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ARTFORUM

PRINT CULTURE

On the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop

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PRINTS, PRINTMAKING, PRINTMAKERS—it sometimes seems as if they pass through the art world unnoticed. The print world is on its own tangent. And in that world, there are figures who carry great significance—master printers such as William Stanley Hayter, for instance, or Aldo Crommelynck. Some are also artists in their own right, but they are legendary more for what they've enabled others to do than for the works they've signed. Among the names spoken with the greatest reverence is that of [Robert Blackburn](#). Born in 1920 to Jamaican immigrant parents, he grew up in Harlem, where as a teenager he took art classes at WPA-sponsored community arts centers and other local organizations, studying with Charles Alston and Augusta Savage, among others; his junior high English teacher was Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen. He learned lithography from Riva Helfond, a social-realist printmaker, and later attended the Art Students League, where his teachers included Will Barnet, who became a lifelong friend and spurred Blackburn's passion for printmaking. As curator Deborah Cullen observed in the catalogue of a 2014 exhibition of Blackburn's work at the David C. Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, College Park, "Barnet found a kindred experimental spirit in Blackburn. Neither was afraid to see the print as painterly and the matrix (the surface from which the print is made) as a sculptural body."

The fecundity of Blackburn's expansive approach is borne out at an exhibition currently on view at the James Gallery, CUNY Graduate Center, New York (through November 14). Curated by Shameekia Shantel Johnson in collaboration with the Blackburn Workshop's program director, Essye Klempner, and its artistic director, Jazmine Catasús, the exhibition, "Press & Pull: Two Decades at the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop," features art made in the period following the founder's passing, including work by Chakaia Booker, Maren Hassinger, and Elliott Jamal Robbins. It also includes considerable documentation on the whole history of the workshop as well as some choice selections of prints by Blackburn himself and by other artists who worked at the printshop during his lifetime, from a 1949 image of John Brown by Charles White to a radiantly hued 1982 abstract etching by Ed Clark—giving a true picture of the almost immeasurable artistic breadth of modern Black art.

Blackburn's experimental spirit found expression not only in his own prints, which from the 1960s onward were mostly abstract, but in the Printmaking Workshop, which he founded in 1947, initially conceived as a way to support himself in the absence of a market or teaching opportunities for a Black artist. In 1956, the workshop became a dues-paying cooperative. Meanwhile, from 1957 through 1963, he commuted to Islip, Long Island, where he was the first master printer for Tatyana Grossman's Universal Limited Art Editions—starting with its very first project, the Larry Rivers–Frank O'Hara collaboration *Stones*, 1957–59, which took two years to

complete. Blackburn went on to work with artists such as Helen Frankenthaler, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg, jump-starting the print boom of the 1960s. Grace Hartigan said she “felt an almost mystic kinship with Bob Blackburn. Without him, my work would have died on those heavy, clumsy stones; with him, they glowed.”

In 1971, Blackburn’s workshop transformed into a nonprofit, and since 2005—two years after his death—it has operated under the auspices of the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts as the EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop. Throughout its history, across the shifts in organizational structure and in address, what Blackburn maintained was the printshop’s ability to function as both a community arts resource where anyone could come to learn and a place where professional artists could come from around the world to experiment with printing as an open-ended artistic process. As Curlee Raven Holton, one of the many artists who was mentored by Blackburn, recalled in the 2014 catalogue, the workshop has been “a place of acceptance where artists from New York City, Ohio, Oklahoma, Greece, Thailand, or South Africa formed an international exchange, the united nations of artists.” (I’m particularly intrigued by the number of Indian or Indian-born artists who passed through, among them Devraj Dakoji, Zarina Hashmi, M. F. Husain, and Krishna Reddy.) “For many artists new to the city,” Holton continued, “the Workshop was the only open door that would embrace them regardless of where they had come from or their professional rank.” It was probably the most truly integrated art space in New York; this, too, was part of Blackburn’s vision. He wanted to make a place that would welcome other Black artists—and a place that would welcome everyone else. His stance was founded on the faith that art and life are not zero-sum games, but fields in which cooperation and collaboration increase the potential of all participants. “I’ve always been an integrationist,” Blackburn declared. “I think an artist’s way of life has to be one that is trying to make things one, and not trying to fragment.”

Seeing the show at CUNY made me the more curious to see what the printmaking workshop looks like today. I dropped by on a fairly quiet day when the shop wasn’t open to members and there were no classes going on, but the presses were running—the extensive facilities include two litho presses, five intaglio presses, screen-printing presses, and a RISO machine. The patient, labor-intensive nature of printmaking was on display as I watched two women working together to repeatedly roll ink out on a lithography stone, wet it, and sponge the ink off to prepare it for printing. It was a reminder of the inherently collaborative nature of even the simplest part of the process. Klempner, the program director, showed me the more than a hundred flat files containing the workshop’s archive of over ten thousand prints made by artists who’ve worked there. (The Library of Congress holds a core archive of over 2,500 prints by 1,300 artists from the history of the workshop, including the largest collection of Blackburn’s own work anywhere.) We opened a drawer marked *B* and there, at the top, were prints by Camille Billops and Joe Brainard—another illustration of the aesthetic and cultural inclusiveness at the workshop’s heart. As we were putting them back, the unusual pinkish hue of the lower right corner of one print farther down in the pile caught my eye. Klempner pulled out what turned out to be a typically perverse work by the German Surrealist Hans Bellmer. “Did Bellmer print here?” I asked. Bellmer does not appear to have visited the US often, if at all. “I don’t think so,” Klempner said. “I don’t know why that’s here. Maybe someone donated it at some point.”

Still, I like to think that Bellmer *could have* worked with Blackburn if the opportunity had arisen. Blackburn saw the printer’s job as “being able to interpret the mood of this individual who has something important to say”—the artist—“because what he has to say is the real truth.” In her essay for the CUNY exhibition, Ethel Renia reminds us that what Blackburn espoused was the potential for “spaces where artists can experiment without fear—regardless of fame, resources, or identity”—and what Surrealist wouldn’t be for that? The thing that sticks with me from my all-too-brief visit—which mainly served to make me realize that I’d only really understand it if I got ink on my hands and started printing there myself—was how everyone (even though the people

I talked to are too young to have known him in person) still speaks of Blackburn as if he'd just been there the other day, as if his spirit were still wandering the shop, looking around to observe what everyone is doing and giving advice where needed. A legacy is defined not by how many people know your name but by how deeply you continue to affect those who do. By that measure, Blackburn's continues to thrive.