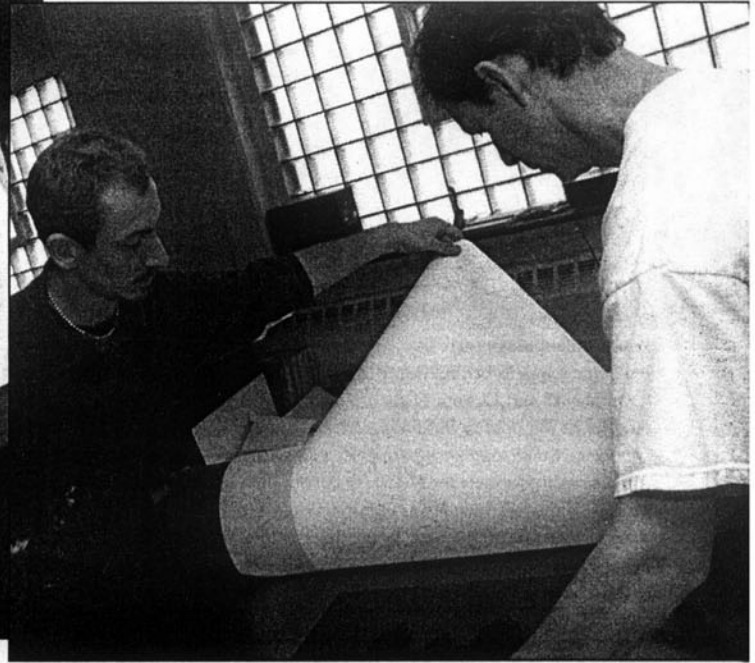
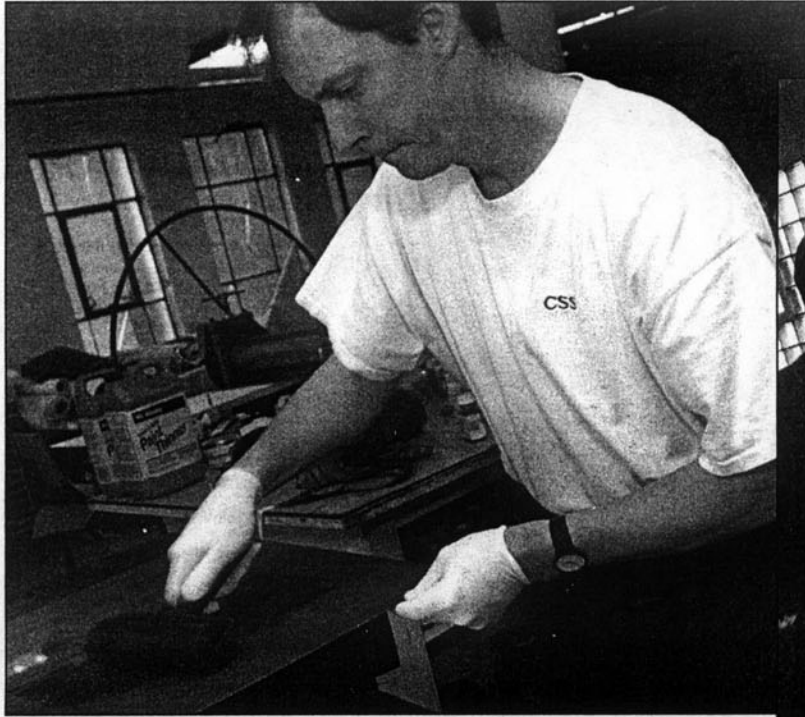


Pressing Matters: C



The integration of process and creativity informs the movingly sophisticated work taking place since 1984 at Center Street Studio in Boston. It is here that abstract artist and master printer Jim Stroud has achieved stunning results in collaborative printmaking. From discovery and conception to execution and, finally, exhibition, Stroud is a one-man art inspiration, production and representation enterprise. But Center Street Studio is the antithesis of the highly commercial, mass-produced art prints that focus solely on famous names. Stroud seeks out artists, many unknown even to insiders, and prints only what he likes. He forges a delicate, intimate collaborative relationship with the artist during the printmaking process to give birth to something new and original, or he directs the artist to attempt a creation different from, but consistent with, the artist's original painting, sculpture, or drawing.

Stroud says he had no plan when he first bought a printmaking press in 1984 from a small workshop in Gloucester, later moving his operation to the Distillery in South Boston and then to Fort Point. But his mission was clear: he wanted to create a place where artists could translate their work/visions into prints. The first print he published was by Lester Johnson, Stroud's teacher in the MFA program at Yale. Stroud is the first to admit that misconceptions abound when it comes to the idea of printmaking, which is often seen purely in mass production terms and not as art in itself. Stroud has over the years gained a reputation for

honing in on young, emerging artists whose work is not immediately marketable.

"I have limited time and means," says Stroud, 41. "Printmaking is time-consuming and costly." Thus, Stroud's criteria for selecting work are deceptively simple. "Regardless of the genre, if it moves me at an exhibition, I see a way to translate image issues in the print process," he says. "It's my immediate response."

Stroud's collaborative relationship with artist Charles Ritchie, a curator at the National Gallery of Art, evolved in this way. Stroud saw an exhibit of Ritchie's "little, beautiful, intricate watercolors," he says, and immediately Stroud envisioned a print that would capture the nuance and feeling evident in Ritchie's watercolors. The artist, who had never made a print before, worked closely with Stroud using a process called mezzotint, a difficult printing technique that involves scraping away the rough texture of the plate that holds the ink. The more surface that is burnished away, the more light tones appear. Stroud's idea to use mezzotint was in response to Ritchie's use of light.

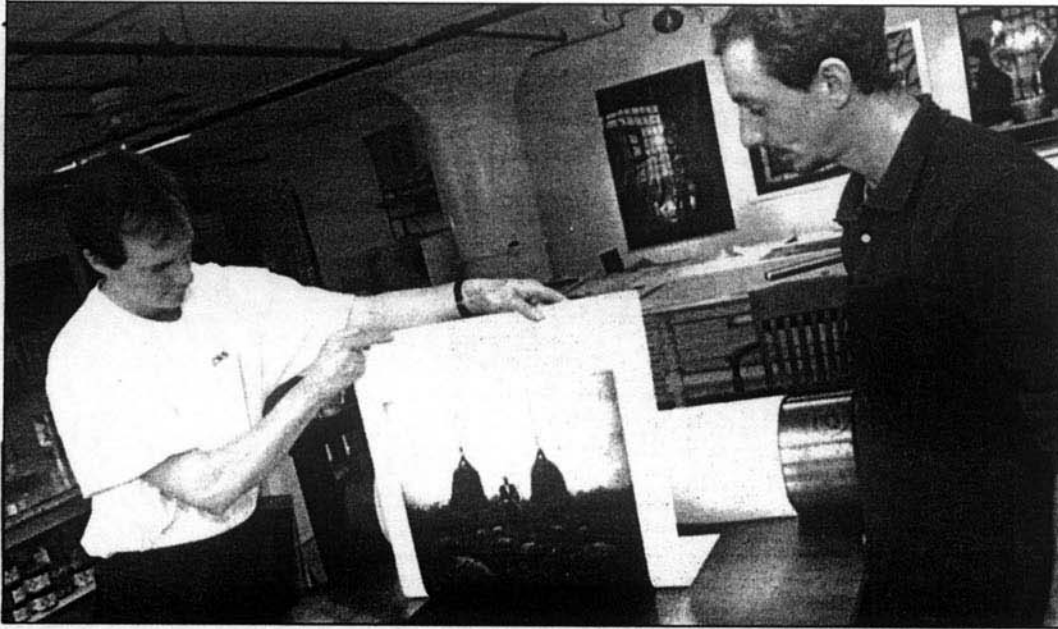
Shipping the plates back and forth via FedEx, Stroud recalls the emergence of Ritchie's heightened vision in the process of creating the print of his "Rocking Chair" watercolor. "He arrested the image at a place which we both described as the moment when you enter a darkened room and see only the highlights," says Stroud. "It was an unexpected place. Those kinds of discoveries through the process are the best parts of the relationship. We pushed the image in such a way

FEATURE

BY LOREN KING

enter Street Studio

PHOTOS BY MARILYN HUMPHRIES



that you see something new, and it adds a level to the print."

The 35 prints Stroud made of "Rocking Chair" are numbered and signed by the artist. Stroud never prints more than 50 prints per image, each of which is numbered and signed. The limited editions allow the artist and printmaker to make money (often it just covers the cost of the printmaking project) if Stroud is able to sell the prints to private collectors or to museums. Surprisingly, he manages to do so relatively often, thanks to his persistence, zeal and contacts.

Stroud is dedicated to sharing his enthusiasm for emerging artists with art collectors, particularly budding ones. His Center Street Studio on Congress Street boasts 3600 square feet consisting of an intimate gallery in front and a sprawling, industrial workspace in the back. Center Street opens its doors regularly for viewing the work of artists Stroud has worked with, including Bill Thompson, Mark Cooper, Aaron Fink, Charles Holtzman, Judy McKie, and Todd McKie, among many others. Stroud's partner and frequent collaborator in the enterprise is his wife, Janine Wong, an accomplished artist and graphic designer who is also dean of the art program at the University of Massachusetts/Dartmouth.

A print Stroud eventually sold to the Whitney Museum came about in the

serendipitous way that often brings Stroud and artist together. Bill Wheelock sparked Stroud's curiosity after Stroud saw an exhibit of Wheelock's work at the Drawing Center in New York. The relatively unknown Wheelock then pitched Stroud a project that, despite its complexity and dubious commercial possibilities, stirred Stroud's enthusiasm. The result was a series of 16 etchings, published by Stroud in 1996, called Quantum Gray. Wheelock's first print project consisted of thousands of parallel vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines drawn free hand, which Wheelock called the EKG of his life over the 16 months it took him to create the plates.

Despite Stroud's success and solid reputation as a printmaker, his own art continues to flourish; in many ways, it has been informed by the maturity and refinement of his printmaking techniques. "My work has become more integrated," he says of a recent series, still being completed,

of large panels that depict slightly varied frames of color and line. These panels will be exhibited at the Barbara Krakow Gallery on Newbury Street in April, 2001. How Stroud's work is made is equally important as what he's made — it is the medium as message, as well as a meditation on the art process. "It's about process and repetition," Stroud says of his recent work. "I am a linear thinker; what interests me as an artist is what is possible through linear means, conceptually and procedurally."

He steals the time from his printmaking and home life with his family to paint at night in his studio. Although successful and well-respected as an artist in his own right, Stroud isn't about to abandon his printmaking, despite its time demands and commitment. The printmaking has informed his art and become integrated into his life and his work. "I don't know why I'll walk into [an exhibition] and something tells me I must make a print," he says. It is the collaborative, nurturing, give-and-take process that happens with the artist that gives Stroud the momentum to continue seeking the challenges and rewards of making prints.

"I guide them," he says of the artists. "It is a challenge and fruitful and other things you can't define. My work has grown because of it. You can't ask for more than that." **AM**