An interview with Grant Wood Fellow: Colin Lyons

By Maddie Smith, March 1, 2017

Grant Wood Fellows come from all over the world and Colin Lyons is no exception. Lyons was born in Windsor, Ontario and his love for printmaking came at the end of his undergraduate years at Mount Allison University in 2007. After years of professional work as a printmaker who pushes the boundaries of traditional printmaking, Lyons now calls Iowa City home where he holds the 2016-17 Grant Wood Fellowship in Printmaking. He teaches several classes in printmaking to undergraduates where he gets to connect with the next generation of printmakers. Read more about Lyons and his journey through the world of printmaking below.

What got you interested in printmaking?
CL: Print was something I came to during my undergrad. During undergrad, I was doing mostly painting but I dabbled in printmaking and right at the end of my degree I was working with themes of industrial obsolescence and the history of labor and realizing there were parallels with printmaking and those themes. The obsolete industrial technology and thinking about printmaking being specifically for industry and the fact it comes with a built-in nostalgia and association to history, labor, memory and craft. At that point, the project I was working on printmaking was saying it a lot better than painting was. I was sucked into the printmaking wormhole. I got fascinated with pushing the boundaries of what print can be. Thinking about it in more than just its traditional purpose.

In this piece, Lyons used a traditional lithographic process called levigating to polish the ruined foundations of an abandoned saw-mill in Kamloops, BC.
You work as a site-specific printmaker. Can you explain what site-specific printmaking is and how it differs from other types of printmaking?
CL: Traditionally the way printmaking is thought of is a matrix printed onto paper in multiples. It has traditional conventions. My format has been looking at pushing the possibility of printmaking and thinking specifically about the matrix itself. Thinking about the plate and the stone and what its life can be beyond its purposes of printing as a printing plate or stone. Pushing that beyond its lifespan. I’ve done a few sites over the year that have been focused on printmaking and what I’m doing there is really diving into the history of those sites.

What makes site-specific printmaking more appealing to you?
CL: I work in many different ways in print but the site-specific avenue of work has been quite recent for me. For a long time, I was doing work that was site oriented or site referenced. Taking a site as the starting point and doing an investigation into the site but the actual work would end up being in a gallery. A couple years ago, I made that transition to start to work within those sites and create work that is more architectural and incorporates the site into the work. But it’s something that isn’t a common practice.

In your work you combine printmaking, sculpture, and chemical experiments. How do all of these elements work together?
CL: I am thinking about printmaking as broadly as I can. If you take for granted the traditional meaning of printmaking, you also should think about what else could it be? I start to look at the chemicals and the reactions and thinking about things like chemistry and excavation. The labor and embodied history that comes...
with printmaking, these processes have been done for hundreds of years. There is an embodied memory in that you are reenacting something that someone did 400 years ago. Being able to incorporate those associations with printmaking enriches the concepts I am dealing with.

*Time Machine for Abandoned Futures (2015).* View of the installation from the Midnight Dome in Dawson City, Yukon. This structure doubled as a printmaking-powered restoration machine used to electro-clean artifacts from the Klondike gold-rush, as well as an off-the-grid shelter that the artist lived in for several weeks.

**What current projects are you working on here at the UI?**

CL: I am making a printed *Map, Proposal, and Prototype* which illustrate a site-specific monument to the layered history of Mount Trashmore and the challenging environmental conditions on the horizon. I designed this project to integrate alongside the proposed Site 1 redevelopment project and commemorate the significance of the site’s various legacies (Snouffer Quarry, Stumptown, and Mount Trashmore), while proposing new strategies for memorializing and preserving industrial artifacts, re-developing urban brownfield lands, and mitigating ongoing carbon emissions.

In collaboration with the engineering department at the University of Iowa (Rick Fosse and Jeff Crone), I have developed a printmaking-based iron-fertilization *Prototype*. Employing the industrial debris left over from demolition efforts at the Sinclair Meatpacking facility, this prototype converts the site’s industrial waste into iron sulfate, the primary ingredient in ocean fertilization projects. As such, the site-remediation effort for this urban brownfield will be built into the creation of the monument itself. This process will simultaneously etch and restore these ‘ruins’, resulting in glistening ‘artifacts’, which carry visible traces of their entire lifespan.
Talk about the class you are teaching here at Iowa. What are some of the main principles of printmaking you are teaching?

CL: Fall 2016 I am teaching a course called Advanced Printmaking. It's an open studio based course. I wanted to start the class by thinking about what printmaking is to them. Every printmaker comes at it with a different angle but most come at it with the traditional definition of print. I wanted them to think critically about whether that is what they want to do as printmakers.

Talk about your use with the old Art Building to do site-specific printmaking:

CL: We went for a tour of the old art building and students took photographs and went through many of the old materials that were left there. Old slides, books, debris and used that material to work with. The murals in basement were an inspiration for some students who went in there.

There were several projects focused on the building itself. A few students created a zine (magazine) which focused on the mural and created these quite gestural dynamic series of images that were dealing with some of the most gruesome aspects of the mural. Then pulling in ideas of the flood and thinking of it as sanitizing things and washing away the context of it and thinking of the flood as how it reframes the meaning of the mural.

Another project made from that visit, students made a memorial to the site. They built into one of the arches facing the river, a small memorial where it had a table
with paintings and photographs and they had the interesting screen-printed cards that had a poem almost like a eulogy to the building. They did printed wreaths that were hand printed flowers. A memorial or monument to a site they never really knew. The aspect of how do you mourn for something you never had to interact with? It was a memorial to a corpse they didn’t have a connection with before.

Mural located in the basement of the old art building.

How has UI / Iowa City been able to facilitate and help you further your projects in printmaking?
CL: The UI facilities are incredible and the best I have been around. Whatever you want to do, you can do it here. The other thing, especially with the Grant Wood Fellowship, maybe because we are only here for a year and there is an urgency to it, there is more interest in getting involved and collaborating. It is a special opportunity for Grant Wood fellows to have and do something more substantial, or risky, and take some chances. The other thing that has been good about it is it is an open fellowship. There is not the same pressure to constantly make. We get the time to develop and cultivate our ideas. It’s something a lot of artists don’t get the chance to do.