Arts + Culture

Visiting artist shares his Indigenous printmaking with UM students

Josh Moyer / Montana Kaimin 1 hrs ago

Visiting artist Marvin Bagaus, 52, explains his wood block printing technique to students. Bagaus uses hole-by-steam wood and ay hoy to show the stories he grew up hearing from his Navajo ancestors. Bagaus's work, "Ancestral Spirit Guides" is made illustrating the stories in which they can usually be found.

Photo by Josh Moyer / Montana Kaimin

According to Marvin Bagaus, when the Navajo deities were creating man, they created the earthial directions: north, south, east and west. From each direction, a different bird spoke to the people. They swallowed the hummingbird. The hummingbird, the ancestor of the Navajo people, then spoke to the hummingbird's beak, which explains the iridescent red and green the bird is known for.

Fifty-two-year-old Bagaus uses the art of printmaking to share the stories he grew up hearing on the Navajo reservation in New Mexico.

"All the prints are in reference to my relationship with landscapes and culture, especially culture stories," he said.

This past week, the University of Oklahoma professor came to UM to share his knowledge and ideas with an artist's talk as part of MATRIX Press's Visiting Artist Program.

An artform of replication, printmaking allows Bagaus to produce dozens of copies of a single piece, which then can be altered with different colors and patterns. One piece he created with students during his time at UM represented the story of the hummingbird.

The bottom of the piece is blue, reminiscent of both reflective water and the Milky Way. The deep red and yellow in the center represent the morning, leading up to a purple dawn on top, all with the incandescent hummingbird in the center, its head surrounded by a halo of light.

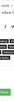
"I'm trying to bring these stories I grew up with into a contemporary setting," Bagaus said. "That's what stories are for."

Bagaus began his journey for 30 years now. He entered the craft while attending the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe usually by accident.

"There was a workshop happening for three visiting Australian artists, and they literally just needed warm bodies, people to fill the seats," Bagaus said. "They said, 'We'll give you lunch, just pretend you're making art.' Of course, my curiosity grew from there."

A quick look through Bagaus's art portfolio would soon reveal a common theme: He likes birds. Herons, cormorants, magpies, ravens — all of these feathered creatures are featured in a variety of his prints. The reason, once again, lies in Bagaus's Navajo heritage.

"Birds are the animals that can be both in the air and on the ground," he said. "They're the messengers between earth and the sky. That's why feathers are so important in Navajo culture and rituals."



Bagaus explains his ongoing relationship with the work of UM. The bride in Bagaus's already sold piece, the Gamagaa from his time, drinks an ancient Ojibwe medicine called the ally, contributing to many rituals with the family around.

Photo by Josh Moyer / Montana Kaimin

Over the course of his three-day stay, Bagaus and the art students created nine prints in total. Half of the works belong to Bagaus, and the other half will stay at the University with MATRIX.

MATRIX Press has been a presence in UM's art scene for more than 50 years now. Founded by the head of UM's printmaking division James Bailey in 1966, the organization has brought 24 different nationally and internationally known artists to the University.

According to Bailey, the opportunities to work with these masters of the craft is what helps the students fully understand the artforms.

"Some of these students haven't done a lot of printmaking," Bailey said. "So this is a really good opportunity to immerse themselves in it with the help of an expert."

Out of those 24 artists, half have been of Indigenous heritage.

"A lot of artists I admire have been through the University of Montana," Bagaus said. "It's a bit like the who's who of the Native art scene. I'm proud to finally be a part of that crew."

Printmaking is alive and well at UM, but it tends to be forgotten within the art scene, Bagaus said.

"When people think art, they think painting and sculpture," he said. "Prints fall through the cracks. It's not a singular, one-and-done thing. Prints work with multiples … and sometimes because of that those pieces are seen as lesser."

However, that doesn't stop Bagaus from stressing its importance.

"A lot of artists have used printmaking to contend information," he said. "It's for spreading the revolution and underground books. It's a form of propaganda and art. Comparing painting to printmaking is like a person using a fine machine to send a message compared to using social media. Printmaking is the social media of the art world. It's for everyone."

Bagaus's favorite part of working with MATRIX, as well as teaching at his university, is sharing printmaking's importance with the students.

"At their age, they're still floating. They aren't tethered to a narrative, and that gives them a chance to develop their own — to find their own stories. I love being in the room when they do," he said.

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