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Aloft: Juggling Print Media and Mediation in Chema Elexpuru's *Malabares*
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Reflecting upon his media exploration and studio process, Chema Elexpuru states "I have a feeling that is like letting myself be carried along by a flowing river, without knowing for certain where I will come to rest once the creative process is complete." The dreamy sentiment of this statement perfectly describes the vibrant yet ethereal, witty yet poignant hybrid digital/relief prints of his series *Malabares*. The combining of soft, warm gestures and hard, sharp forms conjures the feeling of drifting in and out of attention, focus, consciousness. The rich color and bold marks are engaging and startling in contrast. Entering these works, the viewer's world slows as s/he is moved in and out of their space. The works are a welcomed moment of pause. But, not for long! Through these works, Elexpuru has drifted amid questions of the manner with which we navigate our lives, mediated views of reality, the scope of printmaking media, and his own studio practice. As viewers we are engaged by a familiar reflection that is rich, complex, multi-faceted, and challenging. The works are much like the world within which we live.

Juggling is a common, intriguing metaphor. So many metaphors seem grounded and relevant in one breath and then overused and trite in the next. Juggling has, however, always managed to stay aloft, never falling to earth and losing its poignancy. It is perfectly descriptive. As we watch, the juggler frees the mundane from the principles of natural order that govern every other physical thing we know. Balls, pins, torches, knives, even chainsaws fly through the air in graceful arcs devoid of gravity—nothing short of magic! It is a refined skill that most have tried, but at which only few are deftly able.

As life has become more and more complex, the metaphor of juggling has only become more appropriate. In this time of efficiency, multitasking, and reaching fullest potentials, we grapple with tasks, ideas, responsibilities, and expectations all while navigating careers, families, and individual lives. At this, too, only a fortunate few of us are truly agile. So when we compare our efforts handling the diverse aspects of contemporary life to the act of juggling, we express both bemusement and optimism. We acknowledge that it is hard to believe that we find ourselves maneuvering such precarious circumstances and can only hope to act with such beautiful mastery.

This complex world in which we live is moving and changing at a breakneck pace. Whether thankfully or painfully, we are keenly aware of the exponential speed with which change in all areas of life is impelled today. Technology is just one of these areas, but it seems to be either the driver of or driving force behind so many others.

For printmakers technological change is an invitation not just to move forward, but also to look back and think about how the two relate. Printmaking's breadth of media and processes is an exemplar for the gathering of past, present, and future together in one moment. Digital printers next to manual presses and hard drives only steps from ferric chloride baths are common sights in contemporary printshops. For many printmakers technologies of diverse eras are integrated elegantly into fluid studio practice. And, we are always looking for more, newer, the next.

It is with this awareness that Shaurya Kumar asserts that "there is a need for artists themselves to be sensitive to changing times, methods and technologies and to create works that are truly children of [their] age."¹ Chema Elexpuru is an artist actively engaged in this effort. In his work we see an artist conceptually confronting the diverse aspects of contemporary life. His self-described "impossible pairings" of objects and images through varied print media create metaphors addressing ideas of *realidad y i-realidad*. Elexpuru transforms the technologies and equipment of printmaking from the necessary tools of process into active characters in the narratives he presents to his viewers. His works become not only children of their age, but also their process within this age. *Malabares [Juggling]* exemplifies these activities.

"The 'print hybrid,' made through the mixing of both digital and traditional processes, represents the cutting-edge of printmaking that is now being embraced as a twenty-first century paradigm."² Here, too, we juggle. Printmakers began exploring this marrying of the historic and contemporary as soon as they began working with digital printing. Printing over digitally printed surfaces with traditional processes introduced the human touch onto a mechanically generated surface that could appear both literally and figuratively flat. The resulting warmed surfaces were enlivened with layers of ink, expanded by embossment, and enriched by the tactile shadow of the

printmaker's hand. Through this mediation, these images gained a sense of legitimacy that satisfied the unease of the printmaker and quelled the skepticism of purist print critics. Through "reclaim[ing] the surface by either combining or layering digital images with traditional print processes or prints on custom surfaces,"³ as Kumar states, printmaking claimed a new process.

The idea that all reality is mediated is deeply entrenched in the critical discourse of photography and postmodern theory. Unless witnessed first-hand, all experiences are mediated whether they are communicated through words, images, video, television, film, or the internet. Reality is altered by the editorial choices of those communicating to us whether s/he is a friend, an author, a producer, or an artist. Even when we encounter the world with our own senses, we still observe through the filters of our individual values, memories, and life experience. Given this, we realize that the notion of truth is a construct. As one of the characters in Ian McEwan's novel *Sweet Tooth* observes "ultimately reality is social."⁴ We piece it together like a puzzle, constructing our own understandings from the bits we glean from our experiences and the observations of others.

Elexpuru explores the ideas of mediation and reality in *Malabares*. This series of hybrid prints combines digitally printed photographs with relief printed elements. In these works the endless cycle of mediation is evoked by the presentations of diffuse photographs of hands juggling or manipulating objects. Elexpuru cleverly uses printmaking equipment in an unconventional manner to mediate our observation of these actions by photographing his subjects through the nylon mesh of a backlit screenprinting screen. The resulting richly colored images become soft and generalized suggesting movement, distracted observation, and hazy memory. Our observations are filtered again by the layer of heavy, thorny lines that are relief printed over the surface of these images. The layering of traditional upon digital printing mediates our perception of both the print media and the image presented. With these barriers, reality is distanced even further from the viewer.

In *Malabares* we find ourselves decoding varied layers of information to understand the content within. It is as if Elexpuru is saying "Stand back! But, look closely." In these works we are placed in the same position in which we find ourselves trying to handle the various aspects of our everyday lives. We find ourselves juggling with *Malabares*.

Chema Elexpuru may not have known where he would drift as he began manipulating the elements that have become *Malabares*, but as he searched, he skillfully synchronized a complex act. While manipulating traditional and new media, layers of mediation and constructed realities, past explorations and new investigations, he threw the viewer into order, too. And there we find ourselves, aloft like the rest of the elements in his metaphor, with no sign of coming to rest.

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Endnotes

1. Shaurya Kumar, "Techno-Narcissism: A Printmaker's Ordeal," *The Mid America Print Council Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 1 & 2 (2011), 10, <http://www.midamericaprintcouncil.org/Journal/Vol19No1-2/Vol19No1-2.html>.
2. Scott Ludwig, "Ludwig's reflections on Contemporary, Hybrid Printmaking," ed. Matthew Egan, Michael Ehlbeck, and Heather Muise, *A Survey of Contemporary Printmaking* (Greenville, East Carolina University), 39.
3. Kumar, 9.
4. Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (New York, Doubleday, 2012), 162.

