

Making Their Mark Through Time: 21st Century Printmakers Create Their Own History

by Olympia Lambert

Archaeologists have found remnants of human mark-making dating as far back as the Paleolithic era. What do the drawings and etchings on the cave walls of Lascaux mean? Perhaps these earliest of artists were trying to represent their natural and spiritual worlds, or maybe they simply wanted to tell a story. From the earliest of woodcuts traced to the 15th Century, to the advent of recent 21st Century advancements in digital technology, contemporary printmakers are also endeavoring to make their own historical mark.

The artists featured in *Ancient Echoes in Contemporary Printmaking* all express an intimate relationship to the natural world, telling unique stories using a diverse array of approaches. Whether conjuring up images of the interstellar (such as Mary Pinto's *Constellation*) or intracellular (Tomomi Ono's *Spring*), there is an undeniable unity on display. Multiple pieces of evidence are collected to translate experience: in Ono's case, it is a seedpod; in Jessica Baker's case, a leaf; Michael Herstand uses a mountain range; Pinto gives us galactic assemblages; and for Brian Lynch it is the retelling of a man's journey to catch the best wave. Metaphors abound: rebirth, renewal, how we relate to the very small and to the very large. The creative process is what helps each of these artists convey their own narratives in a deeply personal manner.

Knowing what makes a print a true work of art takes time, but it also takes talent. In the case of Brian Lynch, a mastery of printmaking combined with a delightful sense of humor results in images nostalgically reminding us that we're never too far from one another, yet distance can be valuable. In our modern era we find ourselves increasingly fragmented for time, with some of the simplest and most enjoyable moments of the day woefully overlooked. Lynch takes scenes he witnesses at a moment's glance, capturing mundane moments of time that are isolated and reworked as artistic creations. Commonplace objects and people are sketched as gestural drawings on his Palm Pilot, scanned into a computer, digitally manipulated, and then printed on the "plate," which in Lynch's case, is a piece of paper.

In his own way, Lynch merges new technology with the sentiment of days' past. In *Bus With Lights*, suddenly the harried bus driver barreling down upon his next passenger is seen in prostrate -- the charcoal smoke of exhaust fumes forming a thick fog around his carriage. The inky mist that lingers as plate tone is imagery straight out of *The Twilight Zone*. Though often his subjects are from the nation's most populous city, each could be the last man on earth: a sense of man-made isolation pervades throughout. Because the natural realm has been replaced by concrete, nature for the average city dweller is not necessarily the furry or feathered creature of the forest, but humanity itself. An appreciation of solitary moments abounds throughout Lynch's work. This appreciation translates well in Lynch's copper plate etching, *The Surfer*: a quiet moment captured between a man and his surfboard on the beach. You can almost hear the rush of the tide against the shore at sunset while the lone surfer seems intent on setting his own course, enjoying his moment while avoiding the undertow -- a narrative that might describe the artist himself.

A master lithographer, Tomomi Ono's process could be described as a prime example of the sheer determination needed to undertake the laborious process of lithography. Ono knows that the slightest smudge of the waxy crayon on the plate's surface can greatly affect the work, so she applies the lightest touch to the limestone before placing it on her 150 year old printing press. The entire lithographic process is a lesson in discipline. The repetition involved is physically exhausting, requiring the constant lifting of heavy plates and the grinding of carborundum grits into the limestone. Ono's work is not merely a print, but a labor of love.

The resulting images are delicate and refined. Ono offers an intricate look into sprouts, seed pods and

stones not necessarily derived from nature, but imagination. They give the impression of microscopic life at its most basic form: the cell. The softness of the artist's touch is evident throughout her pieces. In *Seed Loop*, the chain-like formation of the seedlings resembles an asteroid belt, or galaxy being formed in a nebulous sea of stars and matter. Ono's color palette is sepia toned mixed with soft pastels, and the objects clustered together seemingly search for strength in numbers. There is a methodical purpose to their order as each seedling or pod must rely upon the next in a string of connections. Ono's unconventional use of the lithographic print results in extraordinary sculptural installations. She uses handmade rice paper for the prints, affixes them to wood panels and arranges them in a series. Carving out small indentations in the flat surface of the panel, she inserts notches that convey a sense of vulnerability, the artist fully exposing herself to the audience. Here, we witness just how fragile each of the subjects are and feel the need to treasure every newly imagined life form as if we are their only protection from the elements.

The ephemeral subject nature of Ono's work translates literally into the fragile materials used in Jessica Baker's prints. She challenges what is commonly accepted as artistic material by taking actual leaves from nature and using them as her paper. Capturing nature's own detritus from the molted leaves of trees in Brooklyn, Baker utilizes the shedding of the old to make way for the new. She holds her subjects captive in their natural surfaces, embellished with new symbolism. Each leaf is printed with an etching, monotype, or monoprint containing a repeating circular symbol continuously referencing the body in spiritual, yoga-inspired poses: arms and feet grasping and forming almost spoon-like intersections between mind and body. Concentric circles appear, each sinewy line embracing the next. The images are symbolic in their nature with perhaps a nod to ancient civilization. Printing on the leaves creates a unique effect: the ink settling within the cellular makeup of their fibrous density and becoming nature's own part of the design.

While the prints on the leaves convey a direct connection to nature, Baker's circular monotypes and monoprints printed on paper connect the viewer to their own humble beginnings, and to the beginning of life itself. The monoprint *Black in Blue in Yellow Circle* presents two forces side by side, as if in utero. In *Circular Repetition*, Baker's inclusion of sequential curved lines caressing each other in increasing frequency seems to evoke aerial photography of a strip mine. We see how one layer begets another one, and then another one, until there is nothing left but an empty, hollowed-out core. As the ink pools in the center of the work, it brings out the shadows produced on the edges. The inky depths of the center are boundless, like the murky water in a quarry's pit. It is as if the artist is referencing infinity and the pursuit of life eternal.

Michael Herstand connects to the natural world through more traditional means. He is an artist keen to utilize the sculptural elements inherent in woodcuts to carve out his own narratives. The ideas for his prints come from paintings created en plein air, which he then brings back to his studio to rework into woodblock prints. Herstand's residencies overseas in Iceland and Norway have inspired images of profound humility and reverence for nature. In *The Queen of Svarfardardalur* the viewer feels like a mere speck compared to the majestic realm presented. The artist is able to connect the viewer to the scenery through a deft hand which cleaves rich depths of light and shadow. Though conceived of in great detail, each work feels as light as air.

A particularly striking element of Herstand's work is the depiction of the mountains of Norway jutting forth into a cold yellow winter sky. Herstand literally splits his wood blocks into two horizontal plates – one for land, the other for sky – in order to achieve the perfect light/dark effect of land abutting horizon. The rocks jut forth from their volcanic beginnings, growing up and out, and creating their own story. Each season, as tributaries freeze, a new narrative begins; the ice melts and the streams make their way to the valley beneath, carving out new rock formations in an endlessly repeating cycle. Herstand's process also involves repetition: multiple prints are made until the right balance is achieved. In his piece, *Sun and Snow*, we are confronted by an arid simplicity. A light wash of watercolor placed on the final print gives the work an almost unidentifiable time-stamp. The soft northern lights of the Nordic seasons make us ponder if we are witnessing a spring thaw or the beginning of winter. The ascending sun serves as the storyteller here and seems to beckon us to come closer.

Mary Pinto's photographs also entice the viewer to come closer, in her case to uncover the mysterious imagery they contain. Pinto uses the cameraless photographic process pioneered by William Henry Fox Talbot and made popular by Man Ray. She places objects (whether it be grains of salt, beads, or a plastic flower stem) directly upon color negative paper and exposes them to light, creating a negative image. Her work has a terrific range – from her *Repair* series (which brings to mind medical sutures or stitches), to the lush botanics of *Flowers and Things*; to the realm of science fiction come alive in her installation *Constellation* -- continuously testing the medium's boundaries. In her *Chemical Landscapes* series we find no additives, but through a hyper-exposure process of the development agent to light, the work exudes the aura of a pastoral landscape. Soft gradient hues hum and flow seamlessly into one another, appearing as sunlit horizon floating above an undulating sea.

In Pinto's *Red Giant* c-print installation, a semi-random regrouping of portions of her previous works, the individual elements congeal into a formation not unlike the tiny platelets found in blood plasma. The work's title evokes the greatest of celestial behemoths, yet also relates to the tiniest of human cellular structures. Each individual pigment coalesces together as if in a star cluster. In her *Constellation* installation, Pinto meticulously cuts out circular shapes from individual images of her c-prints and lines an entire gallery wall with a series of nebulous planetary-like formations. It is the mark of true confidence for an artist to take an original print and then rework it. Pinto herself is witnessing a birth: that of herself as an artist who is soon to make her mark, shining as bright as the star clusters invoked by her creations. It is a lesson that no progress can be made without letting go of the old in order to create the new.

All of the artists in this exhibit have created something new from something old. Whether using advancements in color pigmentation, printmaking technology and modern-day computerized imagery, or the traditional techniques of etching, lithography or wood carving, each of these printmakers have recreated their experience of the natural realm through the artifice of the man-made world. Though inks eventually fade, reinforced papers disintegrate, and limestone and leaves crumble, these five artists demonstrate that leaving something behind for future generations is uniquely human. The permanence is what lies in the celebration of the story.