

Based in St. Louis and started in 2006, Pele Prints doesn't derive its name from the famous soccer player, but is named after the Hawaiian goddess of lightning, volcanoes, and fire. As a reference not only to the geological formation of landmasses, it alludes to the act of creation—an integral component to the spirit of the shop. Rather than focusing on editioned prints, Pele Prints creates unique, one of a kind fine art monoprints.



An Interview with:

PELE PRINTS

Collaborating with master printer Amanda Verbeck and two to four visiting artists a year, the unique prints often incorporate mixed media and focus on the experimental qualities of printmaking. These prints will often merge photolithography, relief, intaglio, screenprinting, and other hand-based techniques on a large scale.

What inspired you to start Pele Prints?

One of my biggest inspirations has been seeing my Mom run her own business since I was a little girl. From the beginning, I've always been encouraged to trust my gut, work hard, and do what I love. In college, I found out that I really loved printmaking. Later, I became an assistant and apprentice to Maryanne Simmons at Wildwood Press. She took me under her wing, taught me so much, and really made being a collaborative printer seem like an attainable goal. Even after opening my own studio, I still work with Maryanne today. These two ladies have been a huge inspiration for me.

What kind of business does your mother run? Even though the two businesses are different, what similarities do you see?

My Mom runs a graphic design business, Ambrilis Graphics. Her office is actually in the same building as my studio...we're pretty family-oriented here! In addition to the basic business end of things (invoicing, payroll, taxes, etc.), the biggest similarity is that we are both in visually-driven fields that rely on our creativity as well as our technical knowledge.

Do you work only with printmakers or with artists of all disciplines?

All disciplines—no printmaking experience required! When an artist comes into the studio, it's helpful if they have an open mind and come ready to play. Some printmakers fit in well with this approach. Non-printers usually don't have any preconceived notions about what printmaking is or should be, and sometimes that makes the whole process more organic.

*Amanda Verbeck printing her Take Off series.

I imagine you've had some great surprises when collaborating with artists—you end up with these final artworks which neither of you envisioned from the beginning.

So true! It's important that both of us walk away with work that we like and feel good about putting out in the world. Thankfully, most of the surprises are good ones.

What's the biggest hurdle you've come across in the ongoing workings of the shop?

Like many small businesses, money is a big hurdle. From pulling together the capital to start the business to having the funds to keep an art studio running on a daily basis, it's a challenge. It's a labor of love.

What kind of processes do the artists have at their disposal?

We use a wide-range of print processes: relief, lithography, collagraph, screenprinting, monotype, and intaglio. The only real limitation in terms of technique is that I want the studio to be as non-toxic as possible.

Aside from some of the more traditional printmaking mediums, are there other processes or objects that artists have incorporated that surprised you?

Nothing is really off limits: major collage work, cutting prints apart and reassembling them, hand

coloring, sculptural elements, stitching and beading. The mixing of mediums and experimentation is part of the fun of making the work.

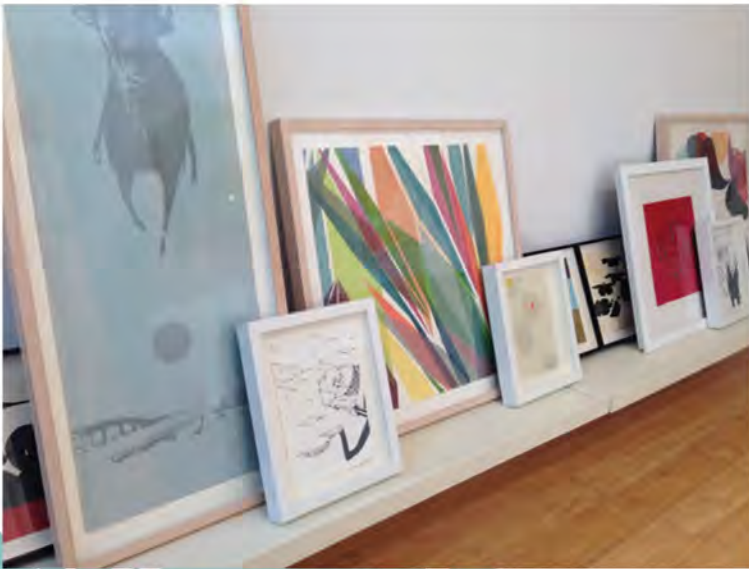
Your shop focuses mainly on monoprints, why did you choose to format it in this way? It's pretty simple actually: I have a short attention span when it comes to printing large editions. The playfulness and spontaneity of creating unique images is just more interesting to me. I think it also provides a more diverse context for the collector.



Ben Guffee, In the studio.



Ben Guffee
Around III (2015)
25" x 45.5"
Collagraph, (Ed. 4)



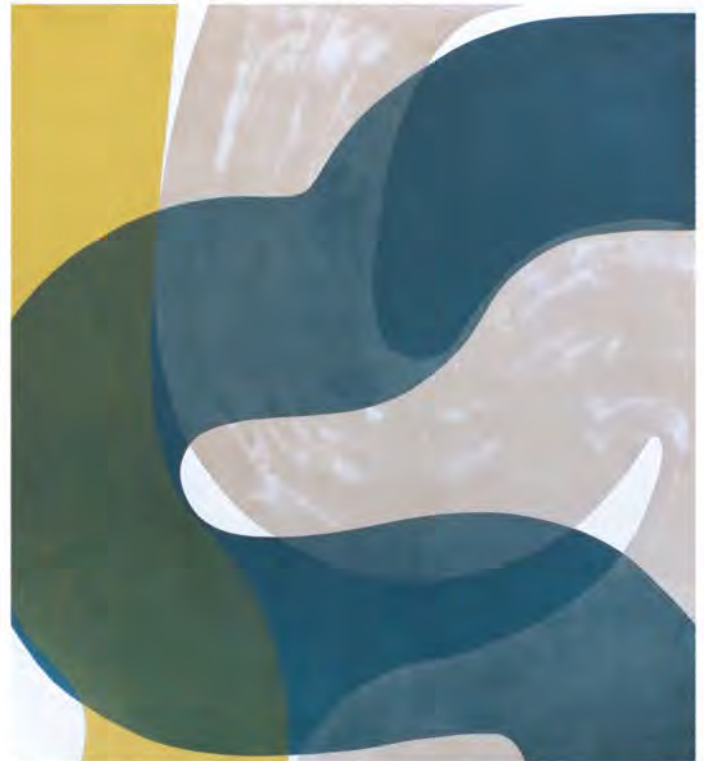
Framed prints.

Could you explain the differences between monotypes and monoprints for our readers who may not know?

This is a good question, since the two words are often confused and used interchangeably. Part of the confusion is that monotypes and monoprints are both one-of-a-kind, unique images. The difference is in how the print is created. Monotype refers to a specific printing technique where the image is painted onto a flat surface and then transferred to paper by running it through the press. After it is printed, there's nothing left on the plate to print again. A monoprint can be made using any printing technique that uses a set plate. The plates are created in the same way as you would for an edition. But instead of printing multiples, the plates are used to create a single unique print. Essentially, the plates can then be used and combined in different ways (by changing color, placement, layers, etc.) to create a series of unique prints.

The business model for the shop is continuously changing, right? When you first began you worked with artists and sold the prints, but in 2009 you switched gears and began printing on fabrics, cards and clothing. You are now currently offering classes and workshops while also maintaining visiting artists.

We do have a fluid business model, but printmaking is at the heart of everything we do. One of the biggest lessons I learned from my Mom was to not get stuck. So if something isn't working, change. When the economy tanked in 2008-2009, people stopped buying prints. We had to get creative in order to keep the doors of the studio open. The good news is it worked! We found a way to ebb and flow with multiple facets of the studio. I have a wonderful assistant, Carly Kurka, who helps to make this happen every day. Currently, we publish 2-4 projects a year, have several ongoing contract printing jobs, create and consign our art off the wall, and offer multiple flexible workshops.



Ken Wood,
Written Words Fly II-b, (2014)
44" x 40", collagraph and relief print (Ed. of 4).



Mary O'Malley,
Hanging Garden #3 (2014)
36" x 50", photo lithograph (Ed. of 12).

Could you describe what this collaboration looks like? Do you have an idea in mind before the artist even walks through the door or do you discuss their vision and try to find the best possible way to execute it using the vocabulary of printmaking?

So much happens before the artist even makes it into the studio. Whenever I look at a piece of art, my "print-maker brain" is thinking about how to print it. As a result, I do have some general ideas ahead of time. But the conversation and planning with the artist is where we really hone in on the project. We both need to be excited about the direction. Collaboration is about trust. It's kind of like standing together at the top of a cliff, grabbing the other person's hand, and jumping off...knowing that it will all work out in the end.



Laura Berman
Umbra: FM15, (2015)
 30" x 30", relief print.

Is it difficult to communicate that vision to non-printmakers? Will you pull prints of previous artists for inspiration or let the artist experiment and get an idea of the possibilities of the medium?

Sometimes it can be difficult to get that vision across until we're printing in the studio. The artist really starts to see the possibilities once we're on the press. I usually don't want to influence the artist's process with work from other collaborations, so I rarely pull out other prints. Even if it takes more time, allowing the artist to experiment is preferable to me. Not to mention that without any preconceived notions, they often find new ways of working with printmaking that wouldn't have happened otherwise.

Has your interpretation of collaboration changed since you started Pele?

Fundamentally, I think it's still the same. I hope I've learned and grown along the way though. The collaboration is different for every project, but the goal is always to make a strong body of work together.

How do you decide to work with an artist? Is it their concept, imagery, or technical approach?

It starts with the imagery... I see work that I admire and would want to live with. Then I try to learn more about where the artist is coming from conceptually. These two components have to work together. Sometimes I will follow an artist's work for years. Eventually, I get in touch with the artist and see where things go from there. I've also had artists approach me, either on their own or through a recommendation. Either way, it really comes down to a gut feeling and liking the work.

As a printer, are you afraid of having too much influence on an artist when working together?
 Not afraid, but I'm definitely sensitive to the artist's aesthetic and conceptual integrity. When I give my input, it's important to me that it makes sense for their work, but still challenges them to push beyond their comfort zone. If I help an artist to see their own art differently, try something new, or expand their idea of what their work can be, then I've done my job as a collaborative printer.

What do you see as the future of printmaking? How do you think printmaking stays relevant and what kind of ideas/understandings/interpretations about printmaking do you see the lay public possess?

Most people don't know what printmaking is. When I tell folks I'm a printmaker, I usually get a blank stare followed by the question, "What's that?" My short and sweet response is that I play with really big stamps. Sometimes people just think I make posters or digital prints. But educating people about fine art printmaking is part of the deal. I enjoy it. Historically, one of the great things about printmaking is its affordability and accessibility. It's often referred to as one of the most democratic art forms. In my mind, it's important to keep the medium inclusive and not intimidate people from engaging with the work. At the end of the day, this is how printmaking stays current.

Haha, I often get the same reaction when I tell people I'm a printmaker too. Describing it as making big stamps is a good solution. I'll usually describe it as simply as possible by saying I put ink on a matrix and run it through a press with paper on top.

That works, too!

Do you still get the opportunity to make work?

Amazingly, yes! And with lots of encouragement from my husband, Mom, and Carly.

*For more information about Pele Prints, visit: <http://www.peleprints.com/>



Photo litho workshop.