



EFA Robert
Blackburn
Printmaking
Workshop

The Only Thing That Lasts:

An Oral History of Robert Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop interview with Deborah Cullen-Morales

Deborah Cullen-Morales began working as an intern at the Printmaking Workshop, sponging for a Jack Whitten lithograph. Her role expanded to organizing and managing the print collection, gaining curatorial expertise along the way, and curating exhibitions, including the US section of the Cairo Biennale. In 2002, she earned her Ph.D. in Art History from the CUNY Graduate Center, focusing her dissertation on master printmaker Robert Blackburn. Cullen-Morales went on to serve as Director of Curatorial Programs at El Museo del Barrio and as director of the Bronx Museum. Her focus on Latinx, Caribbean, and African-American art has left a lasting impact on the global art community.

In this excerpt, she reflects on the moment she decided to focus on Blackburn's work:

"I realized we've never seen this work from him, this man has created a workshop that's not recognized in the history of printmaking and his own work is not recognized in the history of printmaking. I started to realize his impact on ULAE, how many people he invited to the workshop, just his reach and his touch, his influence. At some point, it just snapped. I said why would I write something about out there, when this is right here."

Interview conducted by Camille Crain Drummond

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Deborah Cullen-Morales:

[I] just started trying to organize the drawers, and you'd open a drawer and there would just be prints by so many people in there. And then you'd open a drawer, and you'd realize the store was from 1950 and it had just been stuck under a press somewhere, and nobody had opened it since 1950. And these are prints someone gave Bob when it was his private atelier. We found a print by, you know, Roy de Carava, like, you know, all these amazing things because Bob had been collecting prints and asking people who'd worked with him over the years to leave a print for the collection, never really strictly enforcing it. There were different rules at different times, but no staff to enforce this. But people were generous because Bob was generous. And then at one point, we got all the prints in the room and I just counted how many were in one drawer, and I counted the number of drawers, and I was like, *oh, my God, there's like 15,000 or 18,000 prints in this room.* It was like,

overwhelming. And it was a whole history of printmaking that I realized, after I started studying art history, was not recorded anywhere in a real way. And his contribution was not recognized.

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So I was working in the print collection at the time that I was doing my graduate studies for art history, and imagining that I was going to write a dissertation on some other topic. These were the *October* magazine years. And I had gone to CUNY Grad Center to study with Rosalind Krauss, and I was imagining that I was going to be working on some topic that was out “there,” in a way. And at the same time, I was working for money for Bob and I was a barista in a coffee shop in SoHo. And I was working for money, you know, in the print collection and for passion, and going through this print collection and then realizing that I was probably the only person—to that point, because it had never been gathered like that—who had really gone through all those prints. And as I was going through the prints, I’d keep finding these little packages in brown paper, like stuck here and there and whatever, and I pull it out and I’d open it and it would be Bob’s work. And I’d call him in when I could get his attention, you know, usually at night or something and say, “Tell me about this work, what is this work?” And he’d be like, “Oh, yeah, you know, I—” Because he had no time. Like, eventually what happened to him is he had very little time to make his own work. So he would sneak it in, like in the evenings and the weekends. And then he’d sometimes pull a very small edition or just some color proofs or whatever, or like the mylars from, you know, something he was working on, you know, or woodblock, and he’d secret it away and then sometimes forget about it, you know. So as I was pulling this out, I was putting his work separately. And then I realized we’ve never seen this work from him. This man has created a workshop that’s not recognized in the history of printmaking, and his own work is not recognized in the history of printmaking. And I started to realize, you know, his impact on ULAE, how many people he invited to the workshop, just his reach and his touch and his influence. And at some point, it just snapped. I said, *Why would I write about something out “there” when, you know, this is right here and this would be a contribution?* So I decided to do almost like a, you know, monographic dissertation on Bob, which was the first real piece of writing on his work—trying to stay away from making it a history of the printmaking workshop, which of course it’s intertwined with, but focus it more on his work and the evolution of his work.

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There was a panel on “Rethinking Black Artists,” and I was able to present an early part of my dissertation. But it was looking at his most well-known work, which was the WPA work, and talking about how old he actually was when he did that work, and that that is not the work that should be—that his career should be stopped there in the public memory, because he was less than 18 when he did those prints. So, you know, just sort of quickly recounting all the other work he did after that. And it was almost still producing, because he was working on the MTA public mosaic on 116th Street. And so he was still producing work. And Bob was there. Bob came to the talk. I think it was the first time he met my husband, my husband was there, and Bob was sitting right in the front row in a wheelchair. And he started to cry. I think because it was rare for him to hear somebody speak about his work on a scholarly panel, amongst others like Charles White and other, you know, artists

that we all know and love. And also to say his work did not stop when he was 18 years old and why have we not recognized the rest of his work? So that reassured me that my dissertation topic was important. Important to him, and important for the field, to get the story out there.