



EFA Robert
Blackburn
Printmaking
Workshop

The Only Thing That Lasts:

An Oral History of Robert Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop interview with Kathy Caraccio

Kathy Caraccio, born in 1947 and raised in the Bronx, developed her expertise in printmaking throughout the 1970s and early 80s. She honed her skills in color etching, Japanese woodblock printing, and papermaking, including training in Japan, and spent four years apprenticing at Robert Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop. In 1977, Caraccio established the K. Caraccio Printing Studio in New York City. She has since taught printmaking across the city at several institutions. As a master printer, Caraccio has editioned works for renowned artists such as Romare Bearden, Ed Clark, Emma Amos, and Blackburn. In this excerpt, she reflects on the collaborative atmosphere of Blackburn's workshop—where artists exchanged materials, advice, and even snacks—and how Blackburn fostered opportunities for artists, both in editioning and teaching outside the studio. She also recounts her experience creating an edition with Blackburn himself.

Interview conducted by Camille Crain Drummond

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Kathy Caraccio:

He absolutely—at some point it was a frustration that—you would need Bob for some reason, and the next person who walked off the elevator got all of Bob's attention, and I'd be like, "Here he goes again." He's adopting the brand new stranger over my neediness, which was like a child going, "Wait a second, why is that kid getting more attention than me?" But that type of invitation was, "Come on in, here's the workshop, do you do litho or etching?" and "Get to work." And establish some rapport, and that person was already in the community by the time they spent five minutes there. And he also collected their work. So he made them a member of this kind of community. And it was culturally so diverse. It was an amazing place to be.

I would ask—every time I met someone new, I'd ask them two questions: "What black ink do you prefer?" Because black ink is a very basic thing to both litho and etching. And, "What oil do you use to lubricate your ink?" And I remember someone said he used Oil of Olay, and I thought, *Really? That's a face cream!* It works. It works. And people some people use olive oil, some people use vegetable oil, some people use what they call standard plate oil which is a linseed oil. So it was very curious how people problem-solved their little kitchen chemistry of the printmaking. It was pre-digital. None of this has anything to do with computers and digital, so it was fun to share food with

people along with the kind of kitchen aspect of using acid and setting up ink and doing rollers and doing viscosity.

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Camille Crain Drummond:

It seemed like Bob was maybe striving to make a kind of utopian environment. And we discussed a little bit about the tensions between, like, commercial art for commercial reasons and art for exploration. Do you want to—can you kind of talk a little bit about Bob's ethos with that, and what you observed of him doing with the space?

Kathy Caraccio:

Bob loved jazz. Bob was about going out for jazz after work when his friends came by. Being with his friends and getting out to hear music. It was very important to him, and I didn't care for jazz at all so I wasn't in that group that went out for the party afterwards. I was the morning worker and I went home to the Bronx. Everything he did—all was seamless. Some people came in to print editions, and they were in a marketplace and they were producing. Other people came to explore some mezzotint plate where they got their nose down to the grindstone and worked that mezzotint plate, or came for a class and did some engraving or did viscosity. The community was very—had a wonderful ambiance of possibilities. And I remember Bob coming through and saying Krishna's coming and so, we all wanted to participate in this ... European, or more broader culture. I know Bob was lived in Paris for a while and I have a story. Someone told me Bob had a green motorcycle. Nobody seems to know about Bob's green motorcycle, anything. Did Bob ever drive? I only know that he had a motorcycle, so he probably did.

The version of money-making versus aesthetic was—there was no line. Everybody came with what their motives were. Many of us wanted work, so Bob would find us work. He was in that—in what Romeo Bearden would do, is connect up individuals to possibilities. And so I got a lot of work, including teaching. Teaching at Bob's. He said, "Why don't you teach something here?" And I thought *Really? What do I have to do?* And I had to write up what I wanted to do and propose a class. I loved teaching. It was it was wonderful. I studied in Japan to go green. And when I came back, he gave me an audience, I could sit 15 people in a row and talk about water-based printmaking to help people think about moving from oil basin chemicals to a green possibility. So Bob was open. I don't remember Bob ever shutting anything down, saying that's not going to happen here or this isn't possible. And I was on that team. I got to be fearless. He also took presses out into the community. He loved the children, he loved the high schoolers, he loved the audience of young people. And he got very profoundly fatherly. I loved hearing him talk with people. He was kind and gentle and smart about how he talked to people. He never—he was flawless in that. I think there's some video of him talking to—I don't know if you've seen it—but he's wonderful with his youth audience, he really loved that. And I remember him saying, "Do you have a license? Could we rent a truck and take a press out to a high school in Brooklyn?" And I said, "No, I don't drive." I didn't have a driver's license at the time, but I went in the car to help him move the press. And so, you know, he was very for the community. He was totally dedicated to what he was doing. It was his

family. It was his substitute family. He didn't have a wife or children. So the printmaking workshop was his was his baby. And I felt like I was part of his family. Except for the jazz sessions.

I pursued Bob to make a woodblock with him, and I brought over wood and he gave it away. And I showed up and said, "Can we start?" And he said, "No, I gave the wood away." "Okay, I'll get you more wood." Did it again. He gave it away. And then he said, "Oh, I have this thing in my back and I can't push the tool." And I got him an electric carving tool, and he lost it. He gave it away, I'm sure he gave it away because that was what Bob did. And so one day, knock on the door, intern comes, brings me a plate, and he says, "Bob said, you should hold on to this." I said, "What are you talking about?" Call Bob. "Bob, why do I have this plate?" He said, "We're moving again and I don't want to lose this plate." And it was this image of *Organic Things*. So I said, "Okay, I gotcha. I have your plate and you're going to come over and work with me." Is that right side up? It is. So this is a viscosity print that Bob made in Krishna's class in 1973. And we got to print what's called an 'edition variable,' which is every one has different set of colors. So there's 23 images. And I finally got to co-publish Bob Blackburn. It's a real feather-in-my-cap of being able to work with an artist that I pursued. I otherwise do not publish.