

Madison becomes an epicenter of prints this month

Gayle Worland | Wisconsin State Journal Mar 11, 2022

There's another word for art in Madison this month: Prints.



UW-Madison associate art professor Emily Arthur, right, and James Wehn, of the Chazen Museum of Art, view the exhibition "Seeing Audubon: Robert Havell, Jr. and the Birds of America" at the Chazen. It is among many print shows being held across Madison this month to coincide with an international printmaking conference hosted by UW-Madison.

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Print exhibitions are happening everywhere throughout the city, from museums and galleries to academic buildings, art supply shops, city government offices and even a bar. The celebration of all things printmaking also includes lectures, portfolio shows, print sales and more.



James Wehn, Van Vleck Curator of Works on Paper at the Chazen Museum of Art, talks about the artwork of Jeffrey Gibson, part of the exhibition "Pressing Innovation: Printing Fine Art in the Upper Midwest" now at the museum.

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From March 16-19, Madison is playing host to the [2022 SGCI Annual Conference](#), which is expected to draw more than 500 artists, students, educators and professionals from the U.S. and abroad. SGCI stands for Southern Graphics Council International, a Georgia-based organization that has its roots in the southeastern U.S., but now has global reach and hosts the largest annual printmaking conference in North America.

“It’s been three years since our last conference” because of the COVID-19 pandemic, “so everyone is super-excited,” said Emily Arthur, an associate professor of art at UW-Madison and a member of the conference steering committee. The 2022 event also marks SGCI’s 50th anniversary as an organization.



Printmaker and UW-Madison art professor Emily Arthur curated the exhibition "Seeing Audubon," focused on the methods of the 19th-century London print shop that turned John James Audubon's watercolors into "The Birds of America."

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“Madison has a really strong legacy in the field of printmaking,” Arthur said. “And the Midwest is a real center for printmaking. Generally the East and West coasts receive the most attention, but I think the focus of this conference is to really highlight not only the presses in the Midwest, but also the scholarship around printmaking.”

“Printmaking” is “kind of an umbrella term that describes woodcut and etching, lithography, screen print,” and sometimes book art and handmade papers, Arthur said.

It’s also a collaborative art, involving artists and whole teams of printmakers.



UW-Madison junior Grey Bond visits the exhibit "Pressing Innovation: Printing Fine Art in the Upper Midwest" for an art history class project at the Chazen Museum of Art. The show is one of dozens across Madison this month centered on printmaking.

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"There are so many hands-on," she said. "They used to call it 'print jobbers.' There might be 50 people on a project. People have their specialty within the shop. So this community that forms in the print shop around labor and materials is very different than other forms of art that are solo, with one artist in the studio."



Visitor Graetel Anderson gets a close look at work by Lesley Dill as part of a printmaking exhibit "Pressing Innovation: Printing Fine Art in the Upper Midwest" at the Chazen Museum of Art.

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'Pressing Innovation'

The collaborative spirit of printmaking is on display in ["Pressing Innovation: Printing Fine Art in the Upper Midwest,"](#) an exhibition at the [Chazen Museum of Art](#) through May 15 that brings together art and the histories of five collaborative printmaking workshops in the Midwest.

“Pressing Innovation” explores “how an artist comes to the workshop with a concept, an idea, an image they want to create in printed form, then works with very skilled printmakers, who are also artists, to make that a reality,” said the show’s curator, James Wehn, the Van Vleck Curator of Works on Paper at the Chazen.

“It’s a testament to what happens when people come together to create prints,” he said. “There’s an incredible synthesis of artistic idea, scientific vision, scientific interest, and then the technical skills to actually bring that print to reality.”



Tools and materials used in the printmaking process are on display as part of the exhibit "Seeing Audubon: Robert Havell, Jr. and the Birds of America" at the Chazen Museum of Art.

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“Pressing Innovation” features 3D as well as 2D work from five presses: Landfall Press, Chicago; Vermillion Editions, Minneapolis; Island Press, St. Louis; Highpoint Center for Printmaking, Minneapolis; and UW-Madison’s own Tandem Press, founded in 1987 and now located at 1743 Commercial Ave.

In the Chazen’s second-floor Garfield galleries, printmaking gets a different look with [“Seeing Audubon: Robert Havell, Jr. and The Birds of America.”](#) The exhibition, running through April 3, examines how watercolors made in the field by naturalist John James Audubon were transformed into prints in the London print shop of Robert Havell, Jr. between 1827 and 1838.



From "Seeing Audubon: Robert Havell, Jr. and the Birds of America," an exhibit at the Chazen Museum of Art.
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Arthur attempts to “reverse engineer” the prints that make up “The Birds of America” to see what techniques, methods and materials Havell used to create the collection.

“This is about chemistry and techniques and recipes that belonged to a single shop,” she said. “While Audubon is really the primary voice that is recognized when it comes to ‘The Birds of America,’ his collaborating printmaker contributed a lot more than what is often discussed.”



A visitor views "Pressing Innovation: Printing Fine Art in the Upper Midwest" at the Chazen Museum of Art. The show features art and history from five midwestern fine art presses, including UW-Madison's Tandem Press.

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“To honor the history of materials and printmaking for the conference, I wanted to bring this to the forefront — and it really was an amazing process,” pairing the Chazen’s resources with publications from the Department of Special Collections at Memorial Library, she said.

“It’s a really unique exhibition that’s featuring the materials and process, along with how printmaking aligns with the history of science, which brings ‘The Birds of America’ into that same history.”

‘Shared Future’

The overall SGCI conference is themed “Our Shared Future,” and is also part of UW-Madison’s ongoing effort to educate the campus and the broader community about the Ho-Chunk Nation, on whose lands the university is built. A number of exhibitions focus on this connection, such as “Contemporary Indigenous Printmaking,” curated by Arthur and showing at the James Watrous Gallery at the Overture Center through April 3; “Madison Alumni: A Legacy of Indigenous Perspectives,” featuring works by Indigenous alumni, students and faculty, at Memorial Union through March 21; and others.

Part of the fascination of printmaking, said Arthur, “is striving for the next best print — and you’re always chasing that — but there’s also the legacy that has come down from teacher to teacher, for hundreds of years.”

“Since its development, printmaking has really been about transmitting knowledge,” Wehn said.

“It’s the knowledge that comes from the ability to make prints,” he said. “Then what is made is multiplied and distributed for academic learning (and also serves) as visual knowledge and the dissemination of visual ideas.”