

← Back to Original Article

## ART : Prints of the City : For 25 years, Jean Milant and his shop have provided an influential graphics outlet for some of L.A.'s top artists. LACMA presents 'Made in L.A.: The Prints of Cirrus Editions' in honor of the anniversary.

October 15, 1995 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | *Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is an occasional contributor to Calendar. and*

Jean Milant is surrounded by clichés. "Three Cliches," that is, a series of prints that artist John Baldessari is in the process of completing at Cirrus Editions.

Since 1970, Milant has been publishing graphic art by some of Los Angeles' most acclaimed artists at his print workshop, Cirrus. In honor of his 25th anniversary, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is presenting "Made in L.A.: The Prints of Cirrus Editions," opening Thursday. The exhibition includes more than 130 works from the museum's Cirrus Editions Archive by more than 50 artists who have lived and worked in Southern California.

In the studio at 542 S. Alameda St., Milant and his two assistants show off the complex seven-color process being applied to the Baldessari photographic print. Milant, who is credited for his early recognition of the power and potential of Los Angeles' conceptually oriented artists, first published work by Baldessari in 1976. "Raw Prints," as they were called, used primary and secondary colors. Baldessari's most recent edition continues with a red, yellow and blue motif, but these are overlaid on photographs of three ethnic groups.

Gesturing at a photograph of Japanese figures with parasols, screened with bright yellow, Milant talks about the thrill of organizing a print project with an artist.

"The exciting part for me is to be involved in the creation of the work," Milant says. "For one thing, the artist doesn't bring in a painting to make into prints. They come in with an idea that they want to talk about, and the ball just starts to roll. It's truly an original work of art in a graphic format, not just a reproduction of something that exists."

Milant, 52, gives an example: "The first print I did with Bruce Nauman was 'Raw/War,' which relates to the neon piece that he did. But the others have no reference to any existing artwork."

Bruce Davis, curator of the LACMA exhibition, says: "When Cirrus first came [to be] in 1970, the contemporary art scene in L.A. didn't have the sort of national and international support that it has today. Unlike some of the other print shops, [Cirrus] was especially interested in L.A. artists and allowing them to explore new avenues.

"I think it introduced a lot of artists to the idea of working in the print medium and showing them that it might be different from what they normally do, which is work solitarily in their studios. That had a long-term effect, encouraging artists to take chances and to expand the parameters of art making in a general

"In the '60s and the '70s, there were three big print studios [in Los Angeles]. Tamarind Workshop was essentially a lithography university to train printers. Gemini G.E.L. took on a national focus with a particular interest in the Pop generation coming out of New York in the '60s. What separated Cirrus from other print workshops in L.A. was their interest in Los Angeles. The artists tended to be younger and more experimental, post-minimal and conceptual, so it was a different emphasis. I think their publications brought the art that was being made in L.A. to a larger and broader audience. Those three together put L.A. on the map as a center of contemporary printmaking."

The prints by Baldessari demonstrate Milant's willingness to print with a variety of techniques as opposed to purist lithography. This decision, made in the late '60s by Milant, separated him from the tradition of the master lithographer interested in the historically approved methods. Milant has printed works by Jill Giegerich on cork, Eric Orr on lead and William T. Wiley on leather hide. Most notoriously, he encouraged Edward Ruscha to silk-screen the image of the Hollywood sign in Pepto-Bismol and caviar.

These works lean against the walls of the gallery storeroom where Milant sits to discuss his philosophy:

"In the early '70s, because of the renaissance of printmaking, a lot of parameters were established for what a good print is. I think there are some people who try to take the technology and make it a tour de force. And that's not where I'm coming from. I really only work with what the artist wants to do and hopefully push a little further."

Milant gestures toward a print by Ed Moses. "At that time, he was working with rice papers, so we did a series of prints that were three or four layers of tissue pressed together. That's not archival, not something you are supposed to do," he says with a laugh. "But they are incredible prints. I don't think anybody has done prints like that, yet they are very close to the way he was working."

Milant is sympathetic to artists' whims in part because he began his career as a painter and has a degree in fine art from the University of Wisconsin. In fact, the name Cirrus derives from his paintings of clouds. After entering the master's program at the University of New Mexico in 1967, he worked with Garo Antreasian, master printer at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop. From 1968 to 1970, he worked there as a printer-fellow.

"When I worked at Tamarind, it was the first time they had worked with L.A. artists like Ed Ruscha, John Altoon and Ed Moses," Milant recalls. "Through them, I became involved with the California scene." In fact, Ruscha found a space near his Hollywood studio for the first Cirrus print shop and encouraged Milant to start his own business. Milant opened in 1970 with \$1,200. A few years later, collector Terry Inch became a silent partner by buying shares of Cirrus.

Milant's visual arts background paid off. "I don't think about how much it is going to sell for. I think, 'How great can we make it?' Someone from the other end might be better on the marketing. I had none of that experience. I did not have any connections," he says wryly.

"My whole concept was that I loved L.A. I thought it was like living in New York in 1910 or the '20s. Everyone was building their own tradition."

Milant's support of L.A. artists in the '70s resulted in a fascinating document of the period's post-minimalist and politically vibrant art, with many prints done by women: Karen Carson, Gloria Kisch, Vija Celmins, Kyoko Asano, Lita Albuquerque and Judy Chicago. The Chicago print, titled "Mary, Queen of Scots," also was the cover of the artist's popular 1975 book "Through the Flower."

Milant notes: "You know who bought a lot of those prints? Larry Gagosian. He had a print store right next to the bookstore where that book was in the window. He sold a lot of them."

In 1991, Milant believed that the aesthetic climate was as energized as it had been 20 years before, so he asked a number of younger artists to contribute prints, including Lari Pittman, Linda Burnham, Sabina Ott, Jill Giegerich, Fred Fehlau, Sarah Seager, and Jerry Brane. "I think L.A. has still pretty much got a lot of that energy and creativity," he says.

Milant was one of the first to combine a gallery space with print publishing. He was also one of the first to open in downtown L.A., where he moved in 1979. He kept his gallery operation separate, however. "I didn't do prints and then show other work by the same artist in gallery," he says.

Milant emphasizes that his ability to be in business for so long is due to another first: developing an awareness for L.A. art in Europe. In 1971, he started traveling regularly to the art fairs in Basel, Switzerland, and Cologne and Dusseldorf, Germany.

"My theory was that if I was showing this young art, and I thought it was the greatest art around, then I should put it next to [dealers] Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend's art and see what they thought," he says. "And in fact, we had great success. There was tremendous interest in California art in Europe, and there still is. It was an awakening for me.

"This is a difficult city to sell art in and it's unfortunate, because it has so many good things going for it. If I hadn't developed a European base of support, I wouldn't be here."

\* *"Made in L.A.: The Prints of Cirrus Editions," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd. Thursday through Jan. 14. Tuesdays-Thursdays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Fridays, 10 a.m.-9 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays 11 a.m.-6 p.m. The second Wednesday of every month is free. Adults, \$6, students with ID and senior citizens, \$4; children, \$1. (213) 857-6000.*

\* *Charles Christopher Hill, "French Paintings," Cirrus Gallery, 542 S. Alameda St. Through Oct. 31. (213) 680-3473.*