



Chuck Maurer (right) and Katherine Brown stand by their Iris 3047 giclée printer.

VISUAL ARTS

Original reproduction

How is the digital print changing fine art?

BY JOHN EWING

In a quiet San Antonio neighborhood, a print studio called Alternative INK has set up shop in a small storefront. The proprietors, a computer engineer and a fine art printmaker, have worked in relative obscurity for less than a year, without radio plugs or flashy magazine layouts to advertise their services. In fact, they haven't changed the sign out front, too busy with the work that pours in despite their low-key approach. As digital technology revolutionizes everything from movies to medicine, Chuck Maurer and Katherine Brown represent one of its leading edges in the discipline of digital printmaking. Like all true innovations, digital printing has its advocates, naysayers, and the majority of people in the middle who haven't the slightest idea what they're looking at. All of that may be changing with an elegant French word — "giclée."

"It means 'to spray,' as in spraying ink," says Maurer, whose company specializes in giclée prints made with archival papers, high-quality inks and cutting-edge technology. "When we started, we anticipated 75 percent of our business would be doing reproductions, and only a small portion would be original digital art," recalls the former IBM engineer and 30-year photography buff. Almost immediately, the partners were faced with the opposite. Most of their clients are local painters, photographers and mixed-media artists who are using digital imaging and giclée technology as new tools for creating original works.



Katherine Brown, "Dancing with Signore Covello"

Katherine Brown, Alternative INK's creative director, is one of them. While finishing her UTSA degree in traditional printmaking in 1994, Brown took a digital art course and brought her early efforts to Maurer, who was already experimenting with giclées. Maurer's experience as an artist and printmaker was the necessary complement to Maurer's computer expertise. "I'm more involved with the artists so they won't feel timid. I've been there and had to ask how to save a computer file," says Brown, who with Maurer is teaching a giclée/Photoshop class through the Southwest School of Art & Craft. "There are no stupid questions and people need to know they can learn this process."

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And a complex process it is, transforming a printing business into an incubator for a new art form. Brown and Maurer enjoy the challenges brought by artists who themselves are experimenting. Depending on their familiarity with the digital format, artists have walked through the door with computer disks, slides, photographs, paintings, and three-dimensional objects. This raw material is converted into digital data using image scanners (box and flatbed) or digital cameras, preliminary legwork that most artists interested in the medium have already done. Some artists, such as Brown, collage this information in layers that can be viewed separately on the computer screen and combined with Photoshop, the industry-standard software. At this stage, anything can happen, and the magic of the medium becomes most apparent. Colors, contrast and shapes can be altered, and a host of other visual effects applied. Once the image is completed, the work of the printers is just beginning.

"There aren't many companies in the world that are doing this and doing it well, because you can't just do giclée off the shelf," says Maurer. "You apply the technologies as far as they'll go and then develop your own techniques to carry it further." Color management is the biggest variable, what Maurer calls the "black art" of giclée. The myriad hues in an artwork are separated into grid-like color charts read by robotic spectrophotometers. This information must be calibrated with the inks, the printer and the printing material, which is called the substrate. After proofs are checked by the artist, a full-size version of the piece is relayed to the printer.

Part of what makes giclée exciting to artists is the ability to print on diverse substrates, including watercolor paper, gessoed canvas, metal, and other materials that wrap around the spinning drum of the printer. Iris and Epson make the two printer models used by Alternative INK, but the printing innovation came from outside the computer industry. It was musician and printmaker Graham Nash (of Crosby, Stills and Nash) who in 1988 had the bright idea to move the ink-jet heads back, allowing for textured substrates and better quality papers. The addition of pigmented, archival inks now projects the stable life of these prints beyond the year 2200.

Maurer and Brown can claim their own innovations, the latest they call their "secret

sauce." Applied to a surface, it creates the "tooth" necessary to retain ink and will allow imaging on practically anything. Brown encourages artists to use digital imaging and giclée as elements in combination with other media, such as drawing, painting and collage. That sort of controlled freedom appeals to artists and paves the way for new digital applications. A recent article in *Digital Fine Art* magazine described the use of digital printmaking by artists Chuck Close, Kiki Smith, Jim Dine and Annie Leibowitz, among others. As reported, the medium is valued for its quick releases, allowing a faster progression through working ideas and intermediate proofs than does traditional printmaking.

In San Antonio, photographer Ramin Samandari was initially drawn to giclée for the variety of textured papers available and the option to print a series on demand. As a result, he has closed the door to his darkroom for the time being, making his own investigations into digital art with existing photographs, sampled imagery and Persian calligraphy. "You still need what Ansel Adams calls the "pre-visualization" of the final image," says Samandari. "If you haphazardly shoot and plaster photographs together in Photoshop, you might get something interesting, but that happens rarely and only accidentally."

Looking for new ways to make his own methods more efficient, painter Robaldo Briseño took up giclée for a recent exhibition. He quickly encountered Photoshop's steep learning curve. "There's the manipulation of the layers, the proofs, and then you don't like it. The transference of the colors from the screen to the print is different depending on the paper; also, you're working from this little screen, so when you print, that's another difference," says Briseño, whose giclées contain some 55 layers and 1.5 gigs (over one billion bytes) of information apiece. Undaunted, the painter-cum-digital artist is preparing a 40" x 300" canvas giclée mural commission to be permanently installed in the Austin Convention Center in 2002. Many of the skills he'll use were gained at Alternative INK.

"The more artists know, the better art they can produce," claims Maurer, expressing a democratic ethos characteristic of digital media, from music sampling to the free-for-all Internet. "And it makes good business sense. If you're extremely secretive, you narrow the field, and it isn't near as much fun." ■

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