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ARTIST

Ephemeral Glimpse

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An artist's work is a form of self-portraiture. It is born of the individual's interests, concerns, experiences, and aesthetic sensibilities. The accuracy of these self-portraits, though, is fleeting. Our identities are fixed in ways, but transient in others. Who we are is ephemeral, malleable in the hands of time. The same could be said of many other aspects of our world and is certainly true of art and printmaking.

These ideas were tangible in the panel "New and Old Generations: Teaching Printmaking" in which Jack Damer and Beauvais Lyons presented the findings of their survey on contemporary printmaking. The data created an engaging image of printmaking through its illustration of current trends as related to the gender, education, and average age of respondents. This method of analysis offered its authors the opportunity to look at the generational differences they sought to examine. It also poses as many questions as it begins to answer.

To fully understand this image the moment in which the data was collected must be considered. What are the characteristics of the world in which the data was collected, the values of the society of its sampling, the dominant trends and concerns (economic, political, social, ethical) of this community? Damer and Lyons' study addressed these questions by surveying respondents about artists and writers of influence, but did not consider other societal issues of equal if not greater effect. This was particularly evident in the presentation of data related to safety, sustainability, and archival process. Data indicated that the older the average age of a printmaker, the more he or she is concerned with these topics. Greater age has also been shown to correlate positively with being more informed about current affairs,¹ but this, too is a generalization.

Safety, sustainability, and longevity are all especially timely topics. Our society has become noticeably more cautious and rightly increasingly concerned with safety. The current state of our environment, depletion of our resources, and overcrowding of our planet have placed sustainability as a top concern in our world. Our production of excessive waste, the need for reuse and recycling, the transition from physical to virtual worlds, and the feelings of helplessness in younger generations have brought notions of the archival into question and forced its counterpoint, ephemerality, even further into our vernacular.

In the printshop at the University of Akron I see uses of media and expressions of interests that emphasize diverse life experiences frequently defying conventions of age and gender. Concerns with finding order and reason within chaos, third-wave feminism and the bimbo feminist, and loss of local identity at the hand of global trade and consumerism are as common if not more than visual play that is so often stereotyped as the interest of the current generation of undergraduates. Students work in individual print media and historic processes as often as they combine media or work digitally. I see the same diversity in student work at open portfolio sessions at print conferences. While this generation of printmakers may be different in some ways, they share with others the desires to make sense of the world in which we live and express their individual voices.

Damer and Lyons' study is a self-portrait of printmaking, one created collaboratively by printmakers, at this moment in time. It shows us to be an engaged community with differing, though not far reaching, points of view. It has created a fixed position for comparison by future generations who wonder how we have changed. Its value lies in the issues it brings to light and the questions that it forces us to ask. But its most important revelation is the ephemeral glimpse it gives us of the community that we are, generational differences and all.

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