



EFA Robert
Blackburn
Printmaking
Workshop

The Only Thing That Lasts:

An Oral History of Robert Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop interview with Richard J. Powell

Richard J. Powell was born in Chicago, and earned his B.A. in Art from Morehouse College in 1975, followed by an M.F.A. in Printmaking from Howard University in 1977. While completing a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship in Museum Education at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he developed an interest in art criticism and curation. In 1979, as a guest curator for the Studio Museum in Harlem, he organized one of the first surveys of African American printmakers. He studied at Yale University from 1980 to 1988, earning an M.A. in African American Studies, and M.Phil., and Ph.D. in the History of Art. Since 1989, he has taught Art & Art History at Duke University and has become a prominent figure in African American art, recognized for his curatorial work and publications throughout his 35-year career.

In this excerpt, he places the Blackburn's Workshop in the context of the printmaking boom of the 1960s and 1970s, which saw the development of several professional printmaking studios. He also shares how his relationship with Blackburn shaped his journey from being an artist to becoming a curator and historian.

Interview conducted by Camille Crain Drummond

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Richard J. Powell:

Well, printmaking has been around for centuries. Printmaking goes all the way back to, I guess, Gutenberg and the ability to print text, in Germany and in the Northern Renaissance movement. And it's always evolved over time with new technologies, with new tools, with artists who are thinking in interesting ways as related to the graphic image. I'm also thinking about the relationship of printmaking to written texts—that prints often are accompanying writing, novels, poetry, news pieces. So, there's always been this world of printmakers and printmaking. And that's continued from, you know, those early years all the way through to the moment that I'm emerging as an artist. I would say that, however, what begins to happen in the 1960s and 1970s is, I don't think you'd call it the *professionalization* of printmaking, but certainly the sense that people can develop the skills and the expertise through hiring specialists to help them make prints. And that seems to happen with much more intention in the '60s. I'm thinking about Tamarind in New Mexico, Gemini in New York. And so there are a whole group of organizations that are dedicated to helping artists to make multiples. And that's all fine.

But then you also have organizations like Bob Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop, which is very different. It was not a place where, I guess, commerce was a big, big part of the narrative. I think, for Bob, it was a place of experimentation, it was a place of camaraderie, of making sure young people were in conversation with one another about their artistic practice. It was also putting senior established artists in conversation with younger artists. I have fond memories of being at the workshop and seeing Romy Bearden walk through, or Mel Edwards walk through, or Eldzier Cortor walk through. So again, my trajectory as an artist happened to be connected to a really, really interesting moment in the art world where prints are being appreciated, prints are being used as commodities and things that people can purchase and sell and exhibit in museums and galleries. But it's also, you know, a statement. In fact, I'm kind of thinking about organizations like the Taller de Gráfica Popular in Mexico, which were founded at mid-20th Century in Mexico, that were also engaged with printmaking, but printmaking that, again, would send messages about the rights and social justice issues that were really important for working-class people in Mexico. I was fortunate during this time period to meet Elizabeth Catlett for the first time. And she shared with me as a young artist, you know, that aspect of printmaking as well. So I was inundated in that world during that time period, and I took it all in as an artist and, I guess, eventually as someone who's going to write about this in the future.

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I met Bob when I arrived in the summer-fall of 1977, and I was working at the workshop in '77, '78. I left New York after that, and I taught for a while in Norfolk, Virginia. I ended up coming back this way to attend Yale University. I started there in 1980 and I was in residence at Yale until 1984. So I would say, basically, that my initial engagement with him ended up extending well past my actual place in the workshop. We remained friends. We remained in communication with one another. Something that I think is also important to mention is that when I arrived, I was working at the printmaking workshop, but I was also based at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in this museum education program. And I was working on a project that really came out of my time at the printmaking workshop. I was working on a project on Black Printmakers, trying to find information about historical people who go back in time as well as present Black printmakers. That really came out of—the genesis for that really was the printmaking workshop. And the other thing that was quite fortuitous during that moment is that I shared those ideas with the new director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, Mary Schmidt Campbell, who invited me to organize an exhibition on Black printmakers for the Studio Museum in Harlem, which opened in 1980 and in some ways it incorporated a lot of the information that I had kind of gotten willy-nilly through many of the artists who I hung out with here at the workshop. But it also gave me an opportunity to put on my art-historical hat. I didn't even know I had an art-historical hat until that project began, and I began to do research, and I began to interview people like Bob about his experiences as a printmaker and as a Black artist working in New York for a good part of the early-mid-part of the 20th Century. He, in turn, put me in touch with all sorts of people who were his cohorts during that time period. So, I really have to give props to the printmaking workshop and Bob Blackburn for not only giving me a chance to make art, but giving me a chance to think—as Camille said—to “think about looking at yourself historically.” And that culminated in that exhibit that I organized for the Studio Museum in

Harlem, and that was kind of the beginning of my real engagement with both curating and being an art historian.