



EFA Robert
Blackburn
Printmaking
Workshop

The Only Thing That Lasts:

An Oral History of Robert Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop interview with robin holder

robin holder was born in Chicago in 1952 and grew up in an activist family in New York City, through which she became aware of racial, class, and ethnic dynamics at an early age. She learned to explore these themes through art while attending LaGuardia High School for Music and Art and later at The Art Students League of New York. After spending five years living in Mexico, Ecuador, and Holland, she returned in 1977 to join Blackburn's Printmaking studio as an artist and assistant director, refining her unique printmaking technique.

For the next three decades, holder worked as an art educator while maintaining her artistic practice, gaining recognition through numerous exhibitions, commissions, and community arts projects. In this excerpt, holder recalls her relationship with Blackburn, which began when they were children. She reflects on her experience as the Printshop administrator, describing Blackburn as someone who created a safe space for people of color to create their work. She remembers him as a "humanitarian" who fostered relationships and was generous with his resources.

Interview conducted by Camille Crain Drummond

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robin holder:

Because Bob, one of the things that I noticed about Bob is that he never really commented on the thematic content of anybody's work. And I think that was very important because, particularly for artists who are coming from different countries or BIPOC artists, African-American artists, Asian-American artists, Latino artists, the content of their work in many cases was not appreciated or embraced in many of the contemporary art platforms, galleries, museums, curators, historians at the time. So the fact that I never saw Bob make any comments about the thematic issues in anybody's work I think made people feel safe. And I think one of the important things that needs to be realized is that when you have a group of people interacting in a community, in a communal space, you have a situation where, if the people are really creative, if they're really digging deep in order to do their work, they're very vulnerable.

So, the workshop had two ways that you could do your work. You could be in a private room. Perhaps you are working with a publisher, or maybe you were a painter or a sculptor and you were working with a printer who would provide the technical expertise to realize your imagery. And then

there was a general workshop area which was more affordable. So there were, at the time, four private rooms with etching presses and one room with a lithographic press, and then the general area had three etching presses and another lithographic press. So there were all these things going on. There were all kinds of different levels of engagement or obsession with printmaking, depending on who the person was. And Bob was very, very committed to the relationship between a painter or a photographer and a technical printer. That whole process of collaborating requires very delicate elements. The person who is providing the technical expertise or who is the printer has to have a trusting—or rather, the artist has to trust them to understand that their vision is being comprehended. So you foster this relationship between people to create something that doesn't really exist in physical form, which is a very magical but very sensitive reality. The whole process of collaborating is very delicate, and I don't think that it happens very often. And when it does happen, it's a manifestation of trying to have a vision that's shared enough to render a successful product or realization of the work. So that was really very much what Bob was committed to.

In addition, he was a real humanitarian. He was somebody who really believed fully in bringing people together. And just walking down the street with Bob would be like, he'd talk to—whether you know them or not—everybody practically that you passed by. So going on an errand with Bob was always an adventure. If we had to go from 17th Street down Sixth Avenue to go get Xerox copies—this was like before the digital age—or go to Duggal to get some slides or some black and white photographs or something, the whole journey with him was a series of, “Oh, how are you? This is so-and-so, this is so-and-so.” And that was something that would happen on a daily basis. Whoever was in the shop, whether it was Michael Kelly Williams, or Anna Golici, or Tei-Sing Smith, or Agnes Murray, Bob was always bringing people together. He really believed in connecting people so that they could share information, so that they could become familiar with each other. I would say probably three or four times a week, every week, somebody from abroad would come in from literally all over the world. So that was, you know, the printmaking workshop during the time that I was there. There was this real feeling of being part of an extended family, of the sense that something unexpected and wondrous would happen. You would meet somebody new, you'd be able to share information. And in addition to that, there were a lot of relationships that formed, personal relationships that formed between artists. There were a lot of professional exchanges, information about career-building. That was something, that you could always ask questions. I remember, for example, there was an artist, Maria Henley, who came from the Caribbean, and I remember her talking about—she had a small apartment—and she was very specifically doing three-color etchings, and she had all of her formulas written down. She was very specific about everything that she did, and I remember her explaining that she did not have to print an entire edition of 50 pieces. She had all of the information, the sequence by which she printed every color, the formulas of the amount of transparency and ink that she used. And she would keep her plates in storage, so that in her small apartment she didn't have any of her work. And that idea I remember there were a couple of us who, when she was explaining this, were like dumbfounded at how brilliant that was. So there was always something new to learn, always something to ask about. And then if you wanted to kind of be inside yourself, you could be. People could kind of sense that, you know, you really didn't want to talk too much.

But I think that I could say many of the people that I admire I met at the printmaking workshop: Elizabeth Catlett, Mel Edwards, William T. Williams, Al Loving, Faith Ringgold, Camille Billops. And the other thing was that Bob had these relationships with different organizations and institutions, hundreds of relationships. So he had the ability to cross-reference people and refer people. He had an ongoing relationship with the Art Students League, and I remember several cases of artists who came from different countries who really needed to have a vetted institution in order to get their visas. And I remember very specifically two instances. There was one young Chinese printmaker who, I think that she needed to have her visa renewed. And I remember her having a private conversation with Bob, and then afterwards Bob telling me, "She does not want to go home because they will marry her off. So we have to find a way to keep her here. And I'm going to send her over to the Art Students League for them to give her a scholarship so that she can have her visa renewed. And then she'll find a way. We'll find a way to give her a job so she can stay here." And there was another young artist from South India. It was very interesting because she was telling us about the racism in India, and she was very dark-skinned, and she said, "I just don't want to go back." And Bob figured out a way to create the resources for her to stay in New York. So he was very sensitive to those kinds of things and very generous in his willingness to help anybody, practically, that he could.