

INTERVIEWS

Director of Zea Mays, Liz Chaflin

What made you want to start a non-toxic print practice?

“Well I was teaching at a small college in Southern California in the late 80’s and they moved the print studio into a basement with no ventilation. I didn’t want to set up a studio in that environment. After teaching there for many years I wanted to have a place outside of education.... prolonged exposure happens out of school. So I thought of this space after students got out of school to have a space to work.”

Do you feel like some traditional chemicals processes should not be used any more due to health reasons? If so, which ones?

“Yes, many. I think just the simple things like cleaning up oil based inks with solvents. There’s no learning curve of mastering a new technique. To me, that’s a no brainer. In terms of the other techniques I think that each artist has to make their own decision what they want to work with. Especially in a community space, what you chose to work with impacts everyone that’s around them. But I feel that artists need to be informed about what they expose themselves to. There are alternatives that are out here now.”

How do you see printmaking in current academia?

“I’m not in the academic world anymore so.... we have a lot of participants that come from college. There is a change happening and its usually school by school. I deal with about 30 professors a year that want to implement change. For instance, we’ve been at the editions artist book fair and our work is in museum collections. There’s starting to be a track record of legitimizing this movement. I think this is going to help academic believe this is a viable way to go.”

What type of ventilation do you have?

We have ventilation. We have 76 studio windows which creates a nice cross breeze. 2 specific areas... acrylic – vented so the particle matter is not breathed in. And another one in our darkroom where we process photo polymer plates. Above the plate where the plate is heated and developed and it’s a closed darkroom. We had an environmental chemist come and asses the studio. We have no VOC’s in the studio.”

What advice do you give to Universities that don't want to change their studios to safer environments for their students or are maybe on the fence? Do you think that using toxic chemicals rather than safer methods is OK as long as they tell their students the repercussions?

“Pretty much I don’t think it’s okay but it’s the reality. They need to take caution respirators, gloves, goggles. They owe it to their students. If their dug in, they need to have their students take care of themselves.”

Is there any advice you could give to me, battling this dilemma of toxicity in academia and in contemporary print?

“Educate yourself, I think, I am a firm believer in...honey attracts more bees than

vinegar. If you brought a jar of vegetable oil and 7th generation all-purpose cleaner. Being an example... that's going to have more of an impact than yelling at people about it. There's no benefit to sticking your head in the sand. It's not fine. Osha would shut it down. To me, there's a stubbornness to change. They don't want to start back at the learning curve to learn. Maybe this research will shed light. I've been doing this over 20 years, shouldn't we feel some change? My hope is in people become aware of environmental issues.

"I don't think you lose anything creatively when you work safely."

"I think that thinking the ink is the problem is the wrong place to start. We use oil based, water based inks, soy based inks. Focus on the real issues, find the chemistry and focus on that. People tend to try something once and if they don't like it they give it up, but when you think about new techniques or the first time you do something... there's a learning curve. Airbrush aquatint, people don't think you can get it to look like rosin. But we've been doing for 20 years."

cleaning oil based inks up with;
vegetable oil
degrease with 7th generation all-purpose cleaner
any type of soap and water
VCA

entisol which is derived from coconut -
we also use soy salve

"There's a lot of literature about VOC effecting respiratory and soft tissue- your occasional use of it probably won't make you sick."

Founder and former director of New Grounds Print Studio Regina Held

What made you want to start a non-toxic print practice?

"There was an absolute need for that. It didn't exist. The technology had just become available; it was a no brainer. People kept asking me when I was going to do this. I had done some master printing for artists and somehow I just got this reputation. People just wanted to work with me. It seemed like a natural thing to do after I graduated. "

Do you feel like some traditional chemicals processes should not be used any more due to health reasons? If so, which ones?

"Anything that is toxic should not be used. It's sad because Traditional lithography is most beloved but there is no replacement. But there are water-based options and solutions out there. I know how damaging it is to the environment and the artist health. "

How do you see printmaking in current academia?

"Well I think it will it will never lose its place. It can be combined with digital. I think for anyone who learns a craft or art... it should be used as part of art history. The things that we do today we wouldn't be able to If we hadn't had printmaking... we wouldn't have been able to communicate. It was because of printmaking. it is engrained in our history and it is a big part of art. It should be part of academia and I would like to be

more interdisciplinary ways of making art. When I went to school everything was clearly defined. There are so many opportunities to connected”

Are there any materials or chemicals you have completely banned from the shop? If so, which ones? And why?

Anything toxic should.

What type of ventilation do you have?

You don't need ventilation in non-toxic studios.

What advice do you give to Universities that don't want to change their studios to safer environments for their students or are maybe on the fence? Do you think that using toxic chemicals rather than safer methods is OK as long as they tell their students the repercussions?

“Well do you not want to change? Reasons? Money? A non-toxic studio will be take less resources in less space with less materials and is a lot cheaper to set up. Toxic studio needs a lot more equipment... I would say it is not cost effective to be toxic. Also it is traditional... Rembrandt used ferric chloride in the 16th century... we are not omitting history just changing some the materials. There is a change of techniques. replaced with safer materials.”

Why do you think artists are resisting non-toxic printmaking?

“The very first non-toxic supply of inks on the market were not as good. That gave the stigma of inferiority. Inks have gotten so much better and they need credit. I think they are equally as good if not superior.”

Is there any advice you could give to me, battling this dilemma of toxicity in academia and in contemporary print?

“It's been around for such a long time; I've been doing it for 20 years. I think you need to find shops. Even people who were utterly against it. Ron Picasso is in Santé Fe and he was adamantly against it... until he saw the result. If I was in your shoes I would try to find all the print shops in the world and see who is non-toxic... get some digitals of some of these non-toxic prints. It's about demand. We don't want to hurt ourselves, telling woman they are pregnant they have to leave... I have given the safety lecture so many times if you are pregnant or want to be pregnant in the next 12 months you can't be in this environment. Cancer is inevitable... it's not a matter of will it but a matter is when? People are now becoming so green and so health conscious... “

Tupperware in your locker ferric chloride.
mix your own grounds;
Pledge floor polish and India ink 10 percent

airbrush for aquatint - absolute cheapest— nothing fancy - (\$30) -
remove soda ash carbonate- (washing soda) 10 percent
vinegar - salt- bon ami - (ajax)

Rosin;
you have to use a full blown respirator - heavy particles -
OR
replace with airbrush

Interview with Mark Graver

What made you want to start a non-toxic print practice?

I was aware of research being done in the UK when I lived in London and worked for a printmaking suppliers – but all my training was with traditional acid etching techniques.

Setting up a studio for non-toxic/safer etching was as much about practical issues as it was about health & safety (H&S).

I arrived in NZ from the UK in 2003 and my partner and I moved onto land that had been in her family since 1938. We are in the North of NZ so rather geographically isolated and getting printmaking supplies in NZ is generally not easy.

Buying acid would have been very difficult, apart from the dangers and putting in extraction units for etching is very costly.

We have our own bio-sewerage system on site so are very careful about what goes down drains etc.

The more I researched safer print practices the more it seemed the sensible and practical way to go, the obvious health benefits were almost a bonus in the beginning! I've had printmakers come into my studio who had previously had to give up working because of the cumulative effects of solvents and toxic fumes.

There are no acids or solvents used at all in the studio here.

Do you feel like some traditional chemicals processes should not be used any more due to health reasons? If so, which ones?

I think it's possible to etch safely using acids but only within a strict health & safety environment with good, solid technical instruction. However, I also now believe there's no need to use acid as metal salt etching gives the same results. I think solvents are probably more dangerous than acid.

How do you see printmaking in current academia?

My most recent experience of print departments in academic institutions has been in Australia and here in NZ. It seems that on the one hand H&S regulations are hitting hard but that responsibility is being forever passed down the chain from admin until it becomes part of the tutor's role to police usage of materials.

My experience has shown a growing desire to move to safer etching techniques because of H&S regulations that would otherwise lead to etching departments being closed.

I get invited to run workshops or to do short residencies which include working with students at institutions that are interested in acrylic resist techniques so I guess my experience will always lead me to connect with people and places that have already decided they want to explore safer options.

I introduced acrylic resist etching to the degree course I taught on for the last 10 years only because it was safe – there was no previous set up or any safety equipment in the room. It was the only place in NZ that students could learn acrylic resist etching at tertiary level but the whole degree course was closed down this year and we were all made redundant.

I was recently an artist in residence at a university in Hobart, Tasmania and the print technician there had just been told he was responsible for any materials that students brought in independently such as linseed oil for painting. This just seems mad to me!

Another problem in academia is that there is now less and less specialization within art departments. As such students no longer get a solid grounding in techniques and materials. I worked with students who were doing a 7-week block in the print studio and didn't have the time to explore the subject, history, techniques and materials deeply.

Which processes do you think lend the best to sustainable practices? Which don't?

(ex; Intaglio, screen print, relief, monotype, lithography?)

They can all probably be called 'sustainable' with the right choice of materials apart from perhaps lithography where you still need to use a little acid. My main areas are etching (and digital print) so although I've heard about safer approaches in other techniques it's not something I have direct experience with.

Are there any materials or chemicals you have completely banned from the shop? If so, which ones? And why?

Rather than being banned they were never here in the first place! But there is no petroleum based solvents (white spirit, turps, meths) and no acids used in the studio. Everything is water based and cleans up with water+ a little dish soap. Etching with acid gives off toxic gas and solvents have been linked to long term organ damage.

What type of ventilation do you have?

Windows and fresh air! Etching with metal salts is perfectly safe as it doesn't give off any toxic fumes.

What advice do you give to Universities that don't want to change their studios to safer environments for their students or are maybe on the fence? Do you think

that using toxic chemicals rather than safer methods is OK as long as they tell their students the repercussions?

I would say that seeing the stricter and stricter H&S regulations being brought in to work places in Australasia and I believe the UK and Europe too that the choice will come down to etching with safer alternatives or not etching at all. I think if art schools don't take on the responsibility of introducing safer techniques then we are in danger of losing a 500-year-old tradition.

Students absolutely need to be made aware of the health risks – but do the tutors actually know what they are? – there is a stubbornness about changing to acrylic resists and I can understand some of the reasons but ultimately the tutors and the institutions have a responsibility of care for their students

If you could give advice to aspiring Professors/teachers who want to teach students in the safest way possible what would it be?

I always emphasize that it's the materials that have changed not the techniques. If you have a grounding in traditional etching, then the language is the same. Everything that can be done with traditional, toxic, materials can be done with safe or safer acrylic based resists, metal salts and water based inks. There are actually things that can be done with the new techniques which can't be done traditionally too! (acrylic aquatint washes etc.)

If the students don't have any previous experience then there's no problem as the new, safer techniques just simply become 'the way it's done'

Is there any advice you could give to me, battling this dilemma of toxicity in academia and in contemporary print?

Keep researching and building connections and networks with like-minded people locally, nationally and internationally.

Feel free to contact me for further info/advice/support if you wish.

Also:

In the USA there are a number of studios working with safer techniques. Notably New Grounds in Albuquerque and Zea Mays (in Maine I think).

Don Messec - Making Art Safely <http://makingartsafely.com/> is in Santa Fe.

Gerald Ferstman is at the University of Kentucky

There's an excellent resource here www.nontoxicprint.com which is run by Friedhard Kiekeben in Chicago