

A Quiet Walk by the Roaring Fork River

Woodcut prints and drawings by Curt Carpenter | May 14, 2020

The following is a full transcript of Curt Carpenter's film, *A Quiet Walk by the Roaring Fork River*. The film is Carpenter's artist presentation for the 2019–20 Aspen Art Museum Artist Fellowship.

This is a short video of some ink drawings and woodcut prints inspired by my walks on the Rio Grande Trail and the Roaring Fork River near my studio at the Airport Business Center, where for the first time—this pandemic spring—I actually miss the sound of airplanes.

This walk will start at the river near the airport and end at the top of Independence Pass.

I carry small Strathmore sketchbooks (upstairs at Carl's Pharmacy), and chisel point black and silver Sharpie markers. The black and silver markers are a good substitute for the black and dirty blue I use in my prints.

I've been walking and skiing this trail for many years. When something interesting catches my attention, I stop and draw. The size of the image and the drawing tools are deliberate. The intention of these drawings is for them to, just possibly, become woodcuts.

Japanese woodcuts from the seventeenth century were made as copies for black-and-white Sumi ink drawings. Both Sumi and woodblock printing are derived from Buddhist traditions that emphasize simplicity and mindfulness.

So why draw outside? Why not work from photographs? For me, it has a lot to do with integrity and trying to see the landscape more abstractly.

Edward Abbey wrote in the introduction to *Desert Solitaire*: "In recording my impressions of the natural scene, I have striven above all for accuracy since I

believe that there is a kind of poetry, even a kind of truth in simple fact." I, too, want to be accurate and faithful to the landscape.

The Roaring Fork Valley is great for woodcut printmaking. It's full of contrasts—bright sun and dark shadows, four distinct seasons, the sharp edges and angles of a landscape that was both uplifted and then carved by glaciers. Peaks and ridges, the U-shaped valleys, the raw, scraped granite of the Grottos, endless scree fields, and rock glaciers—all contrasting with the dead-level, gravel-filled valleys, cut by canyons full of whitewater. The river is full of erratics—giant granitic boulders brought down the Pass by the glaciers. And there's snow, which contrasts with everything.

Woodcut is a very restrictive art form, and I find real freedom in the lack of choices. The characteristics of woodcut are simple, blocky, flat areas, often clumsy, kind of primitive. And the lack of color? The truth is, I'm afraid of color, so I don't think about it. Working in black and dirty blue keep the images more abstract, less literal, less illustrative, maybe more formal.

The technique of woodcut is more like sculpture than painting. It's reductive. The artist starts with solid black and has to dig out the image. Straight lines and simple shapes are best. The blocks are cut and chiseled in the mirror image of the final print. So, after all that time-consuming work—finally inking—seeing the first proofs is always a surprise.

We've traveled about eight miles from the ABC on Hwy 82 to Difficult Creek

Trail. After the Wilderness Boundary sign and up a little rise, the trail is covered with windfall aspen—a wildly abstract landscape. Herbert Bayer made a series of beautiful drawings and paintings based, I suspect, on this spot.

Heading up the Pass through the narrows, the next sharp left turn is mile marker 49. This was the river in June of last year at high-water. Whitewater against black rock and stark vegetation. This is a large print—30 by 20 inches.

A little further is Weller Lake trailhead. The lake was high and the beautiful, complex log jam at the far end of the lake has always gotten my attention. This was a real challenge: to try and show reflected light and the logs that are both on the surface underwater—a very graphic combination of angles. This print is 28 x 21 inches.

Now we’re at the top of the Pass. This was the last day it was opened, the last Sunday in October. First snow. And the wind was blowing from the north; it was cold. So, I did this little drawing of Mountain Boy (Peak) out of the wind behind the outhouse.

It seems like a good example to show you my technique of making a woodcut.

- First, 1/2 inch birch veneer plywood, two blocks by 24 inches square, one will be the black block, the other will be the blue block. The image area is going to be 21 x 14 inches with room left for registration marks and a sheet of 20 x 25 inch paper.
- And I’m going to cut that 21 x 14 inch window out of the blocks. I have to give myself a generous border around the edge so that the ink doesn’t get picked up outside the print area.

- I’ll stain the block with some pastel acrylic paint from Walmart (50 cents a tube). They come in all these beautiful colors. There’s something deeply satisfying about staining the wood. You’ll see the reason for it in the moment.

- And then the preparation of the print. That’s the scanned enlargement. The original in the corner and then the enlarged in Photoshop printed on my inkjet printer.

- And this is 1/2 of the transfer for the black block. It’s been printed on oven paper—the kind of paper you use when you’re baking cookies. It’s an interesting material. It’s semi-transparent, and it accepts water-based ink. It also doesn’t dry so you can transfer to another surface, in this case, my prepared block.

- And now you’ll see the reason for staining the block purple—you’re not done cutting until there’s no purple left. I’m using a Stanley box knife. I like the feel of pulling a sharp knife and pushing a sharp chisel through the wood.

- This is a good example of what the block looks like inked. Just the flat untouched surface gets the ink.

- This is the blue block, and I want it to show the grain. Vigorously wire brushing. See how it roughens the surface and brings up the grain. Birch has a beautiful grain.

- This shows the registration system. The plexiglass sheet represents the paper, and the little green squares I’m putting on the blue block are for positioning the paper. You need to be able to have the paper hit the same sweet spot on both the black block and the blue block.

- The ink is oil based, and I’m working on a sheet of tempered plate glass. You need a really nice flat surface to roll out the ink. Usually, I wouldn’t have both colors on at the same time, but this is proofing. So, I need to be able to have both black and blue open. These are six-inch brayers. This block actually has both black and blue ink, which is doubled in the sky. Here you can see very clearly how the brayer spreads the ink on the flat surface, which is what’s left after all the cutting has been done.

- And now with a sheet of 20 x 25 inch rice paper. It’s a thin, semi-transparent paper, but very rugged. Taking the air out of it with a small Japanese barren. Now the blanket, which traditionally is wool, but in this case is a yoga mat—a cut-up yoga mat from Lululemon. This is my new press, which has really helped a lot. It’s courtesy of the fellowship, and I am delighted with the results.

- So, this is the first pass of the black plate.

- Inking the second block, the blue block using a small brayer and spreading evenly over the whole surface.

- And then I positioned the previously printed first block and hope that registration is correct. The barren takes out any possibility of creases showing up as it runs through the press. A pass through the press with just enough pressure—too much pressure and the grain texture might be lost.

- So, there’s the original small drawing and here’s a close-up of the grain of that second pass. And now the color over color. So black was first. Now the blue that’s printed on top of black, which gives a new color—blue/black.

- We now have a 4-value print: black, white, blue, and then the combination blue/black.

- This is my small press; it comes from England. It’s made by the Portable Press Company. And my studio table with some prints on the wall. And there’s the evolution, small drawings, scans, and prints.

There are so many steps involved. Oh, this is Pyramid Peak from Truscott, from the golf course.

There are so many steps involved, and the intensity of one part of the process to the next makes me forget about the previous step. So, when I’m in the stage of preparing the blocks, I’ve forgotten about the drawing. When I’m in the stage of cutting the blocks, I’ve forgotten about the preparation. When I’m in the stage of inking of blocks, I forgot about the cutting of the blocks.

And when you’re finally done proofing and you’re looking at the print, it’s at that moment that you realize what you’ve done. You might have captured what the intent of the original drawing was: a response to the undeniably beautiful, abstract qualities of this spectacular landscape.

My thanks to the Aspen Art Museum, Teresa Booth Brown, and to my fellow artists, Lauren, Marilyn, and Teal, for the honor of spending a stimulating nine months with them in conversation and in sharing their work. Thank you.

