



Compass Rose

Literature and Art Journal

Compass Rose interviews Liz Chalfin

Compass Rose: *In viewing some of your work I noticed a lot of natural elements such as plants and animals. What influences you to use such subjects and why?*

Liz Chalfin: One of the overarching themes I explore through my artwork is the interconnectedness of life - humans, plants, animals, minerals. Images of these elements occur, usually out of their natural context and integrated or juxtaposed in a new context.

CR: *I found the reason behind naming your studio Zea Mays interesting in how you compare the purifying benefits of the sweet corn to the use of non-toxic printmaking methods. What was your drive in creating this non-toxic printmaking studio as opposed to creating a studio for traditional printmaking practices?*

Chalfin: First, I am wary of the term "non-toxic". I believe it is often mis-used. I believe that toxicity is a spectrum, and we try to practice printmaking methods that fall on the less toxic end of the spectrum, but there are still so many unknowns about the toxicity of certain materials, and each persons' level of tolerance for certain substances is different, so toxicity is a relative term. I don't think there really is an appropriate word to describe the studio's mission. We've used "safer" and "green", but it's tricky. My impetus for setting up a "greener" studio came out of my college teaching experience. I used to teach printmaking at a small college in California. We were moved into the basement of the old gym and had no adequate ventilation. I couldn't bear the idea of introducing a toxic chemical mix into that space, so began researching alternatives. This was in the early 1990s and there was some fantastic research being done in Canada and Scotland. The researchers were real pioneers in finding alternatives to traditional printmaking processes. They generously shared their formulas with me, and I started teaching them. When I moved to the East, I decided to open a printmaking studio to teach these ways of working to practicing artists, other college teachers, etc. Our mission is to honor the rich traditions of printmaking by seeking out alternatives that are safer for the artist and the environment.

CR: *In your description of the studio on the Zea Mays website you mention that it is in an art and industry building in Florence, MA. It is also mentioned that Florence is a neighboring town of Northampton which is a strong art community. Does the location of the studio have an impact on the artists that work at Zea Mays? Do you think that the studio would be different if located in a setting not as rich in art and culture?*

Chalfin: I feel so fortunate to be located here in the Pioneer Valley. It is indeed a vibrant artistic community, and I do believe part of the success of the studio is the fact that there are many artists here who believe in the mission of the studio and contribute to its vitality. That said, I also believe that there is an international trend towards studios like mine, and that this model would work in many, many locales.

CR: Could you briefly describe the work you have chosen to show for the visiting artist symposium at Chester College? Why have you chosen these particular pieces?

Chalfin: I am going to show my newest work, which is still very much in the process of development and refinement. The work combines printmaking and watercolor painting. I have recently started to use watercolor as a meditative practice and a way to work from a different place than my head (I tend to be very analytical). This practice has opened up a new way of communicating visually that is very exciting to me at this moment. I wanted to integrate this meditative way of working into my more figurative/symbolic work. The new images are small narratives (not small in size, but in scope). In these pieces I am using figurative elements as forms that convey meaning and emotion through their posture. The watercolor serves as abstracted thoughts, gestures, conversations. Space has become a new concern for me. I'll also be showing some of the earlier work that led up to this new body.

CR: How did you get started in the art of printmaking?

Chalfin: I started printmaking as an undergraduate art student. I took a printmaking class and loved the professor and the music that they played in the studio. I had the temperament to be a printmaker (love process and problem solving), so just got hooked and couldn't stop.

CR: Are there any particular artists, writers or other individual that have influenced you or your work?

Chalfin: I love looking at other artists' work - and am influenced by so many. A few that I've been looking at lately are Kiki Smith, Nancy Spero, Kara Walker, Sam Francis, Nathan Oliviera, Ann Hamilton, Nicholas Hondrogen. I am also so privileged to watch other artists work on a daily basis at the studio, and this has a profound impact on my own work. It's something of a miracle to watch the creative process unfold before your eyes. I get to witness this over and over. I am very lucky. I also am influenced by things I read - and Michael Pollan's books have had an impact on me lately, as well as the research I do into other religious traditions and belief systems, and scientific theories.

CR: What is the mental process you go through to create a piece, from developing ideas to completion?

Chalfin: This is a difficult question to answer. As I said earlier, I do a meditative practice with watercolor to begin. I use water as a drawing medium, usually just with my fingers - and try to get out of my head in the process. Once I am working in this way

things start to flow, and ideas start to bubble up and thoughts manifest themselves through the working process. These little paintings serve as sketches for future reference. I also do a lot of collecting and preparing of images. I'll photograph a lot of things - plants, rocks, textures, and make photopolymer plates from the photographs. I'll sketch figures and make stencils of the figures. I'll mix palettes of ink and save them. Then when I'm ready to start printing I'll bring out all of these elements and start to combine them in an intuitive way. I'll print something, look at it, respond and add to it. I usually print 4-5 different images in a session, then put them away. I'll take them out a week or so later and have a fresh look and either print more, or add the watercolor. Sometimes I go too far, and ruin pieces I've really liked, but it's better to find out how far is too far than never to reach that edge.

CR: *Do you have any advice for beginning printmakers or printmaking students?*

Chalfin: Be conscious of what materials you are using and how to use them safely. Be open. Study the fundamentals - learn how to draw, to paint, to wipe a plate well. Learn technique. Look at lots and lots of art. Try to study with people whom you admire. Make work and keep making work.

CR: *What are some of the materials you use in your art work? (ink, paper, found objects ect.)*

Chalfin: Currently I use both water based and oil based inks, different papers, photopolymer intaglio plates, digital photography, pencil, ink and watercolor drawing, copper plate etching using acrylic grounds and ferric chloride.

CR: *What has been the most memorable event that has happened to you as an artist?*

Chalfin: Very hard to say. I've had private artistic epiphanies that have been incredibly memorable, and worked with other artists on collaborations that will always stay with me. One of the most surprising events was receiving a copy of the international printmaking magazine *Printmaking Today* in the mail to find an image of mine on the front cover. I had no idea it was happening, so it was a really fun surprise.

CR: *And just for fun, what's your favorite flavor of ice cream?*

Chalfin: really good vanilla