

# 100 years of printmaking is worth celebrating

Fred B. Adelson, For the Courier-Post 8:40 p.m. EST February 27, 2015



The Print Center in Philadelphia is celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday this year.

As Billy Crystal would say, "You look marvelous, absolutely marvelous!"

Just a few doors from the Pennsylvania Society of the Colonial Dames of America on Latimer Street, The Print Center is not some stodgy relic of the past but a vibrant force looking toward the future. Indeed, it has come a long way from its patrician beginnings as a Salon-style club for collectors and enthusiasts to promote printmaking using only black ink on white paper

On a recent visit, Elizabeth Spungen, the executive director since 2006, and John Caperton, the Jensen Bryan curator, discussed how the Center has evolved.

Spungen explained that before printmaking "joined the major league," the Center "supported an underappreciated art form and bolstered its makers."



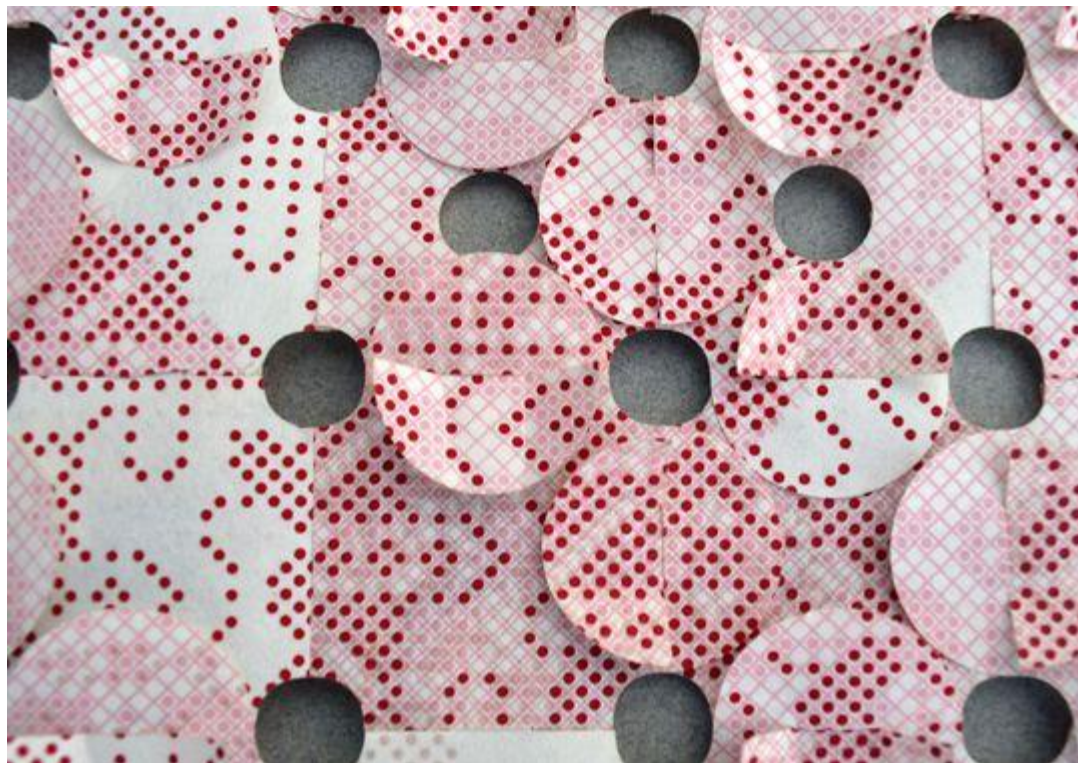
The Print Center of Philadelphia celebrates centennial (Photo: Photo provided)

During the 1960s, photography also was brought under wing. Since then, the nonprofit organization has nurtured many artists from these "two incredibly powerful mediums," supporting the printed image in all its varied manifestations. Furthermore, it spawned both the Fabric Workshop and Brandywine Workshop; two Philadelphia-based but internationally acclaimed creative centers of printmaking activity.

Founded as The Print Club of Philadelphia in 1915, the group moved two years later to its present address, not far from the Rittenhouse Square parlors where its members initially met. The new location provided space for a print studio as well as a place to house a permanent collection of prints. The building was ultimately purchased in 1927 and is still the center of its activity.

With catalogs spread across a table in the first floor gallery of this former carriage house, Spungen and Caperton shared significant milestones in the Center's exhibition history, like "Black Pulse" by Doug and Mike Starn (b. 1961 in Absecon, New Jersey), who first

achieved fame as art-world darlings in the late 1980s. The identical twins used photography, printmaking and digital imaging to create exquisitely sensitive pictures of leaves. To accompany their show in 2007, the Center also co-published "To Find God not the Devil's Insides," an inventive folded artists' book.



The Print Center of Philadelphia celebrates 100 years. (Photo: Photo provided)

Interestingly, in 1942, The Print Club donated its formidable collection of Old Master and modern prints to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which at the time had "no designated fund for prints." These works established the core of the museum's print department. For more than 50 years, the Print Center has also been commissioning artist books and limited edition artwork; it continues to present gifts to the museum to augment its holdings in contemporary art.

In 1960, The Print Club initiated "Prints in Progress," an educational program of art workshops in Philadelphia public schools. With its "printmobile," a portable press, children are introduced to the joys of printmaking, working with professional artists. "Education has long been an important part of our mission," said Spungen, who acknowledged how this is no longer an extra-curricular activity but offsets a severe lack of arts funding.

Over the past century, the organization changed from "the dissemination, study, production, and collection of works by printmakers American and foreign" to its current mission "to support printmaking and photography as vital contemporary arts and to encourage the appreciation of the printed image in all its forms."

In 1996, The Print Club officially became The Print Center to reflect more accurately that it serves a broader public audience.

Six years later, in 2002, the Center organized "Imprint," a monumental public art project that raised its visibility and "transformed the city of Philadelphia into a contemporary art gallery dedicated to the printed image."

Six contemporary artists, who were recognized for their printmaking or photography, were given the opportunity to create works to fit into the context of everyday life. Ultimately, 30 innovative pieces were installed on billboards, bus shelters, and paper coffee cups, resulting in some exciting results.

As printmaking and photography has assimilated into the contemporary scene, Caperton acknowledged: "the early nurturing role (of the organization) has now become one of celebrating and critically examining the print." Indeed, Spungen is enthusiastic about planning "the second hundred years of excitement and ambition while letting artists decide and think about the medium."

Like icing on its birthday cake, the Center recently received a \$100,000 grant from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts to promote contemporary visual arts over the next two years. To mark the centennial, there will be a "citywide festival comprised of 100 wide-ranging components, including exhibitions, public art events, commissions of works," and a variety of other lectures, publications and parties to reach out to the community at large with "an international voice in photography and printmaking."

On view through March 28 and kicking off its anniversary celebration, two exhibits by Denise Bookwalter of Tallahassee, Florida, and Jessica Todd Harper of Merion, Pennsylvania, reflect the organization's dual commitment to printmaking and photography. Both artists won last year's International Competition, which began back in 1924 as the First Annual Exhibition of American Etchers and remains a prestigious and signature event sponsored by The Print Center. It has now expanded in scope and is "the longest running Annual International Competition for prints and photographs in the country."

On the main floor is "The Knitter's Hand and the Telegrapher's Fist," a show of prints and artist books by Bookwalter. She provocatively addresses "the translation of instructions and codes into handmade objects" as accomplished by knitters and telegraphers. Bookwalter deals with positive and negative elements in a complex way that makes it especially hard to appreciate her work without seeing it in person. "Fair Isle Knits," is a large screenprint on laser cut paper and felt; its installation subtly floats against the wall.

Sixteen color photo prints by Harper are displayed in the two upstairs gallery spaces. Her images in "The Home Stage" deal with seemingly ordinary moments of family life, centering around her own children, husband, sister and close friends. As Caperton explained: "her art is about the young mother who works at home," presenting moments that are "deeply personal but deftly orchestrated."

Though each scene may look spontaneous and candid, they have been carefully staged for the camera. The prints are based on straight photography without digital manipulation. She sets up her compositions with a strong art historical frame of reference. For example, "Marshal with Family and the World" brings to mind Jan Vermeer, while "Abby Sees Hugh in the Front Hall" suggests John Singer Sargent.

In mid-February, it was announced that The Print Center Solo Exhibition award winners from the recent 89<sup>th</sup> Annual International Competition are Keith Sharp of Media, Pennsylvania, a photographer, and Ken Wood of St. Louis, Missouri, a printmaker; they will be having their shows simultaneously from April 17 to July 11.

The Print Center is certainly in good custodial hands with a commitment that the organization at 100 remain vibrant and relevant.

A unique collaboration between composition students from Curtis Institute of Music (across the street) and the forthcoming exhibition of poetic prints by Michael Mazur (1935-2009) is planned for April. Caperton pointed out that the Center is "focused on experimental ideas; all kinds of things now happen in this space."

As Pablo Picasso had realized: "It takes a long time to become young."

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**If you go:** The Print Center, 1614 Latimer St., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Free. Hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Call (215) 735-6090 or (215) 735-5511.