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ART

ART; Going Digital With Prints Both Splashy and Subdued

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

THE Davison Art Center at Wesleyan University is a major repository of historical prints and printmaking techniques, and with "Digital Printmaking at Singer Editions," it is showing that it is interested in the latest developments in the field.

These days painting and photography can be talked about in the same breath, so it stands to reason that prints made with etching tools or on a lithography stone can coexist with prints scanned from photographic negatives or prints.

Jonathan Singer, the founder of the Boston print atelier that bears his name, has written for viewers a brief explanation of Iris printmaking. The Iris printer has what Mr. Singer calls "high-resolution and saturated-color capabilities." Using digital controls, it sprays a steady stream of ink in very tiny droplets that are absorbed directly into the paper. When an ink is not needed, it is deflected before reaching the paper surface. The artist has "an incredible amount of control over the color, tone and contrast of an image," Mr. Singer says, while sharing dazzling information such as the fact that each nozzle of the Iris printer produces one million drops per second.

The exhibition itself is varied and splashy. Prints that are almost garish are hung by others that are in subdued black and white or sepia. A unifying characteristic is that all of them are large. A few stand out for their variation on the prescribed method. Richard Linke, whose subject is birds, is quoted as saying, "No camera, no film, no chemicals, just digital magic with a flatbed scanner." For "Birdworks #6" Mr. Linke placed on the scanner a bird that was seemingly dead, with its legs folded close to its body. The magnified size of the prints exaggerates the poignancy inherent in such an image.

Is it the size that often makes a commonplace occurrence into a sweet narrative? The objects in "Fork and Spoon" by Susie Cushner look like they're cuddling. "Bega, Still Life with Peppers" by Sheila Metzger is of the same beguiling order. But here the head of a woman who wears heavy makeup lies on a table along with the peppers. The terms of this picture aren't quite understood; it probably should be considered a specimen of updated Surrealism.

The Iris technique can be probing. It affords close-up look at nature, not just Mr. Linke's bird but also "Rose Opening" by Rosemary Porter. A surprising counterpart to the unfolding petals of the yellow rose are the yellowed pages of "Termite Eaten Copy of 'Foucault's Pendulum' by Umberto Eco." A viewer might be tempted to read Mr. Eco's book to see if the photographer, Rosamond Purcell, had reasons to pick this volume to illustrate the workings of nature.

John Woolf's portrait of a marble statue, "Head of Augustus," looks us in the eye as its equal, and is a fine contrast to "Ed at Forty" by John Goodman. The head and shoulders of the heavily freckled subject are seen from behind, and the all-over mottled quality of the man's skin might be an analogue of the spraying process with its many drops.

The fineness allowed by the technique might be what makes the posts holding an undulating net appear to dance in "Fence, Mexico" by Peter Layton. On the other hand, Chip Hooper chooses to obscure. A viewer can make out three birds in "Three and 1/2 Birds on a Rock," but the half bird, whatever that is, remains elusive.

The close-up isn't the only mode of close investigation. Some artists choose to bring out the details of a wider, perhaps panoramic, subject. Huei-Wen Huang shows the crowded vitality of Chinatown in "Eatery" in which the restaurant is only part of the scene. A second print, "Hello Kitty," is the result of a camera trained on a novelty store and an indulgence in Pop colors. A more head-on composition, "Gable #20," from a series of 25 gables by Michael Thomas, presents the facade of a country store in Hop Bottom, Pa., and the myriad imagery it contains.

The Iris process itself provides countless opportunities for manipulation, but a couple of artists get their hands in the process a little more than the others. Tom Baril photographed the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge that connects Brooklyn and Staten Island from underneath so that it manifests itself as a powerful "V" shape. Its sepia tonality adds to the no-nonsense force of the bridge, an atmosphere that Mr. Baril obtained by staining the print with tea.

Few pictures here are constructed photographs, a mode now in vogue. Scenes, often tableaux, are fabricated by the artists and then photographed to look (at least partly) like they're real. "Little Time for Whimsy" by Barbara Norfleet appears to be a natural activity, beetles rolling balls of dung up an incline. But the actors are obviously preserved specimens. Their concerted action might remind viewers of Sisyphus, but these creatures get their rocks uphill.

"Digital Printmaking at Singer Editions" is at the Davison Art Center at Wesleyan University through May 27. Information: (860) 685-2500

Photos: What happens when printmakers go digital: clockwise from top left, "Fence, Mexico" by Peter Layton; "Bega, Still Life With Peppers," by Sheila Metzner; "Little Time for Whimsy" by Barbara Norfleet, and "Verrazano Narrows" by Tom Baril. (Davison Art Center)