

# Island Press

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Island Press occupies a unique position in the story of American printmaking at the end of the twentieth century. The Press was founded in the late 1960s at Washington University in St. Louis during a period when collaborative printmaking had begun to command respect as a serious artistic medium. Since that time, Island Press has established a niche for itself in the field of printmaking. The press is now known for its very large and complex works, often created on handmade paper produced in the shop. While there are other professional print shops associated with major universities, Island Press is one of the few that relies not only on its master printers but also depends heavily upon the printmaking faculty and students to assist in the contract printing.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, in the past decade Island Press has become a shop that attracts serious artists and collectors alike, flourishing in a very competitive field that holds high standards for excellence.

The story of Island Press begins in the 1960s when Peter Marcus was hired by Washington University in St. Louis to teach printmaking to graphic design majors. He arrived in St. Louis in 1967 and was given free reign to achieve his ambitious goal of changing the nature of printmaking and how it was taught in the university setting.<sup>2</sup> In 1971, he decided to build a big press in St. Louis and, with the assistance of his students, constructed an etching press measuring thirty-eight inches wide with a ninety-six inch long bed.

In that same year, Marcus, under the auspices of Washington University in St. Louis, began making prints for artists outside of the academic community. He applied for his first grant from the Missouri Arts Council and received \$6000 over two years. For the next seven years, Marcus and his student assistants produced prints for visiting artists. The year 1978 was a critical year for the print shop for it was then that Marcus won another grant from the Missouri Arts Council. This time he had applied for money to found a collaborative print shop, which he named the Washington University Collaborative Printmaking Workshop.<sup>3</sup> Marcus used some of the funds to hire a master printer, Dan Gualdoni, who had been working at Gemini G.E.L. in Los Angeles.<sup>4</sup> The new shop would partially support itself by selling its share of the prints from the edition split with the artist. Significantly, that same year Peter Marcus also hired Joan Hall

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Graphicstudio, associated with the University of South Florida, was established in 1968. While it was on the grounds of the University, it strove to remain at a distance from the academic structure. Echo Press in Bloomington, Indiana, was founded in 1979 with seed money from the Indiana University but was not associated with the art school students at the University. Other important shops with ties to universities include Tandem Press at the University of Wisconsin, Madison; Rutgers Center for Innovative Print and Paper in New Brunswick, New Jersey; and the LeRoy Neiman Center for Print Studies, Columbia University, New York. For a more complete discussion of print shops in the United States see Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University, [Printmaking in America](#) (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Marcus' goals derived from an interview with Peter Marcus, conducted by Victoria Durrer, Sarah Rowe and Eric Mace, spring 2000.

<sup>3</sup> The Washington University Collaborative Printmaking Workshop will hereafter be referred to as WUCPW.

<sup>4</sup> Gemini G.E.L., established in 1966, was one of the earliest collaborative print shops. It still commands a major presence in the field of contemporary printmaking. Dan Gualdoni had received his BFA from Washington University in St. Louis.

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as the sabbatical replacement for the departing Suzanne Anker.<sup>5</sup> Hall would stay at Washington University and eventually become Area Coordinator of Printmaking and Drawing as Marcus approached retirement in the 1990s. She was attracted to the program due to both the opportunities offered by its large press and Marcus' pioneering vision of printmaking. Neither of them knew then that Hall would help realize Marcus' vision of a collaborative print shop.

Meanwhile, Gualdoni, who preferred more traditional modes of printmaking, remained the master printer until 1984. During his tenure, Gualdoni worked with such artists as Roy Lichtenstein, John Lees and David Nash. While all of the early prints produced by the press were of high quality and students were beginning to play a part in the contract work, the large and experimental personality of the press had not yet emerged. During the early 1980s, students increasingly became more involved in the print production at WUCPW. In fact, integrating students into the contract printing process had been a stated mission of the shop when it applied for the 1978 MAC grant. This dedication to the inclusion of students in the printing process made the shop unique among contract print shops across the country, even among print shops based in universities.

When Gualdoni decided to leave the shop in 1984 to devote needed time to his own work, Howard Jones became the next master printer. Jones, who trained at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, was attracted to the symbiotic relationship between the visiting artists and the students. Among the artists with whom Jones printed in 1985 were Peter Dean, Sonja Blomdahl and Marvin Lipofsky. Kevin Garber, a graduate of Joan Hall's alma mater Nebraska, succeeded Jones in late 1986. By that time, the print shop had two large etching presses. The original press with the thirty-eight inch wide bed had been joined by a new Marcus-built press with a sixty by one-hundred-twenty inch bed. In addition, the press had acquired access to papermaking facilities. With this new equipment came the opportunity for WUCPW to distinguish itself from other shops, and an increased impetus to move in a more unconventional direction.

Although the early prints under Garber's direction remained traditional in size and scope, the prints that he would work on by the end of the 1980s became increasingly complex. For example, Michael Hall's work in 1988, *WALTZ (with a right hand man)* signaled a move away from traditional printing conventions due to the artist's use of collagraph for its inherent sculptural nature.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, James Drake's 1989 print, *Dance With the Equinox* employed the use of Xerox toner to draw on the plate as well as a combination of processes to build the diptych format. Notably, both Michael Hall and James Drake's works represent Garber's gradual shift away from traditional approaches to printmaking, and the changing face of the WUCPW.

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<sup>5</sup> Suzanne Anker had taught with Peter since 1976 and held a special expertise in papermaking.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Marcus had insisted that Hall employ collagraph due to its inherent sculptural nature.

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In 1989, Joan Hall traveled to South Dakota to make prints with Lloyd Menard at the University of South Dakota. Hall's experience would bring about a further change in the environment at WUCPW. Menard, serving as the master printer, had not one or two students assisting him, as was the existing method in St. Louis, but rather an entire team of students who *worked with him* in producing the print. Indeed, his undergraduate and graduate students were required to assist a visiting artist in order to finish their degrees. For a week, Hall worked with Menard and his students, initially making paper and then producing the prints. Her experience directing the students with multiple aspects of the work, such as inking and making paper, led to Hall's realization that Peter Marcus' initial desire for a unique contract shop was indeed possible.<sup>7</sup> Hall returned to Washington University revitalized. As a result of the innovations in student participation that followed her experience, today it is not unusual to find 10-12 students working with the master printer on the production of one print in the Washington University shop. Again and again, artists who have worked at the shop cite the impact that this aspect of student involvement has had upon their experience in St. Louis. Juan Sanchez, who printed at the shop in 1991 and 1997 remarked, "I was able to achieve on a more ambitious level than I had expected because of them."<sup>8</sup> In a different manner, Joyce Scott saw her role in the collaborative printing process as a didactic one; she observed that through the experience she was helping "the next generation of artists be productive."<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the increased student participation, Marcus and Hall were also assuming a greater involvement in the print production, encouraging the visiting artists to make collagraphs rather than lithographs. This, of course, was a far more labor-intensive process, requiring faculty, and even returning alumni, to assist the master printer. Not surprisingly, the first person invited to WUCPW after Hall's return to St. Louis was Lloyd Menard.<sup>10</sup> According to Hall, the South Dakota professor was actually invited as a visiting artist so "we could watch him orchestrate our students."<sup>11</sup> Garber worked with the students under his direction on Menard's prints in the larger facilities of the printmaking department.<sup>12</sup> The 'Menard experience' proved to be cathartic for the St. Louis shop, and the Department was energized by the new way of working.

The subsequent prints produced by Juan Sanchez (1991), Hung Liu (1992), Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (1995), Tom Nakashima (1994), and Freda Baranek (1994) all reflect the total immersion of the master printer, faculty, and students with the visiting artists. Furthermore, Garber's work with Annette Lemieux (1995) and Jody Pinto (1995) marked significant milestones in the printer/artist relationships at WUCPW.

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<sup>7</sup> E-mail from Joan Hall to the author, 27 December 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Juan Sanchez to the author, 16 December 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Joyce Scott to the author, 5 December 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Menard went to WUCPW in 1990.

<sup>11</sup> E-mail from Joan Hall to the author, 27 December 2001.

<sup>12</sup> At this point, Peter Marcus was the Director of the WUCPW but Hall, who had been in the Department for more than ten years, was wielding a great deal of influence in the decision making.

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When Kevin Garber left WUCPW in the spring of 1996, Maryanne Ellison Simmons was hired as his replacement. From that point, Hall and Simmons would co-direct Island Press. Simmons had been a Washington University graduate student in 1989 as WUCPW reinvented itself under Hall and Marcus' guidance. Simmons had worked on nearly every complex project since that time, either as a student or as a returning alumnus. Simmons' previous experience had given her the opportunity to work with numerous professional artists-in-residence, and as a result she was undeterred by the scope of the experimental work being produced at Washington University. One of the first transformations proposed by Simmons was the renaming of the Washington University Collaborative Printmaking Workshop to mark the twentieth anniversary of the press. Simmons noted that the press needed a name that was easier to market, and proposed the name 'Island Press' as a fitting alternative. This new name honored the founder of the press, Marcus, who had been manufacturing his big presses under the moniker Island Press. Of course, 'Island' could also be seen as a reference to the press as an island of new ideas in the middle of the country.

As Simmons assumed her new role as master printer, Island Press continued to expand upon its innovative position in printmaking. Joyce Scott, known for her work in sculpture, beading, and installation art, arrived as a visiting artist two days after Maryanne Simmons began her tenure.<sup>13</sup> During her visit, Scott produced *Sixteen Days in his Life*, a multi-media piece consisting of collagraph, monoprint, woodcut, glass beads, and handmade paper.<sup>14</sup> The entire edition took three years to complete and embodied everything that Island Press had come to represent — it was large, complex, and eschewed the traditional boundaries of printmaking. Most importantly, its production had been dependent upon the active involvement of a team of students.

By 1997, almost thirty years after its modest beginnings, Island Press was gaining significant recognition as a print shop that was producing serious artwork. In the spring of 1997, Juan Sanchez won a grand prize at the Latin American and Caribbean Print Biennial in San Juan for his Island Press work, *Sol y Flores para Liora*. In 1999, the Native American Arts Alliance displayed Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's monumental Island Press print *Celebrate 40,000 Years of American Art* at the Venice Biennale. Island Press began to attract the attention of artists, collectors, and museum curators from across the country.

Building upon these successes, Island Press hosted Chicago-based artist Nick Cave in January 1999. Cave is a multi-media artist known for his fashion design, fiber work, performances (he also had formal training as a dancer), sculpture, and collages composed of objects that he collects. His art invokes political and social issues including AIDS, gender, race, and sexuality. The prints that Cave produced in St. Louis resonated with the eloquent language of his three-dimensional objects, an aesthetic perfectly suited to the methods of

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<sup>13</sup> Scott would return three more times, in spring 1997 and in fall 1998 to finish the work on the complex print that she chose to do at Island Press, and finally in August 1999 to complete the beaded elements in the edition.

<sup>14</sup> Some of Scott's prints are also hand colored.

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Island Press. Rather than using a traditional print sub-strait such as a metal plate, Cave printed on used shirts that had been stitched together to form the "plate" from which the print was made. Cave's works *MASS* and *Virus* were quickly considered among the most creatively produced prints that had been done in the shop. That is, his was an art that tested the limits of experimental printmaking.

Among the other works that have defined Island Press in the last six years is Yizhak Elyashiv's *Untitled*, produced during his weeklong stay in 2000. Elyashiv's efforts, supported by Simmons and a cadre of Washington University students, resulted in eight monumental 105" x 53" triptychs. Franco Mondini-Ruiz's similarly ambitious site-specific work, *Infinito Botanica: St. Louis, The Lavender Hour* from 2001, featured multiples of modeling clay set within a series of acrylic jars. Shimon Okshteyn's monumental litho and cast paper pieces, produced in 2001, and the ongoing edition (begun in 1999) of printed, painted, stitched and beaded quilts by Susan Shie also mark major advances in the contemporary production of the press. Significantly, all of these works were achieved through a collaboration of artist, master printer, faculty, and an 'army' of aspiring young artists with enormous drive and passion.

In late winter 2001, Maryanne Ellison Simmons announced her plans to retire from Island Press in order to devote full attention to her own print shop, Wildwood Press. Tom Reed, a former printer with Jack Lemon at Landfall Press in Chicago, was named as her successor. Joan Hall resumed full-time responsibilities as Director and the Island Press operations, which had been located partially out of Simmons' Wildwood studio, were moved back to Bixby Hall on the campus of Washington University in St. Louis. Bixby and the Island Press facilities underwent a major renovation in the summer of 2001. It was then that Joan Hall realized her long-standing ambition of designing a "facility that reflected our attitude towards printmaking. That is, one of large scale, mixed media, experimental prints and printmaking."<sup>15</sup> In essence, Island Press became a full-service print shop — an actuality unprecedented in the history of the contract shop at Washington University.

Remarkably, Island Press began as a small collaborative operation at a time when there were many large, successful, and very professional print shops operating across the country. Peter Marcus knew that he had to make his press different. By utilizing the resources that were available to him in a University setting, he carved out his unique space. Beginning with a modest grant, a small shop, and one master printer making a preponderance of traditional lithographs, he built the facilities and hired staff members who shared a similar vision. A critical turning point occurred in the early 1990s when Joan Hall insisted that the students be brought into the production process. The youthful energy that they brought with them, accompanied by their new, and sometimes uninhibited ideals, fostered an atmosphere that, in turn, invigorated the visiting artists. Furthermore, the availability of such a concentrated labor force allowed the visiting artists to 'think complexly' if they so desired.

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<sup>15</sup> Joan Hall to the author, 27 November 2001.

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Kevin Garber once said that he thought of Island Press as a "sleeping orchid waiting to be discovered."<sup>16</sup> Today, Peter Marcus' vision has been realized. In 2001, Marcus noted that he hoped to be remembered as someone who, "brought some innovation to the nature of printmaking, changed the nature of what it can be. I want it to be remembered that I brought large scale to the presses. I also want to make printmaking into an art form that competes visually with everything else. There is no limitation to printmaking. If you think about it, you can make it."<sup>17</sup> Today, because of Marcus' and subsequently Joan Hall's leadership, the prints that are made at Island Press have a complexity taking them beyond the realm of the traditional print. There is very little that the printers at Island Press will not attempt. Some of Island Press's works are as large as oversize paintings with a texture that can challenge any brushwork. Their presence can overwhelm a space as much as some paintings do. Some of the works have a three-dimensionality that is sculptural. Others can be considered installations rather than prints. Indeed, Island Press work can and does "compete visually with everything else." In an era when boundaries between printmaking and other arts media are becoming more blurred each day, Island Press has marked a space for itself that continues to command the attention and respect it well deserves.

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<sup>16</sup> J Kevin Garber interview, 3 April 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Marcus to the author, 28 November 2001