Robert Blackburn, "Boy With a Green Head," 1946, Lithograph, 14 1/2 x 10 1/2
Loan from Clark Atlanta University Art Collection, Courtesy of Clark Atlanta University Art Collection © The Estate of Robert Blackburn

In 1946, he bought his own press and initiated a private, yet collaborative, atelier in his loft, thus founding the Printmaking Workshop (this name was given decades later). Blackburn traveled to Europe in 1953-1954 on a John Hay Whitney Traveling Fellowship, and upon his return, he was hired as the first master printer of ULAE. While there, he printed ULAE’s first seventy-nine editions, including such artists as Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, Jasper Johns, Robert Motherwell, Robert Rauschenberg, Larry Rivers, and others.

Blackburn’s works soon revealed in rich color and explored ideas of edition and variation; he experimented with abstraction at a time when most American artists were expected to use figuration as a more identifiable recognizable imagery. By the mid-1950s, Blackburn’s lithographs were complex, multi-color, abstract style. At the end of the 1950s, abstraction dominated his style.

In 1963, Blackburn returned from ULAE to work full-time as his own shop, which he incorporated as a not-for-profit in 1971. There, he produced an experimental and intimate graphic exploration of his own art. Blackburn received a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation “Genius” award in 1992, and in 1994, he was elected to the National Academy as an Academician. He received a Lee Krasner Award from the Pollack-Krasner Foundation in 2000. In 2002, he was invited by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit and Urban Design, and others, and will be on display from September 18th through December 19th 2014. The exhibition will start its national tour in January 2015 and will travel thereafter.

Robert Blackburn's works have been exhibited internationally and are represented in numerous public and private collections; large numbers of his works are held at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, and by a few private collectors.

Personal relationships between artists were very important for Blackburn’s work. The Printmaking Workshop was well known for its informal, friendly and accommodating atmosphere. Personal relationships between artists were very important, American artist, printmaker, and modernist. He is mainly known for his contribution to American art canon through his role as a printmaker and founder of the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop [RBPMW], the oldest and largest print workshop in the United States until 2001. Throughout his professional career he worked with such artists as Emma Amos, Romare Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett, Mel Edwards, Grace Hartigan, Jasper Johns, Robert Motherwell, Norman Lewis, Robert Rauschenberg, Faith Ringgold, Kay WalkingStick, Charles White and many others.

Blackburn’s “passages” through the modern and contemporary print world are complex and unique; he has been associated with the Works Project Administration [WPA] and the “graphics boom” of the 1960s which, in part, was created due to his fluency and technical mastery of complex, abstract, color lithography at the well-known Universal Limited Art Editions [ULAE] in West Islip, Long Island, from 1957 to 1963. Blackburn was born in Summit, New Jersey, and moved to Harlem, New York at age six. During the 1930s and 1940s, he trained as an artist at several arts organizations in Harlem and learned the art of lithography at the WPA’s Harlem Community Art Center. During that time, his work still adhered to a figurative style, as one can see in Boy With a Green Head, 1948. Later, he studied at The Art Students’ League where he met his crucial mentor and friend, Will Barnet.

In 1963, Blackburn returned from ULAE to work full-time as his own shop, which he incorporated as a not-for-profit in 1971. There, he produced an experimental and intimate body of work, primarily in lithography and later in woodcut. A “printmaker’s printmaker,” Blackburn affected the course of twentieth-century graphic through his own work. Blackburn received a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation “Genius” award in 1992, and in 1994, he was elected to the National Academy as an Academician. He received a Lee Krasner Award from the Pollack-Krasner Foundation in 2000. In 2002, he was invited by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit and Urban Design, and others, and will be on display from September 18th through December 19th 2014. The exhibition will start its national tour in January 2015 and will travel thereafter.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Driskell Center will also publish an exhibition catalogue which will be the first significant monograph of Robert Blackburn’s work. The catalogue will include color reproductions of all the works in the exhibition, continued on page 29.
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as well as essays by Prof. Curlee R. Holton and curator Dr. Deborah Cullen, whose monograph text is an excerpt from her dissertation, “Robert Blackburn: American Printmaker.” (The Graduate Center of the City University of New York). The catalogue will be available for purchase at the Driskell Center and on the Center’s website for $35.

In addition, the David C. Driskell Center and the Arts Program at the University of Maryland University College will host a symposium, Robert Blackburn and the Modernist Movement in Prints, on Friday October 24th and Saturday

Robert Blackburn, October 3, 1993, Photography by George Panichas

25th. Both the symposium and exhibition look at Blackburn’s work within the context of American modernism. The symposium’s sessions include: “Is it a Good Print, or Not?”; “Blackburn as an Artist/Printmaker and his Contemporaries”; and “Blackburn and Modernism.”

Additional information about the symposium and registration will be made available at driskellcenter.umd.edu.

The David C. Driskell Center honors the legacy of David C. Driskell, Distinguished University Professor Emeritus of Art, Artist, Historian, Collector and Curator, by preserving the rich heritage of African American visual art and culture. The Driskell Center is committed to preserving, documenting, and presenting African American art, as well as replenishing and expanding the field of African American art. This exhibition is supported in part by the Maryland State Arts Council.

www.driskellcenter.umd.edu