

Art and Transformation

by
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Artist and Critic

Abstract: Many contemporary artists intend to challenge the viewer's modes of perception by manipulating traditional imagery, but does this transformation of cultural stock images constitute a transformation in the audience? This paper will examine artists who appropriate images using reproductive technologies in an attempt to reach a large audience and initiate social change.

Printmaking plays a significant role in ethical discourse. Since its invention more than 500 years ago, printmaking has been the most economical way to disseminate information. Artists have been using prints to encourage social reform ever since print technology allowed. Today, with the advent of digital cameras, photocopy machines, and inexpensive computer equipment, it is easy to reproduce pre-existing images. These reproductions can then be transformed by cropping, enlarging, erasing part of the image, drawing on top of it, or combining it with other previously unrelated imagery or text. In this way, the altered works acquire new meanings as well as make reference to the original images. This kind of appropriation can be used to raise the moral consciousness of the viewer by using traditional imagery alongside contemporary text or manipulations in order to challenge social norms.

The question is whether or not this transformation of cultural imagery constitutes a transformation in the audience. This is not an automatic process. For example, if an artist alters a reproduction in an effort to highlight discrimination, it does not automatically follow that the community will no longer discriminate. The art does have the potential to make the community aware of discrimination, and this can lead to discourse and the potential to change.

But several factors must be in place in order for the art to have the potential to bring about an awareness of social issues.

How can the appropriation of images bring about an awareness of social issues? First, by using a language the audience can understand. Second, by placing the work in the public realm. At this point, there can be discourse and the potential for social change. To address this issue, I will look at three contemporary artists who have been actively exhibiting in the 1980s and 1990s. I will also look at two political posters to show how artists must sometimes change their own signature styles in order to create a politically successful work. All of these artists have appropriated images and transformed their original meaning to highlight unethical social habits. However, there are different degrees to which these works can be the catalyst for social change. Finally, I will discuss the recent transformation of my own work.

Kathy Grove

The first artist, Kathy Grove, engages in a postmodern transformation of modernist viewpoints in a body of work called “The Other Series.” In 1992, Grove worked with the printers at the Spring Street Workshop in New York City to produce an edition of photogravures called *The Other Series*:



Figure 1. **John Sloan.** *Turning Out the Light.* 1905. Etching. 4 3/4 x 6 7/8 inches. Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 64.1.2.

After Sloan based on a 1905 etching by John Sloan (Figures 1 and 2). Sloan’s etching, *Turning Out the Light*, shows a woman in a nightgown reaching up to turn down a gas lamp on the wall. A man can be seen in the shadows lying in bed next to her on the left. Using bleach, airbrush and dyes on a reproduction of Sloan’s original etching, Grove erased the woman and filled in the rest of the bed and sheets. An intaglio plate was made from the altered image and printed traditionally in a small edition of ten on Rives BFK paper. Grove’s print then had the same look and feel of the original Sloan etching, but the woman in the nightdress was missing. By taking the woman out, Grove questions women’s representation in art history. Grove says, “I am portraying

women as they have been regarded throughout history, invisible and inaudible” (*Print Collector’s Newsletter*, 1993, 20).

Sloan had previously faced criticism for his work. In 1906, he was invited to exhibit his series of ten prints called *New York Life* at the New York City Watercolor Society. *Turning Out the Light* and three other works from this series

were determined to be “too vulgar” (Perlman, 1997, 112) and were subsequently removed from the exhibition. At the time, it was considered improper for a woman to be seen in a nightgown. The implication of what might happen next, once the light is out and the woman is lying next to the man, was considered too risqué for the turn-of-the-century audience to handle. Sloan defended his work by arguing that he was painting real life people in real life situations.

Postmodern critics, like Grove, find fault with Sloan’s work for a different reason. Grove has not removed the woman in the nightgown with the intention of censoring a titillating image; she has removed the woman from the picture in order to emphasize her central role. Grove is suggesting that men use women as the object of desire in their work; without women, the narrative structure is lost and the work seems vacant.

Grove has also appropriated work by the famous French artist, Henri Matisse. Modernist painters frequently used the female nude for artistic inspiration. Matisse painted Henriette Darricarrère nude and semi-nude for several years. She was one of the many models used by Matisse and then dismissed, as inspiration for his work changed. In early twentieth-century Nice, it was easy for Matisse to find young female models, many of whom were poor, underfed and otherwise would be employed as menial laborers or prostitutes. Matisse sometimes dressed up Darricarrère and other women in Turkish pants and jewelry to remind him of harems in Morocco. According to art critic and historian Jo Anna Isaak, it is highly unlikely Matisse actually



Figure 2. **Kathy Grove.** *The Other Series: After Sloan.* 1992. Photogravure. 4 3/4 x 6 3/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

visited a wealthy Moroccan man's house or saw his harem; all this comes from Matisse's Western imagination of Eastern culture (1996, 58).

A 1926 painting of Darricarrère shows her with exposed breasts, reclining in a green striped chair in front of a Moorish screen with decorative arches. Grove took a photograph of this painting and, with her masterful retouching skills, removed Darricarrère in a piece titled *The Other Series: After Matisse*. Without the subject to gratify voyeuristic desires, the work is nothing but an empty chair. The male artist's power over women has been removed by a female artist.

Grove transformed the look and interpretation of the original in these two examples, but has she inspired a new awareness in her audience? Both works by Grove look as if something is missing, even to the untutored viewer. The bed sheets and blank walls glow, the chair opens out to the viewer, both yearn for someone to take center stage. The empty furniture heightens the sense that the human presence is missing, but is this appropriation transformative? In order to fully understand Grove's work, the viewer must know the original image and, even then, the informed viewer has likely already been converted.

I first learned of Grove's work in 1993 when I read an announcement for the publication of *The Other Series: After Sloan* in the *Print Collector's Newsletter*. At the time, I was working for the Elvehjem Museum of Art in Madison, Wisconsin. Since the original etching by Sloan was in the Elvehjem collection, I immediately recognized the reference. Her point was made, but I was one of the tutored.

Grove's prints and photographs are very successful within an art historical context. However, this tends to be a limited and elitist audience. Art historians can talk about the importance of her work in the classroom, and this discussion may enlighten some of the students in the class, but the trickle-down effect to the general populace is minimal. Grove's work certainly speaks eloquently to a certain segment of the population, but it does not succeed in fostering a true transformation in society. The objective of this paper is to look for works that not only challenge received values, but also affect a large audience. One must be familiar with the politics of the image in question in order to understand the debate.

Barbara Kruger

Grove's work seems most at home in an academic world whereas the work of Barbara Kruger runs with street culture, television, and commerce. Kruger

is an artist, writer, curator, lecturer, and graphic designer. Her art exists both inside and outside museums in many different forms. Sometimes her prints are framed and hung on the walls of museums and galleries in the traditional fashion. Sometimes Kruger writes text to be printed or projected directly on the walls or floors of a museum.

In *Picturing "Greatness,"* a photography exhibit curated by Kruger in 1987 for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, text was printed in large black type to fill a center partition. Kruger selected photographs for this exhibit from the museum's collection. According to the words on the partition, these were photographs of "mostly famous artists" (Linker, 1990, 85) who happened to be predominantly white and male. The text on the center partition said these works "can show us how vocation is ambushed by cliché and snapped into stereotype by the camera, and how photography freezes moments, creates prominence and makes history" (85). Kruger questions the definition of great art and great artists and how great art is exhibited. In this work, she is like Grove, in that she challenges the dominance of male artists and the invisible female in art history. Kruger, like Grove, has changed the perception of the original images, but not by physically altering them with airbrush and dyes as Grove does. Kruger has altered their meaning by placing them in a new context. Most importantly, the visitor to Kruger's exhibition does not have to know the original photographs before seeing the show; even the untutored viewer could read Kruger's text, look at the original images and then draw their own conclusions.

Kruger is best known for her black and white photomontages with bold red or black type. These photo montages have been exhibited traditionally, but they have their greatest impact when she takes them out of the museum. She has made them into posters, T-shirts, billboards, matchbooks, shopping bags and a number of commissioned designs for magazines and books. She uses photo-screenprint and commercial printing techniques, not because they have an inherently beautiful and unique quality, but because these best suit her needs. With a background as a graphic designer, she creates bold images which look like advertisements, but instead of trying to sell a product, they scream for attention to social structure. The subject of the text is always "I," "me," "we," "you"; Kruger engages in conversation with the viewer. Messages such as "You are seduced by the sex appeal of the inorganic," "When I hear the word culture, I take out my checkbook" and "We have received orders not to move" provoke discussion about our capitalist nation's social decorum.

The images Kruger appropriates for her montages are anonymous compared to Grove's direct quotation of famous male artists. They are from different print sources and have been enlarged and cropped. Sometimes the original half-tone dots are exaggerated, and distorted or contrast is heightened. The subjects are often stereotypical men, women, and children. The interpretation of these images is easily manipulated within the context of Kruger's penetrating phrases. Below are examples.

We don't need another hero shows a little girl pointing to the flexed arm of a little boy (Figure 3). Without the text, the little girl's expression could be interpreted as awe: "Wow!

What big muscles you have." The boy glances back at the girl with one eyebrow raised, looking to see if he impresses her with his manliness. Combining this image with the words, "We don't need another hero," transforms the girl and boy from innocent, Norman Rockwell type children into savvy young



Figure 3. **Barbara Kruger.** *We don't need another hero.* 1986. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery.

adults. The boy's clenched fist now symbolizes aggression. The girl is empowered as the spokesperson for society and seems to be saying, "We don't need any more of your kind." This illustration combined with Kruger's text brings to mind images of global politics and military struggle. It implies that the archetypal male champion is an outmoded custom and urges prompt dismissal.

In another arresting combination of image and text, a black and white photograph of a woman's face is tightly cropped and split down the middle. The left half is printed as a positive and the right half as a negative. The words "Your body is a battleground," run down the center. This poster was designed for a 1989 rally in Washington, D. C. to support the legal right to an abortion, birth control, and women's rights. The text at the bottom of the poster reads, "On April 26 the Supreme Court will hear a case which the Bush Administration hopes will overturn the *Roe vs. Wade* decision, which established basic abortion rights. Join thousands of women and men in Washington D.C. on April 9. We will show that the majority of Americans support a woman's right to choose" (Linker, 1990, 58) and then gives details regarding the rally.

The caucasian woman's features are classically beautiful with perfect bow-tie lips, almond shaped eyes and hair pulled up to accent her high cheekbones. Without the text or photographic manipulation, she has no real expression, she simply stares straight at the viewer. With the text and image alterations, she is the symbol of a woman divided by violent ethical debates. Her divided face illustrates opposition (positive/negative, black/white, right/wrong). The text directly addresses women: "*Your* body...". The poster demands that women recognize the severity of the issues at stake and that, without action, their freedoms may be taken away.

In both examples, Kruger has transformed the interpretation of idealized figures through her aggressive slogans. The audience, already familiar with these stereotypes as representations of a passive, content America, may be shocked by the contradicting phrases which suggest a shift in social norms. By placing these works in the public realm, the message reaches a wide audience, not just the artistically enlightened. In this case, the potential for discourse and social change is great. Kruger has brought about an awareness of social issues in order to initiate ethical transformations toward sexual equality, democracy, and balance of powers.

What must an artist do to create a politically transformative work?

The great breadth of Kruger's repertoire makes it seem easy to create such politically charged works, but it can sometimes be quite difficult, especially for the traditional studio artist. Artists are notoriously self-centered and seem to work with often elusive concepts. In order to create politically transformative works, the artists must adopt advertising tactics. Designs should capture the viewer's attention, the writing should be concise and the image memorable. The message should be easily discernible and not confusing. Many artists created political posters, buttons and other pop culture pieces in the 1960's. Some of these were very successful and had a great impact on the general population, others were not. Blue chip artists were often commissioned to create political propaganda, but use of these otherwise famous artists did not guarantee success. Quite the contrary, it is often most difficult for blue chip artists to transform their signature styles to the world of advertising. Two examples come to mind.

In 1972, Gemini G.E.L., the prestigious Los Angeles print workshop, published a work by Andy Warhol to raise money for Senator George McGovern's presidential campaign. Warhol took an image of President Richard Nixon,

colored his face green and wrote "Vote McGovern" on the bottom (Figure 4). This poster was intended to make fun of Nixon. "It has been noted, however, that although it raised \$40,000 dollars for the McGovern campaign, it actually garnered votes for both of the candidates" (Wye, 1988, 25). People who liked McGovern understood the image of Nixon to be degrading. People who liked Nixon thought, "Wow! Nixon's portrait has been printed by that arty fellow, Andy Warhol! He's so clever." This time, Warhol was too clever, and the mix of McGovern's name with Nixon's image was not easily discernible as pro-McGovern propaganda.

By contrast, Jasper Johns successfully created a powerful and unambiguous political poster. Johns frequently used the American flag in his early work, but, according to Johns, not for political reasons. The flag was just another image like a U.S. map or numerical digits through which he could explore formal esthetic ideas such as texture, value, and color. For example, in *Flags*, from 1965, Johns painted the American flag twice, the upper image in the flag's complementary colors, green, black, and orange, and the lower image in gray. A dot is painted in the middle of each flag. If viewers stare at the dot in the top flag for a few minutes and then move their gaze down to the gray flag, an afterimage of the flag will appear in its true colors of red, white, and blue. In 1969, Johns was commissioned by the Leo Castelli Gallery to design a poster to rally interest in the first Moratorium Day, an organized protest against the Vietnam War. Johns appropriated the earlier painting for the poster. He reproduced the green, black, and orange flag and stenciled the word "Moratorium" underneath (Figure 5).

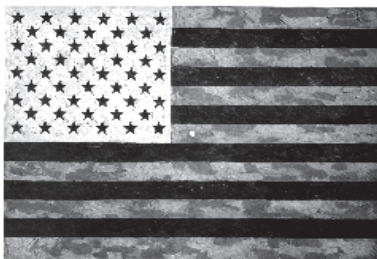
The green, black, and orange flag, which was originally painted to demonstrate an optical illusion, has been transformed into a symbol of war protest. The colors are now sickly representing an ailing America and the black dot



Figure 4. **Andy Warhol.** *Vote McGovern.* 1972. Screenprint, printed in color. Composition: 41 5/16 x 41 1/8 inches; sheet: 42 x 41 15/16 inches. ©1999 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/ARS, New York. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Philip Johnson. Photograph ©1999 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

looks like a bullet hole. This work was reproduced by the thousands through commercial print methods and, according to Deborah Wye, Chief Curator of Prints at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, "The poster was distributed widely and became one of the most well known images of the (Vietnam) period" (69). Approximately one hundred copies were signed by Johns and sold to raise funds for protest activities. Although the print had a vast impact in the political arena, it is not representative of Johns' work. A reproduction for political purposes was not something Johns had ever done before, and he never attempted it again. In this case, Johns was able to successfully step outside the elitist art galleries into street culture to create work designed to raise society's consciousness.

Art critic Lucy Lippard states, "Many artists apparently find it impossible to expand their own recognizable 'style' into an image transmitting a clear-cut 'message'.... Though there is no question of the deep feelings behind most political posters, the esthetic is necessarily that of advertising (good propaganda requires a good marketplace sensibility) and it doesn't come easily to the traditionally educated fine artist" (1984, 26-27). That is to say, for prints to have the potential to transform audiences, artists must be willing to first transform themselves and their signature styles. Warhol did not greatly alter his style, and his message was not clear. His portrait of Nixon easily fits into a catalogue of Warhol's portraits of famous people printed out of register in saturated colors. Although there were some alterations to Nixon's image by painting it green and writing "Vote McGovern" on the bottom, there is little evidence that his work persuaded people to vote for McGovern. The color green could have been intended to make Nixon look evil, but so many of Warhol's prints used unnatural and vivid colors, it is not easy to see this color use as symbolic. Johns' print successfully became a symbol of protest for the Vietnam War, because he changed his approach. The image is immediately recognizable as a symbol for America, but there is obviously some-



MORATORIUM

Figure 5. **Jasper Johns.** *Moratorium.* 1969. Offset lithograph, printed in color. 22 3/4 x 28 1/2 inches. ©Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase. Photograph ©1999 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

thing wrong because the colors are distorted. A single word “Moratorium” requires no complex analysis. Johns’ print is simple, direct, and to the point.

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds

The third artist successfully works as a traditional studio painter and as a political artist. Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds’ career is built on work with radically different styles created for radically different purposes. Heap of Birds, of Cheyenne-Arapaho descent, makes abstract paintings and politically charged word pieces. In his paintings from the *Neuf Series*, the colors and the left to right pattern are inspired by trees from the western Oklahoma landscape (Figure 6). “Neuf” is Cheyenne and means “to do something four times” (Cotner, 1997, 1). Other more recent paintings have been inspired by tropical fish seen while snorkeling in the waters around Australia. These works are usually painted in bright colors and feel very optimistic.

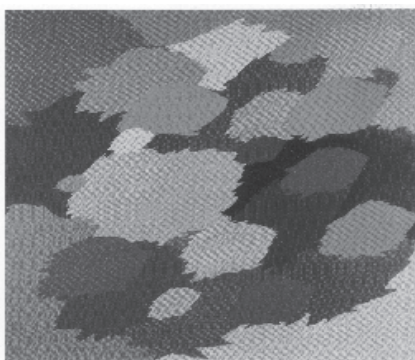


Figure 6. **Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds.** *Untitled (Neuf Series Painting)*. 1996. Acrylic on canvas. 89 x 105 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

His political word pieces are about the domination of Native Americans by the Caucasian majority. These public works often make references to the land and to Native American heritage specific to the area. It is not just that one is colorful and abstract and one is just words, it is important to realize that he works traditionally as a gallery artist, and also in the public domain.

In 1996, Heap of Birds was invited by the Cleveland Institute of Art to design a public art piece. This work would be on view at the same time as a collaborative exhibition of Heap of Birds’ work with work by aborigines from Australia. Heap of Birds wanted to say something about the Cleveland Indians baseball team mascot and, for the first time, decided to include a pictorial image with the text. He considered directly lifting the logo, but was afraid the litigation surrounding this would have killed the project. Instead, Heap of Birds made his own version of the logo. The 10 x 25 foot billboard, titled *American Leagues*, shows a childlike drawing of a frightened Chief

Wahoo, the mascot for the Cleveland Indians baseball team, looking at the words “Smile for Racism” (Figure 7). The work is about the widespread attitude of conservative America toward Native Americans. Heap of Birds explains:



Figure 7. **Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds**. *American Leagues*, 1996. Billboard, Cleveland. 120 x 300 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Over the past 500 years, the dominant culture has attempted to crush the lives of

Indian people, rendering many entire tribes extinct, through brutal wars and government policies. Today, Indian people must still struggle in order to survive in America. We must battle against forces that have dealt us among the lowest educational opportunities, lowest income levels, lowest standards of health, lowest housing conditions, lowest political representation and highest mortality rates in America. Even as these grave hardships exist for the living Indian people, a mockery is made of us by reducing our tribal names and images to the level of insulting sports team mascots, brand name automobiles, camping equipment, city and state names, and various other commercial products produced by the dominate culture. This strange and insensitive custom is particularly insulting when one considers the great lack of attention that is given to real Indian concerns. It must be understood that no human being should be identified as subservient to another culture. To be overpowered and manipulated in such a way as to thought to become [sic] a team mascot is totally unthinkable (Phelan, Beesley, 1997, 14).

American Leagues caused a disturbance before the billboard was even built. From the beginning, discussions about the piece were in newspapers, magazines, and on television as a controversial news story. An article in *Baseball Weekly* talked about the billboard in conjunction with the terrible season Cleveland was having. All the hype and furor surrounding the piece brought racism into public view as much as the billboard itself. People who might not ever go into a museum in their life encountered this art work. It was in their

face and they had to think about it. There are people who might not ever go to Cleveland to see the actual billboard, but they do not have to in order to understand the piece. If it reaches the newsstands, it reaches a wider audience. In the end, the objective is to make anyone who sees the face of Chief Wahoo think about the racial stereotype it represents and the treatment of Native Americans in this country.

In a way, this work by Heap of Birds may even have a greater effect on a larger audience than Barbara Kruger's work. Kruger's work, while very compelling and graphically vibrant, tends to be more elusive. Heap of Birds is blunt.

American Leagues attacks the people who tend to be passive racists. Many people probably felt offended at this work because they do not consider themselves racist. They may think that by wearing Indian emblazoned clothing, they are showing their respect for Indians. This only points to how deeply this prejudice is installed in our society – that we cannot recognize discrimination when it is smiling right at us.

Personal Experiences

I first became interested in appropriating images when I was studying printmaking in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It was a logical progression for me. My work, predicated on strong drawing and image-making, was becoming more conceptual. It was easy for me to quickly reference any one of the hundreds of images I learned about through years of art history classes, choose one that best epitomized my concepts, manipulate, and duplicate it for public consumption (Figure 8). This kind of working satisfied my postmodern, feminist viewpoints and fit into the long his-

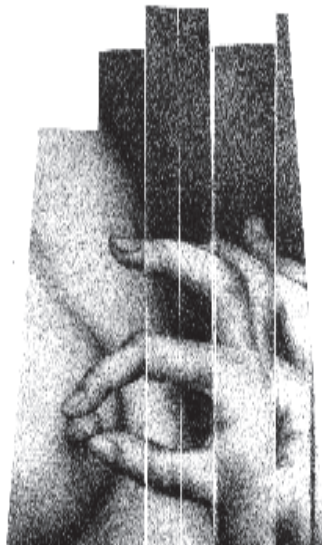


Figure 8. **Debora Wood.** *Venus*. 1991. Lithograph. 8 1/4 x 4 3/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

tory of printmaking's approximation of pre-existing images. Since I had always worked within the academic environment – as a student, then museum employee, then interim professor – people around me could easily recognize my references, and there was a plethora of historical images to appropriate from the university's rich libraries.

My work changed when I left the academic world in 1994. The lack of academic employment opportunities caused me to just “pick a city and wing it.” My partner and I moved to Baltimore where I took a blue collar job at a commercial printing company. I became aware that, like Kathy Grove, my work was overdependent on the viewer's artistic education.

I also became involved in the underground rave/dance/electronic music scene in the Baltimore and Washington area. There, I was surrounded by auditory appropriation: sampled music and sounds, manipulated (sometimes beyond recognition) and combined with other musical fragments and spun back out for consumption. The difference between this kind of appropriation and that which I was involved in is that most of these sounds did not reference their origin for political commentary; they were merely combined for pleasure.

By surrounding myself with aspects of street culture, I was able to adopt a more aggressive esthetic, referencing what is immediately tangible. The forms are now simpler, and there are more references to popular culture, not to academic ideologies (Figure 9). Although I have not yet fully transformed my work to embody the social and political concerns that surround my community, I am continually striving to make this change.

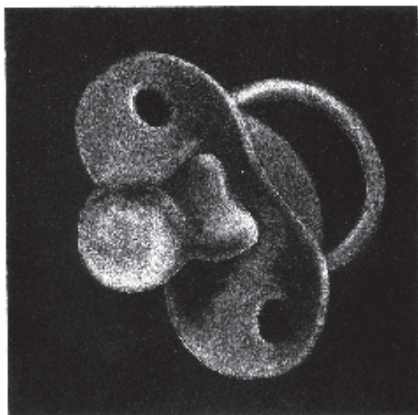


Figure 9. **Debra Wood.** *Pacifier*. 1997. Lithograph. 4 1/2 x 4 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Conclusion

It is possible for art to be a catalyst for social change, but there are several factors concerning the materials, the artist, and the audience that must be in place. Out of the three examples, Kruger and Heap of Birds are most successful in promoting social change because their work fulfills the two primary requirements. First, the artist must use a visual language that the average person can understand. Second, the work must be made available to the public because these are the people that need to be made aware of the issue at hand. Printmaking is the most logical medium to use because, through commercial printing techniques, multiple copies can be made to be distributed, returning printmaking to the service of the community's political, social, and cultural ideas.

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Biographical Note: Debora Wood is an artist and critic who has been making prints for 15 years and exhibits nationally and internationally. She has worked at the Elvehjem Museum of Art, The Baltimore Museum of Art and at commercial printing companies. Most recently, Debora was Assistant Professor of Art at the University of Oklahoma before joining her husband in Chicago where she now lives. She has a BFA from Cornell University and an MFA in printmaking from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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