

SUNDAY

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Distinct impressions

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WITH INK AND PAINT

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Arts

DISTINCT IMPRESSIONS

Memories and observations bloom with ink and paint

By Christina Hennessy

There is nothing spooky or eerie about the “ghost” that is resting on the floor of Betty Ball’s studio. Better words to describe it might be eye-catching, beautiful, and, yes, haunting.

“This is what was left on the plate,” she says, of the shorefront scene she pressed onto thick white paper. A practitioner of the art of monotype, the original print — never to be duplicated — was already one for the books. The ink that remained on the plexiglass plate, however, offered one more impression — a ghost, so to speak, of its former self.

“Depending on the way I put the ink down, if it is really thin on the first one, I get very little,” she says, as she moves about on a recent morning in her studio in the Rowayton section of Norwalk. “Here, I have all these darker areas where the ink was thick.”

The alchemy that goes into applying ink on a plate, creating a scene and then waiting for that one-of-a-kind print to emerge attracted Ball to monotype, a type of printmaking that stretches back to the 1600s. There is a magic in waiting for the surprises that occur as paper meets plate. There is an immediacy, too, that is more common to drawing and painting than other printmaking techniques.

“When it crawls through (the etching press) and the pressure is applied, it does some interesting things,” she says. “You never know what you are going to get.”

Ball has long kept her eyes open to the environment around her. Her prints are, in effect, the ghosts of her childhood memories and present-day observations.

“In the summer, I loved laying in the grass and looking at the sky,” she says, of her childhood in Stamford. The shore was never that far from her mind, either. In the summers, her family would head south, where she was born and lived as a young child, for summer vacations in Virginia.

The great expanse of the beach and sky influenced her perspective. The sky was vast and the horizon endless, providing her with a sense of freedom and openness. She carries such emotions into her prints, imbuing a sense of spontaneity and freshness. “I am drawn to a more organic human experience versus the speed and technology that dominates our lives now.”

Ball, who has had a more than



Christopher Gardner / Contributed photos



Betty Ball, who lives in Rowayton, works in prints and paintings. A fan of nature, her canvases reflect a careful balance between manmade structures and natural elements. Her dream-like houses and landscapes are in contrast with her colorful flowers in “Gerberas in Pink No. 1,” left.

30-year career as a graphic designer, fine artist and printmaker, often switches back-and-forth between printmaking and painting. On this morning, pastoral landscapes inspired by a cross-country trip with her daughter from Connecticut to Seattle sit on easels. In her paintings and prints, she concentrates on light as it is caught and reflected by objects, whether a barn or a glass vase holding flowers.

Over the years, Ball’s muse are places, spaces and natural elements that she has observed and absorbed into her psyche. She has captured the French countryside

she visited, the barns of the Midwest, the Rhode Island shore (she attended Rhode Island School of Design), Indiana’s White River (part of that cross-country trip) and plenty of flowers that caught her eye.

As she swaps back and forth between disciplines, she gains a new perspective. “Each medium allows me to use different palettes and a different thought process,” she says. “I have to move back and forth between the two things and try something different. When you come back to the other, you are much fresher. I think there is a freshness and spontaneity of the printmaking that comes back to my painting.”

Over the centuries, painters have been introduced and adopted the monotype technique into their work, such as Edgar Degas, who used it to experiment and become more spontaneous in his approach. Jasper Johns took to the medium more than 30 years ago. In 2015, the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art featured several of Henri Matisse’s monotypes. As opposed to woodcuts, say, there is a greater flexibility in creating the image — one can make significant changes right up to the point of pressure.

One can see the hand of the creator in such prints. A huge fan of texture, Ball makes sure her brushstrokes remain visible in the final work, revealing the texture and interplay of the oil paint with the surface of the canvas. With her prints, she layers her colors. It starts with a sketch, in marker on the glass, and then she paints the scene, wiping off or adding ink. Rollers, cheesecloth, Q-tips and other tools also are employed. Heavy concentrations of ink tend seep and spread — perhaps with unintended consequences. If the layer is too thin, it might not show up at all. “I love texture. I love layers. I love color. I like to leave bits of layers showing under the paint.”

One of her flower prints is on view at “Footprint 2018” at Norwalk’s Center for Contemporary Printmaking, which runs through Aug. 26. She is one of 83 artists selected from 23 states (she is one of about a dozen in Connecticut) and 13 countries.

“I think people are fascinated by the (printing) process,” she says. “So many people will say, why don’t you just paint it. But, I don’t think you really understand until you do it. There is a magic that happens when you print it.”

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