

REVIEW

# Exhibit showcases studio's exploration of the art of the print

## Founder fuels the talents of many

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | October 24, 2004

WORCESTER -- The printmaker who works with artists is a rare breed. He or she must be deft and intimate with a variety of printmaking techniques. Just as important, though, is the ability to discern the artist's ideas and enter into a collaboration that blends the artist's aesthetic with the printmaker's knowledge. It's a delicate and intuitive relationship, as dicey as the artistic process itself.

"More Than One: Prints and Portfolios From the Center Street Studio, Boston," up at the Cantor Art Gallery at the College of the Holy Cross, explores the relationship one printmaking studio has had with a variety of artists over the years. The scope and rigor of the work on view is remarkable.

James Stroud founded Center Street Studios 20 years ago in Gloucester with the idea that it would be an atelier, a cooperative where artists could come to work. He was fresh out of grad school at Yale, and artists did not flock to his door. One of his former teachers at Yale, Bernard Chaet, sent a young painter up to Gloucester to try his hand at printmaking. His name was Aaron Fink. Today, Fink has an international reputation.

With Fink, Stroud found his niche. He keeps an eye out for work that catches his imagination, by young artists who jump at the chance to stretch their imaginations into printmaking. He has worked with artists poised for the big time, like Robert ParkeHarrison and Bill Wheelock. He has also invited more established artists, like Lester Johnson and John Walker, into his studio, which is now in Milton.

For many years, he tended to work with more expressionistic artists, like Fink and Walker, and to steer away from those closer to his own more abstract aesthetic, thinking he could be more objective about art less like his own. Lately, though, he has engaged more with abstract artists, like Bill Thompson, and finds that dialogue to be just as rich.

Most of these artists come from a painting background. The more painterly their work, the more likely they will make monotypes, which are the painter's print. Essentially, the artist inks a blank plate and runs it through the press, sometimes several times. Fink's "Steaming Cup" shows how perfect the technique is for this artist, who revels in manipulating the paint on his canvases. Putting pigment on a plate and pressing it to paper adds another element to the mix, especially where the ink doesn't stick; it furthers the sense that this yellow mug, big and bold as it is, is merely and miraculously fiction spun from ink.

John Walker's painterly monotypes in the "Anthem" series weigh heavy with the red fog of war. A soldier whose head is the skull of a cow makes his way, blank-eyed, across a battlefield of choking red and gray. The words from "Anthem for Doomed Youth," the lament of World War I-era poet Wilfred Owen, are scrawled in a rage of letters below. These are as potent, if not as heavy, as his paintings.

Stroud enticed Walker to try etchings with chine colle. In an etching, acid incises the plate, and the ink sits in the grooves. Chine colle is a whisper-thin rice paper placed between the plate and the page. Walker's black-and-white etchings are spare and smaller than his heroic monotypes; they feature the same cowed soldier, here seeming even more vulnerable; in one, he holds a ghostly child on his shoulders.

Keith Monda's haunting untitled color photo etching is all tone, shadowy blues and blacks; at first glance it looks like an abstraction. In fact, you're looking down upon a nude, legs pulled up to chest. It's soft, no lines, all shifts of color and fuzzy texture. In contrast, Bill Wheelock's "Quantum Gray" etching features only lines. Riffing on an old project by Sol LeWitt, Wheelock set out to draw parallel lines by hand -- up, down, and diagonally -- and then to layer them. The six pieces, each denser than the next, quiver with his obsessive technique.

They hang right beside James Hansen's "Language of a Lost Generation," a series of color aquatints, a kind of etching that enables the plate to hold a lot of ink. So Hansen's colors sing; they're so lush they almost dominate the biomorphic forms that float through the prints.

Printmaking is for the process-oriented artists, and Charles Ritchie is a dean of process. His "Two Houses/Day" and "Two Houses/Night" are spit-bite aquatints and dry point with chine collé. If Hansen's aquatint echoes acrylic paint, Ritchie's spit-bite is more like watercolor. Drypoint involves scratching lines onto the plate with a sharp point. Here, he made films of

his own drawings, then created photo etchings from the film stills, then scraped down those images to a point at which they were barely recognizable before he built them up with aquatint and drypoint. They're haunting, textured works in black and white, all about light. "Day" shows a house swallowed by sunlight. "Night" feels submerged in the dark. Like Ritchie, Gerry Bergstein pulled out all the stops, using a variety of etching and engraving techniques to make "Apex," one of his trademark apocalyptic visions accentuated with all the different ways in which you can create line and tone in printmaking.

Bill Thompson's "Relaxed Standard" aquatint is a visual pun: a black square sags at the bottom, as if gravity pulls it down; the print is deeply embossed around that edge, accentuating the sense of weight. This kind of abstraction is more like Stroud's own work: "Nine Yellow" is a grid of translucent green shadows over a brilliant yellow ground, simple yet deeply satisfying.

There are many artists in this exhibition -- 21 in total -- and it has been edited down since its first showing at the University of Richmond. They show the tremendous dexterity of printmaking media -- and Stroud tends to stick to intaglio, or etchings, and steer away from lithographs. More important, they show the breadth of one man's appetite for visual art, and his ambition to meet the nuanced and bold dreams of so many artists -- those lucky enough to work with James Stroud.