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Prints Make Themselves Seen (and Heard) Again

A new exhibition at Print Center New York explores how 15 artists have used printmaking techniques since the 1970s to express their ideas about sound.

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By Laurel Graeber

Prints used to be the Cinderellas of the art world. Viewed as serviceable, unglamorous and lacking in distinction, they were not considered elegant enough to keep company with royalty like paintings.

Not anymore. Now regarded as integral to many esteemed artists' practices, prints — which comprise etchings, lithographs, woodcuts and many other art forms — have come to be appreciated for their ability to cross disciplines, create unusual effects and deliver messages in ways that other artworks often cannot.

Jenny Gibbs, executive director of the [International Fine Print Dealers Association](#), recalled how the Museum of Modern Art heralded the medium's new status by mixing prints and paintings within the museum's galleries at [its post-expansion reopening](#) in 2019.

It seemed “revolutionary to be hanging editioned works alongside paintings,” said Ms. Gibbs, whose organization's annual print exposition, the [I.F.P.D.A. Fair](#), is Oct. 27-30 during what is known as Print Week. “And it's sort of blurred the boundaries.”

The American artwork that has commanded the highest price ever paid at auction is also arguably a print: Andy Warhol's 1964 “[Shot Sage Blue Marilyn](#),” a silk-screen on linen that [sold at Christie's in May](#) for \$195 million. “There were several articles which described it as a painting, and then others which described it as a print,” Ms. Gibbs said in a phone interview.

But art experts can agree on one point: that the definition of a print is continuing to expand and change. And nowhere is this more evident than at the former International Print Center New York, which, after temporarily closing in March, reopened on Oct. 8 in a [new ground-floor space](#) with a shorter name (just [Print Center New York](#)) and a broader mission.



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“We’re doubling our exhibition space and tripling our wall space,” Judy Hecker, the center’s executive director, said during a tour in September of the unfinished premises. Designed by the architect Markus Dochantschi of [studioMDA](#) in Manhattan, the 4,100-square-foot nonprofit Print Center, at 535 West 24th Street in Chelsea, functions more like a museum than a gallery, offering exhibitions, informational resources and multiple programs for the public and artists. Admission is also free.

“When the Print Center was first open, it was really about getting as many people as possible to understand what is a print, to appreciate it,” Ms. Hecker said. While that is still a goal, she added, the institution today is more “about positioning print as a vital, responsive, relevant medium.”

As artists have experimented with new technology, materials and modes of presentation, print has evolved in surprising ways. This year, for example, the I.F.P.D.A. Fair is repeating a step it first took with its last in-person event in 2019: commissioning large-scale, immersive, site-specific works. One project, [LaToya M. Hobbs](#)’s “Sistership,” even celebrates the print matrix — the surface to which pigment is applied — as an art object.

At the Print Center, “we’ve shown prints in prior shows, and you will see them in our upcoming shows, that are floor installations, wall installations,” Ms. Hecker said. “We’ve shown prints that are temporal — they’re silk-screened onto ice and they melt.”

The center’s inaugural show in its new location, “[Visual Record: The Materiality of Sound in Print](#),” on view through Jan. 21, explores another intriguing avenue: how 15 artists have used printmaking techniques since the 1970s to express ideas about sound. The objects range from 1975 etchings by the artist [K.P. Brehmer](#), who based them on the sound waves from the Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky’s musical suite “Pictures at an Exhibition,” to [Audra Wolowiec](#)’s “concrete sound” (2020), a cast-concrete piece that takes its form from acoustic tiles.

“The show’s kind of grounded in the mechanical similarities between sound recording and printmaking,” said Elleree Erdos, the exhibition’s curator, who is now the director of prints and editions at the gallery [David Zwirner](#). “The way that a record is an engraving is a very basic way of thinking about it.” (One exhibit actually is a record — a 1988 rubber piece created by [Peter Fischli and David Weiss](#).)

But, she added, the resemblance between the two processes “really lies in the idea of touch — that they both require physical contact and pressure.” The composer and jazz musician [Jason Moran](#), for instance, created prints by playing his piano after he had covered the keyboard with paper and pigment. The artist [Dario Robleto](#) based the portfolio “The First Time, the Heart (A Portrait of Life 1854-1913)” on early sound-wave recordings of vibrations within the human body. The materials that went into this group of photolithographs include transparent ink and soot, which Mr. Robleto created by sweeping a lit candle beneath the paper.

But however unconventional some prints have become, the medium remains remarkably accessible to collectors with all kinds of budgets. At the opposite end of the market from Warhol silk-screens are the many prints that sell for less than \$3,000.

Prints “give you access to spectacular artists at more affordable prices, much more affordable,” said Stewart Gross, a private equity investor in Manhattan who collects prints with his wife, Lois Perelson-Gross, a chaplain. “There are a lot of people who could buy a print by [Julie Mehretu](#), and very few people who could buy a painting.”

The prospect of luring new clients has led even high-end galleries to focus more on prints. [Hauser & Wirth](#) participated in the I.F.P.D.A. Fair for the first time in 2018; [David Zwirner](#), which established its print-publishing division, [Utopia Editions](#), in 2021, is making its debut there this year. The artists working with Zwirner include [Marcel Dzama](#), [Rose Wylie](#) and [Ebecho Muslimova](#) — all with prints for under \$3,000.

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For artists who specialize in print, the layered process has its own magic. “It captures time differently,” said Mark Thomas Gibson, a Philadelphia-based artist. Far from being a detriment, a print’s existence as a series, he added, gives it more force.

With print, “if you have something you really need to say to people, there’s multiple ways that you can actually create an image and you can disperse it into the world,” he said in a phone interview. The message, he added, can become “a rallying cry.”

One of Mr. Gibson’s own works reflects that idea with its title: “Everyone Should Have One on Their Wall.” This series consists of variations of the same image — the imaginary grave of a Ku Klux Klansman, piled high with refuse — in several forms, including prints. Mr. Gibson, who is Black, sees the work as a statement against white supremacy. The more who own it, the more power it has.

Print is “about dissemination of ideas, of creativity and of art,” Ms. Hecker said. Artists who embrace the medium know that what they produce is not “going to sit in the rarefied home of one particular owner or in a particular museum collection,” she said. “Their work is out there for the many.”

