Miles from Nowhere: Collecting Contemporary American Prints in the Margins

By Peter S. Briggs

There is a part of America that exists miles from nowhere.

It has been called many names: the Empty Quarter, the Margins, the Yonlands, America’s Outback, the Lands Nobody Wanted, and the Last, the Remnant, or the Surviving Frontier. Others call it a forgotten region, but in truth it has never been well known and you can’t forget something you never knew. It has just been ignored.

—Dayton Duncan

The Artist Printmaker/Photographer Research Collection (AP/RC) at the Museum of Texas Tech University in Lubbock is a youngster in the world of museum print collecting. Beginning in 2006 with about 2,000 prints, the collection now numbers over 10,000 and grows by an average of 1,100 acquisitions each year. Donated principally by artists or their heirs, these holdings consist primarily of original prints, photographs and related archival materials by 20th and 21st century artists rooted in some way in the western United States. The collection strives to represent each artist in depth and, as organizers, we make few (often no) decisions about one artwork from an artist’s oeuvre being more important than another.

Housed in the Art Division, one of six collecting departments in this multi-disciplinary museum, the AP/RC focuses on artists who have had a demonstrable impact on the artistic environment of the arid and semi-arid regions west of the Mississippi River and east of the Pacific Coast—a territory that constitutes half the area of the lower 48 states but encompasses only 25 percent of the entire U.S. population. It is a region characterized by unpopulated spaces and long-distance travel. The artists in the AP/RC are usually of the region though their work is not necessarily about the region.

When I set up the AP/RC, I sought a collecting strategy that would serve as a means to advance research in post-World War II art, and as a resource for future histories of American printmaking. Rather than select individual art works, I decided to focus on individual artists who demonstrated a persistent commitment to making prints and had a documented connection to the western United States. I also focused on artists who printed their work—that is, did not depend on commercial fine art print workshops. This does not reflect disdain for the quality or importance of work from such shops; it is just an acknowledgment that most artists, unlike many workshops, do not generally have in place specific plans to archive their prints in a public institution.
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The development of the AP/RC collection is ongoing. Artists currently participating in the collection often recommend other artists and the Art Division staff—three as I write—constantly scan the printmaking landscape to identify potential participants. We make deliberate efforts to embrace women, Native Americans, Latinos, African Americans and other artists who tend to be underrepresented in American museum collections. A special interest is printmakers working outside of academic institutions.

Currently, over 70 artists participate in the AP/RC, and seven to ten new artists, mostly living, are added each year. The AP/RC asks each artist to donate one impression from every edition they have created, and as many unique works as possible. This stout commitment extends to any editions they make in the future as well. Of course responses to this request vary: some editions are long gone, some past prints do not meet the artist’s current standards, and who knows what will happen in the future. As part of its research agenda, the collection also asks artists for color proofs, experimental impressions, progressive proofs, print matrices, acetates, drawings, states and other physical residue that contributed to completed prints—anything that provides a manifestation or index of the decisions made on the path toward a finished artwork. We have also begun to record and transcribe oral interviews with the artists talking about specific prints in the collection.

An acquisition of a single group of art works to the AP/RC often numbers in the hundreds. The rigors of collection management—gift agreements, conditioning reporting, cataloging, preparation for storage, photographing, database management, preventive conservation and more—can overwhelm and temporarily impede our collecting efforts. Fortunately, through the Museum of Texas Tech the AP/RC is linked to a graduate program in museum and heritage sciences and benefits from graduate assistants who help accomplish the AP/RC’s work.

West Texas influences our print collecting in curious ways. Located in the southern Plains, Lubbock, the “Hub City” and home of the AP/RC, sits atop a flat limestone cap, the llano estacado (staked plain). Horizontals dominate. Cotton, sorghum, peanut and a few other agriculture enterprises mingle with the cattle ranches and feed lots that surround the city’s 235,000 inhabitants. A 125-mile branch of the interstate highway system (I27) extends south to Lubbock from Amarillo, where Route 66 (now I40) partitions the lower third of the United States. Lubbock is about five hours by car from Dallas, Albuquerque or Santa Fe; six to seven hours from El Paso, Austin or San Antonio; eight to Denver; and nine from Houston. Lubbock is just three hours northeast of Loving County, Texas, the least populated county in the United States (in the 2010 census its population was just 82, or .1 person per square mile). It is also five hours from Marfa, Texas, but Donald Judd-like apparitions are conspicuously rare in Lubbock. It may be just the right spot in the world for the AP/RC: Lubbock is west, plain, semi-arid, and until 2009, dry (as in drink).

Out-of-the-way places like Lubbock affirm the notion that, as Bruno Latour has put it, the “globalized world has no globe.” There are only local artists and artworks connected by a plethora of networks. Prints, like other works on paper, move around the world with relative ease, and their pathways continue to command our attention. The Artist Printmaker Research Collection is a disobedient stepchild of the notion that a print collection, or any collection, assembles a complete story, or something approximating a complete story. All print collections are samples, selected for one reason or another, or by chance. Some collections might have the capacity to tell more chapters or verses, but none captures the whole story. The AP/RC storyline detours from normative print histories. It seeks to...
gather the threads, the critical evidence, for prospective histories of artists illuminated less often. If their stories are to be told in the future, the prints must be collected and preserved, preferably in a public institution. There is, of course, no guarantee that artworks in a museum collection will be taken seriously by future historians, critics, curators or cultural scholars. But if the artworks are not available for study and research, there will be no opportunities for any examination or evaluation—obscurity would be certain. The AP/RC seeks to make it less certain.

The AP/RC’s catchment area in the western United States is not homogenous culturally, linguistically or historically. Colin Woodward’s cultural geography identifies an array of demographic and historical parcels that include the Spanish colonial El Norte, the expansive and inhospitable Far West, as well as western extensions of the farms of Greater Appalachia and the Midlands, and of the plantation-dependent Deep South. Topographically, the area ranges from below-sea-level deserts to alpine environments miles above. It includes densely populated but widely scattered urban centers (Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston, Denver, Salt Lake City, Oklahoma City, Phoenix/Tucson) and resort-like art centers (Santa Fe, Aspen, Sun Valley). Demographically, the artists of the AP/RC congregate around population nodes and centers of higher education, but in states like the Dakotas, Wyoming and Montana, for example, an ‘urban’ center might be a place populated by tens of thousands, rather than hundreds of thousands or millions.

The Museum of Texas Tech University was founded in 1929, just four years after the opening of the university, and has always been multidisciplinary. It currently houses departments of anthropology, art, biology, clothing and textiles, history, and paleontology in a facility occupying more than 200,000 square feet, holding about five million objects, and sited on about 365 acres. In all these domains, the programmatic and research focus is on arid and semi-arid environments, especially those of the southwestern United States. The museum’s art collection was largely built through generous but unpredictable donations, while the more systematic and research-driven collecting among the social and natural sciences created ever-stiffer internal competition within the museum. The AP/RC’s transparency and methodology developed, in part, as a “field collection strategy” to complement the scientific disciplines.

This strategy continues to realize rather remarkable collections of individual artists. Wayne Kimball has been described by Kenneth Hale (who is also in the AP/RC collection) as perhaps the most accomplished chromolithographer in the country. Born in Salt Lake City, Kimball has lived in Wisconsin, Arizona, Texas, California, and now Springville, Utah. His archive at the AP/RC numbers over 580 works, primarily lithographs running from the 1970s to the present, along with a selection of collages. For a few of these prints, Kimball assembled all the separation proofs, color proofs and progressive proofs (often more than 50 proofs per print) that document his process; he designed and made portfolio boxes for these works, and included, inset...
into each cover, a small handmade book recreating his proofing sequence.

In addition to her work as an artist, Melanie Yazzie has become a one-person epicenter of group portfolios over the last 15 years. Based in Boulder, Colorado, Yazzie organizes as many as five thematic portfolios each year, and sends each to the AP/RC. Yazzie, who is Diné and grew up on the Navajo Nation, ensures that these portfolios amply represent the work of indigenous peoples as well as an ever-changing selection of younger and older artists. The AP/RC also includes a wide representation of Yazzie's linocuts and intaglio plates and prints exploring matri-lineal kinship and leadership by women.

Kathryn Polk, from Tucson, who describes herself as "non-indigenous woman," turned to printmaking after a long career in design and marketing. Her several hundred lithographs and select drawings at the AP/RC examine the emotional and social complexities of growing up and living female. Polk learned lithography from her husband, Andy Polk, who taught for many years at the University of Arizona. A studio fire in the mid-1990s destroyed much of his work and his loss was one impetus for founding the AP/RC—many of his prints now in the AP/RC are deckled with carbon.

The first AP/RC artist was Lynwood Kreneck, the organizer and curator of "ColorPrint USA," a Lubbock-based exhibition series (1969–2006). Over 700 artists participated in "ColorPrint USA" exhibitions and its archive, also at the AP/RC, has served as a fertile point of departure to develop the collection's increasing network of artists. Other early artists to commit to the archive were Linda Guy (Fort Worth), Brian Paulsen (Grand Forks), Mary Hood (Tempe, Arizona), Larry Scholder (Dallas) and Jane Abrams (Albuquerque) are among the many AP/RC participants who have made their livings as university faculty while actively working as artists.

The value of the AP/RC lies in the reciprocity between the artists and the institution. Artists generously donate their prints, matrices, drawings, sketchbooks and other work to the AP/RC in substantial quantity. In turn, the AP/RC catalogs each artwork, stores it in securely controlled environments and provides access to scholars, historians, curators and other artists—actually anyone with a reasonable interest—for research, exhibition, publication or study. The AP/RC website (artistprintmakerresearchcollection.org) accumulates frequent updates on additions to the collection and serves as a point of access to scholars, artists and curators who are not able to visit the collection in person. The realization of the relationship between artist and museum is key to the success of our collecting strategy. It has required clarity, extended road trips, flexibility and relentless cultivation. Its success might just stand as an example for analogous collecting strategies to take hold in museums with a distinctively regional agenda. And it may be worth remembering that innovation is often more robust at the margins.

Kent Rush, Untitled (still life with intaglio tint), from the series Texas Still Life (1977), lithograph, 76.3 x 56.9 cm. Artist Printmaker/Photographer Research Collection. ©Kent Rush.

The porous boundary between printmaking and photography prompted the AP/RC to change its name in 2012 to the Artist Printmaker/Photographer Research Collection (while retaining the same acronym). The organization made a concerted effort to solicit work by artists such as Betty Hahn (Albuquerque) and Kent Rush (San Antonio), who actively bridge the two disciplines. Beginning in the 1960s, Hahn advanced the use of nonsilver photographic processes, lithography and photocopying in her conceptually rich body of work; and Rush, who trained in lithography and photography, continues to create contemplative colotypes. The AP/RC also has three decades of Anne Noggle’s (Albuquerque and Santa Fe) gelatin silver prints, including her well-known self-portraits shot during a face lift.

James Dormer (Fort Collins, Colorado), Gesine Janzen (Missoula, Montana), Kent Kapflinger (Fargo, North Dakota), Karin Broker (Houston), Mary Hood (Tempe, Arizona), Larry Scholder (Dallas) and Jane Abrams (Albuquerque) are among the many AP/RC participants who have made their livings as university faculty while actively working as artists.

Notes:
1. Dayton Duncan, Miles from Nowhere: Tales from America’s Contemporary Frontier (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 1–2.