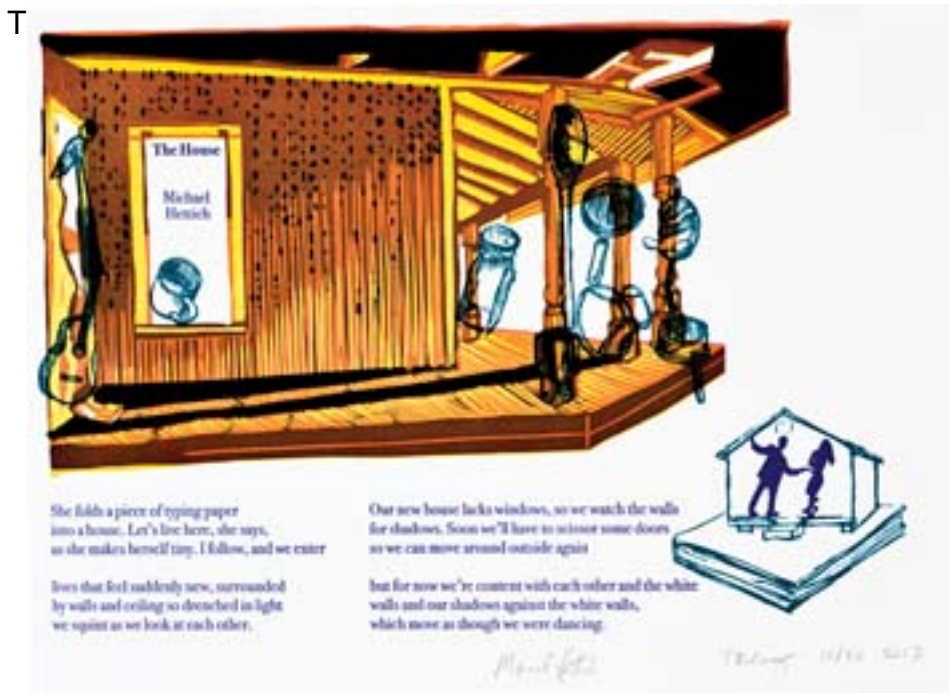


The Art of Relief Printing

Written by Anne Tschida, BT Arts Editor
August 2018

Tom Virgin works in the delicate form of letterpress



Tom Virgin believes in the power of art and how it can help create a better, more connected community. The Miami-based high school teacher and activist is also a printmaker and artist who works in woodcuts.

In addition, he's the founder of Extra Virgin Press in Little Haiti, which makes letterpress book arts and broadsheets. Letterpress is the key to the artistic niche Virgin has carved out for himself. In the age of digital media and imagery, letterpress relief printing is an old-fashioned and labor-intensive craft.

As Virgin explains, you can see the hand involved in the finished product. You can “feel the emboss, see the grain, the human hand on the page. It is effective, efficient, and beautiful.”

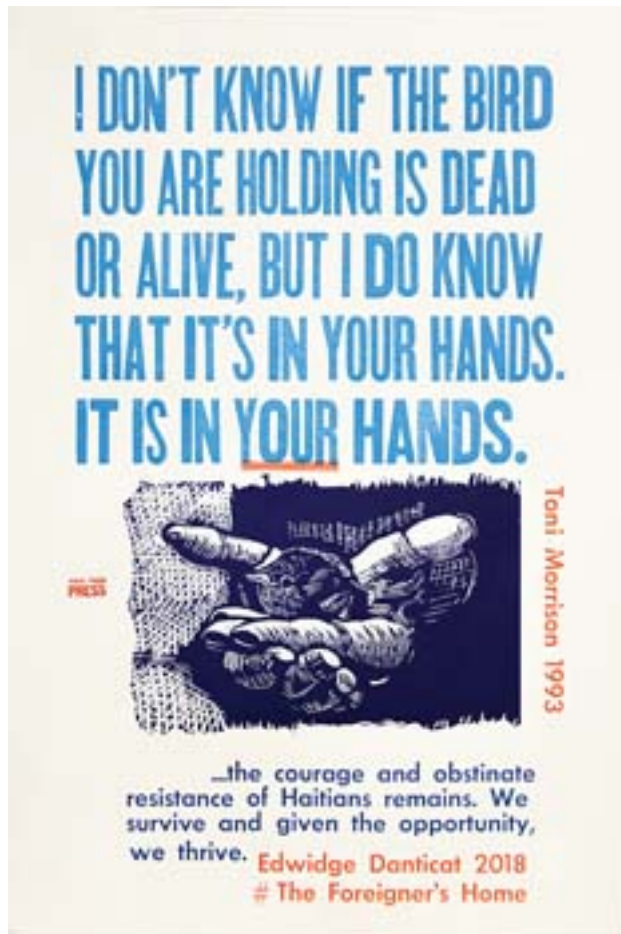
Using letterpress, Virgin came up with a fascinating project, a collection of broadsheets -- single-page sheets, like the old broadsides used for disseminating news of the day -- for which he asked writers to submit extremely short poems or works of fiction.

“I asked each writer for 100 characters,” he says, “including punctuation and spaces -- flash

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fiction, a prose poem, poetry, a koan, a prayer.”



Local contributors to the project include authors Edwidge Danticat and John Dufresne; poets Campbell McGrath, Michael Hettich, Denise Duhamel, and Mia Leonin; and journalist Nadege Green. Virgin says he asked each person to send him “text that provides a window to your community that is also an introduction to your work.” He then combined their texts with imagery and, in the process, created artistic posters. As he quips, they’re “kind of like a literary speed-dating outlet, Tinder or Bumble for readers.”

But speed has no part in the actual process at all, says Virgin. The time to make them is what makes the printed works important. “You really have to choose what you’ll print,” he explains.

Virgin has now crafted letterpress posters for the Little Haiti Book Fair, and for artists showing at the Emerson Dorsch gallery and PAMM; he also makes book covers and artists’ books. His own artwork has been shown at galleries, libraries, and universities.

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Virgin was also instrumental in the SWEAT Broadsheet Collaborative, which starting in 2008 brought together 46 visual artists and 40 writers from South Florida, and eventually resulted in 78 broadsheets made from letterpress, silkscreen, etchings, and other media. Some of them have since been shown in spaces from Portland to Minneapolis, and numerous locations from Palm Beach down to the Miami-Dade College Kendall Campus.

Virgin stresses that the collaborations he works on between artists and writers are as diverse as Miami, with artists from minority communities, a strong voice from women, and, as a teacher, involvement of the young community. “As I come to the end of almost 25 years of teaching and learning in a Title I public high school,” Virgin says of his retirement next year, “I hope to transition into offering messages and small chunks of literary content to my students through teaching letterpress, printing, and book arts.”

The new space of Extra Virgin Press opened on NW 2nd Avenue in Little Haiti after receiving a 2015 Knight Foundation arts grant. Along with some of the broadsheets and artworks, there are two presses, and it is exciting to watch physical printing in progress during a visit.

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