, I
was not sure of the panel’s response to my work. The biggest comment that I took from
the exam, was that the committee members all agreed that I had listened to their
concerns at my thirty hour review, and proceeded to fix whatever problems there were
in presentation, merging print and sculpture, and curating the amount of work in the
given gallery space that I was allotted. Other comments dealt with the delicacy of the
dead prints, and the way that I had presented them in such an elegant manner. The use of color in certain areas of the installation, made the eye flow throughout. Specimen tags were pointed out as a nice layering device for the narrative, but perhaps the way the tags were written upon could have been handled differently. All in all, the attitude toward my work was very positive. I am hopeful that my MFA instillation piece will be a strong launching point for later collections that I will investigate.

In Summary, my two years at The University of Georgia have taken down several positive creative paths. My goal in coming to graduate school was to learn as many artistic processes as possible, get strong academic feedback on my work, and to grow as an artist both conceptually and in a technical manner. I think I have achieved all of these goals. Without coming back to graduate school, I would not have raised the level of my artistic ability to what it is now. I feel that the faculty and my peers got the most out me as an artist. I strived to be the best in my art and what I showed to the public. The University of Georgia and its faculty have given me a tremendous start to a future in art that hopefully will be enlighting and successful. Now that I have worked on my craft, I am eager to see what the art world has in store for me. I would like to thank the professors that have had a major impact on my life. Thanks to Jon Swindler, Margot Ecke, Margaret Morrison, Joe Norman, Mark Callahan, Larry Millard, Jim Buonaccorsi, Didi Dunphy, Asen Kirin and Paul Kos. Their brilliance as educators, and their love for the arts will forever be with me as I leave this institution. You have been a true inspiration to me. Thank you!