

Nowscape

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CONFLUENCES
IN INTAGLIO:
TRACING A FLUID
LEGACY IN
PRINTMAKING
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Vivian Hu is an artist and printmaker and a recent graduate of Colby College, who explores the intersection of computer science and the arts. In her creative practice, she contemplates how sensorial experiences reshape her relationship with nature, and consequently, manifest in her printmaking processes. Vivian was a Prints Initiative Intern at the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation during the summer of 2025.



Fig. 1

In the mid-twentieth century, printmaking, especially lithography, was an overlooked and underexplored medium. Lithography was rarely taught in university art programs, there were only a handful of fine art lithography printshops, and many artists at the time were not interested in a medium that involved the complex collaborations it required.¹ While initially reluctant to experiment in printmaking, Helen Frankenthaler, first explored lithography in 1961 at Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE) guided by the technical expertise of the studio's first master printer, Robert Blackburn. The distinctions between printmaker and artist in the workshop environment necessitated numerous printmakers to execute an artist's visions and often involved arduous reworkings of the printmaking matrices. Blackburn's interventions in lithography fueled a surge of printmaking in mid-century America, making the medium both accessible and relevant to artists who worked with other implements. As an artist and printmaker, Blackburn's influence on the field has impacted my own practice in intaglio printmaking and prompted my study at his workshop, which to this day continues to convey his legacy.

ROBERT BLACKBURN: TECHNICIAN AND ARTIST



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Blackburn's technical mastery of lithography is evident in his own creative practice, characterized by its complexity, abstraction, and vivid use of color. His expertise as a technician was invaluable to his teaching. He was known as a "how-to" teacher—the first printmaker to explain the technical intricacies of lithography to the artists he printed for. Blackburn influenced artists who defined the American printmaking renaissance: Larry Rivers, Jasper Johns, Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Rauschenberg, and Grace Hartigan.² His dedication to maintaining the heritage of lithography and developing its potential was further established with the opening of his printmaking workshop in 1947.³ In this experimental space, Blackburn widened the perspectives of artists to see what was possible beyond the prevailing medium of painting and paved the way for them to be receptive to what American Abstract Expressionist painter George McNeil once called a "sad, retrograde" medium.⁴

In his collaboration with Frankenthaler, Blackburn's passionate force in the printmaking field provided a fresh stimulus in approaching lithography. Her first experiences in printmaking were with tusche, a greasy liquid usually applied with a brush on a polished slab of limestone. Frankenthaler recalls this experience, in an interview with Suzanne Boorsch in 1994:

I went out [to ULAE] and I remember feeling, "Is this tusche? and that's a stone? I've never seen one." And the whole idea of translating black tusche proofs into eventual color was new to me. For example, how to achieve various color experiences, working in stages, proofing, the importance of registration—these were all foreign, cumbersome, terms and ideas to me.⁵

Despite her apprehensions, *First Stone* (1961), printed by Blackburn, depicts Frankenthaler's eager experimentations of tusche wash and crayon through swoops of color and striking lines, embodying her bold and painterly nature even within a new and unfamiliar medium. Curator Deborah Cullen notes that Blackburn also treated his stones with fluidity in his own printmaking practice, and made the painterly style of lithography available to new generations of artists.⁶ Frankenthaler's next two prints, *May 26 Backwards* (1961) and *Brown Moons* (1961), also printed by Blackburn, strategically frame color and line while employing gestural strokes. Such early experimentations with the fluidity of tusche later became an important element in Frankenthaler's lithographic works. These formative collaborations with Blackburn at ULAE sparked a curiosity that extinguished her initial apprehensions about the medium and catalyzed a dedicated printmaking practice for the next five decades.

Fig. 1 Helen Frankenthaler, *First Stone*, 1961, lithograph, 22 x 30 inches (55.9 x 76.2 cm) ©2026 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, NY.

Fig. 2 Robert Blackburn working at ULAE, 1961. Photograph by Hans Namuth. ©1991 Hans Namuth Estate, Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

Fig. 3 Robert Blackburn, *Little Landscape*, 1968. AP, 1st State, lithograph, 12 17/19 x 26 inches. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division ©The Trust for Robert Blackburn. Used with permission.

Fig. 4 Helen Frankenthaler, *Brown Moons* (1961), artwork ©2026 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), West Islip, New York; photograph by Steven Sloman.

Whispers of Touch Astray
By Vivian Hu

I am filled—
with wisterias swaying purple,
with whisperings of willows
whose stillness swells
with echoes that clash,
unfolding into harmony.

I bathe
in familiar anomalies,
among branches laid bare.
Roots fork into the vast—
what becomes of them?

I am inhabited
by rain's melancholy,
a tree unfurling raw.
Beneath, a pulse:
dialogue unseen,
virtues veiled in silence.

I am consumed
by a purple unnamed—
boysenberry shadow,
wisteria remembered.
Listen,
please!
To the thrum of wings
yearning for release.

WHISPERS OF TOUCH ASTRAY: FROM IDEA TO MANIFESTATION

Whispers of Touch Astray emerged from the excitement I felt on discovering that Helen Frankenthaler and I shared an artistic practice: making lists of titles.⁷ Like Frankenthaler, I keep a list of evocative words that arbitrarily surface in my mind and hold the essence of a fleeting instant to be used as inspiration for yet-to-be-made art, whether creative writing or printmaking. I scoured through my word banks for a title that simultaneously served as a prompt, or a source of inspiration for my creative writing and my printmaking practices.

While I was researching printmaking studios that I could access in New York City, I came across the courses offered by the Blackburn Workshop. What better way to understand the beauty of a collaborative environment than a class at the workshop created by the master printer of Frankenthaler's very first prints! As if I needed more convincing, Deborah Cullen wrote that "Robert Hamilton Blackburn was known as a 'printmaker's printmaker';⁸ if you wanted to make prints you made your way to his workshop in Chelsea," and so, the stars aligned.

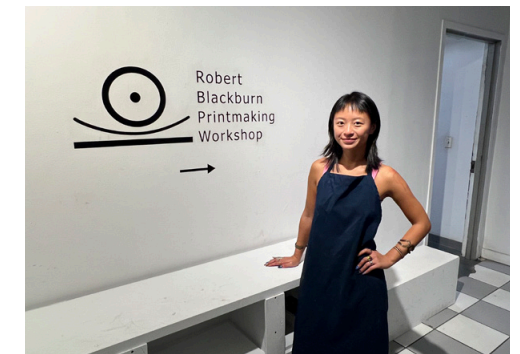


Fig. 5

I enrolled in an etching workshop at the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop to experience for myself the thrill of an environment—built off the backbone of Blackburn's zeal for expanding his knowledge of printmaking and providing artists with access to equipment and facilities—where a community of artists foster enthusiasm and inspiration.⁹ Diving into title lists and vats of ferric chloride (figuratively!), *Whispers of Touch Astray* has materialized as both a poem and an intaglio print. The landscape evokes the memory of melodious winds rustling through tall grasses atop a misty mountain, a landscape I experienced during my time studying printmaking in Japan.

Fig. 5 Vivian Hu at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop where she created her intaglio print *Whispers of Touch Astray* (2025).

Vivian Hu, *Whispers of Touch Astray*, 2025, soap ground aquatint etching, step-etching, intaglio, plate: 4 x 6 in., sheet: 7 ½ x 11 ¼ in. Reproduced at actual size. ©2026 Vivian Hu.



AP ½

Vivian Hu '25

Notes:

1. *The Original Print: An Introduction to Printmaking in the Postwar Period*, Norton Simon Museum, October 1, 2011–April 2, 2012, <https://www.nortonsimon.org/exhibitions/2010-2019/the-original-print-an-introduction-to-printmaking-in-the-postwar-period/>. Lithography was traditionally used only for commercial printing.

2. Elizabeth Jones, "Robert Blackburn: An Investment in an Idea," *The Tamarind Papers: Technical, Critical and Historical Studies on the Art of Lithograph* 6, no. 1 (1982): 12, https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/tamarind_papers/vol6/iss1/1/.

3. The workshop was renamed Creative Graphics Studio in 1955, closed in 2002, and reopened as (the still-operating) EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop, the oldest and longest-running community print shop in the US, <https://www.rbpnw-efanyc.org/about>.

4. Interview with George McNeil, April 21, 1978, quoted in Jones, 11.

5. Helen Frankenthaler, quoted in "Conversations with Prints," in Pegram Harrison, *Frankenthaler: A Catalogue Raisonné: Prints 1961–1994*, 17, fn 22 (Abrams, 1996).

6. Deborah Cullen, "Robert Blackburn (1920–2003): A Printmaker's Printmaker," *American Art* 17, no. 3 (2003): 94, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1215812>.

7. Throughout her career, Frankenthaler periodically maintained lists of titles which she would turn to upon the completion of an artwork.

8. Cullen, 92.

9. Jones, 11.

**MAKING AN AQUATINT-ETCHED
INTAGLIO PRINT:**



1. Vivian prepared the plate by using a flat file to bevel the edges, which prevents the plate from tearing the paper as it is pulled through the pressure of the printing press.



2. A burin was used to incise markings into the soap ground covering the plate. This ground protects areas of the metal from being “etched” when it is exposed to the corrosive influence of the acid during the next stage of the process.



3. The plate for *Whispers of Touch Astray* was submerged in a bath of ferric chloride to “bite” into the metal surface, permanently etching the lines revealed by the burin’s incisions into the soap ground.



4. After the acid bath, the remaining ferric chloride was washed away with water to stop the etching action. This process was repeated multiple times to achieve the final print—a technique called “step etching.”



5. Between each submersion in the acid, areas of the plate are covered or “stopped out” with ground to preserve lighter, more delicate lines while etching the exposed areas of metal further by immersing them in acid for longer periods of time. The depth of these exposed elements holds more ink during the printing process and allows for darker lines and a wider range of tonal variations to register in the final version.




6. After the plate had been cleaned, inked, and excess ink wiped away, Vivian turned to the printing press to pull the print. The plate was positioned face up on the press bed, and slightly dampened paper was centered on the metal surface. The blanket was laid over the plate and paper to evenly distribute pressure as they were mechanically pulled through the rollers.



7. The artist turns the “captain’s wheel” of the printing press to move the plate through the immense pressure of the rollers, which transferred the ink held in the etched lines of the plate onto the paper, creating the artist’s print *Whispers of Touch Astray*.

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