

Audio Guide Transcript

Graphic Revolution:

American Prints 1960 to Now

November 11, 2018–February 3, 2019

Main Exhibition Galleries

Gallery 241: Introduction to *Graphic Revolution*

Speaker: Brent Benjamin
Barbara B. Taylor Director
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, I'm Brent Benjamin, The Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum. Welcome to *Graphic Revolution: American Prints 1960 to Now*. This exhibition will transform your idea of what a print is, from the hand-made to the digital, and from two-dimensional prints to books and multi-media objects. This audio guide offers expert commentary about 11 works of art, whose object labels include an audio icon to help you identify each stop. The object locations are highlighted on a floorplan, which can be accessed on this webpage.

Throughout the galleries, you will hear from Elizabeth Wyckoff, curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs at the Saint Louis Art Museum and co-curator of this exhibition, as well as Gretchen Wagner, Mellon Fellow in the department of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs and also co-curator. They share a

story that begins in the 1960s in the United States, when a boom in the graphic arts occurred. Working with printers and publishers, artists began to push the boundaries of their field, incorporating unexpected materials like Plexiglas and felt, and they experimented with alternative formats such as books. The radical imagery of this era was borrowed, manipulated, and appropriated in a variety of old and new printmaking techniques. This graphic revolution continued well into the 21st century, producing the conventional and sometimes radical works of art you are about to see. I hope you enjoy this audio guide and your visit to *Graphic Revolution*.

Stop 1

Gallery 241:

Edward Ruscha, *EVERY BUILDING ON THE SUNSET STRIP*, 1966

Speaker: Gretchen Wagner
Andrew W. Mellon Fellow for Prints, Drawings,
and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, my name is Gretchen Wagner. I am the Andrew W. Mellon Fellow for Prints, Drawings, and Photographs and co-curator of this exhibition. In 1971, during a 15-year period when artist Ed Ruscha's book production was at its most intense, the artist enthusiastically reported to an interviewer, "If there is any facet of my work that I feel was kissed by angels, I'd say it was my books." His books, which are in this case, assumed this venerated status among an increasing body of paintings, prints, drawings, photographs, and films. By this time, these had already been celebrated in the nation's most prestigious institutions. For example, Ruscha's work had been shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and even exhibited twice at this museum.

The centrality of printed matter within his art is something he shares with a great number of artists featured in this exhibition, as you will discover. This speaks to the significant role printmaking has had in the development of contemporary art during the past 60 years and the unexpected formats it has assumed.

Ed Ruscha's *EVERY BUILDING ON THE SUNSET STRIP*, which takes up one whole side of this case, is one of these transformative landmark publications. An accordion-folded book, it expands to a length of 27 feet, only a portion of which is on view here. To give you a sense of scale, completely unfolded the book reaches almost the entire length of this gallery. Two strips of black-and-white images present a miniaturized panoramic view of a one-and-one-half mile stretch of one of the most iconic American roads: the famous Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. The top strip documents the north side of the street while the south side appears below, rotated 180-degrees. Each are labeled with corresponding house numbers and street names.

The photographs were taken with an inventive, if not rudimentary, set-up, whereby Ruscha installed a motorized Nikon

camera on the flatbed of his pickup truck. Enlisting a few friends and his brother to assist, they cruised the street in the early mornings or on Sundays when it was least populated snapping photos at regular intervals. As a result of their system, they documented a trip through the city in a straightforward, systematic, one could say even boring, manner. “My pictures are not that interesting, nor the subject matter,” Ruscha has stated about the images in his books. He said, “They are simply a collection of ‘facts.’”

This highly informational approach placed this book, along with his others, among the primary works shaping the contours of Conceptual art, which was emerging at the time. Books provided an apt format for this type of art and Ruscha tapped his background in commercial design to conceive and oversee the entire production process of his publications, from laying out paste-ups to even placing advertisements to promote their sale. At only a few dollars apiece and often printed in editions of several thousand copies, Ruscha’s books were affordable, portable, and thus, extremely accessible.

Stop 2

Gallery 242:

Betye Saar, *The Fragility of Smiles (of Strangers Lost at Sea)*, 1998

Speaker: Elizabeth Wyckoff
Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hi, I'm Elizabeth Wyckoff, curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs and co-curator of this exhibition. The resonant blue of the Japanese paper chosen by Betye Saar for this screenprint evokes the symbolic color we automatically associate with water. The handmade sheet of paper also contains visible fibers that suggest water's movements. This apparently peaceful atmosphere however, is disrupted by the image Saar printed on it: it represents the manner in which African slaves were crammed into the cargo hold of the infamous transatlantic slave ship, the *Brooks*. She calls the image "a trickster'... from a distance it looks beautiful, until you realize that the little patterns are bodies."

The source for Saar's slave ship icon is a powerful historical image that has appeared in print countless times since it was first

published 230 years ago. It created its own 18th-century graphic boom after it first appeared in a 1788 English abolitionist pamphlet. Its direct graphic quality was accompanied by equally graphic text that detailed the inhumane treatment of the millions of individuals—on this and other, similar ships—who were subjected to the Middle Passage (the enforced voyage of enslaved Africans to the Americas). In total disregard of the humanity of the enslaved, the *Brooks* cargo hold managed to carry 300 to 600 men, women, and children at once, all of them brutally ripped from their lives in order to be sold into slavery. According to the text of the original pamphlet: “the greatest part of [them] consist of innocent persons, torn from their dearest friends and connections, sometimes by force, and sometimes by treachery.”

Although the image’s use dropped off after the abolition of slavery—in 1807 in Britain, and 1865 in the United States—its graphic power has been repeatedly appropriated since the early 20th century. Saar first encountered it in the mid-1960s in a book by renowned African American poet Langston Hughes about the New Negro Arts Movement, popularly known as the Harlem

Renaissance. Along with many other contemporary American artists, Saar has used it in her work as a symbolic repossession of the past: she calls it “part of her DNA.”

A Los Angeles-based artist, Betye Saar began as a printmaker, but in the 1960s, she began making the found-object assemblages for which she is best known. She did not make this 1998 screenprint in a formal, numbered edition, but she has used both the full image and fragments of it in a variety of ways. A poetic soul, she has written artist statements that include the sentiment that, “There persists a longing, a longing to connect to my roots.” The evocative title that she hand-stamped onto this print: “The Fragility of Smiles / of Strangers Lost at Sea” reminds us that even if her African roots can’t be traced, the memory of her ancestors lives on in her “slave ship icon.”

Stop 3

Gallery 242: Various artists, *Ten from Leo Castelli*, 1967

Speaker: Elizabeth Wyckoff
Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

This stop on the audio guide will focus not on a single object, but on a display of 10 diverse works of art ranging from a pink and black screenprint by Larry Poons to a sculpture of movable Plexiglas disks by Robert Rauschenberg. A curator at New York’s trendsetting Museum of Modern Art wrote that *Ten from Leo Castelli*—as this group of works is collectively titled—“personifies the new look of prints more than any other edition yet published.”

Needless to say, this is not your standard “print portfolio,” and that was precisely Lieberman’s point. The title tells us that the group consists of works by 10 artists who were all in the “stable” of Leo Castelli, the European-born powerhouse New York art dealer whose prescient eye and skillful business dealings contributed significantly to heightening the profile of American

art—both in the United States and on the world stage. Castelli had chosen to promote the work of a group of New York-based artists, who to a large degree defined the new Pop art that epitomizes the look and feel of the 1960s. Andy Warhol contributed *Portraits of the Artists*, stark black headshots printed on tiny plastic boxes that could be rearranged by the owner; Rauschenberg applied his signature process of combining photographic imagery from all different sources, and took it to another level by printing on transparent round wheels that could be turned, creating even more combinations. Roy Lichtenstein employed lenticular technology to create a 3D-effect almost as though you are looking into an aquarium. Robert Morris' green square vacuum-formed plastic echoes what he said in an artist's statement published in 1968, that "The use of the rectangular has a long history."

As is the case throughout this exhibition, these works relate closely to the work these artists were doing in other media: Warhol and Rauschenberg were using the screenprinting technique in their paintings—in part as a way of "mechanizing" the process. Lee Bontecou, the lone woman in this group, echoed

the use of canvas in her so-called “crater-construction” sculptures by printing her signature shapes on a muslin fabric. “Sketch for *Forest Ranger*” by James Rosenquist is just that, a study for a large-scale hanging painting-slash-sculpture.

Ten from Leo Castelli was published by Rosa Esman’s Tanglewood Press. Unlike the majority of print publishers, who were often artists themselves, Esman was a businesswoman who reached out to cutting-edge artists and facilitated the production of often quirky, multi-media projects. This era saw the invention of what we call the “multiple,” a 3-dimensional object that is produced in an edition—in the case of *Ten from Castelli*, 200 sets were produced for sale.

In 1970, *Life* magazine celebrated what they called the “graphics boom,” referring to the growing production of moderately priced original prints by the era’s hottest artists. For Esman, the idea behind producing *Ten from Castelli*, or *7 Objects/1969*, which is in a case nearby, was to provide a “starter-kit” for young collectors who might be interested in having art in their homes, but who could not afford the high prices large-scale

paintings and sculpture commanded, and who also probably did not have the space for larger objects.

Stop 4

Gallery 243:

Robert Rauschenberg, *License*, 1962, and *Breakthrough I*, 1964

Speaker: Gretchen Wagner
Andrew W. Mellon Fellow for Prints, Drawings,
and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

Take a look around this gallery and you will notice the works are grouped by their publishers. Here, we highlight the different ways publishers have played an essential role working with artists to realize groundbreaking projects during the past six decades. These two lithographs by Robert Rauschenberg, which combine abstract washes of ink with photographic imagery, were produced at Universal Limited Art Editions. As some of the Rauschenberg's very first prints, they mark the beginnings of one of the most iconic artist/publisher collaborations in the history of printmaking in the United States.

Rauschenberg spent his first days at Universal Limited Art Editions, also known as ULAE in the spring of 1962. He had been invited there by Tatyana Grosman, founder of the printshop. At

the time, both Grosman and Rauschenberg were at remarkable points in their careers. Grosman, forced to leave a war-torn Europe for the United States in the previous decade and seeking to support her family, decided with her artist husband to try her hand at publishing prints. As the story goes, she serendipitously discovered that pavers in her front yard were actually lithography stones and went on to purchase a printing press from a neighbor. Then, at the suggestion of a curator from The Museum of Modern Art in New York, she invited some of the most accomplished artists of the day to make prints—a defining aspect of ULAE’s mission up to the present moment.

Rauschenberg is among the artists she invited early on. At the time, he had already taken the New York art world by storm and secured international recognition with his radical incorporation of found images and objects in paintings and sculptures. He was initially reluctant to accept Grosman’s invitation. He famously quipped “the second half of the 20th century was no time to start writing on rocks,” referring to the heavy limestone blocks required to make lithographs—of the same type Grosman had

unearthed from her yard. Luckily, Grosman's tenacious requests over two years prevailed, and she was able to entice Rauschenberg to ULAE's small, by mighty, workshop in the backroom of her Long Island house. This was facilitated by the encouragement of his close friend Jasper Johns, who had also begun to collaborate with Grosman in 1960. His work at ULAE is also on view in this gallery.

Rauschenberg produced these two prints, *License* and *Breakthrough I*, during these first years at ULAE, and they demonstrate his use of found images. In the upper areas of *License* you will notice pictures of sporting events, such as auto and horse races, and even a baseball player at bat on the lower left. *Breakthrough I* incorporates great works from art history, including the 17th-century painting *The Rokeby Venus* by Diego Velázquez and Jean-Antoine Houdon's sculptural portrait of George Washington. By transferring copies of images to the lithography stone, Rauschenberg could reuse and recombine the images to his heart's content across many works—a combinatorial collage aesthetic long at the core of his art. Thus, printmaking

freed him up to work even more fluidly, and as a result, he continued to collaborate with ULAE, along with many other publishers, for the remainder of his life; the results of these of collaborations you will encounter throughout this exhibition.

Stop 5

Gallery 243: Richard Artschwager, *Locations*, 1969

Speaker: Gretchen Wagner
Andrew W. Mellon Fellow for Prints, Drawings,
and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

At various points throughout the exhibition, you will encounter the several components of *Locations*, a set of multiples by Richard Artschwager. Here, you see one of these unusual objects, which consists of a bristly mass of rubberized horsehair in the shape of a flat pill. This is an example of Artschwager's *blps*—spelled b-l-p-s. *Blps* are oblong forms of varying size and material, which he first made in the late 1960s. In other galleries, you will find additional *blps* constructed of painted wood, Plexiglas, mirror and even one screenprinted on a box, which doubles as a storage container for the entire set of multiples. These are installed in a variety of unconventional positions, usually overhead, in corners, or on sides of walls to draw your attention. They invite you to

notice locations in the Museum that you might not usually see or consider.

Throughout his career, Artschwager was deeply interested in how we perceive the world around us and conceived paintings, sculptures, prints, and multiples that address the topic. Often unusual textures such as furry exteriors or shiny, reflective surfaces were used to play with how one sees. In the case of his *blps*, it was also a matter of how one detects one's surrounding environment. For several years in the late 60s and early 70s, he would plant his *blps* covertly around cities, including New York, Kansas City, and Bonn, Germany. These earliest *blps* were made of painted wood or painted directly on walls, building exteriors, and street curbs using a stencil. These placements called attention to or, as Artschwager would say, "punctuated," the gaps and interstices of public spaces, something Artschwager has likened to the disruptive nature of graffiti. Artschwager's mysterious *blps*, with their unexpected and rebellious appearances in public spaces, gently provoke revised considerations of the world.

As a multiple produced in an edition of 90 sets, *Locations* places the promising capacity of the *blp* in the hands of a larger public. In fact, Artschwager, with his characteristic dry humor, compared *Locations* to a set of socket wrenches that were just waiting to be used. Free of any specific instructions, the six *blps* can be placed wherever and however the user wishes, as if a tool box to create new perceptions. As a result, Artschwager devised a potent form of everyday intervention, relying on distribution and participation.

Stop 6

Gallery 244: Kiki Smith, *Banshee Pearls*, 1991

Speaker: Gretchen Wagner
Andrew W. Mellon Fellow for Prints, Drawings,
and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

Banshee Pearls is a major work by Kiki Smith. She is an astute observer of the physical world and often closely examines her own body and its psychological dimensions as a means to address the human condition. *Banshee Pearls* is an example of her penetrating self-portraits and a moving illustration of how artists turn to printmaking to respond to challenging social conditions.

As the daughter of sculptor Tony Smith, she and her two sisters were immersed in his studio life from an early age. By 1976, she herself had settled in a loft of New York's Lower East Side, finding her place among the activist artists, putting together gritty exhibitions responding to the era's recession, housing crisis, nuclear armament, and other pressing issues. For such projects in the 1970s and 1980s, she began creating prints, posters, and

multiples. They depict the body's anatomy, often fragmented, to convey human vulnerability and resilience.

So in many regards, *Banshee Pearls* follows in this activist spirit. Created in collaboration with publisher Universal Limited Art Editions in 1991, it is a project of monumental scale comprised of a grid of 12 prints. Within these, Smith's own image appears many times over. In some cases, her face dominates the composition while in other areas a crowd of smaller heads emerge from the background. She captures herself in range of emotional states. In places, she is wide-eyed and smiling while elsewhere, she expresses a more pensive mood. Moreover, one will notice an array of ages, from a snapshot of an infant in the upper right print to a haunting skull figure in the middle row. Still more images of her portrait are to be seen, many which suggest the body's physicality. There is the imprint of her splayed face, which appears disfigured, split in two, or perhaps even smashed against the surface of the sheet. In fact, to create such effects she developed inventive methods in collaboration with the printers at Universal Limited Art Editions. She cast body parts and

photocopied her head and hair to transfer the images to the printing plate. In addition, areas of dripping and sponged ink suggest her anatomy, both inside and out. For Smith, capturing the body in its entirety—internal and external, young and old, content and in pain—empowered her.

Smith remembers her father calling her a banshee as a teenager. Rather than get angry at his unflattering, if not derogatory characterization, she decided to address the topic directly with this work. For her, *Banshee Pearls* celebrates all aspects of the female body and psyche. Also, it is important to note that artists of Smith's generation, who emerged in the 1980s, understood the human body in new ways. At the time, shifting ideas about health and sexuality took hold. One will recall the AIDS epidemic began in the 1980s, and Smith lost both her sister and some close friends to the illness. Smith and fellow artists sought to expose the body's complexities often ignored, or even shunned, in public discourse. In this way, Smith, with *Banshee Pearls*, powerfully pushes back against damaging stereotypes with her art.

Stop 7

Gallery 244: Roy Lichtenstein, *Expressionist Woodcuts*, 1980

Speaker: Gretchen Wagner
Andrew W. Mellon Fellow for Prints, Drawings,
and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

For this portfolio, Roy Lichtenstein looked at the art of the German Expressionists, a group of forward-thinking young artists active in the German cities of Dresden and Berlin during the early 20th century. Let's start first by looking at the different prints that comprise this portfolio. There are seven prints in the set and each is a portrait. Together they present an array of characters, including an embracing couple, a student poised with a cigarette lost in thought, a figure referred to as Dr. Waldmann peering through an authoritative monocle. There is also a reclining nude, another nude dancing in the woods, and two abstracted faces.

Lichtenstein's motifs closely resemble the type of subject matter favored by the German Expressionists, who were drawn to depicting their fellow artists, as well as performers and

intellectuals, defining the radically new art in Europe at the time. Upholding hopeful visions for a transformed future, they sought a more direct way of living and expressing, uncontaminated by social norms. They would cultivate these concerns by spending time in urban dance halls, establishing eccentric studio spaces, and organizing outdoor excursions for unfettered commune with nature. Observations from these scenarios would find their way into the German Expressionist's paintings, drawings, and prints. In fact, the woodcut was a favorite print technique. For them, its jagged, unrefined line work, resulting from carving through a resistant block, communicated the immediacy of these experiences and, in turn, their revolutionary potential.

So nearly 60 years later and following two devastating world wars in Germany, Lichtenstein immersed himself in one of the most renowned collections of German Expressionist prints, the Rifkind Collection in Los Angeles. In light of the destruction witnessed during the intervening decades, Expressionism's promise to convey authentic experience and emotion with transformative ends was difficult for artists like Lichtenstein to

take at face value. Rather, Lichtenstein, who helped to define Pop art in the early 1960s, often approached this sincerity with a hearty dose of skepticism and an ironic wink. To convey this, he relied on exaggeration and, here for this portfolio, he did this by stylizing the distinctive characteristics of woodcut. You can see this, for example, in the print *Head*. This is the one with a tight, close-up view of a face. Here, there are oversized, as if faux, woodgrain designs in the left cheek and the cleanly rendered angles overall—as opposed to German Expressionism’s rougher distortions. In this way, he reinvents iconic art historical subject matter through the eyes of an artist practicing in the late 20th century.

Stop 8

Gallery 244: Lorna Simpson, *Wigs (Portfolio)*, 1994

Speaker: Elizabeth Wyckoff
Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

A group of hairpieces in all their variety appear before you: natural, curly, wavy, braids, and twists. There are blonde tresses, buns, and also a mustache and a merkin, or wig for a woman's private parts. This variety of types, textures, and colors immediately tells you that this is no ordinary display. This section of the exhibition focuses on artists who come to printmaking from diverse disciplines beyond painting, including most prominently sculpture and photography. Lorna Simpson is a photographer and a filmmaker, whose work often explores the many sides of feminine identity with an emphasis on women of color. *Wigs (Portfolio)* from 1994 is a formative work that combines her interests in 1950s and 60s experimental film with a conceptually-driven installation.

Where to begin? There is so much going on here. In terms of

technique, Simpson began with photographs, which were transferred to lithographic plates, using a particular late 20th century variant of the technique called waterless lithography. The images were then printed onto industrial felt. This is one of the unusual and innovative choices that Simpson made. She has used felt extensively in her working, starting around this time. The overall visual effect becomes somewhat muted, even moody, since the surface of the felt is not smooth and the ink is therefore imprinted unevenly.

Simpson dates her fascination with experimental film to a course she took as an undergraduate and the influence of film theory is evident in this composition. It's laid out almost as though it could be a storyboard for a film—a part-text, part-image, planning document, designed to demonstrate the flow of the film's narrative. But then you read the text panels, each of which has a specific placement dictated by the artist. You quickly realize this is no straight forward narrative. As you will see when you read them, these texts range from brief phrases, like "strong desire to decipher," or "to blur," to a string of proverbs, starting

with "if the shoe fits, where it" and ending with the more obscure "nine tailors make a man." There are few episodic narratives, one about the flamboyant lesbian Harlem Renaissance Blues singer Gladys Bentley; another about the 19th-century emancipated slave abolitionist and Women's Rights activist Sojourner Truth. And yet another pair of panels chronicle a pantyhose episode that involves some precocious sexual behavior. The texts lean toward sexual innuendo, gender confusion and/or fluidity. Bentley, for example, wore men's suits and wanted granted a permit to do so in Los Angeles. Contemporaries seem to have speculated about Truth's gender, "How could a women be so assertive?" Others are more ambiguous, but given the handful of rather direct statements, the suggestion of an off-key interpretation is overwhelming.

Stop 9

Gallery 246: Jasper Johns, *Black Numeral Series*, 1968

Speaker: Elizabeth Wyckoff
Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

This series of prints is representative of Jasper Johns' work: first of all the prosaic, schoolroom subject matter. The numerals zero through nine appear in a large number of works by Johns, beginning in the 1950s and continuing into the 21st century. The subdued palette of blacks and grays is also very characteristic Johns: but do note what a surprising variety of grays there are. *Black Numerals* series of 1968 also happens to be the first work by Johns that was published by Gemini G.E.L. in Los Angeles.

Within Johns' work, the numerals zero through nine appear in virtually every medium that he has experimented with—paintings, drawings, etchings, lithographs, and lead reliefs. Sometimes, he superimposes all of the numbers on top of one another, so they merge into a semi-abstract mass, but just as often, like here, he creates a new composition for each number. But why numerals,

you might ask? In this exhibition, you've already come across a print by Johns with a coffee cup and a broom; others include fragmented body parts, or his own handprint, and there is also a lead relief with a curious toothy brush.

One way to understand his repeated return to numbers is to recognize that Johns gravitates toward commonplace subject matter. In the case of the 10 Arabic numbers, they are fundamental building-blocks in our lives, something so familiar that we don't need to think about them; they give meaning and order to our lives. For Johns and many other contemporary artists, the idea of blurring the boundaries of art and life together is the very stuff of art and numbers are a brilliant way of tracking this convergence.

These prints may be just black and white, but each one was printed in two colors: black was printed with a lithographic stone, while an aluminum plate was used to print a second layer, using one of different tones of gray. Johns has a deep relationship with printmaking, and the professional printers who work with him speak of his facility with the processes in almost elegiac tones.

According to one printer, the translucent layers of washes he built up on his stones were “alive” and “magical.” You can see how, just using variations of gray and black, he has created an astonishing graphic symphony, wringing every last drop out of the black and gray inks as well as the white of the paper.

We hope that you have come to see throughout *Graphic Revolution* that the special convergence of artist, printer, and publisher produces something that goes beyond what an artist can produce alone in the studio. When Johns was invited to work with the Gemini printers in Los Angeles, he already had been making lithographs for a decade. But Gemini’s ambition was to create large-scale works of art that could compete with paintings and sculpture, and this led to *Black Numerals*, Johns’ largest prints to date.

Stop 10

Gallery 247: Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, *Sovereign*, 2017

Speaker: Gretchen Wagner
Andrew W. Mellon Fellow for Prints, Drawings,
and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

Edgar Heap of Birds, who is a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Nation of Oklahoma, thinks deeply about the effects dominant colonial powers have had upon indigenous peoples throughout the world. He has dedicated his career as an artist and educator to addressing these dynamics. His work *Sovereign*, which consists of 16 monotype prints arranged in a tight grid, is a recent example of his work and speaks specifically to an aspect of contemporary Native life in the United States.

As with much of his work, *Sovereign* is text-based, meaning the image is built up of words. So what are we reading here? Starting in the upper left corner and reading across the piece, we find phrases such as “Coyote Valley,” “Mystic Lake,” “North Star,”

“Lucky Eagle,” “Talking Stick,” and “Fantasy Springs.” These words seem to evoke settings and characters from Native American stories, or perhaps motifs that fit common expectations about Native arts and cultures. However, Heap of Birds turns expectation on its head. He has instead drawn his phrases from names of casinos and gaming centers operated by Native American tribal groups. In fact, six of the 48 names listed here are in Oklahoma, where the artist lives.

Currently, there are nearly 500 gaming operations in the United States owned by federally recognized tribes. It is a lucrative industry which has taken shape since the late 1980s, following the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act. This legislature granted Native American tribal groups the authority to operate casinos in the United States. By opening these facilities, many tribal groups experience tremendous economic growth, which in turn supports community services and programs. At the same time, gambling, which is known to be addictive, can come with great social costs. So with *Sovereign*, Heap of Birds uses language to get to the heart of these contradictions, playing what

he calls the “hokey, romantic” connotations of the vocabulary against its source in the economic and political realities of contemporary Native American life.

The appropriation of language is a method Heap of Birds shares with other artists represented in this exhibition, such as Barbara Kruger, Glenn Ligon, Ellen Gallagher, and Vito Acconci, each of whom have pieces in previous galleries. They too shed light on complex historical and cultural narratives by mining the nuances of text. Heap of Birds achieves his message by way of a distinctive monotype printmaking technique, which he has utilized for 20 years. First, the artist will write the words backwards on a plate using a colorless resist layer, and then he inks the plate with color. The ink collects in the areas around the letters to produce the vibrant field of red in each print. In addition, a solvent is sprayed on the plate to produce the mottled texture. The surface evokes varying interpretations from the suggestion of blood splatters to the sparkling lights of slot machines on the casino gaming floor. With this work, Heap of Birds continues his decades-long efforts to visualize issues central

to Native representation. Printmaking is at the heart of his committed activism.

Stop 11

Gallery 247: Julie Mehretu, *Epigraph, Damascus* (2016)

Speaker: Elizabeth Wyckoff
Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

Julie Mehretu's resonant and often colorful abstractions are familiar to Saint Louis Art Museum visitors from her *Currents* exhibition in 2005, as well as her painting from 2006 that hangs in the contemporary art galleries (just across Taylor Hall when you leave *Graphic Revolution*—in Gallery 248). *Epigraph, Damascus*, which was completed in 2016, is part of a newer body of work, which is more overtly political even while it remains resolutely abstract. But first take a close look at the print: You will see that behind, or beneath, all the painterly and expressive marks there are very finely rendered architectural drawings. These show bits and pieces of the architecture of Damascus. They are fragmentary, and some of them are upside down. Alongside the abstraction overlaying them, this contributes to the overall sense

of disruption and fragmentation—even chaos—conveyed by the composition.

As the title suggests, this monumental, 17-foot wide print references the ongoing civil war in Syria. Due to its rich and diverse cultural heritage, the Syrian city of Damascus is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Its beginnings are in the 3rd millennium BCE, and it is said to be one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Located at a crossroads between Asia and Africa, it contains layers from the many different cultures and civilizations that make up its past. Since 2011, however, Syria has become increasingly entrenched in a brutal and complex civil war that began when the government cracked down on the country's Arab Spring-inspired uprising. Syrian people, cities, and cultural sites have been killed, plundered, and destroyed. It is this situation to which Mehretu responds in her recent work.

So how, you might be wondering, are we to understand this beautiful, abstract work of art as political? She is herself a refugee, who fled with her family to the United States from a post-revolutionary dictatorship in Ethiopia, and is thus well-

positioned to empathize with the forced separation from one's homeland. Her work has been called "social abstraction," acknowledging that it is possible to produce art, even abstract art, from a political point of view. She has also noted that "there is no such thing as just landscape." Even if on the surface landscape might appear to be non-polemical, it does in fact carry meaning, and is inhabited by and acted upon by peoples and cultures. Mehretu is very much aware of the role an artist can play in communicating what it is like to live and work in this particular global moment.

Epigraph, Damascus was acquired while we were putting together the checklist for this exhibition. Along with Edgar Heap of Birds' monotypes, which are hanging nearby, this acquisition demonstrates in a very palpable way the Museum's commitment to continue building the collection into the future.