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ART OF THE STATE

BY KRIS VAGNER | krisv@newsreview.com



Prints by Fiona McElhany and Katherine Case are part of a group exhibition that showcases work by members of the Printmakers Conspiracy.

PHOTO/KRIS VAGNER

Ink fix

Printmakers Conspiracy

There's a lot to like about printmaking.

Teal Frances, a graduate student in the University of Nevada, Reno's art department, likes it for its surprises. She often makes animal characters that dress like humans and stand around in small groups not knowing what to say to each other—a lot like people do at art receptions—and adheres these characters right to the wall in small groups. Recently, while experimenting with a thin, strong Japanese paper, she learned—by accident—that ink can soak through it to give her a two-sided goat or fox. Now, she can place each critter on the wall so that it's looking either left or right, which makes it easier to mix and match them into the right arrangements.

BreeAnn St. Onge—a California transplant who works in different forms of printmaking—likes how the medium lets her indulge her perfectionist streak. Her austere, grayscale images are emotional responses to current political culture, made up of tiny dots, arranged to suggest movement, as if they were swarms of bugs. She enjoys the challenge of avoiding fingerprints and ink smears, lining up the registrations just right, to make consistent, smudge-free multiples of the same image.

Reno's printmaking scene consists of three hubs—UNR, Truckee Meadows Community College and Laika Press—and a few private studios. TMCC Art Professor Candace Garlock explained that, back in 2006, she and two colleagues—Jim McCormick and Nolan Preece—met to talk about forming a social/professional group.

"We talked about how the printmaking world is like a secret society," she said, because few people knew what it was. So, they named the group Printmakers Conspiracy.

Today's Conspiracy members aim to make their favored medium more visible to viewers and more accessible for potential practitioners. In September 2018, they held an "open portfolio" event at the Holland Project to show off their work, and, this month, they have a group exhibition up at Sierra Arts.

Some in the group are veteran artists. At the same time, St. Onge observed, "There's a lot more younger people interested in printmaking." She suspects the trend is part of a larger one—young artists using low-tech media such as photocopies and zines. "I recently stopped working at Gordon's Photo," St. Onge said. "Half of the people that bring in film are young people who are interested in going lo-fi. And they're teaching themselves how to use film and photography."

While, on one hand, printmaking may be gaining momentum, St. Onge pointed out why "Conspiracy" is probably still an apt name for a group that practices it.

"I think printmaking, for a lot of people who don't have any knowledge about printmaking, is a mystery," she said.

Francis, who used to work in Seattle, noted that there are more opportunities to learn printmaking in Reno than she would have expected.

"Printmaking is hard, because you need facilities to be able to do it," she said. Both Francis and St. Onge praised Laika Press for holding events that make it as easy as possible to explore the medium, such as one-session workshops in specific techniques.

"It's cool that Reno is on the edge of moving toward really good accessibility with printmaking," said Francis. □

Impact, a group exhibition by the Printmakers Conspiracy, is on exhibit at Sierra Arts Gallery, 17 S. Virginia St., through March 31. A reception is scheduled for March 21, 6–8 p.m. For information about the group, follow Printmakers Conspiracy on Facebook or contact Teal Francis, tealarrow@gmail.com.