

St.Louis

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Art to Live With

At Pele Prints, ink and paper transform art for the rest of us.

WORKING ON OPPOSITE sides of a giant fine-art press and moving in tight, almost telepathic unison, Amanda Verbeck and her assistant, Carly Kurka, lift and throw back the heavy felt. Verbeck positions a plastic template, hand cut from one of Kurka's geometric abstractions. Kurka mixes a sea mist color, then glides the roller through a swirl of oil-based paint until she hears "the sizzle"—the sound that promises a glistening stipple of paint on the roller, neither thin nor gloppy. One by one, she coats the puzzle pieces of her design with color. Then she and Verbeck dip a heavy sheet of paper in water, dissolving the sizing and softening the fibers to receive the ink. With surgical precision, they line up the paper and ratchet the top roller, preparing to run the plate through.

Some weeks, they might be hand-printing sweaters for SKIF or onesies for Union Studio. When the copper roof was blown off Lambert-St. Louis International Airport, Verbeck used one of its tiles as a plate, printed flight paths on Japanese paper, and folded them into paper airplanes.

But most of what's done in the studio is fine art, and most of it leaves St. Louis: Pele prints hang in Abu Dhabi, France, Indonesia, Switzerland... Sometimes an art consultant or a corporate curator finds Verbeck; sometimes a young patron sees a Pele print at one of the Art Basel satellite shows.

"With first-time collectors, we'll say things a business owner probably shouldn't, like, 'Don't ever pay full price; ask for a collector's [10 percent] discount,'" Verbeck confides. "Printmaking is a very democratic art form."

Also an experimental one: They've run string, tree roots, even a dead bird and a dead squirrel through the press—"which sounds awful," she adds, "but it was really beautiful. The animals had already died."

"They were pre-squashed," Kurka inserts.

Wouldn't that, er, hurt the press?

"In that case, no, because—sorry—there's a lot of give," Verbeck says, her grin wicked. "If it can survive the 2,000 pounds of pressure, it can go through the press."

More typical experiments are with color and texture, modifying the ink to make it look shiny or dull, opaque or transparent, soft or hard. "Mixing ink is a lot like cooking," Verbeck says. "It's supple, creamy—there's something really seductive about oil-based ink, and for what we're doing with color, there is a richness, a depth, a different saturation and tone than you'd get with a water base. These colors glow."

Today, they're printing Kurka's work, but



what usually happens is that "an artist comes to the studio for a week or so, and we create a body of work," Verbeck explains. "It's intense, it's physically demanding, and decisions have to happen quickly. Artists are used to putting something up on the wall and thinking about it. I'm asking them to trust their gut."

She chooses artists whose work fits under the abstract and colorful Pele umbrella.

"There's work I love—it's important—but you would never want in your house or office," says Verbeck. "We print art you want to wake up and see on the wall." —JEANNETTE COOPERMAN