

The act of art

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Teresa Cole stands with the cylinders she created for the atrium of the newly expanded A.B. Freeman School of Business. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

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Outside of art professor and printmaker Teresa Cole's off-campus workspace on the downtown end of Tchoupitoulas Street, 18-wheelers grind into aching, reluctant halts with such regularity it's almost like music. Cole says she uses this studio as a "thinking space," a place apart from the printmaking studio she runs in the Woldenberg Art Center on Tulane's uptown campus.

Cole has taught at Tulane since 1994. Hundreds of students— whether art majors or not—have taken her classes. She's served as chair and associate chair of the Newcomb Art Department several times. She's shown her work—a catalog of inviting, beguiling, abstract images born of different techniques and technologies—in more than 100 exhibitions. She's been a visiting artist and scholar at numerous international institutions, and traveled to far-flung corners to research resources and gather inspiration.

"It's in the act of trying to do something that you discover something else."

Teresa Cole, art professor and printmaker

Tulane University

Her art—which seems bound by an underlying, unifying spirit— teems with figures both biologic and geometric as she incorporates global iconography.

Just now, Cole has stepped away from her worktable to fetch a thin, 16-inch block of Masonite onto which she has hand-carved the image of a billowing strand of seaweed.

Questioned about creativity, the language of art and the spiritual content of her work, she boils down her work to simple terms: carving, inking, pressing.

“Creativity is an action,” she says. “And it’s very physical—I carve plates, I ink them and press them onto paper.”

INCLINED TO IMPROVISE

Not 10 feet from the worktable and dominating one corner of her studio is a gaggle of 30 5-foot stainless-steel mesh cylinders, all digitally etched with images Cole created using traditional patterns from around the world—star motifs from Japan, latticework from Shanghai, wrought-iron work from New Orleans.

The cylinders are part of a project commissioned by the A. B. Freeman School of Business and will hang in the atrium of the school’s new business complex on the Tulane uptown campus. It’s the largest installation Cole has ever done and has required collaboration with a sculptor to fabricate the cylinders and an architect to generate the 3D modeling needed to precisely orchestrate where the cylinders will hang. She’s also going to need a crew to suspend the bunch of them from the atrium’s 40-foot ceiling.

While there are numerous printmaking processes—including relief, intaglio and lithograph—the basic idea is to create a single picture or design by transferring ink from carved (or engraved, or etched) blocks onto a single sheet of paper, typically through multiple layers. Within the process, the printmaker has myriad choices. Cole, for instance, has traditional Japanese carving knives and computer-controlled routers in her toolkit.

That is all straightforward stuff. And while most printmakers follow a carefully prescribed plan on how those layers will be inked and arranged, Cole is more inclined to improvise.

“These are all about chance and experimentation,” she says.

Moving over to a large flat file, Cole carefully pulls out prints to show some of her work. The crisp, protective paper crackles noisily as she unwraps each print and delivers it to a nearby table. The prints are large, maybe 3 by 4 feet, and flexible, but she handles them with an assured grace.

One on top of another, she places them down in a slow sequence, a slide show that reveals a multilayered world where organic squiggles and curves coexist with chevrons, hexagons and other geometric forms. Interlocking patterns spread out and then dissipate into shapes that are almost familiar to memory. Images are muted in gray scales happily doused with neon green and radiant orange. Bees dance, snakes curl and mosquitoes join their tiny legs to form icky interlocking configurations. Camels and Southern belles coexist in cultural contrast. Ambiguity and perplexity are balanced by surprise and revelation.

In fragmentary musings, Cole succinctly describes her method of working:

“What happens if a ghost of silver (ink that has not been completely removed from a block) gets laid on top of something?” she says. “What if I put down a layer and it doesn’t work? “What if I decide to pick up a different block?” What if she takes a printed sheet of paper that is a discard from a previous project and uses it as a base for a new one? What if she chooses one of the hundreds of blocks she’s made over the years and employs it in a different way than it was originally intended? What if making things is a leap of faith, one that compels the resolve “let’s just see where this idea will go?”

HONEY AND VINEGAR

Beauty, they say, is skin deep—just enough room for a printmaker to ply her trade.

A few days later, in the printmaking studio occupying a third-floor corner of the Woldenberg Art Center, Cole uses a brayer—a roller made out of hard rubber—to determinedly work a green ink onto a block carved with an intricate textile pattern. To do it takes a lot of muscle—a lot of rolling and rolling to get it right.

“I do want to make beautiful things,” says Cole, speaking over the relentless sound of the brayer. She wonders, however, given the highly charged political and social milieu of the country, if that is enough.

“I work very abstractly,” she says. “It’s ornamental and attractive and maybe it doesn’t seem particularly to challenge.”

She says she’s frustrated that her work is not as angry as she is about what she perceives as the heightened level of publicly expressed sexism and racism as well as the country’s increasingly exclusionary policies. She remembers a work-study job in a college photo lab where she was treated as inferior because of gender. She remembers being a young and idealistic art student and the bruising, narrow views of her male professors. She remembers being called “didactic” for the feminist views expressed in her early work.

But she also remembers the old saying that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. And she’s thinking about a comment a female colleague made at a campus event a few weeks back: that pleasure, in and of itself, can be an act of resistance.

“Beauty,” Cole reflects as she sorts through all of this, “can be a gateway to difficult ideas.”

She says this as she works, placing a plate under a wool blanket to print the inked block that she’s put atop a printing press. It will make the transfer smoother, she says, as she lays a sheet of paper on the block.

By now, her two graduate student assistants have filtered in. Instinctively, the two women join in the printing process, helping to calibrate the pressure of the metal roller under which block and paper will pass. They seem to have an intimate understanding of the eccentricities of the machine and how to dial it in to make the best impression.

As they work, the younger women talk about their recent activities. One is recently returned from an out-of-state printmakers’ conference and the other is in the middle of forming her thesis committee.

There is as much listening as there is talk, and there is respect and there is cooperation and fellowship.

A connective tissue stretches between the known and unknown.

“Process is very important to me,” Cole said. “It’s in the act of trying to do something that you discover something else.”