

pressing matters

CELEBRATING MODERN PRINTMAKING

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

Dave Lefner



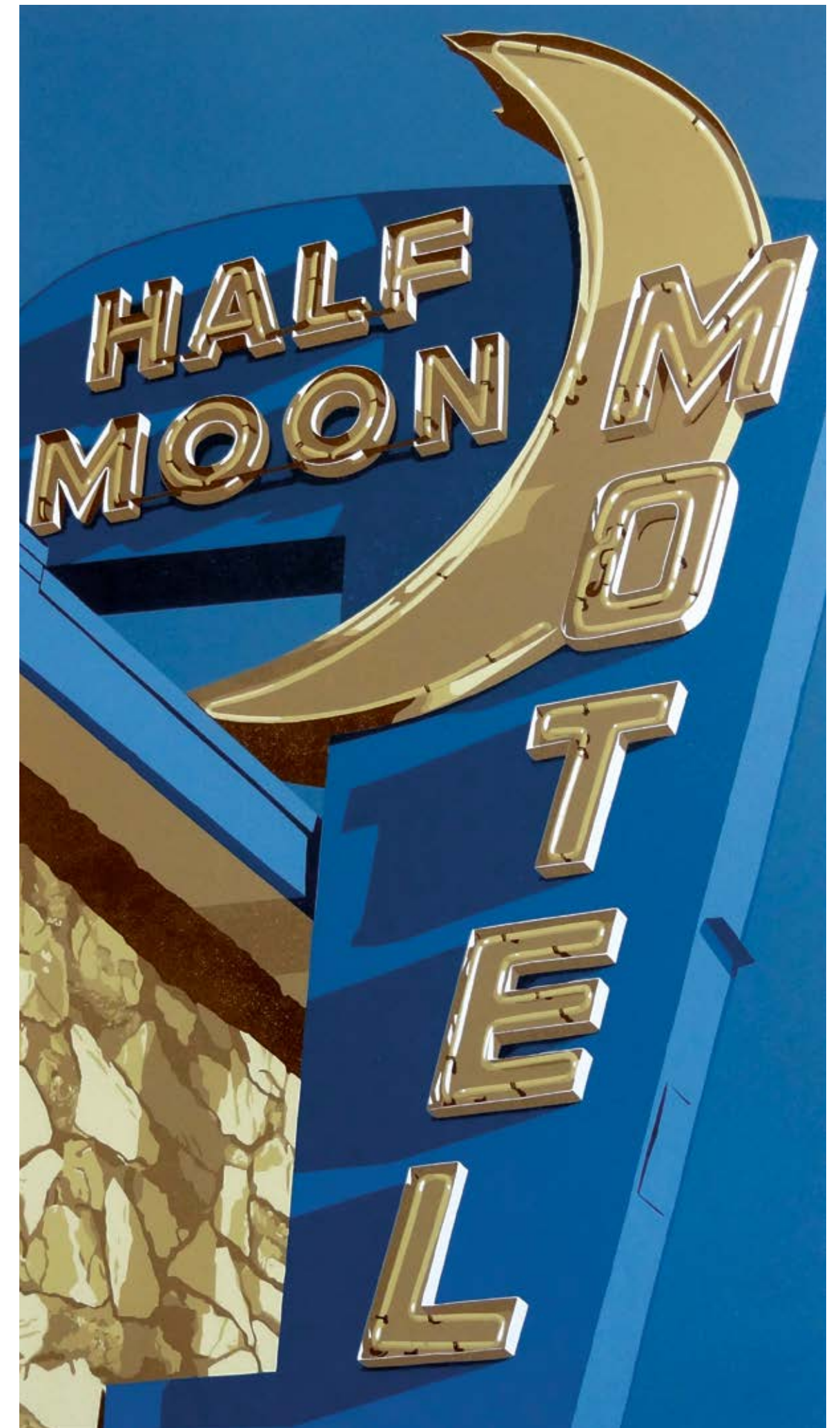
Photos by SERENA CREATIVE

Words by JAKE KENNEDY

Look Again

LA's *Dave Lefner* makes huge reduction prints, but his ambition and skill are bigger still. Working from his own photos and to enormous scale, he repeatedly tricks the viewer into thinking they're looking at a photo. But how could photos ever look so perfect?

THIS ARTICLE WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN ISSUE 3 (FEBRUARY 2018), WHICH IS NOW OUT OF PRINT.
THE DIGITAL VERSION (PDF) OF ISSUE 3 IS AVAILABLE FROM WWW.PRESSINGMATTERSMAG.COM/BUY-MAG





“I love every aspect of the medium. Nothing gets stale because each part of the process is a different mindset.”

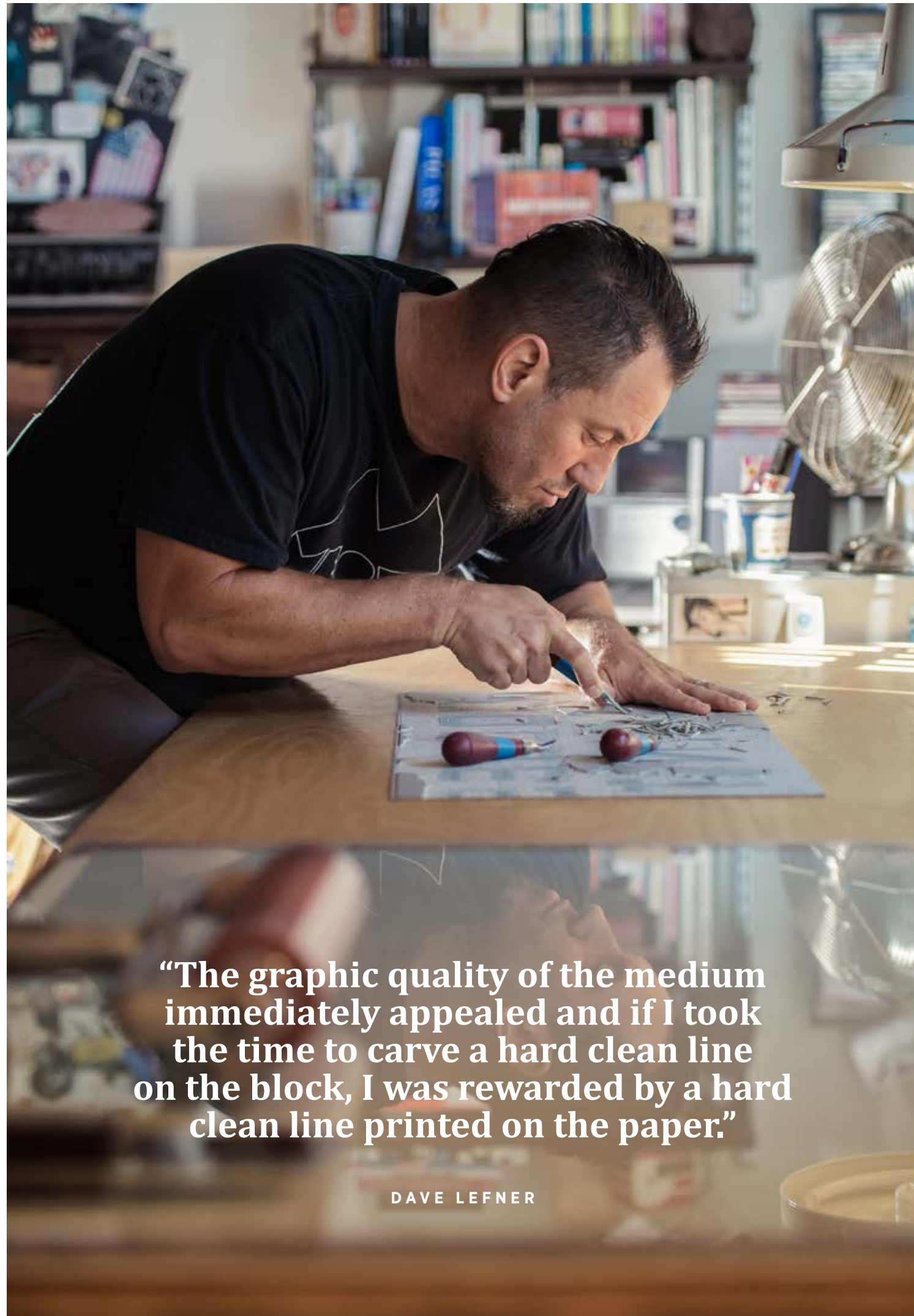
DAVE LEFNER

It was 25 years ago when printer Dave Lefner first pulled a reduction linocut. Yep, that’s right. These images you see on the page are all reduction linocuts – one of the fiddliest, most intricate forms of printing, where registration is everything and all can be lost at the final stage, undoing weeks of work in a single stroke.

Look again. These pictures of neon signs, classic Americana and hoardings from a faded US era have all been carved by hand, many at massive scales (one measures 62” across) and printed off in countless layers to give the requisite depth and shadow. They’re not photos (although they are based on Dave scouting with a camera), but they have a hyper real feel to them. One piece, *The Rialto*, was made with 17 different colour stages. “It’s so heavy,” Dave says.

And people, understandably, love them. Now working full time as a printer in a studio surely cooler than any we’ve seen, Dave says printing still doesn’t feel like a job. “The first – and biggest – factor, is that I love what I do,” he says. “It sounds cliché, but I feel like it’s my reason for being here on this planet. Also, I love every aspect of the medium. Nothing gets stale because each part of the process is a different mindset: doing the original drawing requires certain skills, carving the block is another, mixing and applying the ink another, and so on. It’s not just standing in front of an easel.”

Dave says that his early life as an artist was actually founded in graphics, which might explain the precision of his later work. “It was because I always had a love of fonts and type and, also, it sounded like a real profession. But I really always knew I wanted to be an Artist with a capital A. I wasn’t sure exactly what that path would be. I went to



“The graphic quality of the medium immediately appealed and if I took the time to carve a hard clean line on the block, I was rewarded by a hard clean line printed on the paper.”

DAVE LEFNER



every gallery and museum opening I could, trying to find inspiration, but all I found was frustration. I saw a lot of 'Art' that seemed to be thrown together, or created just trying to be original for originality's sake. It seemed concept was more important than talent or execution," he explains.

"I always had an artistic ability, and I wanted to do something that required use of those innate skills. I took drawing, painting and sculpture classes, but nothing really clicked. It seemed like I'd seen it all before. Then I took a beginning printmaking class and, needless to say, it changed my life. From carving and printing my very first woodcut, I just knew it was for me. The graphic quality of the medium immediately appealed, and if I took the time to carve a hard clean line on the block, I was rewarded by a clean hard line printed on the paper after I inked it."

So the path to the crisp, immaculate prints you see before you had begun. It opened up a new world to Dave. "I suddenly felt like an artisan of old, practicing true craftsmanship, and regardless of subject matter, one had to master the technique to even begin to call oneself an artist. When the class moved on to linoleum, I discovered a book about Picasso's series from the 1950s of his innovative reduction linocuts. I pored over every page, trying to take in everything I could. The reduction process required an even greater skill set, as well as a different way of looking at the piece from beginning to end. I had to give over to the mystery of that process. I became fascinated by it, and I still am to this day..."

Then other, more urban influences started to creep into Dave's work. "My main influence for subject matter started with Stuart Davis, a New York painter from the 1920s. He started abstracting on the urban landscape of NY, including bits of signage, and lettering. My early work shows this direct influence. When I started taking pictures of the Los Angeles urban landscape for photo reference, I began to notice all the cool neon signs and I became fascinated by the shadows that were cast from the tubing. From then on, I challenged myself to go for realism, but not photo-realism. I wanted to fool people from a distance, but I always want them to get up close and see that it was a result of flat colours on top of flat colours to create the illusion. I always want the process to be as much a part of my art as the subject matter. Also, I realised how much I liked, not only the iconic, big DTLA Broadway theatre marquees, but the small, aging mom-and-pop businesses that sold liquor, lodging or dry cleaning. As time went on, the influence of Andy Warhol's love of the common object and Ed Ruscha's use of lettering has certainly crept into my work too."

"I've always loved the design and optimism of Americana in the 1950s and 60s, and I try to replicate that, even in the colours."

DAVE LEFNER





ART (ārt) *n.* 1. Human effort to imitate, supplement, alter, or counteract the work of nature. 2. a. The conscious production or arrangements of sounds, colors, forms, movements, or other elements in a manner that affects the sense of beauty; specifically, the production of the beautiful in a graphic or plastic medium. b. The study of these activities. c. The product of these activities. 3. High quality of conception and execution, as found in the works of beauty; aesthetic value. 4. a. A system of principles and methods employed in the performance of a set of activities. b. A trade or profession that requires such a system of principles and methods. c. Skill in adept performance, con-





“I’m definitely the only artist in my galleries whose main medium is a form of printmaking.”

DAVE LEFNER

“The trajectory of my life and career completely shifted. Having the space to create, as well as having a built-in venue to show my work twice a year just by opening my door, has led to so many pivotal moments in my journey in art. Even now, I still look forward to each Artwalk. I get a chance to interact with people who want to see art and I can explain my process to those who may not understand how it's created, all without leaving the comfort of my own home!”

In terms of the equipment Dave uses in the space, there are tried and tested methods alongside newer experiments, he says. “I own three presses. The first I found for \$50 while I was in college. It's a 1925 Vandercook Truss Proof Press meant for proofing a single letterpress plate. But since letterpress is basically relief printing it worked great for my linocuts. However, I'm limited to a bed size of 18"x12". I recently bought 50 drawers of some amazing lead type, so now I'm using it to experiment with letterpress and linocuts together. I have another small standard roller hand-cranked press, which I still use constantly for small prints. But my true love is my 50"x30" Conrad hand-cranked monotype press. I made the investment about 15 years ago and it changed my life. I also have a large drying rack, which is invaluable, since I used to have to hang the prints on clotheslines all over the studio.” Needless to say, all the investment paid off, and Dave is now in the envious position of printing for a living. “I'm represented by two galleries right now, with generally one solo show a year at each. They're usually spread out about six months apart, so I have time to create new work. But because I do editions, albeit small ones, it's not unusual for each gallery to have some of the same pieces. I also currently have a museum exhibition – sort of a mini retrospective – that's been running since August.”

So how does it feel? “I say with all humility, that I feel blessed to be living the dream. Also, as a bit of a side note, I have to admit to a certain sense of pride by the success I've had in spite of being a printmaker! I'm definitely the only artist in my galleries whose main medium is a form of printmaking. We live in a world where painting and sculpture take centre stage! It's just not fair!” Fair or not, Dave's prints have come to represent a retro America, a more innocent one perhaps, in a time when the country is anything but. “The universal theme running through all my work is definitely the ‘vintage’ element,” he says. “I've always loved the design and optimism of Americana in the 1950s and 60s, and I try to replicate that, even in the colours. Occasionally I use Permanent Red straight out of the tube, but every other colour is specifically mixed by me for each piece, where I often warm the colours for that nostalgic feel.”

So look again, and then again, and try and get a feel for the work and love that went into these pieces. It seems you can make anything happen if you dedicate enough time to it. Even dreams. **T**

www.davelefnr.com

Fooling viewers – making them have a moment of realisation that somehow enhances Dave's work, has become a key part for him. “It's absolutely a moment I love. The artist community where I live has two annual open studio events, where thousands of people come through the studio (also, our home!). So, unlike galleries where I'm not there most of the time, I get to see first-hand as people walk around looking at my work. However, most of the time, that “a-ha moment” doesn't come until I show them the process. They usually think they're doctored photos or something. But then, as they look at the work again, you can see a different appreciation in their eyes.”

Dave's workspace also warrants a mention, and will seem a world away from the bedroom and box room spaces of many home printers. “Nineteen years ago, I found out about an open studios event at an artist community near Downtown LA at a place called the Brewery,” he remembers. “Now, I was born and raised in Los Angeles but I'd never heard about the place. They say it's the world's largest artist live/work colony, with 310 lofts. Twice a year, most of the artists would open the doors of their spaces for a free public viewing called Artwalk. Thousands of people attended the event. It was absolutely amazing, like nothing I could have ever imagined. It was just big, beautiful raw industrial spaces for creative types. I knew I just had to live here, and despite being warned about a long waiting list, I secured a loft in about a month. The rest is history!



Watch.

CLICK ON IMAGE TO LAUNCH >



A SHORT FILM BY **SERENA CREATIVE**

“Over an 8 month period, we had the wonderful opportunity to document the inspiring talent of Los Angeles artist, Dave Lefner. We’ve always enjoyed the visceral quality of his work, but now have a very fond appreciation for this incredibly passionate, dedicated and humble artisan.”

Dave chooses the rarely used medium of reduction linocuts to express his love for the City of Angels as well as preserve the history of it’s ever changing urban landscape. Whether it’s found in the extreme shadows cast from a broken neon sign at midday or in the intricate web of power lines crisscrossed overhead, Los Angeles provides him the perfect inspiration for his detailed linoleum block prints.”

www.serenacreative.com/lefner

Update.

CATCHING UP WITH DAVE LEFNER • APRIL 2020

WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN UP TO SINCE WE SPOKE TO YOU FOR YOUR ARTICLE IN ISSUE 3?

I can't believe it's been two years since my feature in Pressing Matters! Time sure flies when you're having fun! Well, I guess the top three things that happened since then were unique exhibition opportunities. The first, I allude to in the article, which was having the privilege of being featured in a five-month solo exhibition of my work, "LA Redux: Reduction Linocuts by Dave Lefner" at the Pasadena Museum of California Art (PMCA). This was a very special institution to me personally, because it was a place where I saw some truly inspiring shows; Corita Kent and Frances Gearhart, among them. And if that wasn't enough, I got to meet and talk with Mr. Wayne Thiebaud! During that five-month duration, I hosted seven block printing workshops at the museum and was featured in a Los Angeles Times review of the show.

My next opportunity was a three-person exhibition in March of 2019, "Typolino: La typographie en linogravure", at Le Musée de l'imprimerie de Nantes in France. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend. But later that year, I had two pieces selected by the prestigious, Royal Society of Painters-Printmakers for "The Masters Relief" exhibition at the Banksie Gallery in London. Despite having several collectors in the UK, this was the first time my work was shown in a gallery. And I am happy to report that my wife and I had already previously booked a trip to Europe at that time and we were able to make the opening! It was a nice show and I was able to meet a few of my favorite printmakers on Instagram.

CAN YOU TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT A COUPLE OF YOUR RECENT PROJECTS FEATURED IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES?

As always, I'm wanting to work bigger and bigger, and in the last few years I did just that.

For a long time now I've wanted to create large compositions using images of individual neon letters to spell out specific words. This would require a reduction linocut for each letter in the word, with editions of at least 10 for each letter. Eventually, my plan is to do the whole alphabet, but for now, I'm doing the letters according to the words I want to create. "BEAUTY" was the first word I started on. Obviously, it required six letters, each measuring 17in x 11in, with each reduction linocut averaging almost 8 colors. In the end, it was a total of 47 colors between the six blocks. All framed up, the piece measures 25in x 80in. Since then, I've done the words "LOVE" and "JOY", as well.

"Endless Summer" (Diptych) is one of my latest large pieces. The image is of a 1946 Ford Woodie, that absolutely embodies the sunny optimism of mid-

century design that I wish to show in most of my work. The piece measures 28in x 65in overall and took 12 color stages to complete. I have to admit that it was a labour of love, as doing a reduction linocut that large, using that many colors can be a little nerve-racking. After every stage, I considered it a small victory to still clearly see the white of the paper in those places where I had carved away the block at the very first stage!

HAVE YOU DEVELOPED YOUR STYLE OR TRIED NEW TECHNIQUES?

Even after 27 years, I feel I'm continually trying to challenge my skills through larger scale and more and more detail through the reduction process. This is always my goal. But that being said, I've also been playing around with yet another "Alphabet series", in which I'm creating a single letter by carving two separate blocks; one being an actual font of a letter, and the other representing the same letter in neon, stylized to be printed in one color. These blocks can then be re-used (something I'm not used to having the luxury of doing!), to create words. It's been a fun way to experiment (see "ART" print below for an example of this technique).



HAVE YOU BEEN DOING DEMOS, HOLDING WORKSHOPS OR MORE OPEN STUDIOS?

As mentioned above, I taught seven Basic Block Printing Workshops during the run of my exhibition at the PMCA. Also, as mentioned in the magazine, I always open up my studio for the bi-annual, Spring and Fall, Brewery Artwalk in the art community where we live. But obviously, this year the Spring event was cancelled due to the COVID nightmare. I was so bummed, as it's always such a great opportunity to show new work and talk to the public about the process... all from the comfort of my home/studio!

HOW WOULD YOU RECOMMEND PEOPLE GET STARTED PRINTING USING THE REDUCTION LINOCUT TECHNIQUE?

First, research the Master, Pablo Picasso, and look up his series from the 1950s. Then don't get too ambitious, too fast. Create a nice, simple design, and not more than 3 colors... using a light, mid-range, and dark, possibly even in the same color.

CAN YOU LIST OUT SOME GOOD ONLINE RESOURCES FOR THE TECHNIQUE?

I've never really thought of looking. But I'd be happy to tell you what materials I use! Everything I use, I can basically get through Blick Art Materials - <https://www.dickblick.com>. My linoleum is Blick Battleship Gray Unmounted, Pkg of 3 Pieces 24in x 36in. It's shipped flat, so you don't have to worry about the curve of a roll. (it makes a big difference!) My inks are Cranfield Traditional Relief Inks (oil-based). They come in 500 g cans or 75 ml tubes. I hate the waste of ink from cans, even if you change the skins, so I only use the 75 ml tubes. It's a little less cost-effective, but with a tube wringer, I can get every bit of ink out. Also, I use the Wiping Compound/Tack Reducer to modify/control the consistency of the ink. And the paper I use is Rives BFK Heavyweight. I'm not sure if it's a top "printmaking" paper, but I love it. It's heavy enough to accept a lot of layers of ink, but be careful... it can also crease easily if mis-handled.

CAN YOU SHARE SOME INSTAGRAM PROFILES FOR ARTISTS THAT YOU LIKE THAT PEOPLE CAN CHECK OUT?

I have to admit, most of my favorite printmakers are from the UK. Here's eight of my favourites, in no particular order...

Nick Morley is probably the one artist/printmaker who I've known of the longest, even before Instagram [@linocutboy](#)

Ieuan Edwards [@ieuanedwards_bgp](#)

Alexandra Buckle [@alexandra.buckle](#)

Pernille Sand [@persilleand](#)

Jennifer and Jo [@starshapedpress](#)

Kari Kristensen [@theprintmakerandherdog](#)

Mary Lynn Blasutta [@blasutta](#)

Elina Adrshina [@elina.artist](#)

Kelly Reemtsen [@kellyreemtsen](#)

New Work.

A SELECTION OF MORE RECENT PROJECTS

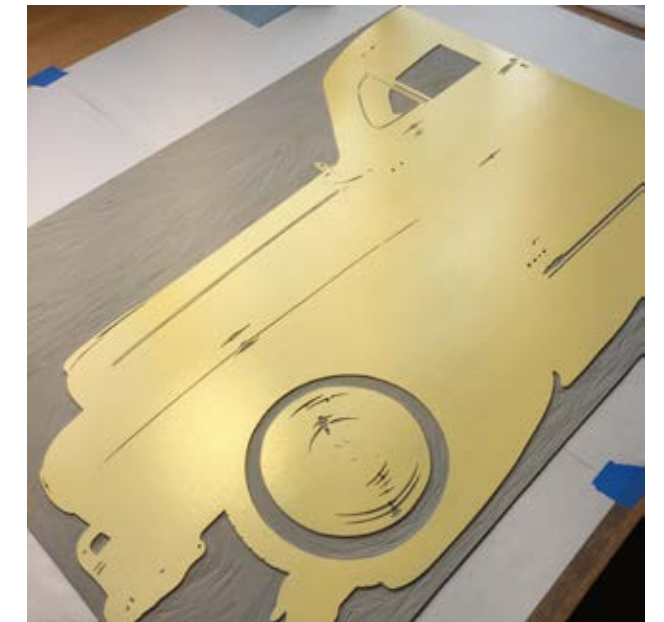
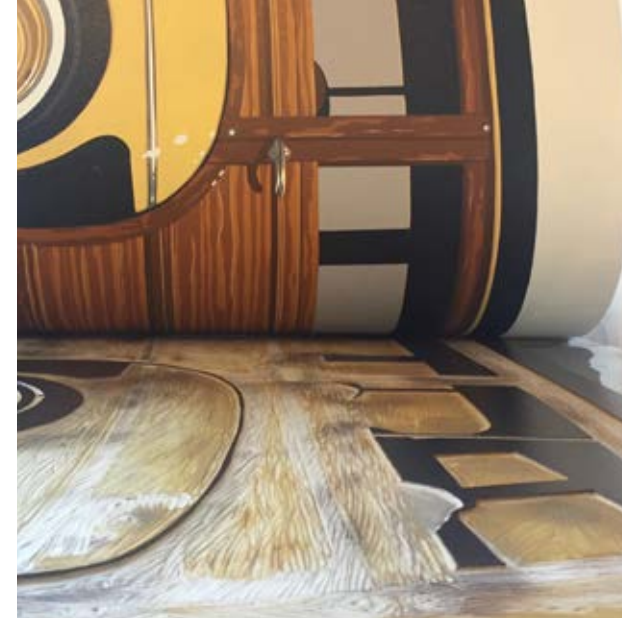
“THE SKYVIEW MOTEL”

- REDUCTION LINOCUT
- 11 COLORS
- EDITION OF 7
- 34" X 20"



New Work.

A SELECTION OF MORE RECENT PROJECTS



“ENDLESS SUMMER” (FORD WOODIE)

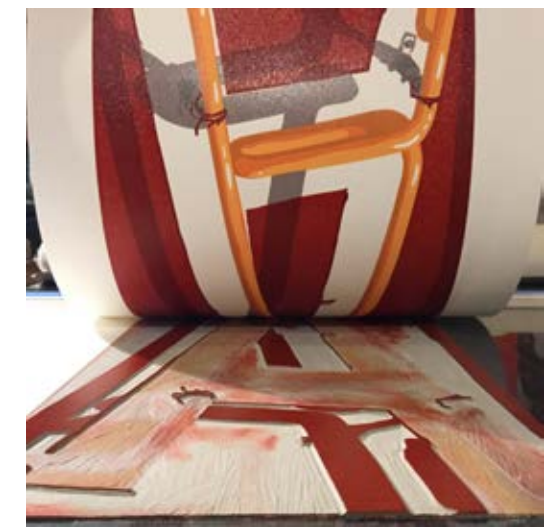
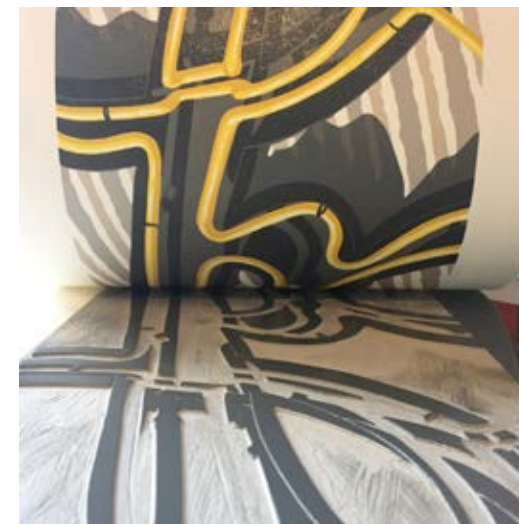
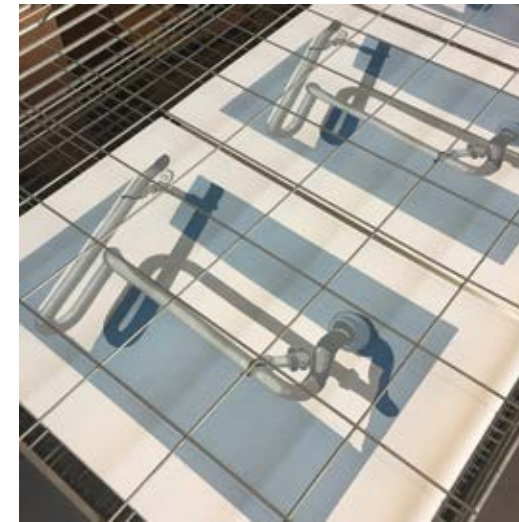
- REDUCTION LINOCUT
- 12 COLORS
- EDITION OF 6
- 28" X 65"

New Work.

A SELECTION OF MORE RECENT PROJECTS

“BEAUTY”

- 6 REDUCTION LINOCUTS
- 47 COLORS TOTAL
- 20" X 74"

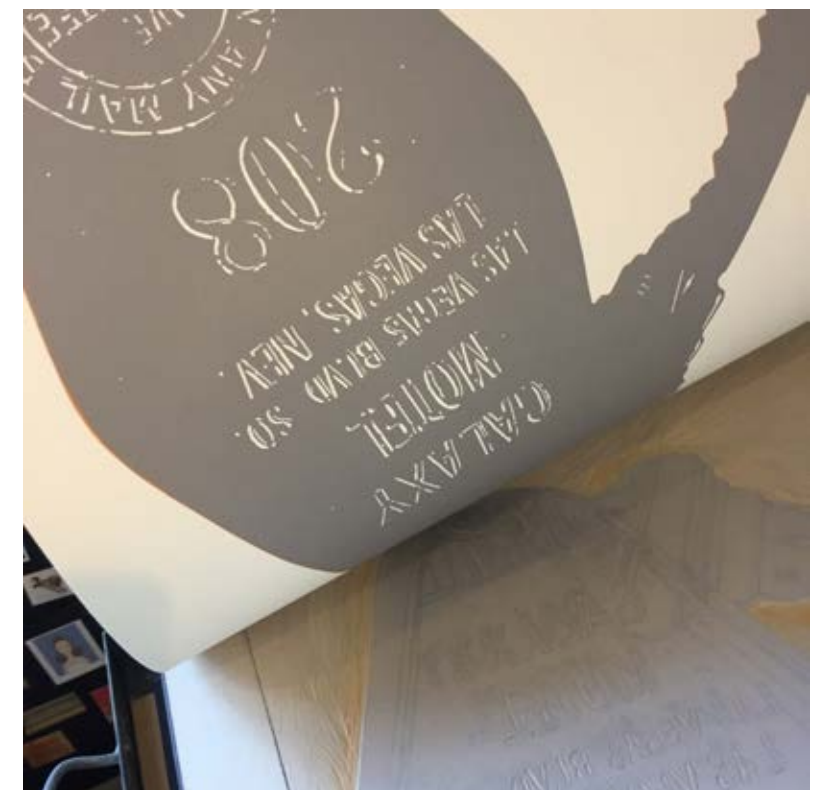
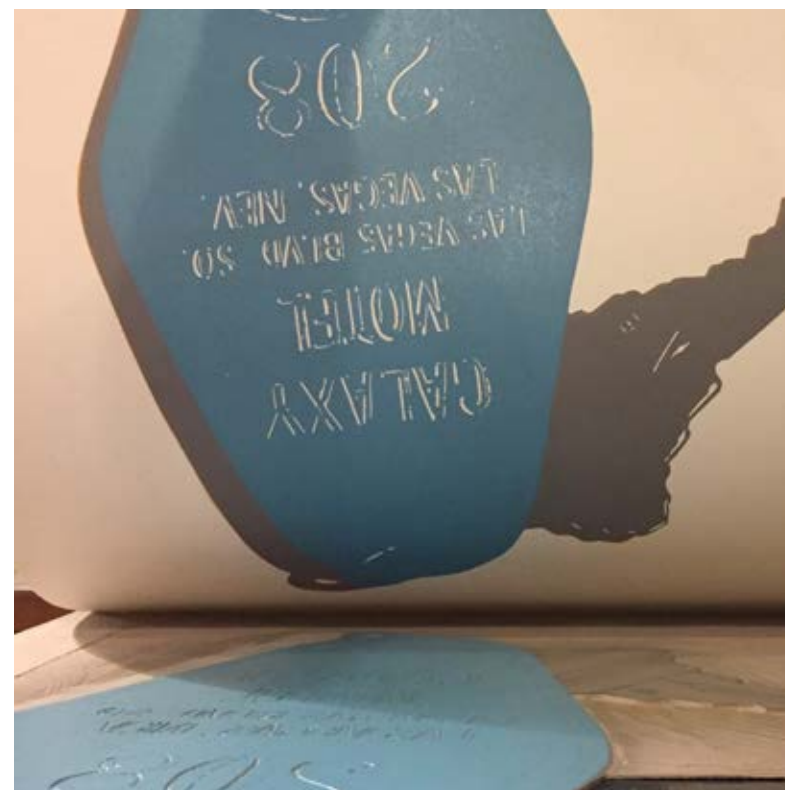


New Work.

A SELECTION OF MORE RECENT PROJECTS

“THE GALAXY MOTEL”

- REDUCTION LINOCUT
- 11 COLORS
- EDITION OF 6
- 30" X 20"



New Work.

A SELECTION OF MORE RECENT PROJECTS

“SINCE 1968”

- REDUCTION LINOCUT
- 7 COLORS
- EDITION OF 3
- 17" X 34"

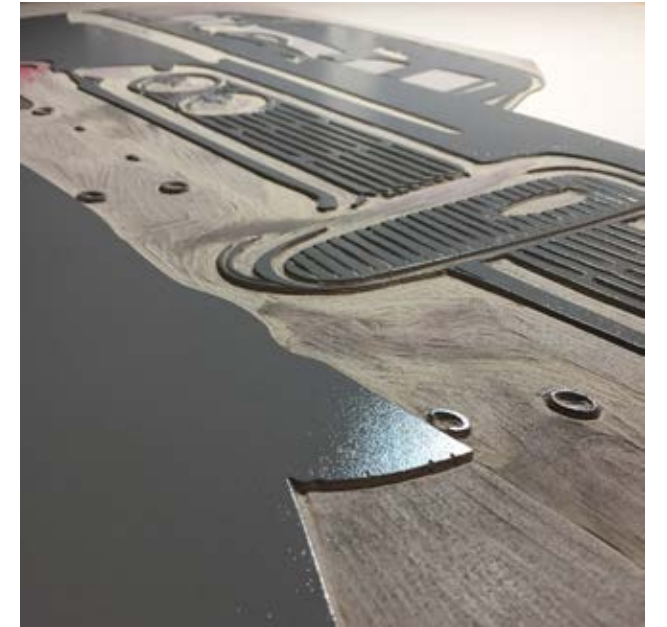
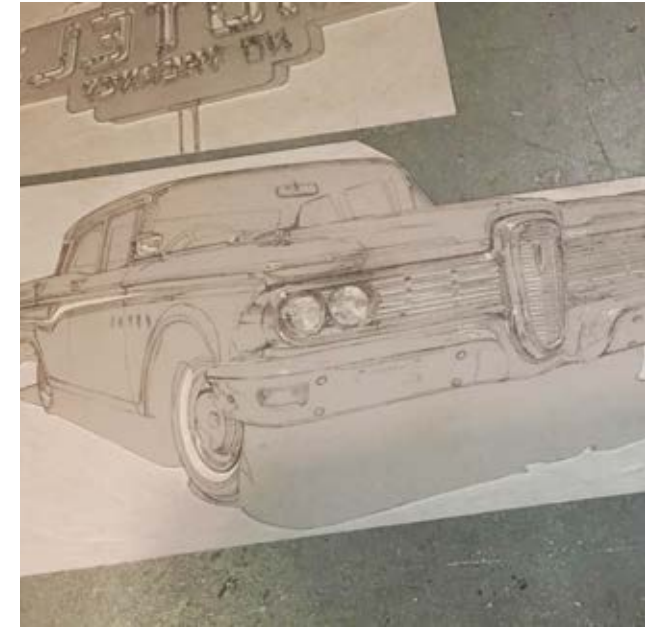


New Work.

A SELECTION OF MORE RECENT PROJECTS

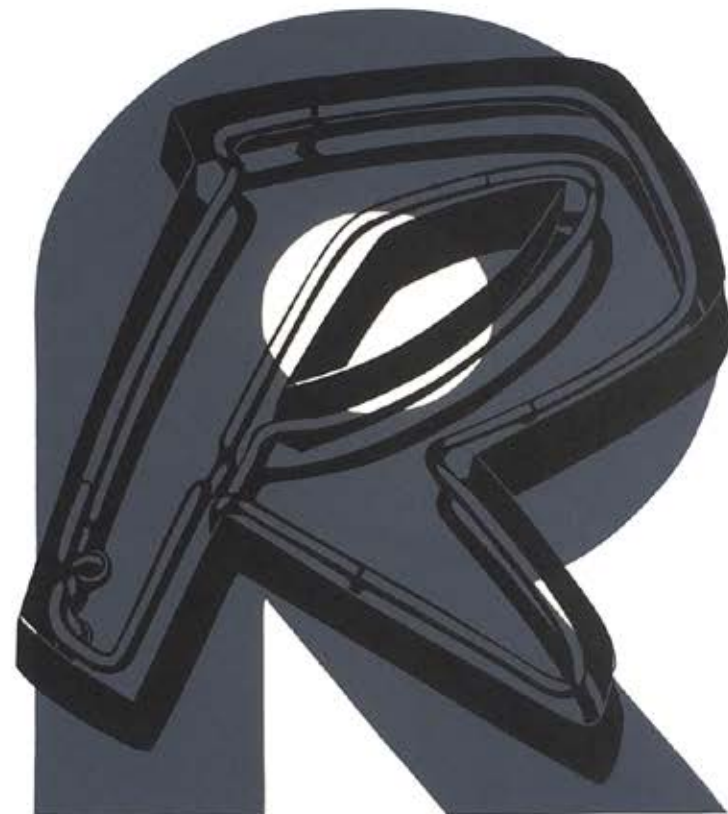
“THE EDESEL”

- REDUCTION LINOCUT
- 7 COLORS
- EDITION OF 8
- 20" X 35"



New Work.

A SELECTION OF MORE RECENT PROJECTS



“ART”

- 6 LINOCUTS
- 4 COLORS
- OPEN EDITION
- 16" X 35"



Studio Gallery.

TAKE A WALK AROUND DAVE'S AMAZING STUDIO SPACE



Studio Gallery.

TAKE A WALK AROUND DAVE'S AMAZING STUDIO SPACE



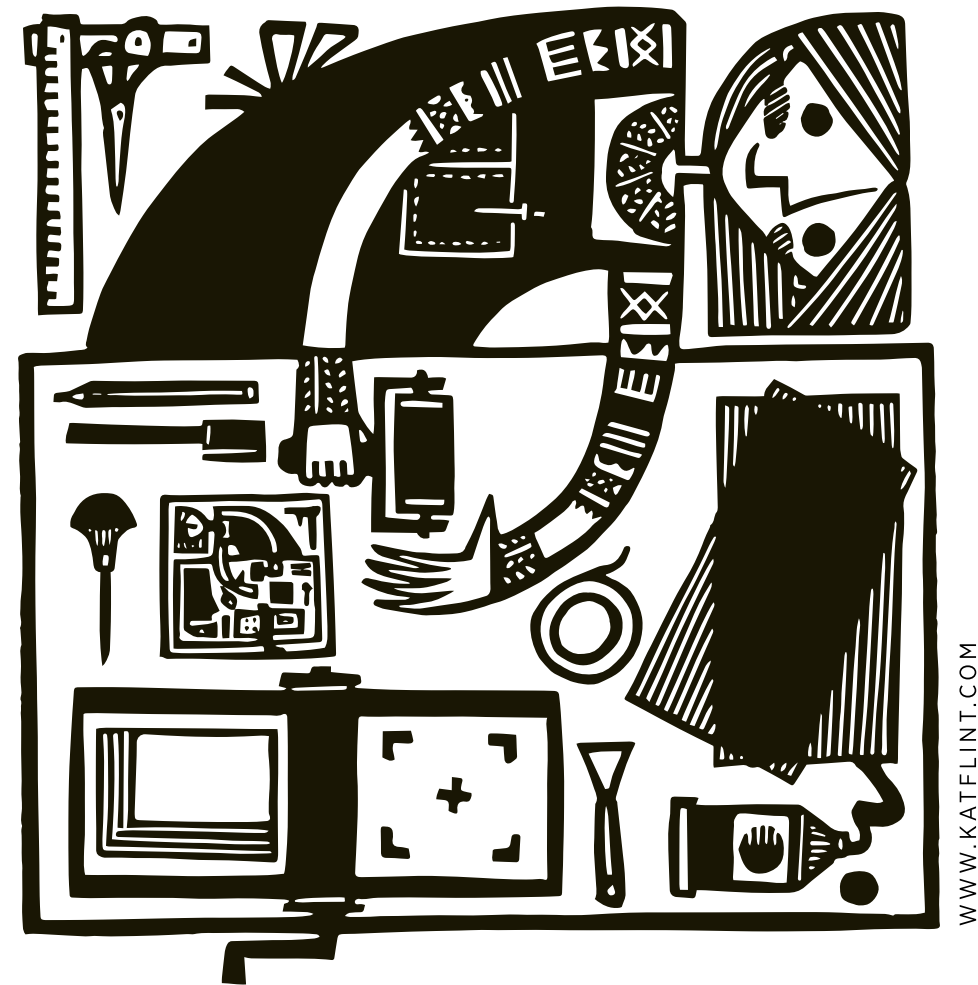
Studio Gallery.

TAKE A WALK AROUND DAVE'S AMAZING STUDIO SPACE



pressing matters

CELEBRATING MODERN PRINTMAKING



HELLO@PRESSINGMATTERSMAG.COM

WWW.PRESSINGMATTERSMAG.COM

 PRESSINGMATTERSMAG