

Juror's Statement

I'd like to thank Liz Shepherd and the Boston Printmakers for inviting me to participate as juror for the 2013 North American Print Biennial. It's been an honor and a privilege to work with this collegial group of dedicated artists and educators whose passion for printmaking is something to be proud of. Their attention to the many details of hosting a national biennial has made my task of judging submissions a pleasant one. I'd also like to thank the many talented artists from across the country and beyond who submitted entries. Over the 25 years of my curatorial career, most of it at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, I've juried a range of contemporary art exhibitions, portfolio reviews, and grants, and The North American Print Biennial is among the best-organized events of its kind. Because the biennial is a competitive exhibition, I want to share a few thoughts on the selection process. As a museum-based curator, I'm often called on to exercise critical judgment, which for better or worse can have real-world consequences for the institution, the public, and the living artists whose work is being considered for exhibition or acquisition. Judging is necessarily a subjective exercise, one mediated by experience, knowledge, and yes, personal taste. Ideally, judgments are based on a seasoned critical eye, developed through years of seeing and feeling and discerning the sometimes subtle factors that distinguish a work of art. What makes a work compelling? Compositional harmony? The perfect balance of form and content? Emotional resonance? Intellectual heft? Sometimes one needs only a few seconds to experience the power of a work of art; while at other times, content and meaning must be teased out through careful deliberation. Either way, recognizing excellence is something that is learned. Experience builds confidence, of course, but the ability to defend one's judgment is also essential; a simple "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" is not good enough. Thoughtful discourse and the exchange of ideas allows for consensus-building among curators, critics, educators, artists, dealers, and other art-world professionals.

Being new to the North American Print Biennial, I didn't know what to expect from the submissions. My first surprise was the sheer number of entries. Nearly 2,400 works of art were presented for consideration—a number that ultimately would be honed to around

135. Even so, there was no guarantee that I'd find enough works of merit to mount an exhibition that represented the diverse currents of contemporary printmaking. I shouldn't have worried, as the quality of the submissions was on the whole very high. In the space of three weeks I held various personal elimination rounds until I had my list of final contenders—around 350 works—from which I made my final selection. I want to emphasize that every submission I reviewed had positive attributes; there were in fact many of great merit. Every juror uses distinct criteria when judging. Though objectivity is the ideal, it still comes down to personal judgment. For me, in addition to identifying quality in individual works, I considered how the final choices would function together as a cohesive exhibition. I looked for a diversity of media, style, subject, and content. I also sought to showcase prints that represent risk-taking, especially works that demonstrate a re-thinking of the conventional definition of printmaking. Examples of this are prints that blend traditional and innovative media; prints that explore scale as an expressive element; computer-generated images; and prints that engage the third dimension. Having said that, you will also see examples of pure woodcut, linocut, etching, mezzotint, lithography, and other traditional techniques. I also included a number of mixed-media installations in the 2013 biennial, reflecting an ongoing trend in contemporary art that has spilled over into printmaking. Artists' books and illustrated books also make a solid appearance in the show. By necessity, all selections were based solely on viewing digital images downloaded to a third-party website, and no artist names were attached to the submissions. Though the quality of electronic images has greatly improved over the years, images have never been a substitute for seeing works in person. Computer viewing prevents close inspection of surface texture and other details and can mask the scale of the works, even though the dimensions were available. Nevertheless, when I had the chance to view the final selection in person, I was pleasantly surprised by how well their quality and visual appeal had come through on the computer screen. I am confident the exhibition exemplifies the diversity and excellence that one expects to see in a national print competition.

If I may, I'd also like to share a few thoughts about some of the changes I see as reshaping the nature of contemporary printmaking. Some of those changes will be in

evidence in this exhibition. It should come as no surprise to those who make or collect or study prints that the global art market increasingly relegates contemporary prints and printmaking to a secondary status. For varying reasons, many art professionals view contemporary prints as less significant than other art forms. In part this is due to a simple business calculation. Contemporary art galleries and private dealers typically would prefer to place a more expensive painting or sculpture or installation than to sell an editioned print or other work on paper, because the other works bring more profit. And while it's true that many art collectors start out by acquiring original prints, it is becoming harder to find them at major art fairs. Editioned prints usually make up only a small percentage of the works on sale, and some international art fairs, such as Art Basel, restrict graphic art and consign it to the art fair equivalent of Siberia. Notwithstanding a dedicated group of fine print dealers, workshops, and publishers who actively promote prints old and new, many commercial galleries don't feature editioned prints. Others do so reluctantly (or strategically), such as when their blue-chip artists decide to make prints. Think Damien Hirst. In addition, the inherent market value of a print, and its relative place in the hierarchy of contemporary art, is weighed down by its very nature as a multiple original. On a level playing field, uniqueness and rarity often drive market value. So does material. Works on paper, even unique works, are often perceived as less worthy or important. This perception even creeps into the museum world. Print departments are coming under increasing pressure to prove their legitimacy, with some institutions merging prints with other departments or eliminating print curatorial positions. When museums do showcase prints, they are only rarely presented as headliner exhibitions. Fortunately for those living in the Boston area, the Museum of Fine Arts holds one of the premier print collections in the world and regularly puts it on public view, though generally in secondary galleries.

In a recent online discussion moderated by blogger Joanne Mattera concerning the "ghettoization" of printmaking, I stumbled upon this response from a working artist to the growing reality that identifying oneself as a printmaker is somehow seen as a disadvantage.

When people ask me what I do, I tell them I'm an artist. If they ask what kind of work I do, I drill down a bit and tell them I'm a works on paper artist who does prints and other works coming in layered paper and drawing materials....Although I make prints and a large portion of my studio is my printshop, I prefer to not refer to myself as a printmaker....¹

It's a sobering admission, but I can sympathize. Prints are frequently segregated from other forms of art. When it's the North American Print Biennial or the recent Philagrafika festival in Philadelphia, this segregation is a conscious celebration of printmaking. But other times the separation reflects an implicit devaluing of the print medium. Museums often segregate prints in galleries for legitimate historical or cultural reasons, but they also do so out of habit. At the same time, the perception of printmaking as a cohesive and independent discipline seems to be facing increased scrutiny, especially among younger contemporary artists, for whom cross-disciplinary experimentation and technical innovation can be fundamental to their expression. The persistent belief that printmakers are insular and resistant to change, while certainly a generalization, may paradoxically help to undermine the vigor of the discipline. Much of this characterization—the cliché of the lone printmaker cloistered in some inky hovel—is given credibility by the technical hurdles artists face when making editioned prints. That very attention to craft, which can take years to master, may mean an artist sacrifices creative expression for technical prowess. Happily, I cannot say that many, if any, of the 2,400 prints I reviewed for this exhibition suffered in this way. Tatyana Grossman, the legendary founder of Universal Limited Art Editions, once declared that the best artists make the best prints. A simple statement that could have served as her studio motto; perhaps it did. Grossman believed that a lack of technical skill should not be a barrier for artists who wanted to make editioned prints. I am a big fan of Grossman's model of collaborative printmaking. Picasso comes to mind as an artist who was highly prolific and highly accomplished as a printmaker, but who relied on professional printers to produce his numerous editions. At Grossman's ULAE, resident master printers provided the technical expertise for a new generation of printmakers. In her early collaborations, most of the artists she invited to make prints—Rivers, Hartigan, Johns, Rauschenberg, Dine, Bontecou, Twombly, and

others—had little or no printmaking experience, yet were able to produce some of the finest prints of their era. The growth of the collaborative print workshop over the past half century has provided contemporary artists with increasing opportunities to make editioned prints without becoming specialists.

New technologies are also changing the traditional nature of printmaking. Innovation seems to be flowing unabated, led in recent years by the use of digital technologies that challenge some of the accepted norms of printmaking, such as the necessity of a printing matrix or how “original print” is defined. Computer-generated images have replaced the need for hand-held tools. Photoshop allows users to freely manipulate digital images. 3D printers have opened a new realm of artistic expression that is causing us to rethink the parameters of printmaking. Though I believe there will always be a place for the traditional workshop methods, innovation and pluralism are rapidly becoming the norm among contemporary printmakers. Despite the obstacles printmakers face in the marketplace and elsewhere, I have every expectation that this expanded creative terrain will provide greater opportunities for all artists to venture their own definition of what it means to make a print. If the North American Print Biennial is any indication, the future course of printmaking, in all its permutations, is one that will embrace inclusivity and reward risk-taking. To the artists whose work was selected for the 2013 biennial, a hearty congratulations! You represent that future.

Dennis Michael Jon

¹ Robin Sherin, “Marketing Mondays: In the Ghetto,” *Joanne Mattera Art Blog*, March 19, 2012.