2009

Nature Morte: Lynne Allen

Cooney, Lynne
Boston University

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/12924

Boston University
Nature Morte
LYNNE ALLEN
Cover image:
Lure, Photograph, 2009
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Nature Morte, Lynne Allen’s exhibition of recent photogravures, as well as neon sculpture and miniature glass objects, is not just about still life, but literally about dead objects, metaphors for lost ways of life. Allen’s Native American relatives became Westernized through three generations of white intermarriage and U.S. government policies. Allen terms the arranged objects in her photogravures “portraits of a way of life.”

Allen has been incorporating meaningful objects into her prints since graduate school at the University of New Mexico in 1986. In 1997–1998 in Colonial Colors (Figure 1), Allen depicted an outstretched glove, as if in welcome, but printed with a battle scene, alluding to the broken treaties between the U.S. government and Native Americans.

Allen employed a shoe symbol in My Winter Count (Figure 2) with a range of footwear from moccasins to high-heeled Western pumps, showing movement in footwear design from Native American to Western European or American, symbolizing the shift of culture over the generations. Similarly, she juxtaposed a Western-European shoe mold with a plastic toy Indian in her photogravure Horse and Rider (Plate 1), comparing cultures.

Allen’s print from 2003, My Grandmother Was an Indian—Can You Tell? (Figure 3) also featured a Western-European or American woman’s shoe. In this case, the shoe is a symbol for Allen herself. The contemporary shoe has Indian patterns on it, visually linking Allen to her heritage, since she herself does not look Native American. As Judith Brodsky so insightfully expressed,
“Each revelation in understanding this Sioux portion of her heritage has enriched Allen’s efforts to illuminate the complexity of the psychological issues she finds within herself and ultimately within all humankind.”

Allen’s 2003 installation (Figure 4), combined screen projected images of cowboys and Indians with tiny plastic toy cowboys and Indians on the floor beneath the screen, like the small Indian figure mounted on the European American shoe mold in Horse and Rider. The toy figures in the installation were running free, unaware that their way of life was coming to an end. In both instances, scale reinforced the power of the conqueror. In the installation, the cowboy was large on the screen compared to the running toy figures below. In the recent photogravure, the plastic Indian is tiny compared to the large, Western-style shoe mold. Figuratively, the Indian is being kicked out of sight.

Another example from Allen’s past oeuvre that directly relates to the current exhibition is her print from 2009, They Waited Silently, depicting Allen’s great-grandmother Josephine Waggoner as a symbol for Native peoples. Ominous hooks scatter across the surface. The words “Gulf of Mexico,” “Mexico,” “Mississippi R.,” and “Florida” orient the viewer and identify the U.S. map. The hooks are pink, seemingly innocent or harmless, but they represent unseen danger, another instance of a misleading surface, like the beautiful feathered fishing flies in Allen’s photogravures (Plate 3). Allen said, “the work was about the ‘taming’ of the West and bringing to light the bloody history that has been so richly romanticized through TV Westerns and movies.” Allen’s print with drawing on it questions the romanticism of the Western.

A final example linking Allen’s past work with her present is her mixed media quilted packing blanket with stenciled boat forms, lead sinkers, smashed bottle caps, and red yarn, a work that continues to evolve with hand stitching, like the hand-stitched mourning bag in Allen’s photogravure (Plate 2). The lead sinkers, like the fishing flies in the photogravures, look harmless, but have the functional purpose of weighing something down.

Lynne Allen selects objects for her still life photogravures that symbolize the domination of the conqueror over the conquered, whether Native American or some other victim. Although she often introduces humor into her work, such as the use of plastic toy soldiers or the flamingo, she is serious about alerting the viewer to invisible dangers presented in attractive wrappers not only in history but also in life today—hidden agendas.

His or her own experience of power domination to the objects and keep interpretations of them alive and current. Although content drives Allen’s work, she constantly expands her formal development, incorporating repeated symbols such as shoes, fishing lures, and toy soldiers into new contexts as varied as projected installations, three-dimensional prints, printed packing blankets, and now photogravures, neon sculptures, and glass objects. Distinguishing photogravure from photography she says, “The photogravure process intrigues me for many reasons: It was invented in the 1830s, around the same time things were heating up for the Natives on their native soil. It is a way to keep a photograph forever, as it is etched in copper and can be reprinted many times... I love the depth of photogravures. The blacks are intense but welcoming. The continuous tonal range from white to black is what gives the print the three-dimensional depth that a normal photo doesn’t have. These [photogravures] are lush and almost tactile.” These velvety black prints contrast starkly with the ethereal translucency of the glass objects. Allen’s photogravures recall the power struggles in the American West and project future such conflicts in the world today. Is anyone listening?
Lynne Allen is a collector of things. Unique things. Sentimental things. Honorable things. Mournful things. As an artist and printmaker, Allen has always made objects. Ranging from richly layered prints and mixed media two-dimensional works to small-scale sculptural objects made out of paper, Allen moves easily between two and three dimensions. In her recent body of work, Nature Morte, Allen expands her formal repertoire to include exquisitely composed photogravures, a technique she recently learned, and multiples of fabricated miniature glass and resin objects. In Nature Morte, the object itself takes center stage. Allen literally “casts” various found and made objects, including fishing lures, beaded moccasins, riding spurs, antique shoe forms, souvenir paperweights, glass rattles, a miniature log cabin, and a toy “Indian” figurine, to name a few, as the subjects of inquiry into which she explores the inner life of things and their symbolic and imagined relation to an exterior world. In Allen’s handling, such objects veer away from static depiction but rather, despite the work’s somewhat minimal and ethereal aesthetic, embody complex layers of meaning that operate within the spaces of the personal/private and the public/collective.

Lost and Found
Nature morte connotes the “life” of the object as stillness, as contained or weighted within the boundary of the frame, suspended eternally between past and present. As “dead nature,” the still life evokes a sense of loss or a kind of longing for what has been or what will never be. Nature Morte speaks to such longing. Formally related to the still life but also to the genre of nineteenth-century portrait photography and Victorian cartes de visite, Allen’s series of nine photogravures depict discreet objects and staged tableaux suspended against a lush, velvety blackness. Together, the objects assert themselves in a sensuous luminosity, shimmering like a bracelet of melancholic charms. Yet, like the genre of nature morte, Allen’s objects cease to exist as functional things, and consequently any tangible connection to origins or to lived experience is ultimately severed. These objects take on new “life,” but one that is put in the service of a continually recontextualized and reformulated past.

$3.99 WILL BUY YOU A MEMORY: RE-COLLECTION IN THE WORK OF LYNNE ALLEN
By Lynne Cooney | Exhibitions Director | Boston University College of Fine Arts | School of Visual Arts

The environment of private objects and their possession—of which collections are an extreme manifestation—is a dimension of our life that is both essential and imaginary. As essential as dreams.
—Jean Baudrillard

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nineteenth-century frame. In the Victorian era, women who lost their husbands would customarily carry mourning purses, usually brown or black, sometimes for up to a three-year period as a solemn reminder of their widowed status. These purses held symbolic as well as practical function (after all, ladies require purses), indicating that one should not approach or speak with a smile in certain social circumstances until her mourning period had ended. Thus the mourning bag was not just a signifier of death but of mournful silence. In Mourning Bag, Allen stitched onto the front of her constructed purse the phrase “No thought death but of mournful silence. In”, quoting Michelangelo. It seems an appropriate sentiment for such a silent object. The twice of the hand through the stitching on the face of the antique handkerchief, which is also reminiscent of women’s embroidered samplers, also evokes a sense of loss. But not that which is solely related to death. It connotes other types of loss such as lost thoughts, lost time, a lost way of life. But not that which is solely related to death. It connotes other types of loss such as lost thoughts, lost time, a lost way of life. The purse is framed, immortalized in its stillness. We experience Mourning Bag as it unfolds and refolds within the confined space of its own time.

Re-Collection

As an assembly of objects, Allen’s series of photogravures looks back to the past through notions of the collection. In the construction of formal relationships and juxtapositions, Allen recontextualizes her found objects and proposes new meanings. As Susan Stewart observes in her remarkable book her found objects and proposes new meanings. As Susan Stewart states further, “The collection presents a hermetic world in which the object’s significance is defined solely within the material space of the collection itself, often dramatized through modes of display such as the glass case or shelf. Detached from its origins, the individual object serves as an example and its uniqueness expands or defines the limits of the collection. Fishing Flies (Figure 5, Plate 3) is a collection within a collection. The image shows the arrangement of six antique handmade fishing flies forming two news. At first glance, all seem to share similar physical characteristics with feathered wispy tails, sharp hooks, and curved bodies (attributes we imagine fish to like). Upon closer inspection, the viewer, like the connoisseur, begins to discern the subtle differences between the objects. We are seduced into Allen’s obsession, into the process in which a unique object becomes a pair, then turns into several, until ultimately we are threatened by the possibility of infinity.

However, Fishing Flies is not just a collection of pretty things. These are dangerous things, I am reminded of collections of dead insects or spiders, to which Allen’s fishing flies bear some physical resemblance, where the aestheticized nature of display detracts or distracts from the disagreeable nature (to some) of the things represented. The fishing flies are beautiful objects, but they are also bait and traps, and by this Allen alludes to hidden conflicts, pitfalls, and unending dangers. Through the image’s multiple readings, Allen reveals part of the underlying narrative of Nature Morte—that which explores her Native American heri- tage (Allen’s great-grandmother was Sioux and her mother was raised on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in South Dakota). This means that Allen’s subjects within a particular moment in American history where there existed escalating tensions between Native Ameri- can and whites. Metonymically, Nature Morte not only explores issues of conflict relating to Native Americans but relates to the history of all conflicts. Like Fishing Flies, Lure (Plate 4) also con- tains a tension between the beauty of the object depicted and its real function, isolated against the expanse of black, the lure’s host glitters as a warning or marker of treacherous beginnings (or endings). These works remind us of those contested spaces between domination and struggle, strength and weakness, wrongs committed and rights derived.

The formal arrangement of images such as Fishing Flies and Lure evokes the aesthetic of the specimen or artifact and, in this regard, addresses the collection through the principles of classification and display found in the cultural history or ethno- graphic museum. The history of acquisition and presentation of non-Western objects by both European and American institutions (sometimes under questionable circumstances) is now commonly understood. Extracted from any context of origin—whether Historical, cultural, or geographical—the museum collection con- structed illusions of representation of the cultural Other through the re-presentation of objects. Within the museum setting, sin- gular objects or groups of objects act as surrogates and stand-ins for cultural wholes as is part of Sioux women’s moxacins become representative of all Sioux women, for example). As such, the object’s original function—whether utilitarian, spiritual, etc.—is reconfigured through its aesthetic presentation, and meaning is conveyed through the employment of varied visual strategies such as didactic text or the superficial non-relation to other objects (a collection of various types of Native American pottery becomes representative of all Native Americans despite their unique tribal affiliation). The object then becomes a test to be “read” within the collection according to the language of display. The collection’s inherent hierarchies of value are understood through these systems of classification that are defined as much by absence as by presence. James Clifford writes in his essay on collecting art and culture that “collecting presupposes a story.” Practices of inclusion and exclusion within the collection construct not only narratives about the identity of the culture “represented” but, simultaneously, the identity of the collector/ possessor. Much of the cultural authority of the West has been built upon the acquisition, collection, and pillaging of objects from other cultures. As James Clifford further observes, “In the West...collecting has long been a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture and authenticity.” Allen’s objects tell untold stories. Unlike the silence often imposed upon objects within the museum collection, Allen’s objects do nothing to conceal or obscure narrative but rather allude to certain truths. Allen’s story is a tale of complex and of
unequal relations of power. Consider the paired images of Moccasins (Figure 6, Plate 6) and Size 9D (Figure 7, Plate 7). Size 9D depicts a pair of antique wooden shoe forms. Like a portrait, the shoe forms are centrally framed, serving as an inanimate substitute for the unnamed person to whom they once belonged. Through the perceived style and time period of the shoe forms, however, one can reason that the identity of the individual is not only masculine but also white. We then are able to imagine the style of shoes, the kind of man who wore them, the earth crossed and covered by his steps, and the land he has taken. Size 9D, in its stillness, tells the story of colonial expansionism and of surrender and occupation.

In contrast to the men’s shoe forms, Moccasins suggests the feminized space of the Other. The delicately beaded Native American moccasins, believed to be female, represent the Native American woman. Viewed as a double portrait, the paired images of the shoe forms and moccasins suggest multiple readings. On the one hand, a personal narrative is conveyed which is related to the racial split of Allen’s biography, specifically her matrilineal Native American heritage and the European ancestry of her father. Each portrait represents one half of the self. On the other hand, the images serve as opposing portraits, representing the colonizer and the colonized—the omnipresent white patriarchy and the invisible Native American. To complicate such a straightforward interpretation, Allen gives the portraits comparable aesthetic weight and scale in which Allen asserts a feminist perspective where the female Other is visually equal to that of her white, masculine counterpart. Here, history is rearranged or re-imagined as it should have been.

Similarly, Spurs (Plate 5) depicts a pair of men’s riding spurs which belonged to Allen’s father, and like the shoe forms and moccasins, are given immediacy and presence within the frame. Suspended, shimmering like jewelry or a pair of woman’s earrings, Spurs possesses a feminine delicacy. The image creates a tension within the object’s inherent masculinity as a signifier of brute aggression, as a symbol for the taming and control of nature. Spurs occupies a feminine space that carries through in much of Nature Morte. And so, Allen’s history is a feminist one, one that acknowledges the untold contributions of women—both Native American and European—in the early history of the United States. As many present-day Native American tribes have sought to reclaim lands once inhabited by their ancestors (through often complex legal processes), Allen seeks to correct falsehoods and reassert truths. And in this way, she symbolically reclaims American history from a hegemonic patriarchy.

Spurious Objects
Whereas the photogravures speak to the layers of meaning embedded in the unique object and its relation to the collection, Allen’s arrangement of found and cast objects is situated within the realm of serialization and the mechanized reproduction of the souvenir. On a glass table, Allen assembles multiples of hand-blown glass rattles and cups, miniature cast-resin “Indians” on horseback, “Indian” figures sitting in a canoe, and manipulated found-glass paperweights. Allen’s interest in revealing the true nature of things continues in this grouping of objects, and the translucent materiality of the glass and resin objects resonates visually with the photogravures. Unlike the collection, where a connection to the past is embedded within the immediacy of the objects represented, therefore lending value to the collection’s authenticity, the souvenir object has no direct value. Authenticity in the souvenir is tangential and exists only through its abstract association with the memory of experience. Stewart describes this as a distancing effect in which the memory of the body, or of the labor of its maker, is replaced by the memory associated with the discreet and reproducible object. The object then becomes a memory standing outside of itself and thus presents “a surplus and lack of significance.”

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The mass-produced quality of the souvenir means that many people can acquire the same object, like these souvenir snow domes for sale in interstate gift shops. Only when the object is obtained and preserved through the memory of an individual experience does the souvenir gain value. The value of the souvenir resides in the context of its acquisition, the uniqueness of how and where it was obtained. In her array of souvenir objects, Allen offers memories for sale. But whose memories? The clear resin miniature Native Americans on horseback are reminiscent of both a child’s toy and the type of glass figurines Native American rattles; but according to Allen, Native Americans would never use glass, preferring natural and flexible materials. Thus, these objects are ersatz, conforming to our expectations of otherness and our desire for an authenticating image, however spurious.

Souvenirs purchased from tourist destinations offer miniature reproductions of the experience of place. This is why it is more meaningful to purchase a souvenir from the visited site that contains an image of the place or is some kind of small-scale replica, such as an astyly depicting the Grand Canyon or a miniature model of Mount Rushmore. In a similar vein, Allen incorporates found souvenir glass paperweights of varying sizes within the multiples of glass and resin objects. Some of the paperweights contain their original images, whereas others have been replaced with images that Allen created or manipulated. The differences are not immediately discernible, which adds a level of ambiguity to these already uncertain objects. Compare two objects: One is a souvenir paperweight containing an image of Niagara Falls, the sublime beauty of the falls encased under false or misleading pretenses: “hook, line and sinker” can be read, then, as the moral of Nature Morte’s story. In Allen’s conception, things are not always as they seem, and we are not to believe appearances, even in art.

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2 Stewart, p. 133.
3 Ibid, p. 151.
5 Ibid, p. 135.
Horse and Rider | Photogravure | 17” x 21” | 2009 | Plate 1
Fishing Flies | Photogravure | 17” x 21” | 2009 | Plate 3

Mourning Bag | Photogravure | 17” x 21” | 2009 | Plate 2
Spurs | Photogravure | 17” x 21” | 2009 | Plate 5

Lure | Photogravure | 17” x 21” | 2009 | Plate 4
Moccasins | Photogravure | 17” x 21” | 2009 | Plate 6

Size 9D | Photogravure | 17” x 21” | 2009 | Plate 7
Flamingo | Photogravure | 17” x 21” | 2009 | Plate 8

You are not worth a penny | Photogravure | 17” x 21” | 2009 | Plate 9
The neon sign is a kind of lure, seducing the viewer under false or misleading pretenses:
...things are not always as they seem, and we are not to believe appearances, even in art.
Selected Solo Exhibitions

2010
- Gallery of the College of Staten Island CUNY
  Winding the Image: Pat Steir, Jaune Quick-To-See Smith, Lynne Allen and Lacy Whitman
- Fuller Craft Museum, Brockton, MA.
2009
- Museum of Fine Arts, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL.
- Novosibirsk Museum of Art, Novosibirsk, Russia. U Novosibirsk Print Triennial.
- Peabody Historical Society and Museum, Peabody, MA.
- Jewish Gallery, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA.
- Adele Clark University, Long Island, NY. Sanglienti Women.
2009
- Novosibirsk Museum of Art, Novosibirsk, Russia. U Novosibirsk Print Triennial.
- Institute of American Indian Arts Museum, Santa Fe, NM.
- The Morris Museum, Montclair, NJ.
- Chamalokins, France. 6th Triennale Mondiale d’Estampes Petit Format.
- Paired Birds, Philadelphia, PA.
2008
- Museum of Modern Art for Wales, Machynleth, Wales, UK.
- Shanghai University College of Fine Art, and the China Academy of Fine Art, Hangzhou, China. China Sandan International Printmaking Exhibition.
- Nathan Cummings Foundation, New York, NY.
- Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, MO.
- University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan.
- Tallinn, Estonia. 13th Tallinn Print Triennial.
2007
- Institute of American Indian Arts Museum, Santa Fe, NM.
- The Morris Museum, Montclair, NJ.
- Chamalokins, France. 6th Triennale Mondiale d’Estampes Petit Format.
- Paired Birds, Philadelphia, PA.
- Quadro di Omega Gallery, Rome, Italy.
- Fleischer Memorial Galleries, Philadelphia, PA.
- Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY. Digital Now (Print National).
- USASKA Art Gallery, Pretoria, South Africa.
- Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, MN.
- Omas De L’arte/Famiglia Artistica, Omas Museum, Cornice, Italy.
- Giotto’s Fortress, Cortona, Italy.
- Tallinn, Estonia. 12th Tallinn Print Triennial.
2006
- Nathan Cummings Foundation, New York, NY.
- Tallinn, Estonia. 11th Tallinn Print Triennial.
- Ministry of Flemish Culture, Kasterlee, Belgium.
2005
- Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, MO.
- University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan.
2004
- Tallinn, Estonia. 10th Tallinn Print Triennial.
- University of Nebraska Art Gallery, Lincoln, NE.
2003
- Institute of American Indian Arts Museum, Santa Fe, NM.
- The Morris Museum, Montclair, NJ.
- Chamalokins, France. 6th Triennale Mondiale d’Estampes Petit Format.
- Paired Birds, Philadelphia, PA.
- Quadro di Omega Gallery, Rome, Italy.
- Fleischer Memorial Galleries, Philadelphia, PA.
- Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY. Digital Now (Print National).
- USASKA Art Gallery, Pretoria, South Africa.
- Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, MN.
2002
- Tallinn, Estonia. 9th Tallinn Print Triennial.
- 21st Ljubljana Print Biennial.
2001
- Nathan Cummings Foundation, New York, NY.
- Tallinn, Estonia. 8th Tallinn Print Triennial.
- University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan.
- Tallinn, Estonia. 7th Tallinn Print Triennial.
- Tallinn, Estonia. 6th Tallinn Print Triennial.
2000
- Tallinn, Estonia. 5th Tallinn Print Triennial.
- University of Nebraska Art Gallery, Lincoln, NE.
2000
- Tallinn, Estonia. 4th Tallinn Print Triennial.
- University of Nebraska Art Gallery, Lincoln, NE.
- Tallinn, Estonia. 3rd Tallinn Print Triennial.
- 20th anniversary art exhibit.
- Fulbright Association 20th Anniversary Art Exhibit.
- The Portland Art Museum, Portland, OR.
- Seattle Art Museum, West Seattle, WA.
- Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, MN.
- Omas De L’arte/Famiglia Artistica, Omas Museum, Cornice, Italy.
- Giotto’s Fortress, Cortona, Italy.
- Tallinn, Estonia. 11th Tallinn Print Triennial.
- Ministry of Flemish Culture, Kasterlee, Belgium.
2000
- Tallinn, Estonia. 4th Tallinn Print Triennial.
- 21st Ljubljana Print Biennial.

Awards/Honors/Posts

2007
- Marion and Jasper Whiting Fellowship.
- Fulbright Scholarship, University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan.
- Pennsylvania Council on the Arts/Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation Grant.
- Leeway Foundation, Window of Opportunity Grant.
- Diploma, 12th Tallinn Print Triennial, Tallinn, Estonia.
- Finalist, Pew Fellowships in the Arts, Philadelphia, PA.
- Ture Bengtz Memorial Prize, Boston, MA.
- Ture Bengtz Memorial Prize, Boston, MA.
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Research Grant.

2000  Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota at Duluth, Purchase Award.

1999  County Government Board of Sodermanland Award. Grafikens Hus, Mariefred, Sweden.

1998  Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Research Grant.

Fulbright Scholarship Alternate, Lecture and Research in New Zealand.

1995  Board of Trustees Research Fellowship Award, Rutgers University.

1994  New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Department of State Award.


1993  Sixty Square Inches, Ninth Biennial, Purdue University Galleries, Purchase Award.

1992/93  Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Sweet Brier, VA.

1990  Fulbright Scholarship, Sorikov Art Institute, Moscow, USSR.

1986  Master of Fine Arts, University of New Mexico, NM, 1986.

Painting/Printmaking with a minor in Art History.

Master Printer Certification, Tamarind Institute, Albuquerque, NM, 1982.

Master Printer Certification in the Fine Art of Lithography.

University of Georgia Art Museum, Athens, GA.

Duke Museum of Art, Durham, NC.

Unisa Art Gallery, Pretoria, South Africa.


Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Museum of Modern Art Library, New York, NY.

The New York Public Library, New York, NY.


Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington, D.C.

Jordan & Johnson Corporate Collection

The Noyes Museum, Oceanville, NJ.

Johnson & Johnson Corporate Collection

The Newark Public Library, Newark, NJ.

Earned Museum of Art, Denver, CO.

Macedonian Culture Ministry, Republic of Macedonia.

University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque, NM.

Ministry of Flemish Culture, Belgium.

University of New Mexico, NM, 1986.

Painting/Printmaking with a minor in Art History.

Master Printer Certification, Tamarind Institute, Albuquerque, NM, 1982.

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Master of Fine Arts, University of New Mexico, NM, 1986.

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Master Printer Certification, Tamarind Institute, Albuquerque, NM, 1982.

Master Printer Certification in the Fine Art of Lithography.


Bachelor of Science in Art Education, Kutztown University, PA, 1970.
Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the following:

Emily Wade – Photoshop assistance
Dana Salvo, for photography of plates 1–9
Light Brite Neen, Brooklyn, New York
Creative Services, Boston University
James A. Michener Art Museum

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