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Entertainment & Life

BIG INK: Spreading gospel of woodcut printmaking in a BIG way

By Alex Cipolle For The Register-Guard

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Whiteaker Printmakers in Eugene welcomes 16 artists to print on its large-scale press

The late mechanical engineer Raymond Trayle continues to make a mark on Pacific Northwest art, particularly in printmaking. The Portland native and Oregon Governor Arts Award recipient, who passed in 2012, worked with artists and institutions to design and build more than 60 printing presses in his lifetime.

One of his largest creations, a press built in 1990 that measures 4 by 8 feet, is still busy cranking out prints in the historic Cox Cannery building, home to Whiteaker Printmakers, the printmaking hub that opened in the Whiteaker in 2015.

A massive press like this — complete with a 6-foot captain's wheel and rollers repurposed from a ship's mast — is a rare commodity. And it's precisely the reason that the New Hampshire woodcut printmaking advocacy and education organization BIG INK chose to host its BIG INK event Saturday and Sunday at Whiteaker Printmakers.

"It's very unusual to have a press of that size that people can just come in and use," says Lyell Castonguay, BIG INK co-director and woodblock printer and teacher. Castonguay says there are only a handful of publicly accessible presses of this size in the country. "It's very difficult to find."

This is the second time Whiteaker Printmakers will host BIG INK: The first event was in 2016 featuring nine artists. This year's event will feature 16 artists, selected from all over the West Coast (and one from Australia) working over

two days. The event is free and open to the public.

“You’ll see large-scale woodcut printmaking in action,” says Paul Halpern, who runs Whiteaker Printmakers with his wife, Heather Halpern, an artist and printmaker. “It’s an all-day process.”

To be considered, applying artists had to supply a preliminary design for what they would like to create at the event. The proposed projects must meet a minimum size of 2 by 3 feet.

“We work with not only printmakers, but painters and sculptors, too,” Castonguay explains.

Castonguay says that he founded BIG INK with co-director Carand Burnet in 2012 to facilitate large-scale woodblock printing events across the country for artists who may not be able to work on this scale with their own resources. BIG INK also partners with galleries and museums, as well as universities to help facilitate students studying printmaking. Basically, BIG INK is spreading the gospel of woodcut printing to artists and the public alike. Or as their website declares, “Welcome to the Woodcut Revolution.”

“It really just grew out of my own work,” he says. “I noticed that in different places that there were other artists producing large-scale wood block prints, but there wasn’t any cohesive events to bring these people together.”

When BIG INK began, Castonguay and Burnet scoured the country looking for big presses, finding the beasts in places as far-flung as Atlanta, Manhattan, Oklahoma City and San Francisco. They discovered Whiteaker Printmakers because they had heard from other artists about the Ray Trayle press.

“The printmaking community is really tight,” Castonguay says.

And the reason Whiteaker Printmakers was able to acquire such a press in the first place, says Paul Halpern, is because of Margaret Prentice, a University of Oregon professor emeritus and former Printmaking department chair. For 26 years, Prentice taught drawing, relief printmaking, intaglio and papermaking, while her own work has been collected by institutions like Harvard University and the Getty Museum. Locally, her work often is on view at the White Lotus Gallery.

Prentice has Trayle custom-build the press. “I remember it was the largest press he had made at the time,” Prentice says in the 2012 book, “Ray Trayle: Pressmaker.” “I had asked Ray if he could make it 3 feet wide and he said, ‘The sheet of phenolic resin comes 4 feet by 8 feet and it would be a shame to cut a foot off of it.’”

She continues, “I consider the press Ray made for me a kind of gift from Ray’s heart. He has always been so supportive of me as an artist and has called regularly to ask how is press is working and how I’m enjoying it.”

Heather Halpern and Prentice, both printmakers, had been friends for years, says Paul Halpern, and when Prentice was downscaling at the University of Oregon, she inquired if the Halperns were interested in the press. The answer was a big yes, of course.

The 16 artists coming to Eugene for BIG INK will have the opportunity to make their own mark with that very press. Each artist will pull three prints from their woodcut, one of which will go into the BIG INK archive, which now houses 150 prints.

BIG INK also has partnered with the Bend Art Center to exhibit the prints from this year’s event Sept. 7-30, as well as the prints from the 2016 Eugene BIG INK event Aug. 3-26.

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