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# Old fashioned printing sees a revival in the province

*In the digital age, pens and notebooks have given way to the Apple Notes app. Animation happens with clicks and taps on a computer. Newspaper companies are bleeding as readers look to screens for their media fix. But in the top-floor studio of downtown Regina's Creative City Centre, there are wooden trays full of type in various fonts — tiny metal pieces of individual letters. There are presses here, the kind that succeeded Gutenberg's original mid-15th-century invention: an etching press, a screen printing press and two small letterpresses. And there are jars and jars of ink.*

ASHLEY MARTIN

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“Print for life” is the motto here, the home of Articulate Ink, Regina’s two-year-old print collective.

There’s a similar passion for print in Saskatoon. The Ink Slab collective formed in 2010 and has about a dozen members. On the smaller end of the spectrum, there’s Backyard Letterpress with a membership of one — creator Shauna Buck.

What they have in common is this love of a medium that, considering technological advancements, should probably be extinct. But as an artistic medium, printmaking is thriving. Whereas five years ago there were only three students in the University of Regina’s upper-level printmaking course, today there are 26.

It was in this program that the four founding members of Articulate Ink met. When they left school and realized there was nowhere to continue printmaking, they decided to do something about it. For a class project, Michelle Brownridge, Caitlin Mullan, Karli Jessup and Amber Dalton had written a business plan for a print collective. After university, they made it a reality.

Ink Slab was similarly founded in Saskatoon. After graduating from printmaking in 2009, Michael Peterson and some of his former classmates realized they needed a place to print, and outside of the University of Saskatchewan, there wasn't one. They found a space in the Charter House building downtown that was cheap enough to make it worthwhile.

"None of us do this full-time, so the fact that the costs are low allows us to sustain members," he said.

The facilities aren't ideal — there's no running water in the studio, which means they can't do silkscreening — but there is room to print.

Two years ago, Articulate Ink's new home "was the complete ghetto version of the print studio at the university. Nothing quite worked properly or perfectly," said Jessup. And there were many growing pains.

Letterpress was new to them, but they pursued it anyway. "Printmakers are kind of greedy and ever-curious," said Mullan. There was a lot to learn. "It was like a new degree."

Then there was the business side of things. For the former fine arts students, running a business — the administration, acquiring startup materials and applying for funding — proved a steep learning curve.

But it was worth it to have a studio where they could exercise their passion.

"Once you start printmaking and you get the ink under your fingernails, I think it's just in your system and you can't ever get it out. There's no reasoning with it, like yeah maybe it's quicker to do it on an ink-jet, it's just like, so what? The printmaking bite has got you and it will never let you go," said Mullan.

"The inks are so juicy," added Jessup. "The embossing, you can't get that from a computer printer."

"Printmaking for the most part restricts you to a few tones or colours," said Peterson. "Working within those limitations and figuring out how to create an image within them is what we find interesting. We enjoy the technical challenges."

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The biggest technical challenge the women of Articulate Ink faced was trying to get their massive 1919 Chandler & Price letterpress to work. After a year and a half of sitting on "Ol' Bessie," a lucky find located in the basement of The Artful Dodger artists' space, they finally got it working in January.

"It's something that we didn't learn in art school and we had to learn ourselves, so getting that 100-year-old press up and running was pretty sweet," said Jessup.

Measuring four feet high by three feet deep, it's 1,500 pounds of cast iron with a motor attached.

"It is dangerous," said Mullan.

"It could eat your hand," added Brownridge.

"It's beautiful," Jessup affirmed. "Once the motor's on and it gets going, the floor actually moves. It's so powerful you can feel the floor moving and it's a cement floor in a basement."

Shauna Buck speaks just as glowingly of her 1927 C&P press, which she received a year ago. It took three months for the "big behemoth" to ship from Vancouver Island to Saskatoon.

When the motor gets going on the five-by-six-foot machine, "It makes a really satisfying whirling clank noise as it runs. You still have to hand-feed the paper one sheet at a time, so as it's moving you're getting

your hands in and out of there, which is kind of an adventure in and of itself.”

Buck's foray into printmaking was extracurricular. The Toronto native studied illustration at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ont., but always had an admiration of letterpress.

“I've always had a love of working with my hands. A lot of my friends and colleagues prefer digital illustration for the ease of editing and things like that, but I've always been a lot more partial to the down and dirty way,” said Buck, whose father Larry is a mechanic. “When I'm working with letterpress, the smell of oil and the mechanical greases and stuff like that reminds me a little bit of him working in the automotive shop. I feel like it's kind of a nice full-circle way for me to make artwork and do something pretty and industrial at the same time.”

So when she finally got her hands on this press, there was a lot of trial and error, but it was all done with love, and with purpose: Letterpress affords her a new way to make her illustrations.

“Every print that I'll pull on the press will be slightly different due to the amount of ink, or if I've maybe not mixed it thoroughly enough and there's a crazy colour shift somewhere in it, or debris got on the plate somewhere,” said Buck. “So each one is an artwork in and of itself.”

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Buck is a bit of an anomaly among printers. Though her husband Stefan Jackowski sometimes helps her run the press, located in her converted garage studio in Caswell Hill, she generally works alone. But printmaking is usually a communal practice.

“It's kind of that way by nature because the equipment is expensive and it's big and you need a space to do it,” said Brownridge.

“Once you've created the image, the actual printing of it is very technical and it requires time but not necessarily a lot of concentration, and it becomes fairly social,” added Peterson. “You're sort of doing it in a community of other printmakers.”

For Mullan, the connection extends past the here-and-now: It's about being part of a lineage, “people who've been doing this for thousands and thousands of years.” The earliest form of printmaking dates back 5,000 years.

Encountering former printmakers justifies all the hard work Articulate Ink has put in here: “There's this group of people who used to be printmakers but they couldn't continue doing it or they chose not to because there wasn't a space like this,” said Mullan. Now there is.

Last year, Peterson discovered a print community in Melfort. He was working at the University of Saskatchewan and had the opportunity to teach a weekly woodcuts course through Cumberland College. Nine eager students attended, one of whom has her own etching press at home. This year, though there was no official class, three of the students wanted to learn metal etching, so he continues to teach them on a monthly basis.

“For me that ties back into Ink Slab, just that spread of (knowledge). It's an old technique but there's still people out there learning it and I think that's still growing,” said Peterson.

Buck is proof.

“I taught myself how to screen print off the Internet and I taught myself how to letterpress off the Internet. The fact that you can have an interest and chase it down enough to teach yourself with determination is a big step in why it's becoming so much more prevalent now. It's a lot more accessible than it would have been previously,” she said.

Buck hopes to share her wealth of knowledge: She wants to obtain a couple of tabletop presses so she can start running workshops.

That's on Ink Slab's agenda, too.

“Our focus more than anything is on providing space, making sure space is available, getting the studio up and running. Now that we have that, we’re starting to say ‘where else can we move to with it?’” said Peterson.

Articulate Ink’s goal is to become a self-sustaining enterprise, diversifying its income and relying less on grant money. The fact that letterpress is in vogue can only help that: Wedding invitations, business cards and stationery are all on their radar as commission opportunities. The week following the big press’s resurgence, Articulate Ink already had commissions lined up. Brownridge says there’s a big demand for quality letterpress work in this province.

“Printmaking has kind of evolved from a commercial standpoint,” said Brownridge. “It’s this unique pull between commercial and fine art practice and it’s kind of fun when you can play in the middle of it.”

Why printed materials are making a comeback in a digital age is anyone’s guess. Peterson speaks of JackPine Press’s chapbooks. The hand-bound books are printed in limited edition and are much more artistic than an average book.

“There’s a desire to see that hand-printed individual quality of it and to hold something in your hand that you know someone has spent hours working on, rather than just something that got printed off a computer,” said Peterson.

Rob Truszkowski, a U of R printmaking professor who taught all four Articulate Ink founders, sees print-made products as an extension of people’s desire for connection. While a lot of that now happens through social media, it also happens “in tactility and the fragility of an object, and that’s where I think printmaking has the capacity to span notions of mass communication with an intimate gesture.”

Printmaking’s popularity might also be due to its affordability as art, says Buck.

“I think when you say prints, there’s still the perception out there that it’s the copy of a painting,” said Jessup. “I don’t know if everyone knows it can be a fine art practice.”

Maybe that’s why printmakers are so rare in art galleries. Peterson is working to change that, as co-owner of the Void Gallery, where Articulate Ink is having a show this summer.

As it is now, Articulate Ink has big plans for growth. Its current studio has space for seven artists and there is a wait-list. The collective wants to gain a larger space and hopes to attract printmakers from across the country for residencies. It also wants to develop a relationship with the U of R and with local high schools, offering mentorship opportunities to students.

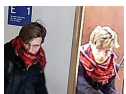
“It seems so bizarrely professional from where we started from,” said Mullan, looking back at last year’s grant applications. “Hopefully another year from now, it will be running a lot more like clockwork.”

Only Dalton of Articulate Ink works in printing — she screen prints T-shirts at FloPrint, which uses an entirely different, mechanized technique. The ultimate dream is to make printmaking a full-time job for each of them, and to see other people “getting the same sparkle in their eye that we get when we’re in here and our hands are dirty, and to have people in Regina and Saskatchewan recognize this place as a centre of creativity,” said Mullan.



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