

Divergent Consistencies

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

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Divergent Consistencies charts the studio and community artwork of Hugh Merrill 1970 to 2009. Merrill's early prints were informed by his interest in social justice and environmental issues. These underlying perceptions have been consistent in his studio work for over 40 years. Merrill has worked for over 15 years on collaborative, socially engaged, interdisciplinary community art actions. He has led and developed Chameleon Arts and Youth Development, a not for profit company, that has brought over 1 million dollars worth of arts and educational projects to disenfranchised communities in Kansas City. **Divergent Consistencies** demonstrates Merrill's deep belief in the enriching relationship between studio and community artistic practice.

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The following text outlining Hugh Merrill's artistic practice is an excerpt from: *'Printmaking at the Edge'*, by Richard Noyce, published by A&C Black, London 2006, reprinted 2008. (© Richard Noyce, and used with permission.)

Richard Noyce is a noted international critic and writer on visual arts and printmaking. He interviewed Merrill for his book *Printmaking at the Edge*, published in 2006. The book explores the work of 45



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innovative print artists from 16 countries. This book has generated 'Further', a portfolio project with work from a large number of the artists in the book, and with an invited print from Richard Noyce. Exhibitions of the portfolio of prints have taken place at a growing number of international locations, including Winston/Salem, (North Carolina) Kansas City (Missouri), Kaunas (Lithuania), Seoul Korea, Jyväskylä (Finland), Kasterlee (Belgium) and Falun (Sweden), with projects being developed for further exhibitions in Austria, Argentina and the USA.

'Print is not an object, a technique, or a category, but it is a theoretical language of evolving ideas.' This quotation, from Hugh Merrill's essay, 'Educating the Next Generation of Printmakers', can be seen as being central to his work both as a studio artist and as a community artist. He grew up in Washington D.C. in the 1950s and '60s where his father worked in government, and was from an early age exposed to Democratic Party politics, meeting many of the major politicians of those decades. He studied art in Baltimore and at Yale, before going into teaching, moving to the Kansas City Art



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Institute in 1976 where he is now Professor of Printmaking and Community Arts. His broad vision of what art, and Printmaking in particular, can achieve has developed during his long career in the arts, beginning with the reductionist approach at Yale in the mid-1970s which revered artists such as Rothko, Sol Lewitt and Ellsworth Kelly, and moving on continuously from that beautiful but sterile point. Of the need to consider the changes in the art scene and the wider relevance and a deeper sense of engagement he now considers to be essential Merrill writes, 'Deconstructing Modernism is asking art to take on new values and functions, asking for social content, communication and audience interaction.'



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Merrill's work as an educator is not limited to the Art Institute as he is also actively involved in community work, particularly in his close involvement with Chameleon, a multi-media arts project situated in a former factory in an industrial area of Kansas City. The dynamic sense of vitality and creativity that runs through that centre is remarkable as is its production of dance, music and visual arts. He maintains a base in the centre because of his profound belief that his personal studio work and community projects are symbiotic. His work as a community artist began with having the opportunity to work with Christian Boltanski on a project at the Kemper Art Museum, a short distance from the Art Institute. This experience led to Merrill's 'Portrait of Self' project in which community groups are guided in the production of 'notebooks' that archive their recollections and experiences, so that they can be shared with and communicated to others. Through this approach, 'art is no longer an activity; it is a method for children to learn to think... ..freely, creatively and critically about their world.' He considers that instruction and education have very different functions – instruction to enable the development of skills and education to allow a process of thinking that leads to discovery.

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In his personal work Merrill adopts a complex freewheeling approach to the production of his 'hybrid prints', which combine a wide variety of traditional and technological techniques. A typical sequence of processes might include a drawing on a zinc etching plate to produce an image which is then scanned into a computer and modified as part of a Photoshop® collage that is printed out on decal paper and adhered to a board. This

is then altered first by the addition of screen-print and then again by the addition of further paper allowing the image to be drawn and painted into. In the artist's view the work remains a Print because his use of technology in the process allows him, 'to slow, stop, multiply, transform, produce variations and re-contextualise the image', techniques that are commonly used in Printmaking. This process is used in the 'Columbia' series, in which photographic images from different periods are layered together to produce something like a movie that freezes time, allowing an 'all-at-once-ness' experience of someone else's past, or like the fragments of fleeting landscape seen from a speeding train.



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To come to a fuller appreciation of the dynamics within Hugh Merrill's personal work, or indeed his community work, requires an understanding of the important he places on delay and variation, factors that are inherent in the Printmaking process. Delay comes between those moments of spontaneity that come with the stages in a drawing, or from a change of medium. It also comes from the need for reflection, and this in turn provokes the desire for variation and progression in an enriching process of discovery.

(Note: Richard Noyce is currently working on "Printmaking Beyond the Edge", for publication by A&C Black, London, in 2010)

Images:

1. Merrill, 1957 horse/Florida
2. Merrill, 2000 Cuba print studio Havana
3. Merrill Kemper Museum 1996, Boltanski, Self, Kegan
4. Objects 1, 1975 etching Yale University 24x36
5. Bad Ditch, western garden suite 1980 etching 18x24
6. Lucky Dragon Suite 1985, Nelson Atkins Museum Kansas City etching 24x36
7. Mural Dania Beach Florida 2000
- 8 Pools of Belief, community arts action, National Museum, Pozan Poland 2005
9. Art of Memory, community arts action, Columbia Missouri 2002