

BEEJ NIERENGARTEN-SMITH

Over 35 years my career path centered on art history and art education, with successful careers in teaching and museum work, primarily as Director and Chief Curator of Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis Missouri, for 23 years. During this period of time I never stopped making art. I continued to take drawing and printmaking classes, taught myself ceramics and how to make paper, became fascinated with bookmaking, and spent summer printmaking residencies at such well-known institutions as Penland School of Crafts, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, and Anderson Ranch Arts Center. Through serigraphy classes at Webster University, I became an accomplished silkscreen artist and adept at cutting stencils by hand, a skill that has served me well in producing the chine colle patterns that are integral to my prints today.

My home in St. Louis had a studio, and it was here that I made a series of autobiographical books in the late 1990's. Some of these dealt with body parts, chronicling surgeries on my own body; others were about experiences with Brazilian artists in South America, Viet Nam, and China. I also did books devoted to feminist artists that I admired, Frieda Kahlo and Niki de St. Phalle. In these books I used appropriated images and other techniques that are the foundation of my prints today. I also began to see that if I was ever going to make prints seriously, I needed to leave the museum world. I accomplished this in 2001 when I moved to Santa Fe. Everything you learn in the studio comes back; color, working with your hands, your appreciation ---so it was a nexus moving to Santa Fe. Everything I ever learned suddenly was there; it just needed to be distilled into a distinct voice. This distinctiveness involved a personal iconography with a singular printmaking technique.

Peru Notes

After several visits to Peru, I selected the mesmerizing images of the country as captured by the photographer Martin Chambe from 1920 to 1950. It is difficult to believe that such an enlightened population as the indigenous Peruvians should have been so decimated by the Spanish. Chambe's sensitive photographs served as icons for my Peruvian series, representing my love of the country and the tragedy inflicted upon its marvelous people.

Notes on BodyScapes

My nudes, for all their passion, are very modest. The entwined lovers, which appear in so many of my works, were adapted from a Japanese pillow book. Originally a diary or notebook, the term pillow book is now usually associated with the erotic pictures and book illustrations that flourished especially in Japan but also in China, India, and most Asian cultures until the late 19th century. These illustrations graphically depict a wide variety of lovemaking techniques and situations. Although the images themselves are usually quite small, the genitalia of both male and female figures are enormously exaggerated. My

lovers, by contrast, have no visible genitalia, at all. This is deliberate because I do not want viewers to see my prints as “dirty pictures.” Instead, I have taken these erotic images, magnified them in scale, and made them more lyrical and elegant.

Purses

The large handbags toted by females in another series of amorous couples represent the burdens women carry—the need to be seductive as well as capable—but the purses also symbolize the financial dependence that binds women to men. More than any other creature in society, women carry everything on their shoulder, their right shoulder and cling firmly to their handbags. The purses connote, the glass ceiling that many workingwomen and I have experienced and the inequity of our salaries compared to men in similar positions.

The Printmaking Process

My prints are created through an exceptional, labor-intensive combination of photolithography and chine-colle’. Photolithography is an emulsion photo plate process that I use to print the outlined shapes, and the collage-like technique of chine-colle’ produces the patterns.

Creating a print, always begins with the linear image, usually ones that I appropriate from other sources and combine, transform, and reinterpret to give new meaning. Artists from Leonardo da Vinci to Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso have created works with appropriated images, but Pop artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein brought this artistic process into the public consciousness.

Once I have roughly decided what I want the print to look like and have selected my images I scan them into my computer and use my printer to produce very high quality Mylar negatives. These negatives are then mounted on aluminum plates coated with a light sensitive photo emulsion. A plate maker exposes the Mylar transparency and creates an image on the plate; this becomes the printing plate.

The printing plate is treated with oil, and I ink it and run it through the press. Some of the big, linear prints take an hour and a half to ink because I manipulate the density of the colors while the plate is on the printing bed. I repeat the process with additional plates to add other elements and build up the complexity of images in the final print. Some of the prints have a series of small vignettes across the bottom that complement and expand the print’s main message.

To create the areas of pattern that fill in and around the printed linear images, I first mount very thin Japanese silk paper on an adhesive paper, then scan the patterns into my computer and print them on the silk. I hand cut the patterned sections and affix them to the print. I then outline all of the elements with black or a complementary color. The last step is applying wax to the print’s surface and ironing it.