

The 800 Ton Secret – The Presses of Atelier Richard Tullis

Richard Tullis would almost prefer not to have an article written about him or his art studio. Having run a highly respected creative haven for over a decade, Tullis is aware of the fine line between recognition and hype—and treads it lightly. Even at 8:30 a.m., however, he's remarkably indulgent of my curiosity as we tour Atelier Richard Tullis, explaining how an intimidating 800-ton press—only one among several bulky, brutish machines he's expert in handling is used to create finely tuned pieces of art. Perhaps this tolerance is prompted by a realization that his days as Santa Barbara's best kept art secret may be over.

Made In Santa Barbara: Work from Atelier Richard Tullis / A.R.T.9 on display in the County's Channing Peake Gallery through August, is only the latest step in Tullis's gradual and somewhat reluctant local emergence. Although Tullis and a host of renowned artists have collaborated within the former Lemon packing plant on Salsipuedes Street since 1985, their work has been carried on quietly beneath Santa Barbara's art scene, finding notice instead within New York circles. For Tullis, that's been just fine. "I run a very private studio," he said simply. "I've done a really good job of not being well known in Santa Barbara. I don't want people knocking on my door and disrupting the art process." Seeing the quality of work that privacy nurtures, one understands why Tullis has safeguarded it so passionately. But in recent years he's opened his studio to exposure, and begun the balancing act between promoting his artists' works and protecting the sanctity of their studio time, by donating a selection of Atelier Richard Tullis prints to UCSB's University Art Museum and participating in a handful of Santa Barbara exhibitions.

This latest exhibit features the work of Michelle Fierro, Thérèse Oulton, Jacqueline Humphries, Shirley Kaneda, Nancy Haynes, and Joan Tanner, produced during intense individual residencies with Tullis. Only Tanner, however, is actually from Santa Barbara, making this show an interesting twist in the gallery's functioning. "It's the first show they've had without Santa Barbara artists," Tullis said. "They're bending the rules a little because I live and work here, and I love Santa Barbara, but the artists are actually from many different places." By happy coincidence, Tullis selected all female artists to represent his workshop at a time when female focused exhibitions are dominating the Santa Barbara scene. "It was fortuitous that so many other galleries are focusing on women right now," Tullis said. But beyond the gender solidarity, the diverse works of these artists speak of the workshop's range of capabilities.

"I have six artists in this show, but none of them work in the same methods," Tullis said. "My job is to help them learn how the materials in my workshop are similar but different to what they've already worked with. If I do my job well, artists will come back to me and say they have a whole new body of work."

Tullis learned the trade of facilitating talent from his father, Garner, who founded the International Institute of Experimental Printmaking in Santa Cruz. The studio later moved to San Francisco, and finally to Santa Barbara. "Garner brought me down from San Francisco in '85 to build this place," Tullis said. "My plan was to go back to San Francisco, but he sold that press in '87." Tullis assumed full control of the Santa Barbara press in 1992. His father now runs his own workshop on the East Coast. Overcoming the shadow of his father's incredible reputation hasn't been easy, but Tullis has taken pains to establish himself in his own right, in part by working with artists his father passed over. "Nancy Haynes and Thésèse Oulton are

both artist my father introduced me to,” he said. “But I had been impressed with Jacqueline Humphries’s work, and that was something my father didn’t want to do.”

To the uninitiated, the tools of Tullis’s studio seem more suited to destruction than art. In fact, the offset proof press Tullis’s artists use to create their prints was originally used to manufacture B29 bomber struts during World War II. That piece of equipment and a massive hydraulic platen press (built in 1935 to print newspaper) are so heavy that they have to be supported on their own foundations of steel beams to avoid sinking the entire building. “It’s like stacking hundreds of elephants on top of your piece of paper,” Tullis said of the hydraulic press’s power.

It’s not surprising that Tullis’s expertise is crucial to transforming artists’ ideas into unique works on paper. While a work’s components seem simple enough—usually oil paint, aluminum cutouts, and wood—Tullis, through decades of experience, knows how they will perform under extreme forces. “Basically, an artist will come here with ideas, sometimes with sketches,” he said. “There’s a learning period where what the artist wants to achieve isn’t happening because the materials aren’t behaving like they thought they would. The artists have to learn to work in a more fluid manner.”

But Tullis strives to do more than provide mechanical tools; within his atelier he offers the artist an atmosphere conducive to creativity. During his or her residency, each artist is given the complete run of Tullis’s studio. “Only one artist is invited to work here at a time,” Tullis said. “I try to keep the walls free of anyone else’s art. This really becomes their studio. They’re got my technical assistance, but the phones not ringing for them. They’re left to their own devices as far as how fast they want to work, how much they want to get done.”

During his busiest period with his father, Tullis would work with up to 40 artists each year. Now he prefers to concentrate on six to eight projects within that time span. This significant downscaling is in part due to Tullis’s return to paper making. As if the two presses weren’t enough, Tullis also owns a 250-gallon hydropulper, and spends two consecutive months each year making special papers for his artists to work on.

Tullis works with both new and experienced, well-known and just-being-discovered artists. He worked with Sam Francis and Charles Arnouldi, two artists he finds most inspirational, for over a decade each; but Michelle Fierro, among others, is relatively new to his studio and the scene. This balance helps his studio keep afloat financially! “The old people help the young people, and they pretty well know that. It works somehow,” Tullis said. “Something by Per Kirkeby will help cover the expenses for something by Michelle Fierro.” None of his artists sell much in Santa Barbara, however. “I sell almost nothing here,” Tullis said. “It’s a tough market.” It will be interesting to see how much longer Tullis’s achievements will go virtually undetected.

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