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UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

## Indigenous printmaker John Hitchcock on beadwork, versatility of the medium

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John Hitchcock, a guest artist in residency with Matrix Press and the Missoula Art Museum, stands by some of his screenprints in the University of Montana art school's printmaking studio this week.

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Hitchcock has been working on layered prints based on abstractions of beadwork and symbolic use of color that

sometimes return to drawings of his youth.

TOM BAUER, Missoulian

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Some of John Hitchcock's latest screenprints started, in a way, when he was very young.

His grandmother, a Comanche beadwork artist, would assign him to draw some shapes. Then she asked him to pay attention to how the shapes connect. Then, to draw some floral patterns, and to go outside and study a rose to draw it. Then think about how to transfer that drawing into beads.

"I was learning the whole process of observation, the process of thinking about things conceptually, and also the process of finding a voice," said Hitchcock, an art professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



Hitchcock has been at work in the art school at the University of Montana this week for a guest artist residency through the Matrix Press and the Missoula Art Museum. One set of prints is based on abstractions of beadwork with expressive linework, layered designs and symbolic use of color, a return to the drawings of his youth.

This summer, he spent a week as a resident artist at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming. He was given access to their collections, where he could sketch beadwork from moccasins and other artifacts. His drawings of a taxidermy buffalo head also were put to use in his new series of prints.

He emailed the drawings to an assistant, who cleaned them up on the computer and transferred them to transparencies that can fill a 20-inch-tall piece of paper. While the size increased, they retain the natural elegance and variation of drawings made by hand — at this scale, they sometimes resemble large brush strokes.

This series is called "Flatlander," a reference to a joke the celebrated printmaker Tony Fitzpatrick made when Hitchcock told him he was from Oklahoma and Texas.

"He just said, 'Ha! You're a flatlander!' It just stuck in my head. I love the idea," Hitchcock said. When he shows the series at the Plains Museum in Fargo next year, the exhibition will be called "Flatlander Returning to the Plains," in reference to his trip to Wyoming.

These are more abstract than much of his work, which he's displayed in museums and galleries over the United States and Europe in room-sized installations. Some still bear the political and social messages he's developed.

One piece has an array of helicopters. Once he tells you the name of the models, the reason comes into focus: Kiowa, Apache, Chinook. They're named after tribes whose chiefs were imprisoned at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, by the U.S. government. The base is still there, near his hometown and the Wichita Mountains and its wildlife refuge for deer, elk and buffalo. In this particular print, ghostly heads from each of these animals loom high above the helicopters and the outline of the mountain range. Beadwork patterns skitter in layers across the whole piece.

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**This week, Hitchcock and a small team** at UM have developed some 120 prints. UM professor James Bailey, who founded the press in 1998, said two graduate students and one undergraduate have been assisting: They help Hitchcock dye the paper to produce a base of watery, pooling color. They run the press and lay the sheets on racks to dry.

"It's a great chance for them to learn new techniques and see how one artist generates ideas and how that creative problem-solving works from start to finish," Bailey said.

He said Hitchcock has his own system that's different from other visiting printmakers, some of whom set out to make identical prints. Instead, Hitchcock loves variations in color and layering: Each print might have five layers of the beadwork designs in different combinations and arrangements.

He's not done at five, though. After the printing is complete, he continues adding lines and dots with acrylic markers so that each one is different.

Brandon Reintjes, the MAM's senior curator, said many artists might be happy after the printing was done. For Hitchcock, it's "a starting point for a whole other level of exploration with the visual image." The give-and-take between the enlarged and printed line drawings and the hand-drawn finishes goes "back and forth and create their own language and vocabulary of mark-making." He thinks it generates a visceral and raw feeling.

Rows of them hang on the wall and display different balances of hot and cool colors: His grandmother instilled in him that warm tones like red and yellow represent the day and blue and purple symbolize the night.

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**Hitchcock's visit** is part of a joint venture between the MAM and the UM School of Art's Matrix Press. In 2016, the contemporary art museum was awarded a two-year, \$100,000 grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation.

Ten years ago, the museum opened a gallery on its top floor dedicated exclusively to Native contemporary artists. The MAM saw the grant as a way to expand on its work with indigenous artists going into the second decade.



The first two artists were Molly Murphy-Adams and Sara Siestrem.

Murphy-Adams, an Oglala Lakota artist now based in Oklahoma, graduated from Hellgate High School and studied at UM. She was here this past March. In fall 2016, Sara Siestrem, a Hanis Coos artist from Portland, Oregon, made a return visit to Missoula. Her large abstractions were exhibited in a solo show at the MAM in 2013.

The final artist is Duane Slick, who will visit next semester. The prints will be exhibited at the MAM in 2018 under the name, "The Shape of Things: New Approaches to Indigenous Abstraction."

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**Hitchcock fell into printmaking** through not one but a series of accidents. When he was an undergraduate at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma, he broke the band saw in sculpture class three times in a row. His professor sent him to the printmaking class, telling him, "There's this big rock. Draw on it and call it sculpture," Hitchcock said.

It was a lithography stone. It steered him back toward the talents he'd already developed — he'd been recruited for an art school because of his drawing abilities. He pursued it further for grad school at Texas Tech University. He wanted to move to Lubbock because Terry Allen, a visual artist and cult outlaw-country songwriter, called it home.

Printmaking has a versatility that has continued to fascinate him since graduate school.

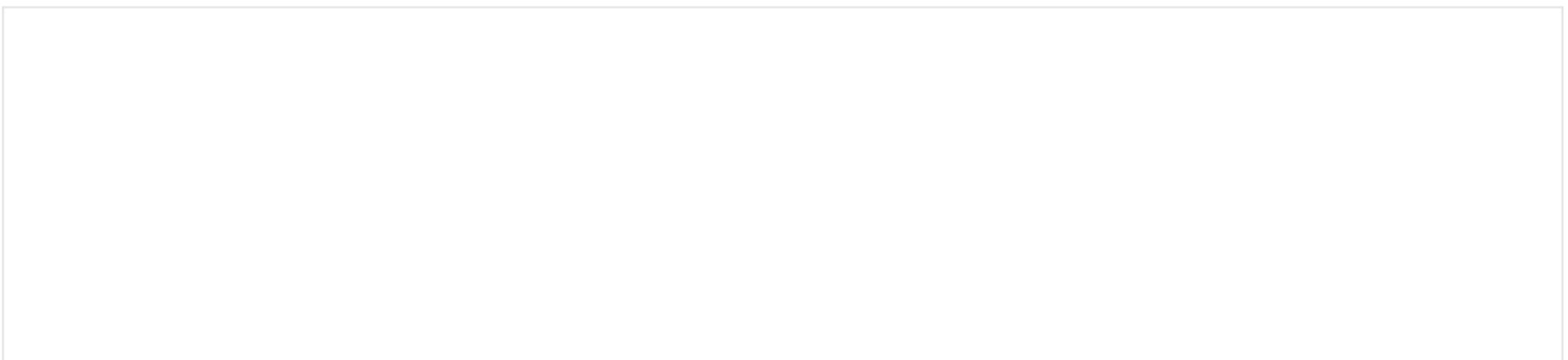
"You can print on any surface, you can print on anything, any object. You can print anywhere," he said. He prints on fabric, he designs album sleeves for his three rock bands, he prints on paper that he brings to museums where he covers the walls, floors and ceilings of entire rooms for installations. He'll bring a printing press on a bicycle cart to print wherever he wants.

The reasons go on: It's not bad for the environment. It's visually versatile, too: He can achieve the line work of a drawing and the liquid texture of a painter and the bold, clean edges of a photograph.

There's also the political background of the cheap, easily dispersed print.

"The democratic nature is also key to its history," he said. "Because printmaking has always had ties to social or political agendas, whether it's Apartheid in South Africa or the Mexican Revolution, there's components of printmaking that have helped communities get beyond their oppressive states, pushing against the government in some way. I think that's another key aspect of printmaking for me."

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