

Interview for the Wood Engravers Network Publication, "Block and Burin" Autumn 2012

Interview by Tony Drehfal

On the back of your business card you have this writing:

*wood engraving * wood cut * book arts*

That is as concise as you can be as an introduction to your work. I could easily see the three words connected in the form of a circle, maybe with the word "storytelling" added into this bare bones list of the elements of your work.

Storytelling is more than just a fourth element; it is the overarching description of my work. So much so, I would change mediums if I really thought a story would benefit from it.

So, as a bit of an introduction about you, my first question is a little about your background as what got you here - in this point in time, as a printmaker/artist?

Hmmm. long story... probably boring, art school, followed by art making and other work in tandem. I came out of school making etchings, and did for about 3-4 years until a friend asked if I'd do an illustration for a letterpressed journal, which I did as a wood engraving.

He told me I could do whatever I wanted. It was a pivotal point for me as an artist.

Two things happened, 1. I fell in love with wood engraving, and 2. I let go of the preconceived notions I had gathered in art school about what I thought art was supposed to be or be about, and started making just the work I wanted to make, with animals, bears, squirrels, frogs etc., and including story, I created images with text together. Creating what I hope to be "springboards" for a larger narrative, yet untold that a viewer could relate to and flesh out on their own, or at least relate to the point in the narrative the image takes place... the rest is history.

Was this artistic path a straight "traditional" one, though art school to now? or Have you had other interests that have been important to you?

Pretty straight since art school I think... I've made art ever since... it's the other work that's a little disjointed... the other (main source of income). From coffee shop clerk, to children's museum educator, to Newspaper ad designer, to trophy engraving and finally to working for myself as a graphic designer, I assume it's also pretty standard for artists nowadays to have secondary sources of income. I've always been a designer and I've always divorced that work from my own artistic ambitions and desires. Keeps that work clean, concise and function oriented which serves clients well.

As for other interests, you mention storytelling below. that has been very important to my development as an artist. It was at the end of my college career that I realized all of the work I had created thus far was explicitly narrative. It wasn't until a few years ago that I really started thinking that most art is narrative, at least in the sense that everyone, when they look at a piece of art places it within a narrative, whether the artist has created the narrative construct or the piece lives as a piece of the viewers own personal narrative. All works beckon the viewer to create within the space something familiar that they can relate to, whether an abstract landscape, familiar color fields, or some other story or space. I bring this up because

it really has everything to do with how and why I make my work. My feeling is that this innate desire for others to superimpose story onto art or life is so strong and important to their well being that it's my responsibility as the artist to create an appropriate and positive platform for a viewer of art to springboard from, that makes the foray into story, both easy and engaging. I couple that with our desire to find meaning. And because I can't presume any meaning someone else might have, all my work is me searching for my own meanings. this makes all the work very personal, plus, I never spell out what I think a meaning might be, i only try to point towards it. You can see how important text is to the process. Reading and text represent analytical function — searching for meaning, the image represents and responds more to our emotional function, our desires and our innate knowledge (I should also say that I certainly don't believe that text or image is limited to either the analytical or emotional realm).

It may go without saying that these are only my thoughts and ideas and I wouldn't presume that they are correct, just food for thought.

I know from looking through your book projects that the written word is as important as the visuals - working together with a wonderful creative synergy, could you tell us about how you came to work with words and language together with your printmaking?

The creative synergy of text and image developed for me simply from my previous habit of naming all my work. Eventually, the titles of the pieces became integral to the fuller appreciation of the piece and worked their way into the pieces themselves. It was a natural progression, especially considering how interested I was in storytelling.

You work with wood engraving and traditional Moku Hanga process, how did you come about to integrating both of these printmaking traditions together in your work?

I began the Moku Hanga process after I wrote a story about a river and wood engraving just wouldn't do for it... It goes to my previous comment about changing mediums if need be, and for this project I did. I fell in love with the process and now I float back and forth between them. I don't actually use Moku Hanga techniques in my wood engraving, just some modified usage of some of the tools.

Wood engraving serves as a great way of clearing my head and getting centered. At times I find it such a meditative process, and I have had conversations with other engravers who have a similar observations. Do you find the process of engraving/printmaking meditative? As for the meditative aspect of engraving I totally agree, probably in broader terms than you realize. Being someone who meditates on a regular basis, In my own personal opinion and experience, I would go so far as to say that the entire art making process is not meditative but actual meditation, (an important distinction in my estimation). I mention that because sometimes the adjective meditative can be used to mean simply a sense of calm, which is only part of what meditation is. It may be too large of a topic to discuss briefly, since I've actually thought about this topic extensively and also come to this from more of a Taoist perspective, which would also take some additional explanation.

I'd like to end with a question about what you have learned from our group of engravers the week you were our guest at our Asheville workshop? You worked alongside WEN engravers the week of the workshop. Could you share any observations, as an "outsider"? What did you learn from us? Did anyone or anything inspire you? (I think you joined our organization too? If that is the case, welcome.)

As for what I learned or what inspired me that week I was with you, was that I felt like the group, as a whole and individually, struck a very good balance of individuality in work and group camaraderie. I find this in parenting too, that when you "know" you are not alone on an issue or experience, it creates a sense of comfort allowing you to more easily move forward with an action or decision, too much of that can lead either to competition or complacency, neither of which I felt in the group, which makes it one I'm inclined to participate in. As far as learning, that's a more difficult question to answer. What I'm sure of are subtle influences. Watching others work, seeing others prints and blocks, the marks and images they value, how they approach their work, what they sacrificed to be in that space, those are all the things I think about and subtly absorb. I imagine those things may surface again in my work or own life somehow. Where and when I may not even know.

Andy wrote the following piece for the Washington Printmakers Gallery.

Fourteen years ago I made an interesting discovery about myself. I liked to write. After feeling as though high school had removed all inclination to the written arts, I was in fact enjoying writing a book as part of a senior college thesis project, made strange by the fact that my major was printmaking.

The discovery was important not only because of my newfound love of writing but also because it altered my view of art making, my new belief: the creative process is blind to media. What I found was that the act of writing did not differ so dramatically from the act of creating an image or a print. I have always believed that great art begins with an idea and not a process, and so, if an idea lends itself to a particular media then why lock myself into a certain "style" or media because it is "what I do" or even "what I know."

In school I made lithographs, and after graduating I made only intaglio prints, years later I discovered a love of wood engraving and a few years after was driven to learn the traditional Japanese technique of Moku Hanga to fulfill an idea for a book I was working on. I now write text with all my prints as well and am inclining towards verbal storytelling and performance for some of my newer ideas. Thankfully, I've been able to move from media to media as it has served my ideas and sensibilities.

One stable and steady thread of influence though has always been the idea of storytelling. Through much exploration I've come to a place of great comfort in how I tell stories, in my images, words, and actions. Stories tap into something deep in our nature. We long to hear them, we want to tell them (no matter how mundane they might be to the listener), and we want them to be about us or, at the very least, relate to our own experiences or ideas of

ourselves or of what we want to be. These ideas have led me towards two additional important guideposts for making art; one, that it be personal and two, that it be honest.

I was asked recently by a friend who is a preacher how I feel about that which I've made (as he was doing research on a sermon about the Creation), which was an interesting question and one I'd not given much thought to. My response on creation: "In my work, there are two very distinct and separate aspects. The act of creation, and the creation itself (once created). The act of creation is very personal and selfish in the sense that what I create, I create for myself. It is what I am needing, that the world around me doesn't or isn't providing. It also, does not come from my conscience thought, but in bits, and I jot it down the pieces as they come into my conscience. I don't have a full picture of what it will be until all the pieces are in place... no preconceived ideas."

"When the piece is done, I am done with it, I no longer need it, but it is completely a piece of me, and I put it out into the world. I find working in this way; honest, personal and uncontrived, allows others to attach to the work in the same way I do. The work at this point fills me with a sense of connectedness to all people and things."

I find myself awash in these ideas as opposed to the intricacies of different processes. Improvisational ideas bound across my mind nearly too quick to capture, and so the real challenge of printmaking comes in keeping the ideas and images as full of life in the print as when they come to me in my head, even after dragging them through the confines of 'process.' That's the real magic of printmaking.

Here at the end, I've realized I've not talked substantially of printmaking, or storytelling, but only about myself. I shouldn't be surprised...my art is the same way.