



BIRDS ON THE EDGE: COLLABORATION AND CHANGE

April Vollmer

In what felt like a cosmic coincidence, the pandemic of 2020 was the final year of my dad's life. At first that gave me the queasy feeling that somehow the world was a projection of my own mind, but I gradually settled down to making art, got vaccinated and began a new chapter. My way of working, my subject matter, my whole understanding of how printmaking fit into my life, everything shifted that year.

A few months before the pandemic I had moved from New York City to Santa Cruz, California, to care for my father and stayed for the duration, walking the ocean cliffs and watching the birds. Without a studio, I turned to photography and began a long distance collaboration with printers in Spain.

Living in New York City's art world is part of my identity as an artist. I moved there for college in 1975 and stayed, thrilled to be a part of exciting changes in contemporary art at a time when anything seemed possible. My understanding expanded and my artwork became more abstract, more complex, more layered, though still based on literal images from nature. I developed an identity as a creative printmaker specializing in Japanese woodcut, taught workshops and wrote a book about the process.

I traveled often to Santa Cruz where my mother showed me native plants and my father introduced me to the North Coast beaches. After my mother died my father

moved closer to the ocean. In 2020 as he declined I tried to calculate the best course of action. Then abruptly on March 19, a state executive order shut down California, there were no choices to be made and everyone had to stay home.

I had the odd sensation of being trapped in paradise. Santa Cruz is achingly beautiful, but I was stuck there away from home. One thing I could count on during that time was the constancy of birds. Unaffected by the pandemic, they simply dealt with their usual challenges: climate change, habitat loss, oil spills, fishing nets, dogs. They always live on the edge. With the pandemic, the fragility of their existence seemed to echo our own vulnerability. I bought a camera with a 300mm lens, good enough to photograph nearby birds and small enough to use without a tripod. Everything creative had to be easy because everything else was so hard.

First I learned to be a photographer by taking thousands of photographs on my daily walks. I left my dad with a caregiver during the day and sorted photos sitting with him in the evenings. I began posting the bird photos on Facebook, matching them with famous paintings to keep myself and my friends entertained during those days of isolation. I started a book project called *A Continental Divide* based on those unexpected correspondences.

But I wanted a more complete expression, a fuller way to use the bird photographs in my printmaking. I noticed that my friends at Art Print Residence outside Barcelona were offering photopolymer platemaking for artists. I had taught Japanese woodcut there three times and had grown close to master printers Clàudia Lloret and Jordi Rosés, along with



their daughter Ariadna Abadel. They had originally opened the studio to print for well known artists and had adjusted to changed circumstances by opening the art residency program where I taught. With the loss of international travel they began offering platemaking.

This was the first time I had truly collaborated with master printers. Because of their expertise and our personal connection, I knew I could trust their decisions even without the opportunity to meet in person. We worked simply, in one color on half sheets of Rives BFK. I refined the photos on my laptop, adjusting shadows and reflections, and added layers of architectural plans, scientific diagrams and patterns from other parts of my experience, keeping focus on the birds. We emailed back and forth about size and color, which photographs to include and the number of prints to make. I had to resend a few where the contrast was hard to transform into plates. I expect there was trial and error in the studio to bring out subtle contrasts, but the package I received a few months later was astonishing. I could see an experienced hand in each image, the subtle sense of touch gave a softness to the photographic plates, they were much more than mechanical reproductions.

With a new appreciation for the rich possibilities of collaboration, when I returned to New York I arranged with Esther K. Smith and Dikko Faust of Purgatory Pie Press to create a title page of hand set type with information about the project and the names of the birds to complete the 12 sheet portfolio.

I continue to work with the bird photographs I took that year. I have made a few new hand cut Japanese woodcut prints, the technique I was known for before this year of cosmic coincidence. But collaborating during the pandemic

marked a permanent change that shifted my life and my printmaking into unexpected territory. I stopped doing everything myself, I loosened my reliance on my New York studio and committed more to California, recognizing how essential it has always been to my work. So what does it mean for the future? More birdwatching, more collaboration and a deeper recognition of the source of my printmaking.





Artist Information

April Vollmer is a New York based artist specializing in *mokuhanga*, Japanese woodcut. After receiving her MFA from Hunter College in 1983 she participated in the *Nagasawa Art Park Program*, Japan, in 2004. She has taught classes at the Japan Society and the Lower East Side Printshop in New York; Cabrillo College and Kala Art Institute in California; MakingArtSafely in New Mexico; The Morgan Conservatory in Ohio; *Art Print* residence in Spain, as well as many other locations. Vollmer actively promotes cultural exchange through the study of *mokuhanga* and was on the board of the triennial *International Mokuhanga Conferences* in Kyoto and Tokyo and communications attaché for Hawaii and Nara. In addition to exhibiting her prints, her work has been published in journals including *Science*, *Printmaking Today* and *Contemporary Impressions*. Her book on the contemporary use of *mokuhanga*, *Japanese Woodblock Print Workshop*, was released by Watson-Guipill in 2015.
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Image Documentation

Photo credit: Paul Takeuchi

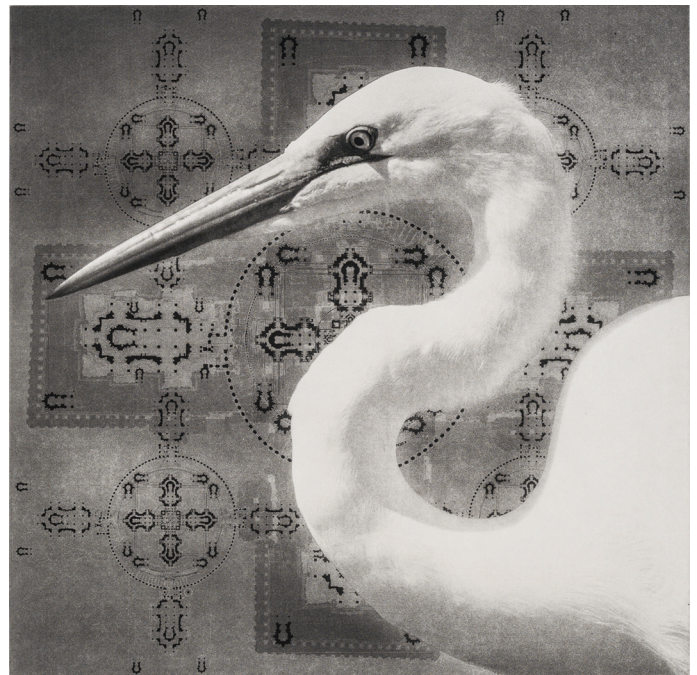
Spotted Sandpiper Standing (portfolio *Birds on the Edge*), photo etching, 15" x 19.5", 2021

Radiant Bird (double crested cormorant), *mokuhanga* on Sekishu washi, 13" x 10.6", 2021

Marbled Godwits and Whimbrels Foraging (portfolio *Birds on the Edge*), photo etching, 15" x 19.5", 2021

Brown Pelican Balancing (portfolio *Birds on the Edge*), photo etching, 15" x 19.5", 2021

Snowy Egret Stirring (portfolio *Birds on the Edge*), photo etching, 15" x 19.5", 2021



Sanderlings Running (portfolio *Birds on the Edge*), photo etching, 15" x 19.5", 2021

Green Heron Fishing (portfolio *Birds on the Edge*), photo etching, 15" x 19.5", 2021

Great Egret Hunting (portfolio *Birds on the Edge*), photo etching, 15" x 19.5", 2021