

An Artist's Touch

A look at the lost art of collaborative printmaking. By D. Dominick Lombardi

Gary Lichtenstein's interest in silkscreen printmaking goes back to the early '60s when he enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute and apprenticed under artist and printmaker Robert Fried.

"In those days, back East there were pop artists like Andy Warhol who used the

silkscreen process to make art," says Lichtenstein. "In the West, it was more about rock 'n' roll concert posters. Fried helped take the silkscreen from a commercial technique for creating the concert poster to a viable medium for the fine artist."

In 1978, Lichtenstein moved on to open his own studio in San Francisco, seeking to create an environment similar to the feel of a recording studio—giving artists the freedom (and the help) to create in a collaborative environment. Now, having returned to the East Coast, Lichtenstein's studio is housed in a white barn off a winding road in western Connecticut. "I continue to collaborate, so the painter doesn't have to take the time to learn the art of silkscreen printing," he says. "It's like the relationship between an architect and builder. The architect is the artist, with the vision and the ideas, and the builder has the know-how, the expertise to produce the concepts. That's the master printer."

His clients agree. Artist Tom Christopher, who's working on a number of serigraphs with Lichtenstein, says: "Gary pulls things out of your work that you were unaware of. He gives you his thoughts on how you can make your artwork a silkscreen, and you see new color combinations and new shapes. Machines don't do that."

Pointing at a section of the print, Christopher says: "Look at this shape, these colors. I wouldn't have thought to simplify that area. It's inspired us to rework these areas over here. Those ideas go right back with me into the painting studio. It's stuff you miss when you're working alone or on a computer."

Personal contact

Painter Tom Christopher (on the right) consults with screen printer Gary Lichtenstein. Christopher appreciates the personal attention that the screen printing process allows. "I can come in here, in the middle of the series of color applications, and I can see something, an area that's supposedly not done, and decide it looks great just the way it is. I'll see that Gary has hit something early on that's better than what I'd envisioned."

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FYI

A quick lesson in terms

A **silkscreen** is a print made by pushing ink through a stencil onto paper. The stencil is made of a sheet of fabric (originally silk) that has certain areas blocked out to prevent ink from getting through. Separate fabric stencils are made for each color to be printed. The term **serigraph** distinguishes a fine-art screen print from screen prints made industrially—like T-shirt designs.

Indeed, the master printmaker's biggest competition is the computer-generated *giclée* print. "Around 1995 was when the digital medium started to really develop for the artist," says Lichtenstein. "It began to displace fine-art printmaking. The artist was out of the picture and the computer took over."

"Silkscreen prints have their own unique characteristics," he continues. "They don't look like lithographs or etchings, or, for that matter, paintings. And it's hands-on. Artists come in here and paint directly on the Mylar film to make changes in the prints. It's not about how many colors; it's about how colors create imagery. Just like in painting." For additional information, contact Gary Lichtenstein at thewhitebarn@hotmail.com.

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