

arts **wednesday**

Prints that connect artists and communities

By Cate McQuaid
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Printmaking, perhaps more than any other medium, fosters community. Printmakers don't work alone in their studios, as painters often do.

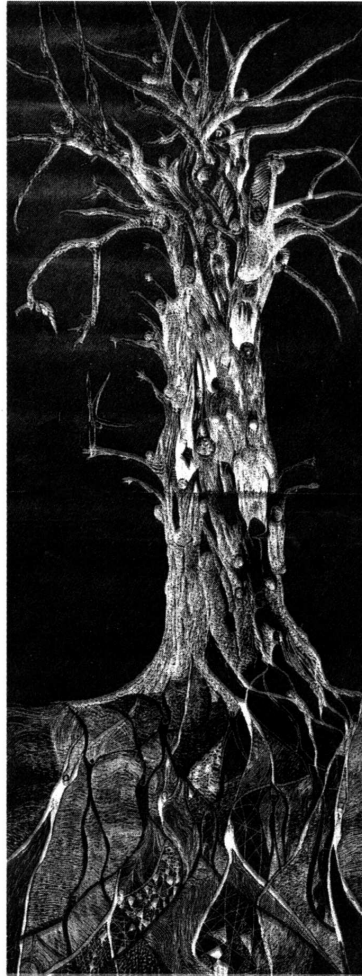
GALLERIES They share space and equipment.

Two exhibits up now celebrate the bonds among printmakers. "The Boston — Jo'Burg Connection: Collaboration and Exchange at Artist Proof Studio, 1983-2012," curated by Pamela Allara at Tufts University Art Gallery, is an impressive and humbling show charting the evolution of Artist Proof Studio in Johannesburg, which has many ties to Boston. "ReThink INK: 25 Years at Mixit Print Studio," which is all over the place, touts the thriving community that works at the Somerville studio.

The two shows are linked. Kim Berman, the South African artist who founded Artist Proof Studio, lived in Boston for several years. She worked at Mixit's predecessor, Artist's Proof in Cambridge, and Mixit artists have traveled to South Africa to mentor young printmakers. Berman and several other artists, including Mixit founders Catherine Kernan and Jane Goldman, have prints in both shows.

"The Boston-Jo'Burg Connection" works so well because it moves along a compelling story line, which Allara tells effectively with the art, with wall text, and with the way she organizes the exhibit; it's roughly chronological, but each section also takes on a theme. The story involves empowering young black printmakers after the fall of apartheid, working to heal a racial divide, tackling issues such as the AIDS pandemic, and nurturing self-reflective citizen-artists. There's more: The studio burned in a fire in 2003, and cofounder Nhlanhla Xaba was killed. The Artist Proof community rallied and rebuilt.

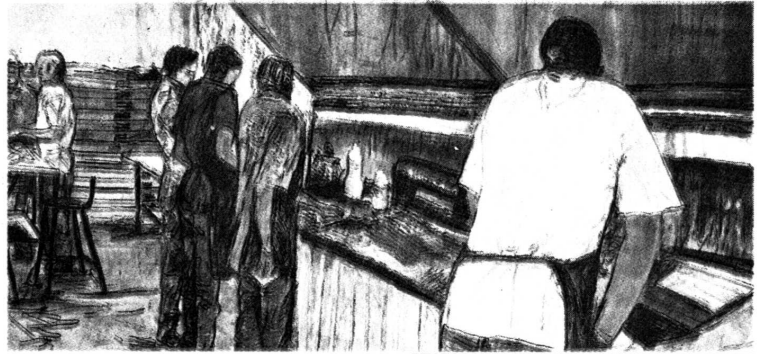
The work is, by and large, graphic, searing, and thoughtful. Several black-and-white linocut murals made by groups of artists have punch; they recall the muscle and verve of Works Progress Adminis-



**THE BOSTON-JO'BURG CONNECTION:
Collaboration and Exchange at
Artist Proof Studio, 1983-2012**
At: Tufts University Art Gallery,
40 Talbot Ave., Medford,
through July 29. 617-627-3518,
artgallery.tufts.edu

**RETHINK INK:
25 Years at Mixit Print Studio**
At: Boston Public Library,
700 Boylston St., through July 31.
617-536-5400, www.bpl.org/mixit

tration murals. Some honor the idea of "ubuntu," which ties individual achievement to community well-being. "Ubuntu: Tree of Life" sets a tree drawn in white against blackness. Figures inhabit its bark; reaching hands become branches.



PHOTOS BY ALONSO NICHOLS/TUFTS UNIVERSITY

Left: Kim Berman's "Ubuntu: Tree of Life." Above: one of two documentary prints from Berman's "Telling the Story."

Berman's two documentary prints, titled "Telling the Story," gracefully capture artists at work in the studio. There's a splash of glamour with linocuts from William Kentridge's "Colour Chart" series, in which the world-renowned artist conveys the energy of hues such as "French Ultramarine" in simple black gestures.

"Volatile Alliances," the studio's first portfolio of prints made in 1995, featured work by 40 artists from nine countries — half from South Africa. A selection hangs together beautifully; the prints, mostly etchings, are largely figurative, with taut lines and hints of harrowing narrative.

Boston-based artists Birgit Blyth and Judy Quinn taught photo-based printmaking for many years at Artist Proof. Quinn's two works, "Border Crossing" and "Night Crossing," depict the same sharp picture, of a dead gull beneath a barbed wire, but the second is a negative, inverted version.

This dark imagery fits well with an untitled photo-based print across the way by Lehlogonolo Mashaba and Molefe Twala, which collages together strips of blue with strips of brown, each depicting a man's beautiful, upturned face in an expression of surrender or despair. Sometimes he's drawn in crisp, heavy lines and sometimes he's blurred and velvety.

The connections among works made by Bostonians and Johannesburg artists are fluid and understated.

The support the teachers from Boston have given the students is something to be proud of.

Boston is a hotbed of printmaking, and the Boston Public Library has been a staunch supporter of Boston printmakers for decades. That's to be celebrated, but "ReThink Ink" doesn't do it effectively. It doesn't matter that these artists all have connections to Mixit. The show's a muddle.

To commemorate the studio's 25th anniversary, a portfolio of 66 prints has been made by some worthy printmakers. These works hang at the center of one of the two galleries at the Copley Square branch that house the exhibit. But unlike the portfolios in "The Boston-Jo'Burg Connection," there's no thematic or visual through-line.

That can be said of the entire exhibit, which includes a juried exhibition, selections from the library's permanent collection, and a handful of installations. This enervating show is a soup of symbols, metaphors, patterns, and techniques. The expansive, inclusive nature of the exhibit mirrors the nurturance of community and the democratic nature of printmaking, but it does a disservice to some fine work by individual artists.

There are strong prints here — they are simply not displayed to their advantage. Valda Zalkalns gets a bump with her delightful "Corn Prints and Bird Walks" series, because it's displayed near the library's entrance, away from the rest of the show, with that of a couple of other artists. She used copper etching plates to pick up the footprints and beak-marks of birds feeding on ice.

Illana Manolson's "Putting Down Routes," one of the portfolio prints, is a fluid, fresh example of a many-layered print made with virtuoso technique, layering roots with maps. Beth Galston's "Drilled" sports a fizzy yet scarified series of dots. Thaddeus Beal's "Compressed Crawling" is a velvety, unraveling spiral around a jagged black path.

Artists such as these make work that, when shown well, would be arresting. Here, it merely gets lost.

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