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Lyle Rexer / first impression

Romancing the Stone

Printmaking is fashionable in the hands of artist Beverly Semmes

New York based sculptor Beverly Semmes is used to making big dresses—fabric cascading down walls into a lake of ruffles, cloud dresses made of aluminum. But this piece, made of paper, is different, and she isn't using a needle and thread to create it but two 400-pound lithography stones.

Semmes is in Copenhagen, invited by World House Editions, based in New Jersey, and Edition Copenhagen to work with a group of master printers on the largest lithography stones in Europe. The goal is to produce a portfolio—a single original work of multiple parts. The run will be strictly limited to forty, with thirty for sale, divided among Semmes, World House, and Edition Copenhagen.

It is all part of a new printmaking program that supports the work of several artists per year. The artists aren't paid up front, but they do have the chance to keep their work and to use the shop's other press for monoprints and additional editions on smaller stones. "It's risk free," says World House founder Donald Tagliatella. "If they don't like the outcome, we cancel it. We can always try again."

Like many of the artists before her (John Armleder, Not Vital, Mark Francis, and Darren Almond) Semmes didn't know quite what to expect before she arrived. For one thing, she had never worked in lithography, and the thought of trying to create prints of Brobdingnagian size was daunting. She is also the first woman to work in the program and wondered how she would fit in. She spent days before her flight doing drawings in oil stick and litho crayon on the floor of her Brooklyn studio just to get the feel. "The idea of making an edition in six days seemed impossible," she remarks. In the end, she left her drawings



Lithography stone used by Beverly Semmes for her recent project at Edition Copenhagen. All images courtesy World House Editions, South Orange, New Jersey, and Edition Copenhagen, Copenhagen.

behind and decided just to romance the stone when she arrived.

When the Swiss-based artist Not Vital saw the stones, an idea came to him in a flash. For the series "Dirigerer" (Conducted), he used conducting batons dipped in ink to mark the stones in rhythm to movements from works by composers Jean Sibelius, Edvard Grieg, and Carl Nielsen. Each of the completed prints captures a different experience of sound in the visual language of gesture. For Semmes, the process has been more of an evolution, the testing of an idea to see what might be possible. Her first notion was to create the image of a dress with an open circle at its center in four 32-by-47-inch sheets. She

was reassured at first that the process was close to the directness of drawing. Stone lithography involves making an image on the stone by drawing on it, either in ink or litho crayon, then etching away everything around the drawing with acid. This stone relief then serves as a template for the printing press's inked roller, which carries the image to the paper. Working on stone eases the transition because, unlike plate lithography, the artist can work in positive. What you see is (hopefully) what you get.

Semmes's project began with such rapid success that the real challenge was sustaining it. She quickly adapted her blocky drawing style to the new surface. The first "quadrant" of the dress came off

first impression

the press without a hitch—the shape a surprisingly diaphanous magenta, more like a gouache than the thick color she had experimented with in her studio. The second sheet was almost a perfect match, but the third was very different, muddier. Semmes grappled with whether to keep it, and in the end decided to scrap it and try again. “You want to give yourself up to the process,” she says, “but it’s also a leap of faith. You can’t know the outcome.”

Presiding over such leaps into the unknown is the master printer Rasmus Urwald, whose father founded Edition Copenhagen in 1959. Both print shop and gallery, the operation occupies a beautifully renovated warehouse near the harborside. Urwald is part printer, part psychologist, part clown, helping the artists take chances and bounce back from failures. His sense of humor is crucial to the artists’ productivity. When the going gets rough, Urwald is likely to pull a fright wig from his drawer and transform himself into a troll.

In spite of the learning curve, Semmes has managed to make two large dresses and several smaller prints. “The energy of the collaboration is great,” she says. “Nothing is ever a problem.” But there have been some very long days. When Semmes and



Urwald returned in the morning after inking one of the stones for another try, the printer knew that the ink had dried to a film that was too uniform and thick to yield an image matching the earlier prints in tone and texture. Stones can be temperamental. Each one takes the etching ink differently, and the ink has to be mixed with water in just the right proportion. They decided to use another stone and try again. Adds Vieten, “Artists often feel it’s a bother for us to redo work, but it’s a deci-

sion we encourage them to make.” Urwald didn’t voice a strong opinion until after Semmes had decided. Then he smiled and said, “That’s the right choice,” and began grinding the stone for another try. Tagliatella sees this as true to the spirit of the residency. “Today with litho shops closing and printers going digital,” he adds, “the artist is increasingly removed from the process of creation. Here, it’s all about the process and the collaboration. That’s where the discovery is.” ■



Top and left: Beverly Semmes at work in the Edition Copenhagen studio. Above: *Hole*, color stone lithograph in four parts on Velin d’Arches paper, 2005.