

Printmaking show rises above politics to show process rather than propaganda

The CVA's "Pressing for Change" challenges notions of printmaking

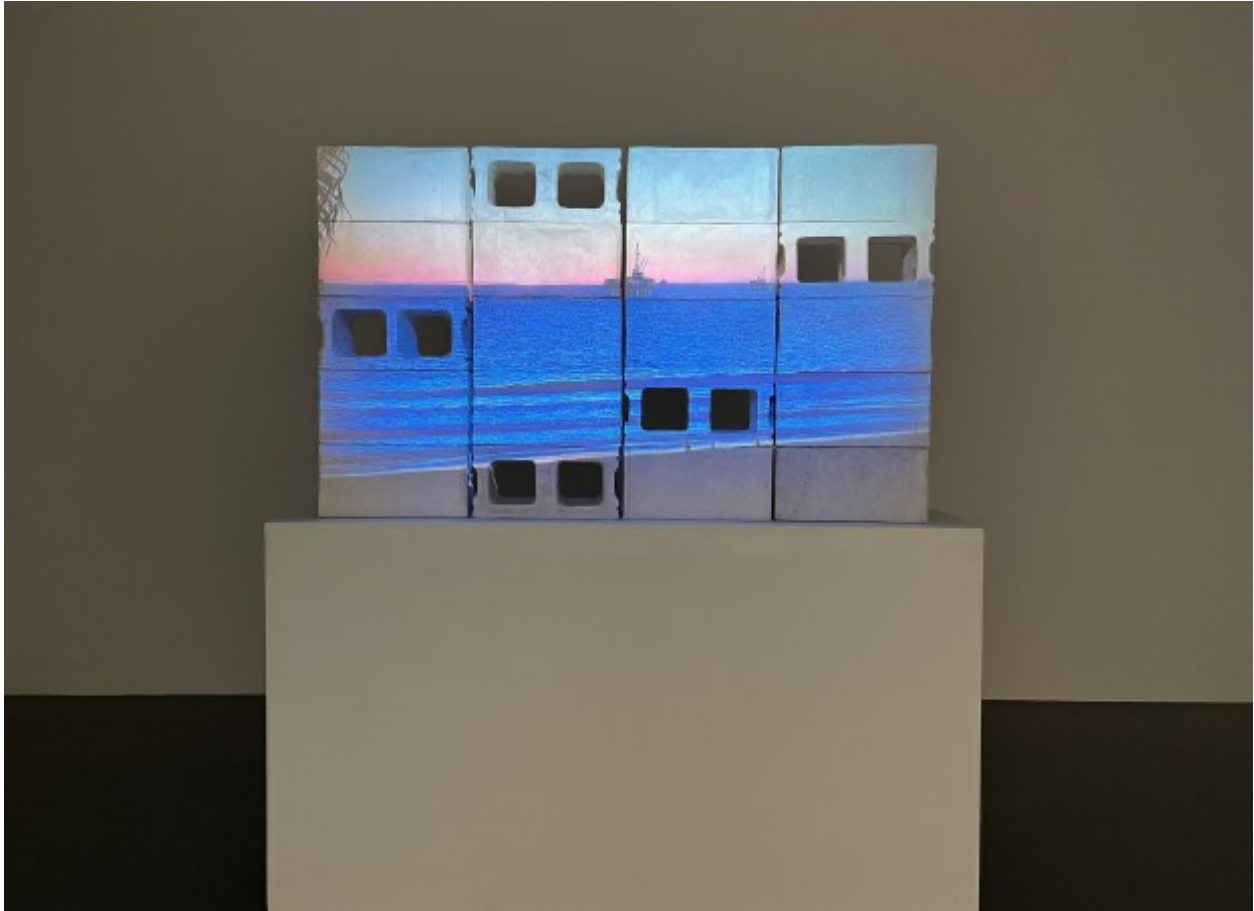


A CVA visitor contemplates John Hitchcock's series of screen prints on naugahyde. (Daniel Tseng, Special to The Denver Post)

By **RAY MARK RINALDI** | media@rayrinaldi.com | The Denver Post | January 29, 2024 at 6:00 a.m.

There are just handful of museums and galleries I recommend to people without even knowing what they are showing at the moment, places where the art or the architecture are so consistently well-presented that every visit is a guaranteed good time.

The Denver Art Museum is on the list for sheer volume, as are the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Clyfford Sill Museum, both with international-level wares and great buildings. There are also commercial enterprises, such as the Robischon and David B. Smith galleries with their rosters of artists from Denver and beyond. Add to that smaller, nonprofit spaces like Understudy and Union Hall.



Adriana Barrios' "Sky's On Fire California Dreamin'" is projected on hand-made paper blocks that appear to be real. (Daniel Tseng, Special to The Denver Post)

But at the top is always the Center for Visual Art, the teaching gallery of Metropolitan State University, located in the arts district along Santa Fe Drive.

CVA understands what it takes to produce a winning exhibition, combining visually appealing work with challenging ideas about art, culture or community issues. Simply put, a visit there can be viscerally pleasing but also informative. The curators do their homework and bring forth artists from across the world who are doing unique things.

That is the case with the latest exhibit, "Pressing for Change," curated by Melanie Finlayson. It is essentially a printmaking show, featuring artists who use the media to inspire social change. There are 10 artists on display, from both near and far.

The show has all of the visual requirements that have become standard in the age of selfies. That is to say, there are a lot of exciting pieces, raging with color and form, that photograph well with a cellphone. Visitors can knock themselves out taking shots proclaiming their presence at CVA while showing off their outfit of the day. Nothing wrong with that, I say, as long as folks consume the art, too.

But it also reaches deep into the creative intentions of artists who are trying to say important things through printmaking, while at the same time commenting on the world of fine art.

Prints have a special place in that ecosystem. They are difficult to produce and speak a singular language, but they are second-class citizens to fine-art objects like paintings and sculpture, mainly because they are usually (not always in the case of monotypes) produced in multiples.

They are not unique objects, so they have less value. On the market, they are usually cheaper.

But prints are also more democratic; they can be shared widely and speak louder, and to a wider audience. As Denver artist Raymundo Muñoz explains in the artist's statement accompanying his impeccably rendered linoleum block prints in this show, using printmaking techniques "makes my work more affordable, thus removing some of the exclusivity and preciousness that comes with most forms of art."

"Pressing for Change" nails that point with vigor. Artists use the media to raise awareness of climate change, indigenous rights, immigration and more — each in their own way.



Susan Goethel Campbell uses a traditional wood block printing technique, but also makes thousands of tiny perforations in the hand-made paper that serves as the base for her work. (Daniel Tseng, Special to The Denver Post)

Frankly, galleries are overloaded with art carrying social messages these days — to the point of exhaustion — and it would be easy to pass off this show as yet another example of curators pushing trendy political causes. Except the work here goes deeper, because it makes its points through process, not propaganda.

Take, for example, the work of Adriana Barrios, who is showing both wall-mounted prints and video. Her aim is to bring attention to a 2022 report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that projected sea levels to rise more than three times faster than normal over the next decade. To illustrate this, she makes screen prints of coastal scenes using sand and rocks gathered from beaches to etch marks into copper plates used in her printmaking process. The marks “imagine the history of impact and collision of the ocean and the land,” as the wall text explains.

Her video work, “Sky’s On Fire California Dreamin’,” consists of moving images she captured of oil or gas drilling wells placed offshore in California that are set in front of a backdrop of sky that appears to be in flames. Instead of using a screen to show the work, she projects it on a wall of concrete blocks, the material used as the base for buildings that contribute to the overdevelopment of fragile areas of beach. Barrios’ wall of blocks looks real, but it is artificial, each block made meticulously by hand using paper.

“Pressing for Change” is strong in the way it challenges common notions of print-making. The old idea that artists simply etch something into wood or metal, ink it up and press it on paper is only one of the many methods on display.

John Hitchcock shows a series of screen prints on pieces of Naugahyde that are cut into the shape of animal skins. He then applies acrylic paint on top of that to make works that recreate stories told by his Kiowa/Comanche grandparents.



Multi-media prints by Diane Fine and Mario Laplante are featured in “Pressing for Change.”
(Daniel Tseng, Special to The Denver Post)

For her mesmerizing two-dimensional wall pieces, Susan Goethel Campbell uses a traditional wood block print technique, but she applies it in multiple layers and then makes scores of tiny, delicate perforations in her handmade paper. She pulls her pieces together using small and tight stitches of sewn thread. Printmaking may be at the heart of her work, but there is so much more going on.

“Pressing for Change” has a lot of material twists and turns like that, a lot of mysteries that need to be solved over how and why these objects exist. In every one of them, the labor is definitely impressive, even if the politics are debatable.

But it never feels like homework, or preaching. It plays out like a beautiful, non-confrontational conversation, between CVA visitors and 10 very thoughtful and creative minds.

IF YOU GO

“Pressing for Change” continues through March 23 at the Center for Visual Art, 965 Santa Fe Drive. It is free. Info: msudenver.edu/cva