



## Prix de Print No. 22

### Aerial: Other Cities #9 by Susan Goethel Campbell

Juried by Katie Michel

This iteration of the *Art in Print* Prix de Print has been judged by Katie Michel. The Prix de Print is a bimonthly competition, open to all subscribers, in which a single work is selected by an outside juror to be the subject of a brief essay. For further information on entering the Prix de Print, please go to our website: <http://artinprint.org/about-art-in-print/#competitions>.

*Susan Goethel Campbell, Aerial: Other Cities #9 (2015)*

Woodblock print with perforations, 23 1/2 x 30 3/4 inches. Edition of 10. Printed and published by P.R.I.N.T. Press, Denton, TX. \$2,000.

Susan Goethel Campbell's perforated woodblock print *Aerial, Other Cities #9* (2015) captures the contemporary landscape with ambivalent, quiet elegance. In a sea of swirling night, spots of light pick out a map—freeways, city streets, the tight grids of residential real estate—interrupted by irregular swathes of blackness: the edge of water or the rise of undeveloped hills, perhaps. A multidisciplinary artist concerned with the relationship between human industry and nature, Campbell has spent most of her adult life in Detroit (she is currently interim head of print media at Cranbrook Academy of Art), a city whose decay has become iconic of urban Rust Belt decline. Residential neighborhoods and once-humming factories have given way to empty open space; the municipal fabric is in constant flux. In 2011 she spent a year documenting the skies of her hometown with a webcam, compiling the sped-up

results into a three-hour video, *Detroit Weather, 365 Days*. This close observation of nature in an urban setting was a catalyst for her ongoing series of large, nighttime, birds-eye views of cities.

Campbell's subject matter taps into a long tradition in American printmaking, and her work has some of the romantic cadence of Arthur Wesley Dow's New England woodblocks from the early 1900s and Charles Sheeler's later precisionist screenprints of industrial America. In the decades between Dow, Sheeler and ourselves, however, technology has changed the way we view the world and also the nature of the world we view. First, there is the commonplaceness of flight: commercial aviation has given us a different perspective on the landscape, and Campbell always takes a window seat when she flies. Second, there are our digital devices: Campbell uses her iPhone the way previous generations used graphite



*Susan Goethel Campbell, video still from Detroit Weather, 365 Days (2011).*

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Susan Goethel Campbell, *Aerial: Other Cities #9* (2015). Photo: Tim Thayer.

pencils and paper. She takes photographs from her plane window and edits them in Photoshop to prepare the compositions that she then makes through traditional craft means. The prints, like the land they depict, bear the footprint of industry, and Campbell, like Sheeler, recognizes the mixed blessing this is. The spray of lights is spectacular and beautiful, even as it marks human intervention and the destruction of nature. The phrase “light pollution” comes to mind, with its troubling conflation of the first good (“and there was light”) with CO<sub>2</sub>’s dire threat to all life on the planet.

For Campbell, the qualities of the wooden matrix are as critical as the layout of the city portrayed. She usually works with birch and lets it be the muse: rather than carving or cutting the block, she roughs its surface to exacerbate the grain. Printed in multiple layers of graduated blacks and grays, its patterns

become wind, clouds, immense sky and solid land. The grain and its imperfections are translated onto delicate paper so that you sense the fragility of the environment in her choices of paper and wood. The pattern of lights is formed by holes punched through the printed paper with a Japanese screw punch, following a Mylar map prepared by the artist.

*Aerial, Other Cities #9*, was realized through P.R.I.N.T. (Print Research Institute of North Texas) at the University of North Texas, a fine-art press where artists and master printers work with students and faculty on collaborative print projects. With the aid of student printers, Campbell was able to produce an edition of ten; her earlier woodblocks—produced on her own or with one assistant—exist only as unique works or in editions of just two or three.

The Prix de Print was my first introduction to Campbell’s work—a very

welcome one. In her print, one can see allusions to the cycles of civilization and the ongoing dialectic of development and decay between human society and non-human nature. More immediately, her image acknowledges the excitement and mystery of coming and going via air, but also leaves us to wonder about our impact on our skies and land. Its rich ambiguity reminded me of these lines from Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “Questions of Travel”:

*Continent, city, country, society:*

*The choice is never wide and never free.*

*And here or there... No. Should we have stayed at home,*

*Wherever that may be? ■*

Katie Michel is a graphic designer and printer at The Grenfell Press. She is also co-director of Planthouse Gallery in New York City.