

GALLERY VIEW

JOHN RUSSELL

Some Special Printmakers

Printmaking at the highest level is one of the most demanding of all human activities. One of the most dramatic, too: to watch the pulling of a first sheet from the plate is to witness the creative moment in epitome. It cannot surprize us that printmaking has often an obsessional quality and that there is among printmakers, print collectors and print marketers a wild camaraderie (and just a touch, from time to time, of megalomania). Print collectors, in particular, are the vegetarians of art: opting out of our grosser concerns, they settle for a loyalty that is narrow but tenacious.

It has to be borne in mind, however, that most printmaking is not at the highest level. Most printmaking is a journeyman activity in which the pressure of the imagination is very low indeed and our interest is held (where held at all) by technical sleight of hand. Many print collectors are cranks, moreover, and many print marketers are bores. But it remains true that between 1900 and 1950 Matisse and Picasso (to name two only) put some of their best energies into printmaking and that the third quarter of this century has seen some phenomenally fine printmaking in the United States.

The lead in this was given above all by Tatyana Grosman at the print workshop on Long Island to which she gave the name of Universal Limited Art Editions. Other and later workshops are undeniably larger, more "modern" and more cost-efficient. But Madame Grosman set a standard of fastidious perfection and made sure that everyone connected with her activities lived up to it. The life style of U.L.A.E. is that of a Chekhovian country house in which a most un-Chekhovian amount of hard work gets done. There are no deadlines, no timetables, no beginning and no end to the working day. No limits are set to the redefinition of the words "print" and "printmaker." The print in progress may turn out to be a book by R. Buckminster Fuller that just happens to be 40 feet in length, and the printmaker may turn out to be a visiting Russian poet who has never seen a lithographic stone before but manages to make his words dance on the page in quite a new way.

There is (through Jan. 27) a show of prints from U.L.A.E. at Castelli Graphics, 4 East 77th Street. Though no more than a sample of Tatyana Grosman's multifarious production, it includes sheets by Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg and James Rosenquist that in every case are subtly different from the prints made by those same artists elsewhere. Not better or worse, but different: The exploration of self that is fundamental to good printmaking has here a quality that is open-ended without loss of intensity and experimental without being merely freakish. Looking at Rauschenberg's spectral image of a

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The New York Times

Published: January 21, 1979

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bicycle, we remember how initially he didn't want to go to U.L.A.E. at all. ("The second half of the 20th century is no time to start drawing on rocks" was his first reaction). But he got to love it: so much so that the book which he lately produced at U.L.A.E. in collaboration with the French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet can stand with the great books that Matisse illustrated (and wrote out with his own hand) towards the end of his life.

Kenneth Tyler's workshop at Bedford Village, New York, is a very different operation from Madame Grosman's. But he has in common with her a determination to break the mould in which the word "print" was set for so long. There is nothing that he will not try, to that end; and as he is a champion persuader it can happen that artists will come to him for a day or two, just to get the feel of the place, and end up staying a month or more.

David Hockney is one of those artists. One of the fastest learners in the business, he soon realized the potential of the method of printmaking with paper pulp that Kenneth Tyler devised not long ago. In no time at all he produced his "Paper Pools" series, some of which are on view through Jan. 27 at Andre Emmerich Downtown, 420 West Broadway. Californian pools have been wonderland for Hockney ever since he first came to this country as a young Englishman starved for sun and starved for pleasure. With the paper pulp process he can work on six or even 12 big sheets that form up as a single image; and whereas his recent paintings have been tight and careful in their handling, the "Paper Pools" deal in huge flat areas of pure color that

come across with an effect of immense exhilaration.

The "Paper Pools" have, in fact, something of the simplifications of pure color-painting. But they also bring a new energy and a new snap to imagery that Hockney has used many times before: the fantail of white water that follows in a diver's wake, for instance, and the tensile geometry of a diving board as it vibrates in the sun. These big prints are all pleasure: Broad and simple effects are fundamental to the new medium, and most visitors will have themselves a very good time.

Now that prints are big business a certain apostolic dignity attaches itself to printmakers who aren't in the big time, rarely come to the big city and make their prints for just one or two people. To comb through the ranks of such people takes time and trouble, but the Brooklyn Museum aims to find the best among them for its annual National Print Exhibition, of which No. 23 will be on view at the museum through Feb. 11. Its adviser in this adventure is Gene Baro, a portly and experienced ecumenist who traveled the length and breadth of the country and came up with prints by 75 artists who had not been seen in previous annuals.

It makes a most enjoyable show: resourceful, unaggressive, mostly intimate in scale and marked by a high degree of technical address. Sometimes a multiplicity of techniques is employed within a single print to no very memorable result. But a close look will reveal some printmakers who put complexity to good use: among them Eva Pokorny, Leonardo Lasansky and Anita Janoff-Katjanelson. Wayne Kimball from Salt Lake City has a humor all his own, and Shunji Sakuyama brings a fresh eye to the landscape of Brooklyn itself. 51