

Meet the press

Four great artists from near and far team up to showcase the versatility of printing presses, old and new

BY JEFF HORNADAY

They're crafting a lot more than wine in Corbett Canyon these days. From every corner of the earth, on radically different journeys, four distinguished artists have come together in San Luis Obispo County with a common passion for fusing traditional arts with state-of-the-art technology. By luck or fate, this dynamic cadre of painters and designers found each other and now share studio space under one towering roof, on 14 acres of rural wine country, situated neatly on the cutting edge of contemporary print making.

Carol Paquet originally formed CorkStop Studios in 2005, constructing a 2,500-square-foot studio workspace, steeped in rustic charm and topped with ceilings of Gothic proportion. Fulfilling a longtime dream, Paquet has made the space available for numerous art workshops and exhibits, and offered the expansive facility to share with other resident artists, who currently include Anne Stahl, Roger Lee and Pacha. The foursome is delighted to announce its first group show, "Beyond the Print: Revealed," to be held at CorkStop Studios on Saturday, May 23.

Just around the corner from Kynsi Winery on the back roads of Arroyo Grande, the barn-like studio has instant appeal. With sweeping views of the rolling hills and quiet respite from the strip malls and highways, CorkStop Studios offers more than the ideal setting for solitude and inspiration, it also houses a museum quality, large format Epson printer and a traditional intaglio printing press, as well as all manner of printing tools, such as inks, papers, plates and rollers, all intended for communal use.

While the four artists share a penchant for artistic expression and a combined 60 years of experience in the advertising and graphic design industry, their backgrounds could not be more varied. Born in Southern Rhodesia (now Zambia), Paquet attended art college in Johannesburg and went on to spend a couple decades working for multinational advertising agencies in South Africa and Great Britain. She declared herself a full-time artist and painter in 1999 when she and her family moved from South Africa to Canada, and in 2002 they arrived in California.

While painting in Canada, Paquet became fascinated by the interplay of shadows across her landscapes and landscape-inspired canvases.

Many hours were spent outdoors, holding her paintings under trees, gates and bridges, studying the choreography of shadows as they moved in and out of focus, stretching her depth of field and adding natural contours to her already impressive abstract works. Transfixed by this delicate interaction, Paquet began

photographing her paintings in various shadowy settings, and her “Penumbra” series was born.

To perfect this series, Paquet has enlisted the help of professional photographers, and now her shadows are added in the studio where they can be arranged with strict precision or cast at random, as twigs, wires and branches sway under the tungsten lights, and the camera captures every moment. Finally, using the studio’s state-of-the-art equipment, her finished product is printed on archival, acid-free paper with pigmented inks that will last as long as any oil painting, and up to 38” x 55” with perfect resolution. While this printer is suitable for high-quality Giclées, Paquet is careful to point out that in this case, “The print *is* the original product, part of the process, not simply a reproduction.”

Out-of-State Plates

If Paquet is the naturalist in this quartet, then Stahl must be the scientist. A graphic designer and computer programmer by trade, she is always seeking new techniques and materials to enhance her fine art, which has achieved international recognition and distinction. A native of Germany – the home of Johannes Gutenberg and the moveable printing press – Stahl moved to Ireland in 1988 and spent 11 years there, studying art and print making. “Print making has always been *almost* as important to me as painting,” she says.

For several years, Stahl was active in the “Black Church Print Studio,” a printers’ cooperative in Dublin with hundreds of members and a wealth of printing equipment. When she came to the Central Coast in 2001, she searched high and low to find a similar group where she could work with other print makers and gain access to tools and presses. In 2002, Stahl had the opportunity to study some of the more technical aspects in a print making class at class Cuesta College, where she also worked as a painting instructor for several semesters. But it wasn’t until CorkStop Studios acquired its intaglio printing press in 2006 that she was really able to revive her craft.

In her current series, “Landscapes of the Human Mind,” Stahl is working on a concept she’s been developing since she was a teenager, to create pictures of human thoughts and feelings, as she envisions them anyway. In order to produce these abstract, minimalist images, she works on the press with traditional, acid-etched printing plates, and more often with acid-free, UV-sensitive solar plates. The advantages of the solar plates include their lower environmental impact and their greater versatility in working from photographic negatives.

Stahl has developed a couple of different processes that allow her to integrate the traditional printing press with her high-tech, digital savvy. Some of her pieces start on the computer, with a photograph or other digital image, from which she is able to create a solar plate which can be run through the printing press. But she’s also able to work in the opposite direction, starting with a solar or conventionally etched copper plate, running it through the press, then scanning the resulting print on her computer where she can continue to edit and manipulate the image. The trained eye will see and appreciate the subtle textural variations between prints that roll off the press and images than slide out of the Epson printer.

Now and Zen

Lee, the only American-born artist in the line-up, joined CorkStop late last year and brings a sense of eastern spirituality to the group. A true veteran of Silicon Valley, Lee earned his first artistic distinction in an American Legion Poppy Poster contest in elementary school. He later went on to Stanford University where he not only continued his fine art studies, but was also instrumental in developing and launching a host of high tech products through an interdisciplinary graduate program, which he attended on a full scholarship from Hewlett Packard.

Lee then spent 14 years as an industrial design manager for HP. No stranger to high-risk innovation, he witnessed the birth of the personal computer and the Internet, and stood at the epicenter of dot com boom rubbing elbows with founders and CEOs of Apple, Netscape and Intel, to name a few.

Lee's technical know-how and sharp business acumen suggest a more left brain approach, but his discovery of Buddhism and eastern meditation practices in 1972 brought new direction to his life and new meaning to his art. He describes his art making as "the challenge to get the mind out of the way of the creative process."

A part-time art and design instructor at both Cal Poly and Cuesta College, Lee trains his students to apply digital technology to their artistic process, a skill he puts to practice at CorkStop. For "Beyond the Print: Revealed" in May, Lee has been experimenting extensively with alternative inks and different emulsions, such as InkAid, that allow him to print on non-conventional surfaces like sheets of aluminum, as well as ultra-traditional surfaces like rice paper. Another new product he's been working with is a line of water-based inks called Akua, which give the artist complete control over things like the consistency and viscosity of the ink.

Many of Lee's printing plates feature imagery that reflects his own quest for truth through eastern philosophy. And by modifying his inks and plates, both manually and digitally, Lee is able to enhance his prints with organic textures and ethereal hues that lend his work a truly mystical quality.

Like his fellow artist, Lee looks forward to the May exhibit as an opportunity not just to show his work, but also to share and explain some of these innovative techniques that he and his colleagues have been discovering.

A Printer's Paradise

Pacha, the youngest member of the foursome, was born and raised in East Germany, where she studied art and completed an intensive three-year graphic design apprenticeship. Prior to leaving her hometown of Gotha in 2001, Pacha participated very actively in a homegrown arts association, made up primarily of student writers, actors and artists, who put on exhibits and performances for the community. She has spent most of the last ten years working as a designer for agencies in Germany and independently as a fee-lancer on the Central Coast, but she's never lost her passion for producing fine art on canvas.

Since her arrival in San Luis Obispo in 2004, Pacha has been highly involved in the local arts community, joining the Art Center, showing her work in numerous

galleries and spearheading the Holonic Arts Movement, a collaborative art project that has brought together more than 70 local and international artists to collaborate on shared canvases and collective pieces to raise money for community-based charity organizations. The communal arrangement at CorkStop Studios naturally appeals to Pacha's sense of community, perhaps a remnant of her growing up in a communist society.

As a graphic designer, Pacha has always been fascinated by the subtle elegance of fonts and typefaces, and she incorporates letters and characters into her canvases whenever she can. Collage seemed to be the ideal format for mixing text and lettering with her own painting and sketching, but she has recently grown frustrated by the various issues associated with collage, such as copyright infringement and premature color fading. Through her tireless experimentation, she discovered the advantages of stenciling and rub-on letter as superior to cut-and-paste collage, but these techniques also had their limitations.

In 2005, just as the Holonic Arts Movement was being conceived, Pacha decided to take a typography class at Cuesta College. The instructor for that course was none other than Roger Lee, who also turned out to be the first participant in Pacha's collaborative art movement. Pacha presented Lee with a blank canvas, and a few weeks later he returned it with a shimmering image of Buddha, which he applied by a special transfer process that she had not seen before.

The following year Pacha enrolled in an intermediate painting class with Mariana Galzcenski, where she and her classmates were given an assignment that further opened her eyes to the possibility of melding her digital skills with her painting prowess. The piece started on the computer with Photoshop, where Pacha scanned and created an assortment images and arranged them in a digital collage. She used the school's large-format printer to put this image onto a 30"x30" canvas, and then stretched this canvas over a frame and proceeded to paint over it by hand to produce the final product.

"That really got me interested in the whole digital printing combination with traditional painting," Pacha says. But this requires a much larger and better printer than she can afford in her own private studio. Now, at CorkStop, she finally has the opportunity to revisit and develop that technique. Between the tutelage of her more experienced colleagues and her own relentless creativity, the possibilities now are virtually unlimited.

Stahl, Pacha, Paquet and Lee are as eager to share their new creations and discoveries as they are to produce them. "Beyond the Print Revealed" will not simply showcase their spellbinding series of works, but – as the title suggests – they will also be revealing the innovative processes that have made their finished products possible. Art, like fine wine, requires a bit of knowledge to be thoroughly appreciated, and these high-caliber artists understand that. The four of them have come together to blend the best of what they have to offer, like a Meritage of exquisite varietals that ultimately offers far more depth and complexity than you'd ever find in a single grape.

CorkStop Studios is located at 1250 Judith Lane in Arroyo Grande. For more information call (805)550-6399 or visit www.corkstopstudios.com.