

## YOU CAN FLY AND MAKE PRINTS TOO:

### EPI CELEBRATES TWENTY YEARS

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Founded in 1996 at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, Experimental Printmaking Institute (EPI) combines the collaborative nature of great print workshops with the vision of its artist-founder, Curlee Raven Holton. Poignantly stated by Anna G. Schaefer, a former Holton student and EPI intern, “Holton sees the infinite potential in terms of what could be [when] given creativity, collaboration, and hard work.”<sup>1</sup> Although the seeds for EPI were sown before 1996, the establishment of EPI was timely, serendipitously overlapping with the seminal traveling exhibition *Printmaking in America: Collaborative Prints and Presses, 1960–1990*. As noted by David Mickenberg, contributing exhibition organizer and then director of Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University, “Non-profit and university-affiliated presses have played an integral role in the development of collaborative printmaking in this country... Each has extended the boundaries of collaboration and education.”<sup>2</sup> In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, Mickenberg recounted the pioneering individuals and nonprofit institutions dedicated to education, collaboration, and creativity—a legacy inherited and furthered by Holton and EPI at Lafayette.

Tamarind Institute; Pratt Graphic Art Center; graphic workshops established at the University of California, Yale University, University of Iowa, under John Paul Jones, Gabor Peterdi, and Mauricio Lasansky respectively; and Donald Saff's Graphicstudio at the University of South Florida figure in this distinguished history, as do university-affiliated Echo Press, Normal Editions, Tandem Press, and The Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions (founded as the Rutgers Center for Innovative Print and Paper). Committed to the development and application of traditional and innovative techniques for the production of limited-edition prints, artist's books, and sculptural multiples, college- and university-based ateliers merge art, education, and process in foundational and experimental ways. Like EPI, many of these workshops were inspired by artists—printmakers, art advocates, and educators with entrepreneurial vision. The particular nature of printmaking, a medium that excels through collaboration, informs and naturalizes the collective impulse. As Holton notes:

The future of the print is to be found in its unique potential for communal collaboration. This union of ritualized creativity is both primordial and powerful and offers a shared sense of relevancy for all its participants. The future of the printmaking medium is far more than serving as a tool in the toolbox of artistic mediums and approaches to the art-making process. It is a process by which we enter into a visual, aesthetic and social exchange that captures the multitude of images and complexities of our lives and the ever-present sense that our psychic selves are living in the past and future simultaneously.<sup>3</sup>

“Like Professor Holton, we should never stop dreaming or experimenting—even when the opportunity isn't apparent, it is always present.” ~Anna G.

An artist and educator, Holton joined the faculty of Lafayette in 1991, tasked with developing the printmaking curriculum. Arriving on the recommendation of artist and master printer Robert Blackburn (1920-2003) with whom he had worked, Holton had the full support of the art department and of then head, Robert Saltonstall Mattison, professor of art history, alliances critical to the expansion of the pedagogical program.<sup>3</sup> From 1991 to 1996 Holton oversaw a sequential traditional printmaking curriculum that included black-and-white intaglio, etching, relief and mono printing, limited lithography, and experimental collagraph with color printing. With modest means and a progressive attitude, Holton pushed the boundaries of available resources to their fullest. The working classroom cum print studio—or *print lab* in Holton's words—a converted living/ dining room and kitchen of the first-floor residence at 328 McCartney Street, had one small Charles Brand etching press (ca. 1970). Photographs of the early print lab point to the intimate quarters: Paper was soaked in the kitchen sink, plates were processed in the closet, and Holton's office was on the porch.<sup>4</sup> Faith Ringgold's first etching under Holton's direction—*Anyone Can Fly*—was created in the print lab in 1993 (editioned in 1997). The story of Ringgold's initial visit to Lafayette is told well and often by EPI friends and colleagues and never ceases to amaze listeners.<sup>5</sup> Holton saw opportunity in Ringgold's first visit, and they have been collaborating since that time.

In April 1995 an expanded printmaking studio, the Hamilton Street Print Studio (now EPI Building), opened at 421 Hamilton Street. Holton oversaw the transformation of a former garage space (nearly 3,000 square feet) into the current printmaking studio. Most immediately, experimental techniques and more advanced lithography processes papermaking,

bookmaking, and advanced digital technology followed. Artists such as Richard Anuszkiewicz, Kumi Korf, Duncan Bullen, Maureen Cummins, and Audrey Flack employed the equipment and technologies to create new and exciting work. Over time it became a student-centered professional workshop with regional and international outreach. Innovations generated through collaborations of EPI artists with Lafayette students and faculty across departments, such as engineering, became workshop standards at EPI. The fruit of these alliances, seen in the work of Sam Gilliam, Mel Edwards, William T. Williams, and others, is chronicled in this catalogue. Described as an “artistic magnet” by Lewis Tanner Moore, “EPI was always true to its name—Experimental Printmaking Institute—committed to the question of what a print is and what a print could be.”<sup>6</sup> As a board member, Moore helped facilitate a number of distinguished artist residencies at EPI, enabling collaborations with artists renowned in the history of African American art such as Lois Mailou Jones, Allan Rohan Crite, and Paul Keene.

Today’s EPI atelier, inclusive of a workshop, archives, and reference collection, reflects strategic planning, consistency of vision, *and* the financial support of Lafayette College, alumni, and EPI friends.<sup>7</sup> Equipped with two etching presses (one large format), lithographic and silk screen printing presses, a Vandercook letterpress, photo dark room, and a vacuum exposure and screen blowout unit, it is vastly different from the kitchen lab and fundamentally disposed for cooperative learning and playful collaboration.

Holton’s vision for EPI as a professional printmaking atelier embedded in an educational institution was timely, yet atypical to undertake at a small college dedicated to liberal arts education. Chartered in 1826 by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Lafayette is a residential undergraduate college with an enrollment of approximately 2,450 students. The majority of educational ateliers have been and remain university based.<sup>8</sup> A notable exception is the Printmaking Workshop at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, founded by art professor Nancy Campbell, and befriended and supported by Holton and EPI.<sup>9</sup> University- and college-based ateliers engage in unique experiments in art and education. The integration of education and student participation in the creation of fine art prints and other editioned multiples is of utmost importance for these ateliers. Noting ever-present financial constraints, Mattison wrote, “The experimentation, partial success, rethinking, revision, modification, and time-

consuming labor needed for true invention in printmaking are finally more suited to the foundation and academic environment than to the commercial world. It may well be that the future of printmaking lies in the hands of EPI and similar institutions.”<sup>10</sup> If atypical, EPI is certainly not inconsequential to Lafayette; it thrives through the very mission that drives the College. Indeed, one cannot separate the evolution of EPI from its liberal arts location and vocation.

Merging atelier-style traditions of apprenticeship and mentorship with student-centered learning and experience, EPI introduces the printmaking medium to students through inherent qualities of collaboration, shared artistic visions, intercultural exchange, and multigenerational engagement. Equally important is EPI’s commitment and support for diversity and ecumenical genius. Blackburn’s Printmaking Workshop was established at a time when institutional racism, widespread discrimination, and exclusionary practices barred African American artists and other minorities from the mainstream art world. Envisioned and established by practicing black artists, the Printmaking Workshop and EPI—founded forty-eight years later—espouse and teach egalitarian principles. The social, ethical, and pedagogical principles of Blackburn’s workshop provided an excellent model, and one that Holton reimagined for a college campus.

Student engagement with EPI extended beyond coursework as Holton ensured students had opportunities to work as assistants for the studio courses and paid internships. The latter included EXCEL Scholars and the EPI Internship/Apprentice Program. Over time, EPI became a fully student-centered creative arts laboratory where students engage intimately in the art-making process alongside the business and management of an active atelier. Student interns assist with EPI’s business initiatives, media relations, research, and documentation efforts. Many claim Holton made EPI possible at Lafayette, while Holton credits Lafayette students for making EPI achievable. In truth, these elements are inseparable: the College, the professor, the students, and the workshop. Each has *impressed* the other.

Moreover, EPI has left an indelible, visible mark on the campus—most readily expressed by Melvin Edwards’ sixteen-foot tall stainless steel sculpture *Transcendence* (2008).<sup>11</sup> Installed near Skillman Library and honoring David Kearney McDonogh, Class of 1844, Lafayette’s first African

American graduate, *Transcendence* stands as testament to achievement over adversity and through struggle. Edwards' commissioned sculpture is a quintessential example of an opportunity conceived and seized by Holton. Its presence on the campus attests to the vision of Holton and his ability to wed EPI to the mission and aspirations of the College and the extended Lafayette family. In 2004–5 Edwards worked with students and faculty at Lafayette in a residency at EPI sponsored by the David L. Sr. and Helen J. Temple Visiting Lecture Series Fund. Holton, EPI, and Lafayette subsequently commissioned Edwards to design the commemorative sculpture. As a fundraiser, Holton and EPI produced a limited-edition print, *Legacy* (2007), which centers McDonogh's personal triumphs within a larger historical montage encompassing slavery, the Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Bill of Rights.

EPI programming—workshops, artist residencies, and international exchanges—have expanded the concept of a residential college to one of global collaboration. Exhibitions and cooperative exchanges in Japan, England, Costa Rica, and Mexico, and a rich roster of visiting artists, active in the United States and beyond, have engendered lasting, reciprocal relationships. Borne out by this volume celebrating twenty years of creative agency, EPI's visiting artist and artist-in-residence programs, have introduced students to artists from diverse cultural and social backgrounds, providing them with talented, ambitious, and industrious role models. In some years, the visiting-artist program included as many as ten artists per year. The success of the program brought more requests, national and international, than EPI could fully support. Artist and master printer Jase Clark joined Holton in 2005, and EPI began to invite students (BFA and MFA) from other institutions engaged in advanced printmaking study. As Holton explains, "This allowed us to take on more demanding and complicated projects, the quantity and quality of our editions increased, especially with the addition of the serigraph press, and we were able to provide specialized services of papermaking and book arts."<sup>12</sup> As with most things EPI, the College reciprocated the workshop's investiture in book arts—a new collecting focus on artists' books took hold under the leadership of Diane Windham Shaw, Special Collections Librarian and College Archivist.<sup>13</sup>

The number of visiting artists and editions produced at EPI both exceed two hundred. Yet statistics fail to express the deeper story: the commitment to artistic vision EPI

shares with everyone who enters the workshop. For many, the Lafayette residency lives beyond its contractual term—emotionally, spiritually, and creatively. "Personally, my residency, which was executed in 1999, never actually ended. Curlee has always made me feel invited to pick up and continue thinking visually or begin again. As a resident artist...there were no limitations but also no template. EPI embodies the revelatory magic of printmaking wherein one is never completely sure of outcome. By definition, printmaking takes expertise and layers it with chance. Curlee nurtures that practice. He lives in that belief and gifts it as experience to all who enter."<sup>14</sup> This recollection by Berrisford Boothe, Class of 1983, artist, and associate professor of art, Lehigh University, expresses what those fortunate enough to enter EPI have experienced: unbridled creativity and collaborative magic, freedom, and joy.

In 2010, Holton began refining the workshop pace and model further, working more consistently with fewer artists, such as David C. Driskell and Faith Ringgold. Holton and Ringgold along with Grace Matthews have collaborated since Ringgold's first visit to the print lab in 1993. Her quote—an homage to Holton—serves as the title for this essay.<sup>15</sup> Holton has been collaborating with Driskell since 2003, creating inspired prints and lyrical artist's books. Driskell calls EPI a "creative destination" and a privilege to experience.

The magic of EPI manifests in what is editioned *and* what is shared and passed on. For Holton, the mentorship of his teachers and the inspiration of Blackburn are gifts he has instinctively made his own and shared liberally. Blackburn's description of the artist and master printmaker relationship, frequently quoted in the print world, remains apt: "The wizardry and alchemy that is wielded by the creative technician enriches the experience of the final image, but it must never dominate or dictate the creative thrust."<sup>16</sup> This tradition continues at EPI where, under Holton's leadership, artists and master printers work as reciprocating conduits for creativity and ambition. Schaefer has dubbed this tradition "redefining reality." Together Holton, Lafayette College, and EPI have shown the relevancy of visual, aesthetic, and social exchange and the value of communal collaboration. For twenty years EPI has been transforming paper and much more from 421 Hamilton Street and beyond.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Personal statement, Anna G. Schaefer, "Redefining Reality," June 2016]
- 2 Mickenberg presently serves as the Priscilla Payne Hurd President and CEO of the Allentown Art Museum of the Lehigh Valley, Allentown, PA. David Mickenberg, "Multiple Purposes: Collaboration and Education in University and Non-Profit Workshops," *Printmaking in America: Collaborative Prints and Presses, 1960-1990* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 106, 110. The exhibition opened at The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, and traveled to three other venues including the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (now SAAM).
- 3 Holton earned his MFA with honors from Kent State University and his BFA from Cleveland Institute of Fine Arts in Drawing and Printmaking. Robert Blackburn founded the influential Printmaking Workshop in New York City in 1948. For a brief history of the workshop see <http://www.rbpmw-efanyc.org/missionhistory/>.
- 4 Curlee Holton, email message to author, June 20, 2016.
- 5 Curlee Raven Holton, *Faith Ringgold: A View From the Studio* (Charlestown, MA: Bunker Hill Publishing, Inc., 2004).
- 6 Personal communication, Lewis Tanner Moore, "Two Decades of EPI," June 2016.
- 7 The acquisition of presses was made possible by generous gifts, including ones from Alan '56 and Wendy Pesky, Harold and Jean Tague, parents of Christopher '00, and the College.
- 8 For a list of ateliers and university presses see "Printmaking Links," accessed June 20, 2016, <http://www.printmakinglinks.com/university.html>.
- 9 The Mount Holyoke College Printmaking Workshop was conceived and run by printmaking professor Nancy Campbell from 1984 to 2012. The workshop brought women artists from diverse backgrounds to Mount Holyoke to create fine art limited-edition prints, exposing students to highly successful women artists and the printmaking practice. See "Mount Holyoke College Printmaking Workshop," accessed July 10, 2016, <https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/collection/mount-holyoke-college-printmaking-workshop#sthash.PVIGKH2h.dpuf>.
- 10 Robert Saltonstall Mattison, *The Experimental Printmaking Institute at Lafayette College: Selections from the Collection* (Pittsburgh, PA: The Artists Image Resource at Foreland Street, 2001), exhibition catalog, 5.
- 11 See Julie L. McGee, "An Iron Will Commemorated in Steel," *International Review of African American Art* 22, no. 4 (2009): 12-14.
- 12 Holton, interview with author, July 8, 2016. Holton studied bookmaking and papermaking techniques at Buffalo State University in 1996-97 and advanced bookmaking and bookbinding techniques at Columbia College Chicago Center for Book and Paper Arts in 1999.
- 13 "One of the reasons for the new collecting focus has been the presence of the Experimental Printmaking Institute on campus, and the opportunity to watch as Curlee Holton, his students, and visiting artists turn out an array of marvelous books, each one representing the unique vision of its creator." Diane Windham Shaw, *Artists and the Art of the Book* (Bethlehem, PA: Banana Factory, 2002), exhibition catalog, 3.
- 14 Personal statement, "EPI Testimonial"

by Berrisford Boothe, June 2016.

- 15 Holton, *Ringgold: A View from the Studio*, 34.
- 16 Robert Blackburn, *Printers' Impressions* (Albuquerque: Albuquerque Museum, 1990), 6.