

Outmoded?

“The second half of the twentieth century is no time to start writing on rocks,” proclaimed Robert Rauschenberg in the early 1960s. He was referring to stone-based lithography, a medium that struck him as outmoded in the Space Age. Despite his declaration, Rauschenberg went on to embrace the medium, producing one after another groundbreaking lithograph.

Artists working today might similarly contend that the dawn of the third millennium is no time to start chipping away at wood. Evidence, however, suggests otherwise. Nearly half of the works selected for the *Boston Printmakers 2017 North American Print Biennial* are relief prints—either woodcuts or linocuts—with additional techniques often part of the mix, as in Mark Sisson’s *Portrait of Daniel King: Scouting, for Men and Boys*, which combines linocut, woodcut, and lithography (p.34). It would be reasonable to argue that this high percentage is the result of a prejudice on my part as the juror. I had to ask this very question: Am I unduly partial to relief prints? Searching for an answer I turned to a 2016 exhibition, *Three Centuries of American Prints from the National Gallery of Art*, which I co-curated with Amy Johnston. If I had a bias, I thought, then it would reveal itself in the checklist at the back of the catalogue. What I learned was that of the 144 works listed, more than half were intaglio prints—either mezzotints, etchings, or engravings. Thirty-seven works, or precisely a quarter, were lithographs. As for woodcuts and linocuts, they numbered a scant ten, or 14 percent of the total. While the history of printmaking and the makeup of the National Gallery of Art’s collection had a determining role in the selection, the relatively small number of relief prints in the *Three Centuries of American Prints* exhibition would indicate that I am not overly partial to

woodcuts and linocuts. For a more contemporary filter, I turned to a 2017 exhibition at the British Museum: *The American Dream: pop to the present*, featuring works from 1960 to 2013. Only 12 percent of the 195 works recorded in the catalogue are either woodcuts or linocuts, a figure that accords closely with the 14 percent figure for *Three Centuries of American Prints*. Yet 12 and 14 percent are far removed from the 50 percent figure for this biennial exhibition. I needed to probe further.

Perhaps, I thought, what was skewing the percentages in the case of the National Gallery and British Museum exhibitions was the fact that most of those artists are painters or sculptors who make prints, like Helen Frankenthaler or Donald Judd. Whereas—and admittedly this is an assumption—it is likely that most artists represented in the Boston biennial are printmakers, first and foremost.

Wanting to dig deeper into the question of percentages, I asked the organizers of the biennial for a breakdown of this year's submissions. I learned that of the approximately 700 artists who competed for inclusion in this year's biennial, about 220, 31 percent, had submitted woodcuts or linocuts (interestingly, a good number of the woodcuts reflecting Asian print traditions). Because relief prints (woodcuts and linocuts) represent only one category of printmaking—others being intaglio (etching, engraving, drypoint, mezzotint, etc.), lithography, screenprinting, monotype, and digital—the approximately 220 woodcuts and linocuts submitted constitute a big slice of the pie relative to these other categories. This alone may explain why of the 78 artists whose works were ultimately selected, almost 50 percent are represented in the exhibition by woodcuts or linocuts, or I may be partial to relief prints, or—and I place my bet here—the artist working in those techniques produced the more successful

and compelling images. Whatever the case, the noteworthy fact is that we seem to be witnessing a rise in the number of artists making arresting woodcuts and linocuts today—a rise that might strike some as oddly anachronistic in the digital age, the way “writing on rocks” struck Rauschenberg as anachronistic in the sixties.

Is the apparent upsurge nothing more than a Luddite reaction to technological change? Or does it reflect an almost stubborn delight in returning to that which is outmoded? The artist Chuck Close has long shown an interest in antiquated genres and processes. He took up portrait painting in the late 1960s when, he says, “painting was dead, figurative painting was deader than a doornail, and portraiture was the most moribund of all activities.” When he made the improbably large mezzotint *Keith* in 1972, he took on a process that had experienced its heyday in the eighteenth century. Close’s interest in reviving an antiquated technique is not unlike that of the German artist Christiane Baumgartner, whose fourteen-foot long woodcut, *Transall*, is presently on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. That same interest is evident in many of the works featured in this biennial. In a touchscreen environment, there’s a lot to be said for the hands-on physicality of making a woodcut.

Next I queried some of the artists in the biennial, wanting to know why they had opted to make woodcuts or linocuts. Mark Sisson, whose work I mentioned earlier, questioned why anyone would “create portraits or use the onerous and often unforgiving traditional printmaking processes to make portraits in the digital millennium, when portraits of every kind are ubiquitous, thoughtlessly derivative, disposable and made by any pea brain with a cell phone who then makes them instantaneously available to all.” Sisson called his current work,

“for better or worse . . . antiquated traditional portraiture,” and said that for him, spending countless hours working in an obsolete medium is “perversely satisfying.”

For Jean Gumper, who has two woodcuts in the biennial (p. 21), the woodcut’s greatest appeal is the “physicality of carving and printing.” She even likened the experience to the physical movement of hiking, “with many steps along the way adding to the completed print.” Maria Doering, who is represented by the linocut *Adventurous Soul* (p. 18), gave up the taxing labor of carving in wood when she developed carpal tunnel syndrome. Undeterred, she turned to linocuts, saying that linoleum, when heated, “will carve like butter.” She wrote of carving for hours and letting her thoughts “weave in and out of the medium as [her] whole body engaged in the process of carving.” Raluca Iancu, whose prints combine woodcut, linocut, collage, and computer technology (p. 25), expressed the enjoyment “that comes from carving directly into the matrix.”

Charles Norris called the making of a woodcut such as *Ghost Pile III* (p. 30) a “zen-like experience,” adding (with credit to Marshall McLuhan) that “perhaps for some woodcut artists, the medium is also part of the message.” It seems that indeed that is the case and that the *Boston Printmakers 2017 North American Print Biennial* is sending a clear message: the touchscreen culture is leaving many artists hungering for labor-intensive, hands-on experiences.