



## REBECCA GILBERT

PHILADELPHIA, PA | BY RACHEL SITKIN

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### Art Making and the Search for Hidden Treasure

Rebecca Gilbert is a printmaker based in Philadelphia. We spoke in her studio in Bella Vista, Philadelphia on February 29. Rebecca teaches at University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA and Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD. When she is not teaching she'll probably be found at the studio. Her studio space, on the second floor of the [Da Vinci Art Alliance](#) building, was flooded with morning light. Though modest in size, it houses several work benches and a Takach etching press, and is conveniently located just one block from her South Philadelphia home. Like much of her work, Rebecca was both approachable and a stickler for the details. She had several bodies of work underway and is busy preparing for an upcoming three-person exhibition at [Center for Emerging Visual Artists](#) opening April 7, and a 2017 exhibition at [The Print Center](#), both in Philadelphia, PA.



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### Art Making and the Search for Hidden Treasure

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### Can you tell me where you grew up and what important moves brought you to where you are now?

I grew up in Gettysburg, PA. I was actually born in Ontario, Canada, but only lived there until I was three. We lived in a trailer park for a little while, in Gettysburg, which I actually loved. When I was in fourth grade, my dad bought some land in the country, and we moved our trailer to a cornfield. I loved that too. I had a great dog. Around seventh or eighth grade my mom moved to West Virginia, so I went back-and-forth between Pennsylvania and West Virginia. I don't know how many times – a bunch of times. I went to undergrad in West Virginia at Marshall University. [Peter Massing](#) was my first printmaking professor, and I love him very much; he is one of my best friends to this day. But I hated West Virginia, so I went to grad school right away, to get out of there.

I had stopped in Philadelphia on my way back from Woodstock '94, and I just loved it. I knew I wanted to come back. So I ended up going to University of the Arts for an MFA in Book Arts & Printmaking in 2000. I felt I belonged here more than anywhere else, so I stayed. I used to say I would never leave, but I've been here now almost 16 years, and though I don't have any immediate plans, I now feel that if there was a cool opportunity somewhere else, I would take it. Philadelphia is still going to be here.

## **What are you working on now?**

A few years ago I became aware of this man named Forrest Fenn. He lives in Sante Fe, NM and he wrote a memoir called The Thrill of the Chase. He did all kinds of crazy things with his life: He served in the military; became an art dealer and collector; and eventually an author. When he was diagnosed with cancer, he began reflecting on his life. He had amassed all these treasures and decided to fill a chest with gold coins, gold nuggets, and rare jewelry. The chest is purported to be well over 500 years old and a treasure in itself. He hid it somewhere in the mountains near Santa Fe, and then he wrote a poem with nine clues as to where it is hidden. He claims that it is really out there, but it's the thrill of the chase that is the real treasure. This idea really resonated with me.

My work is about finding the balance between keeping your eye on the prize in life, and taking the blinders off and noticing the treasures along the way. I've been making work about searching and appreciating for a long time. So once I learned about Forrest Fenn's treasure, I knew I was going to go looking for it.

I was a Center for Emerging Visual Artist (CFEVA) fellow in 2012-14, and last year I was awarded the CFEVA Alumni Travel Grant. It was perfect! When I went to apply for the grant, I began with the poem. As far as I could tell, the first clue pointed to the confluence of the Red River and the Rio Grande, and the second clue pointed to a fish hatchery. I looked at a map to see where the rivers met, and where was this fish hatchery. I discovered this itty-bitty village in the mountains of northern New Mexico, Questa, which felt significant too. And I'll be damned if there wasn't a little artist's residency there, with a printing press! It was a new residency, OCHO, that didn't even have applications guidelines, so I called up the director and she said, "Get out here!"

I did not find millions of dollars, just to put that out there. But I did have the best time ever. It takes me a really long time to finish anything, so while there I focused on experiencing the countryside, the people and the community as much as possible, and just drawing and writing. I didn't really start the 'work' until I got home.

So what I am working on now are these little wood engravings – my most literal depiction of the treasure, personal treasures I found out there. There were wild horses out there, and I drew from this little antique horse that I found at a thrift store. These fishing lures are a nod to the second clue, which was the fish hatchery, but also are symbolic of the power of the water and food. This bear rattle is drawn from an actual monkey rattle we took with us to keep the bears away on hikes.

The weed was the first treasure! We flew into Denver and our first stop was the weed store. I could never imagine, as a high school student, walking into a boutique and getting waited on to buy the BEST weed that I've ever seen, legally, for recreational use! I do think legal marijuana is a treasure.

I am also working on these larger reduction woodcuts that depict ant mounds; several points of view crammed into one image. I was struck by the wide open spaces, you could see so far away that it was difficult to tell what exactly was close and what was far away, or how big anything was. It inspired me to create a few pieces that shifted perception, depicting ant mounds in a literal sense but also depicting the Rio Grande, the Red River and the clouds as design elements.

I felt that the ant mounds were a great metaphor for that shifting sense of scale, but also work as a symbol of community. This village barely had a population, but I met so many people! Community is so important – the winter is insane and if anything were to happen, or if someone gets sick, they all rely on each other. So that idea of the ants working together, building together represents that sense of community.

For another set of prints I am working on, a diptych, my reference material is this natural still life [of two ant mounds side-by-side] that was so perfect as it was. One will be a more literal translation with all natural colors, and the second one will be the same composition with more of a psychedelic form and a CMYK color pallet. This is very different from what I usually do but I think the conversation between the two prints will be really nice.

## **You have been drawing these piles of dirt for awhile. What originally drew you to depicting the ant mounds?**

It wasn't always ant mounds that I was drawn to. It originally started out as piles of dirt and rocks. It started when I had this experience, at least ten years ago, I was repotting some plants, and I was overcome by this feeling of wanting to eat the dirt – which I did not do. But it felt like it would have been the most natural thing in the world to eat the dirt. I was really conscious of that feeling, that connection to the earth, wanting to put it your body, this natural primal feeling. I did some research on geophagy. I began using images of water, wishing wells, or puddles to depict this thirst. And then eventually the dirt took over, because, like water, it is a natural material that sustains us, but you can also build with it.

I then began illustrating these man-made forms that I found in the woods, while hiking or camping. Rock piles or groupings of rocks and moss that someone else had built. I liked the idea of using natural materials to depict natural materials: depicting rocks with wood. Also the act of carving is very primal and mirrors the subject matter.

And I just like the shape of the mound.

The U is a shape that I have been using in my work for quite some time too. It started out as a horseshoe to divine good luck. Now I use it less literally – as a vessel, embrace or safe haven.

**If you could visit the studio of any living artist, who would it be?**

Many of the artists that I like the most are dead. (laughter)

**Well, what about naming a few artists whose work you look at with some regularity?**

There are a lot of artists that I look at. I'm not sure the translation is obvious but I'm really drawn to Gustav Klimt. I saw his work in Vienna. Up to that point, I had been so used to seeing the work reproduced that I couldn't stand it. But seeing it in real life was the most intense art experience I'd ever had. I follow [Marcel Dzama](#) on Instagram. His imagery is different than mine, and the product is very different but it is something that I'm very drawn to. [Amy Cutler](#), I've been spending a lot of time with her imagery lately. Of course Louise Bourgeois, I think about her work a lot, and Kiki Smith.

But really the artist that I spend the most time looking at is Albrecht Dürer, the really early master. The technique, the workmanship, the perfection of it. I teach all these printmaking classes about process and maintaining a studio practice and exploring the creative process, and the conversation always comes up that you shouldn't strive for perfection, that it will hold you back. I know that is probably true, but I feel compelled to strive for perfection.

**You are clearly still producing, so striving for perfection is not keeping you from finishing your work. Ok, my last question – If you were me, which local artist should I interview next?**

[Justin Webb](#), he's a young painter. I recently traded with him, a print for a painting. I would like to hear about his practice and see pictures from his studio. His work looks so different, in a lot of ways his work is much more modern than mine. He sets up big still lives in his studio, these formal still lives that tell a story. I also love [Katie Baldwin](#) and [Amze Emmons](#). I would love to see their studios.

You can see more of Rebecca Gilbert's work at [www.rebeccaprint.com](http://www.rebeccaprint.com).

#### REBECCA GILBERT IMAGES



Rebecca Gilbert – 1



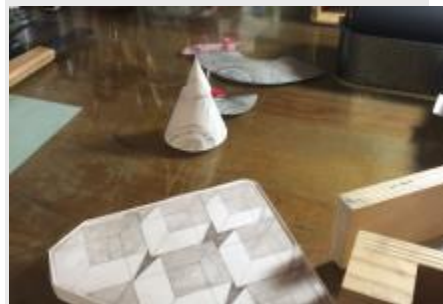
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Rebecca Gilbert – 5



Rebecca Gilbert – 2



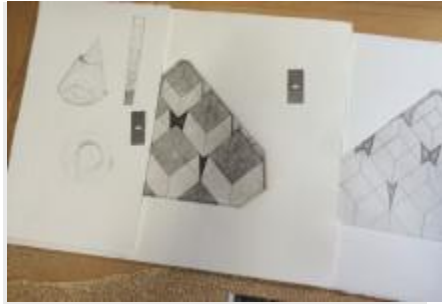
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Rebecca Gilbert – 10



Rebecca Gilbert – 13



Rebecca Gilbert – 8



Rebecca Gilbert – 11



Rebecca Gilbert – 14



Rebecca Gilbert – 9



Rebecca Gilbert – 12



Rebecca Gilbert – 15