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By Popular Demand-Printmakers Exhibit at Town Hall Theatre

By Andrea A. Firth



Homestead, a drypoint/collagraph etching, by Sherry Smith Bell on exhibit at Town Hall Theatre. Photo provided

"Printmaking is a process," says artist Sherry Smith Bell, "And it's always a surprise."

"Yes, it's like magic," adds artist Dalia Alekna, "You do all the planning and preparation, but you never know quite what the work will look like until it comes through the press."

Bell and Alekna are members of the Lafayette Printmaking Workshop—a devoted group of local artists whose media is printmaking. The artwork of these two artists and of their workshop colleagues, Lynn Curtis, Ruth Gendler, and Elizabeth Jameson, is currently on display at Town Hall Theatre. The 16 works that comprise the exhibit aptly titled *By Popular Demand* can be viewed in the lobby of the theater through March 24th.

Bell, a nationally recognized printmaker, has been mentoring artists in the methods of printmaking at her Lafayette-based studio for over twenty-five years. She started the workshop when she moved back to the area from the east coast as a way to create an artist community and to nurture other printmakers and her own art. "Plus I had this fabulous press to share," says Bell. The Meeker McPhee, a good-size press that can accommodate up to 36-inch paper, is electric which makes it easy for anyone to use, according to Bell.

Conscious of the environmental impact of printmaking art even back when the workshop launched in 1984, Bell steered the group away from the standard acid baths and chemicals, and they committed to take a more ecologically gentle approach to their art.

Over the years more than 50 artists have been part of the workshop, which meets twice a week for a full day of printmaking. "It takes time," says Bell, "And then there is always a mandatory break for lunch." An important part of the workshop is the artists sharing, both about their art and their lives. "Sherry [Bell] develops each individual artist and helps them to express who they are," says Alekna.

"My art is a diary of my life. It's my story," says Bell, "I try to help other artists do the same." Bell's artwork reflects her Oklahoma roots and childhood memories of time spent on her grandparents' farm. Her prints depict the brilliant blue skies and yellow and orange fields of grains as a backdrop to the clapboard barns she explored as a youth.

Another poignant example of the connection between an artist's life and her art is the printmaking of workshop member Elizabeth Jameson. Formerly a lawyer who relied heavily on the spoken word to deliver her message, Jameson's speech was compromised by a significant multiple sclerosis episode. She worked to regain her speech but continuing life as a practicing lawyer was not realistic. Jameson joined Bell's workshop about five years ago and soon began to combine the brain scans that documented her disease, the magnetic resonance images (MRIs), with printmaking. She saturates the computerized neurological images with vibrant colors providing a new insight into the brain. A selection of Jameson's MRI-based printmaking portraits is on permanent display at Harvard University's Center for Brain Science.

The exhibit was coordinated through the Lamorinda Arts Alliance, which has partnered with the Town Hall Theatre for almost two decades. "Our audiences love the fact that each time they visit the theater they get the opportunity to see a different display of fabulous art by local talent," says THT Artistic Director Clive Worsley. "In fact our first meetings were held in the Town Hall lobby in 1994," says JoAnn Lieberman, an Alliance member and the exhibit curator. "By graciously providing us with gallery space all year long, Town Hall Theatre enables us to promote both established and emerging artists."

The *By Popular Demand* exhibiting artists are hosting a free reception in the Town Hall Theatre lobby on Saturday, March 3rd from 6:30 pm to 7:30 pm just prior to the theater's main stage production of *Distracted*.

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