

Divergent Consistencies

The Studio and Community Art of Hugh Merrill, 1969-2009

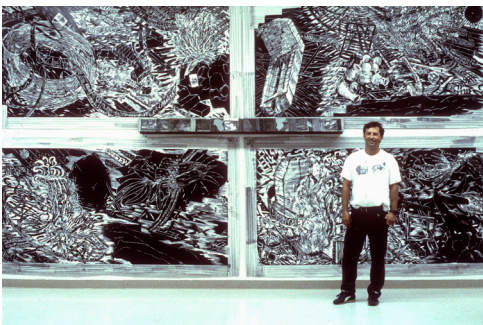
Presented by Leedy-Voukos Art Center, September 4-27, 2009

2012 Baltimore Street Kansas City, MO 64108, 816-474-1919

www.leedyvoukos.com www.hughmerrill.com 816-686-8626

Biographical Profile by Rebekah Calloway

Hugh Merrill began his artistic career in 1969 at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). Very quickly he found himself focused on printmaking, specifically working on etchings of the urban environment in the 1970's. He resisted the term landscape as a descriptor of his work, feeling the term looked backward towards a time when the relationship between mankind and nature was dominated by romantic ideas of progress. Instead, Merrill referred to these etchings as real-estatescapes, a phrase meant to represent the dominance of society over nature. He saw that nature had been divided up for economic benefit, it was for sale, and he wanted his prints and drawings to confront this reality. His early affinity for printmaking was due in part to an undiagnosed learning disability that made it extremely difficult for him to read. To his eyes, the white spaces of a page dominated the text and the entire page vibrated before him. He often saw words in reverse. So printmaking's reliance on the reversal of the drawn image became a natural area of investigation. It opened the door to his vision and became his primary means of expression for the next 4 decades.



Within his first year at MICA, Merrill flunked out and ended up in Washington D.C. as an office worker for Sen. John Sparkman of Alabama. He returned to MICA the following year and despite continued academic difficulties completed his undergraduate work and was accepted to Yale's School of Art & Architecture. There, he studied with John Cage, Gabor Pederti, William Bailey, Alex Katz, Robert Motherwell, Al Held and others, all of whom would have a profound impact on his thinking and work. Merrill's early work was generally informed by the chaotic climate of the late 60's and early 70's, the rise of the environmental movement, the struggle for civil rights and the anti-war movement. Yet during this time, while coming to maturity as an artist, the art world viewed political image-making as illustrative and secondary to modernist abstract concerns. Like other artists of his generation such as Louisa Chase, Judy Paff and Jonathan Boronski, he searched for a personal narrative that could unlock the grip of minimalism and high modernism. He sensed that his studio work, no matter how authentic, did not have a direct impact on the social and environmental concerns that informed him. He sought to balance his personal poetic studio voice with a more participatory process that involved disenfranchised communities. It has been artists such as Joseph Beuys, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and David Hammons that have helped Merrill define his work outside the traditional parameters of the studio artist. Their rejection of the commercial ego-based aesthetics of mainstream art production and their desire to reinvent art making based on community values, social justice and action have provided a model for Merrill to move his own social justice instincts toward community art projects and social sculptures.





The underlying political/social discourse for Merrill's work was fostered in childhood. He grew up in a political yellow-dog Democratic family from Alabama caught between the old south, Jim Crow laws and the emerging fight for equality and cultural validation. His grandfather was a state judge and Lieutenant Governor of Alabama. His father worked with the Democratic Party advising Kennedy, Humphrey and Johnson on agricultural issues. As the man in charge of peanuts for the Agriculture Department in the 50's and early 60's, his father would travel through the rural segregated south stopping in small towns where he gave talks on peanut allotments. Merrill often accompanied his father on these trips and it was here he saw first hand American apartheid, poverty and the resilience of the African-American community.

After graduation from Yale University, Merrill taught at Wheaton College in Norton, Mass before being hired to teach printmaking at the Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI) in 1976. Since then Merrill has worked on developing the Printmaking program at KCAI into an internationally regarded undergraduate department. Merrill applied an educational concept that focused on the investigation of both traditional print processes and new conceptual territory. The students' competency flows between etching, lithography, relief printing, the use of new forms of print reproduction and digital print outputting. Their work is marked by an ability to explore both a personal voice while navigating between consumer product production, installations, high and low cultural interactions, community and conceptual pathways.

During the late 1980's Merrill focused on sequential etching suites that had a social underpinning such as the Lucky Dragon Suite exhibited at the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art in 1985, and the Rosa Luxemburg and Raoul Wallenberg Suites exhibited at Printworks gallery in Chicago. But he became concerned that his prints and studio work were not having the direct impact on society he had been striving for. He began looking at the writings of Lucy Lippard, Suzanne Lacy, Suzi Gabcic and the work of Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival. These writers and artists laid out the belief that art strives for local context and cultural authenticity. This idea asks for art to come from the fabric of community and be made within the context of community. It asks artists to facilitate, listen and collaborate. After traveling to Poland photographing and doing drawings in Krakow and Auschwitz, he returned, determined to begin a series of community arts actions. He saw the importance of continuing his studio work in a new light, one that balanced his studio vision with social actions.

In 1996, Merrill worked with the Kemper Museum as a visiting artist for the Christian Boltanski exhibition So Far. He and Boltanski collaborated on the citywide community artwork Our City Ourselves. With the help of designer Bruce McIntosh, Merrill created a tabloid publication insert in the Sunday Kansas City Star inviting the public to bring their family photographs and personal archives to the museum where they could pin them to the walls. Soon the gallery was filled from floor to ceiling with thousands of photocopies of family pictures and letters. The museum was in effect turned over to the local populace. The installation celebrated their lives, but also rendered them insignificant through their placement out of a familiar/familial context. In conjunction with the exhibit Merrill also created Portrait of Self, an arts and educational project to help young people talk about the many influences that create their sense of self. It is an archive of drawings, poetry, writing, photography, and other artistic practices collected in journal form. Since its creation Merrill has gone on to use Portrait of Self in community arts projects in Dana Beach, Florida, Sydney, Australia, Dublin, Ireland, as well as Colorado Springs, CO, Pittsburgh, PA, Portland, OR and a number of other cities nationwide.



Building on these experiences, Merrill helped transform Chameleon Theatre, a small not for profit whose mission was to create dramatic plays about youth experience, into a broader Arts and Youth Development agency. Chameleon utilizes theater, Hip Hop, visual arts, and dance to transform the lives of homeless and at risk kids. Merrill views himself as a social sculptor and does not see a divide between his continued printmaking and drawing efforts and his work as a community artist and director of an arts agency. In the past 5 years, Chameleon Arts and Youth Development have raised over 1 million dollars for community art and arts educational projects for homeless and at risk youth communities in the urban core. Chameleon has also become a resource for small arts agencies including Stone Lion Puppet Theatre, I am U entertainment, Gospilunifics, Esoke African Drumming, Lewis Scenic Design, Happy Feet, the Arts Incubator and others.

Merrill's work as a community artist continues to grow and change with each new opportunity. In 2005, he was invited



to produce a community arts action for the Impact Conference in Berlin, Germany and Poznan, Poland. The project, Pools, consisted of graphics of children's swimming pools laid out in a public square and filled with images of mousetraps shaped like boats. Trailing from the traps were narrow sheets of paper with the text "I believe in the New York Stock Exchange" and other statements. The public was asked to participate by writing their own answers to the phrase "I believe in..." on a narrow sheet of paper, which they then attached to the work. Pools have gone on to be exhibited at the Dalarnas Museum for the Falun Print Triennial in Falun, Sweden, Colorado College and the National Conference of Environmental Educators.

Most recently Merrill has worked with Director Staci Pratt of the Office of Homeless Liaison, Kansas City, KS. Public Schools to facilitate a number of community arts projects, including Faces of the Homeless. Faces was a collaboration with Patrick Moonasar and Matt Hilger which produced a series of posters of homeless children showing not their need but their value. Merrill says "They are simply amazing and resilient children, no different on the surface than any child in any school. They represent not want but possibility and opportunity." Faces of the Homeless, has been exhibited nationally including the conference for the National Association of Educators of Homeless Children and Youth in Washington DC 2008.



Since his introduction to printmaking Merrill has become a leader in the international printmaking community and has written articles on the redefinition of art, printmaking and education. Merrill has taught and lectured on printmaking at over 75 universities, colleges and schools worldwide. He collaborated with Doug Baker and Dan Younger in Kansas City to open Squadron Press in the 1970's one of the first art businesses and studios in the now famous Kansas City Cross Roads arts district. In 2008 he was invited by the Nelson Atkins Museum to curate the print exhibition, *Print Lovers at Thirty*, in recognition of the Nelson Print Society and the contribution of George McKenna, long time print curator for the museum.

Merrill has been a speaker at numerous conferences including the College Art Association, The Southern Graphics Council, of which he was president in the early 1990's, and The National Association of Educators of Homeless Children and Youth. He has been awarded grants including a regional NEA grant, Melon Foundation, a Yaddo Fellowship, and the distinguished education award from the Southern Graphics Council 2007. His artwork has been exhibited internationally and his work has been collected by major Museums such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Daum Museum the Harvard Art Museums, the Cranbrook Museum, the Minneapolis Museum of Art, and the Nelson Atkins Museum among others.

Merrill has a long history of community involvement in Kansas City, he was president of the Kansas City Jewish Museum Foundation in the late 1990's, has been an artist invited on Kansas City Medical Missions trips to the Philippines, Guatemala and Cuba. He presently works with Soulfari Kenya which is building an orphanage in western Kenya. Merrill is on the board of United Inner City Services working to use the arts in early childhood development and he is on the steering committee of Inkubator Press of the Arts Incubator. Merrill continues to work with other artists, small arts agencies to bring arts events and programming to not for profit social service agencies.



"My mentor as both an artist and community leader comes from my long friendship with Jim Leedy. I can think of no one who has been a more consistent studio artist while simultaneously providing so many opportunities for others. What ever I have achieved as a community artist can be traced back to my friendship with Jim."