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Making an impression

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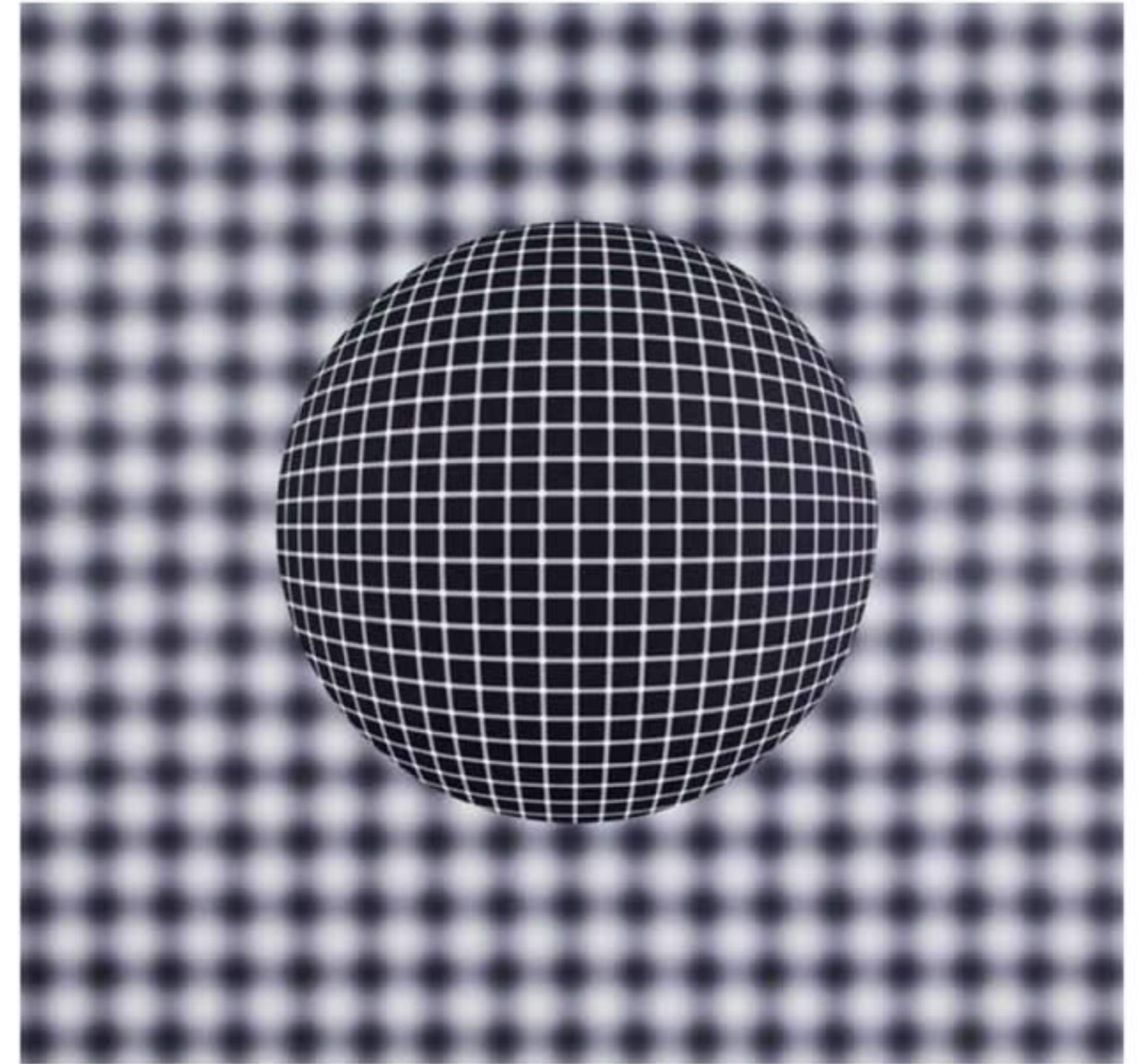


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MAKING **AN** IMPRESSION

The craftsmanship and ingenuity associated with printmaking, a technique used as a tool for cultural exchange since the Tang dynasty, has come to HKDI in an exhibition showcasing 149 artworks from print shops around the world. DAISY ZHONG reports.

In 868AD, during the Tang dynasty, the Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, or Diamond Sutra, was printed using woodblocks, which was state-of-the-art technology in the ninth century. The Sutra, discovered in the Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang as the earliest surviving dated printed book, is testimony in the history of not only relief printing but also international cultural exchange.

Today the newest and most sophisticated technologies such as 3D printing and laser engraving continue to open up endless possibilities for creativity in the art of printmaking, as shown in the exhibition *Confront/Conform – An International Print Exchange Exhibition* which ran through October and November at HKDI.

“Compared to other forms of art, printmaking is distinctively diversified in the technologies adopted,” says Yung Sau-mui, the curator of the exhibition and a co-founder of Hong Kong Open Printshop, a charity organisation run by artists. “For centuries, oil painting hasn’t changed much

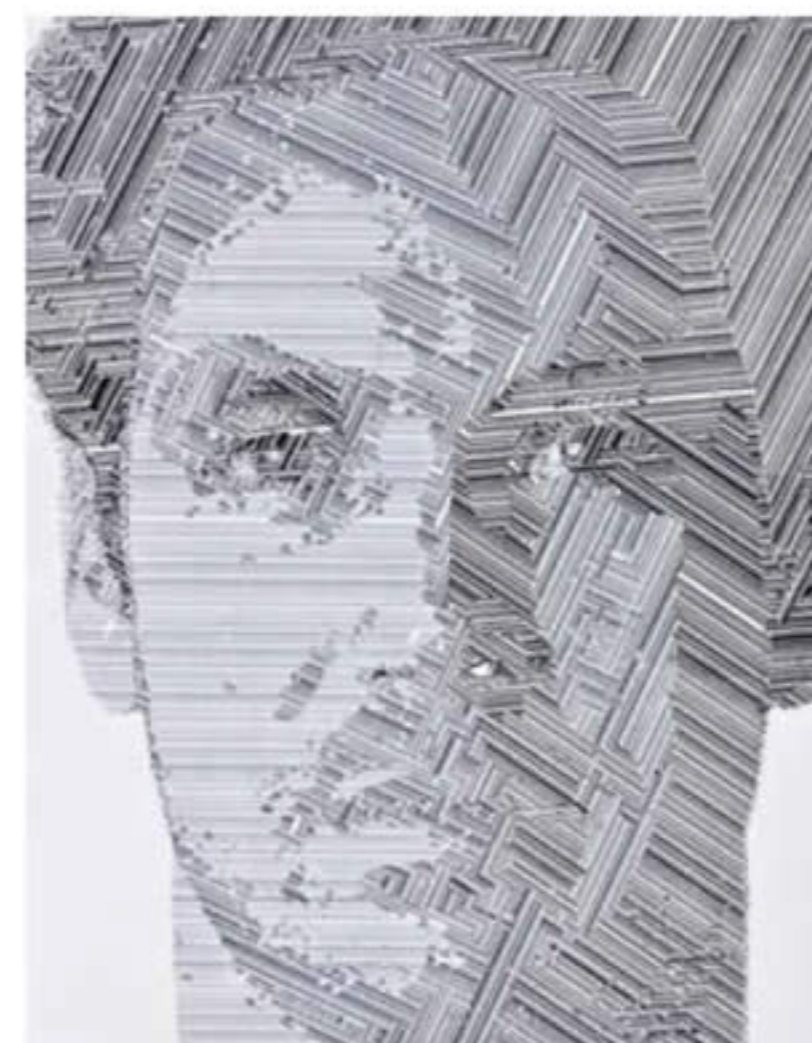
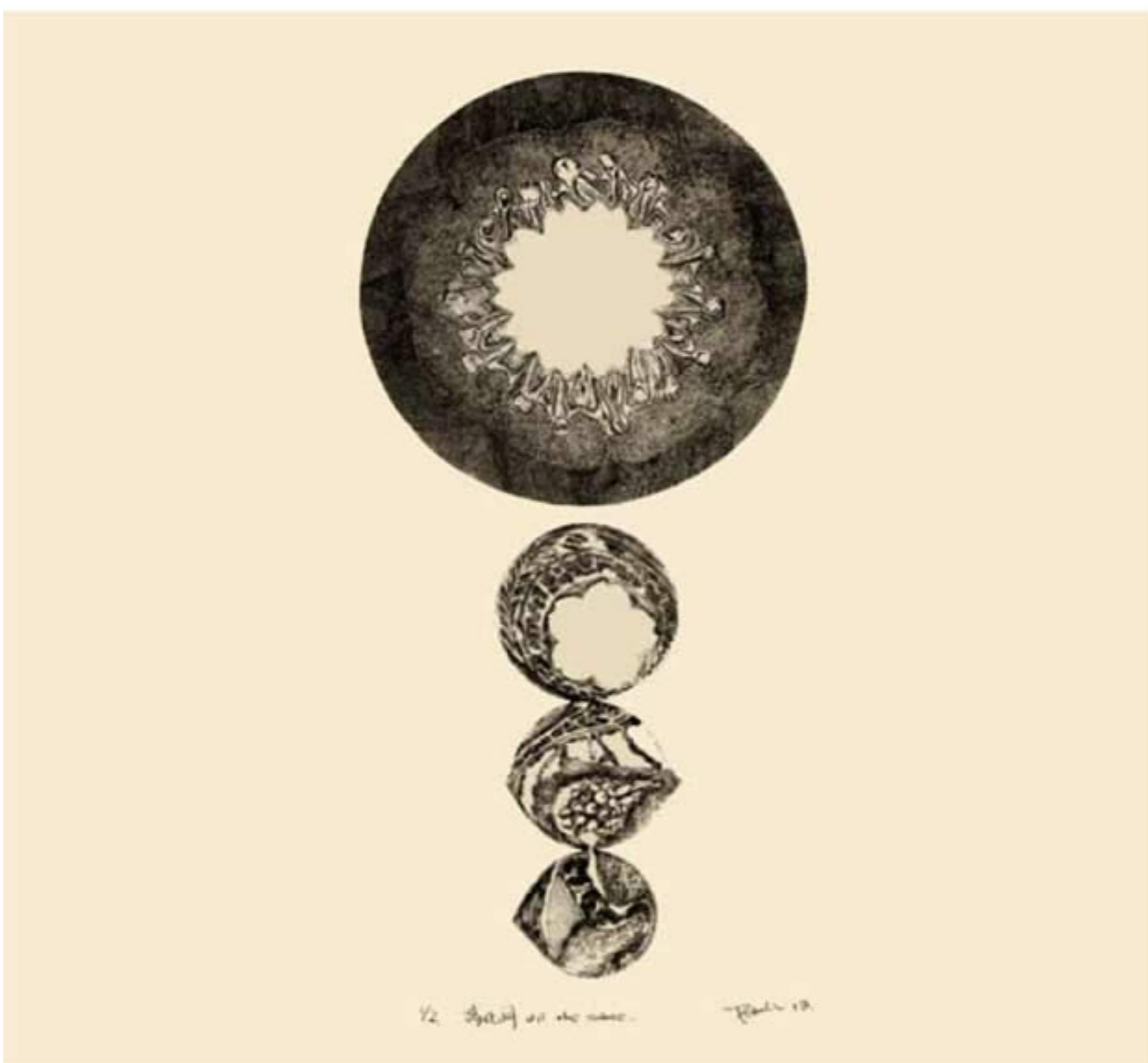
in its tools and techniques, but printmaking has progressed dramatically since the Tang dynasty – it has always been associated with groundbreaking technologies that help the dissemination of popular culture, such as letterpress, etching, mezzotint, aquatint, lithography, offset printing and screen printing.”

The result is an astonishingly wide range of modes of artistic expression based on different media and techniques. The 149 graphic prints exhibited at *Confront/Conform* encompassed woodblock printing, the oldest form of printmaking, cyanotypes, lithographs and laser engravings by established and emerging artists.

OPPOSITE: EVOLUTIONARY LANDSCAPE BY EVE STOCKTON, RELIEF PRINT, WOODCUT
ABOVE: UNIVERSAL NOISE BY ROBERT PETERS, 2012, DIGITAL IMAGE

“Images created on different media and through different technologies of printmaking can have hugely different visual effects, so artists can choose the approach that best suits their individual style and theme.”

The exhibition, presented as part of the Hong Kong Graphic Art Fiesta 2013, was a platform that congregated such works from 20 studios from nine countries and regions. This was the fourth time Yung has organised the print exhibition, and Yung says she is



LEFT ALL THE SAME BY PAULINE CHAN SO-YEE 2013, ITAGUO, DRYPOINT
 ABOVE UNTITLED (SELF PORTRAIT) BY BEN PAK, 2010, SILKSCREEN, LACRYLIC
 ABOVE RIGHT THE PRINT SHOP INKMASTERS CAIRNS INC. IN AUSTRALIA



ABOVE GLIMPS OF A DISTANT DISTANT PAST BY GABRIEL VIEIRA, 2012, RELIEF PRINT, WOODCUT

« PRINT MAKING IS INHERENTLY COLLABORATIVE AND OPEN TO SHARING »

delighted to have found a common trend among artists around the world.

"Apart from the eternal topic of the inner self, artists seem to have simultaneously explored the blurring of boundaries brought about by rapid globalisation and urbanisation. Artwork from Hong Kong includes concerns about restoration of heritage buildings, and Australia has seen a surge of participation of indigenous artists whose work reveals the conflicts of culture. They are consciously reflecting on people

and their connections to the land and community, and social and political issues."

Yung says the exhibition was held also to celebrate the culture of sharing, another distinctive feature of print art. She notes that whereas photography or sculpture is a solo work and done in one's own studio, print artists always share machines in a print shop. "This space then becomes another source of artistic inspiration because artists exchange their experiences and learn from each other's technological skills.

Therefore printmaking is inherently collaborative and open to sharing."

This year the exhibition acted as a "mega" print shop connecting print studios around the world. "Cultural exchange has always been the main theme of our exhibitions," says Yung. "Both the Tang dynasty Buddhist text and the hippest of contemporary 3D prints have played an integral part in the communication of cultures."

Printmaking was transformed from a means of reproduction to a mode of art in 17th century Europe,

exemplified by the wonderful etchings of Rembrandt (32 of his signature self-portraits are etchings).

Artists took charge of the whole process of drawing, engraving and printing, so that originality could be incorporated into every step.

All this means appreciating print art requires understanding not only composition, colour and content, but also craftsmanship. Wood engraving requires a magnifier to help create the detailed carving; in traditional Chinese woodblock engraving, sophistication comes from the use of "knife strokes", similar to the use of strokes in calligraphy, which accurately conveys the style and craftsmanship of the creator.

Hand-made printing processes also require expertise and ingenuity. "For instance, the moisture level of the print paper, a key factor in determining printing effects, is controlled by how much

water we put on the paper," Yung says. "The printing pressure is judged by hand. Even for today's computer-based printmaking, you also need to get to know the machines and do numerous tests to achieve the best effect."

In China, one of the country's greatest modern writer and critics, Lu Xun, led the New Woodcut Movement in the 1930s, a central part of the New Culture Movement. Although not an artist himself, Lu was nonetheless the driving force behind the movement. Developed by German Expressionists, woodblock print characterised by strong contrast and sharp strokes became the favourite form of art for revolutionary forerunners, who used text and images in the woodcuts to expose the social ills of China. Printmaking artists in that era were often also influential front-line thinkers.

HKDI principal Leslie

Lu believes this social conscientiousness as well as critical thinking is still relevant in today's world and is precisely what design students should inherit. "It is our aspiration that, in addition to the appreciation of the art of printmaking, the exhibition will help to shape the hearts and minds of a new generation of design students, who dare to confront things intelligently at a time when conformity rules." ©