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**Art**

## Lou Stovall, Prince of Prints

Howard Exhibition Traces Colorful Career of Silk-Screens

By Paul Richard

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Lou Stovall remembers that he had a sort of vision. This was 30 years ago. From his silk-screen studio -- with its dustless floors and polished tools and multicolored inks -- he had looked into the city and had seen the glaring blankness of its numberless and colorless and pictureless white walls.

As a printer of his own art, and of the art of many others, as a framer and installer and shepherd of collections, Stovall has inserted more art into Washington than almost anyone in town.

"Lou Stovall: The Art of Silkscreen Printmaking," at the Howard University Gallery of Art, provides a glimpse, but just a glimpse, of his good-hearted industriousness. He's been an art-world rock. Admired for his skill as a master printer, he also gets the sort of gratitude that car owners reserve for a reliable mechanic. The man's there when you need him. When the glass breaks on a picture, he'll fix it. When the office art needs rehung, he's the one who's called. He's on the D.C. Arts Commission. He shows up at art openings and serves on charitable boards. Since then he has taught dozens of apprentices. You sense his generosity when you step into his show.

It's a collaborative exhibit. Of the 70 prints on view, a mere 20 bear his signature. The rest were signed by other artists, many better known than he (Jacob Lawrence, Jacob Kainen, Sam Gilliam, Tom Downing). But all display the Stovall touch -- his certainty of color, his insistence on precision, his unshaking hand.

When Stovall, 64, started showing in the '60s he did so on the streets. He printed ads for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and posters for the Who. When the Washington Gallery of Modern Art gave up being a museum in 1968, Stovall took its building, just west of Dupont Circle, and there founded the Workshop Inc., an open-to-the-public place for making art.

In important ways he changed printmaking in Washington. Both etching and lithography are relatively rare here, but thanks to Stovall's Workshop silk-screening isn't. The time was right. The medium was ideal for hard-edged panels of flat color, in those days much in vogue.



"Morning Streams" (1981) by Lou Stovall: Gentle imagery belying rigorous craft. (Smithsonian Institution)

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Stovall was soon printing rigorous color-field abstractions for Josef Albers, the famous Bauhaus colorist, and for such Washington Color Painters as Gene Davis and Paul Reed. Their prints begin his show. He also opened up the Workshop to young flower-power printmakers (Jonathan Meader, for example); Stovall, come to think of it, while entirely respectable, was sort of one himself.

Though his tools were honed and shiny, Stovall made benign, oddly edgeless art. The prints that he designed himself neither shock nor baffle. His songbirds and his flowers are images of gentleness. He understood full well that the art world sneers at edgelessness. Stovall's sort of sweetness may not be your cup of tea. Still he kept producing pictures about peace.

Born in Athens, Ga., raised in Springfield, Mass., Stovall found his life's work early. He already was an artist, and a screen-printer as well, before his sophomore year at Springfield Technical High School.

Stovall still gives credit to the pair of grown-ups who inspired him. One was Helen Norrgard, "the angel of art teachers." The other was a grocer whose name was Al La Pierre.

La Pierre ran the sign shop at the Growers Outlet Super Market, and it was there in the basement, cleaning screens and squeegees, that Stovall began pulling silk-screen prints.

These weren't exactly art. The message they delivered was more likely to be "3 cucumbers 15 cents." But, as his boss soon noticed, Stovall had the knack -- the steadiness of hand, the skill at freehand lettering, the instinct for design, the cleanliness and care -- that silk-screening required.

He came to Washington for college. It was at Howard that he encountered James Lesesne Wells. Wells believed in printmaking and in using prints to tell the story of his people. He also was an artist of exceptional integrity. In Wells, Stovall had found a mentor, although he never calls him that. He still says "Mr. Wells."

"Harvey Botkin's Sign Shop," writes Stovall in his catalogue, "happened to be halfway between the Howard University Fine Arts Department and my apartment . . . I stopped every morning and every evening to ask for a job. It finally occurred to me that I had to take even more positive action. One day . . . instead of asking, I put my jacket and books in the corner and cleaned the entire shop. It was a mess and it took a while. When I wet down the floor before I swept, the sign painters relaxed . . . Before I graduated from college I became foreman of the shop."

Those were heady days at Howard. Like many other students there, Stovall, Class of '64, "hoped to change the world."

He says, "This exhibit is a homecoming."

In those days many recognized a Howard kind of art. Often blackness was the theme, Africa the memory, militancy the mood. Stovall's art was different. It never raised the fist.

He preferred then, as he does still, peonies and jonquils, sweetly singing birds, and rushing streams that wend their way beneath stately trees. The toughness in these

pictures is in the way they're made.

In Stovall's meticulous kind of printing, mistakes are not permitted. One print on display -- Peter Blume's "Autumn," from 1988 -- displays 120 colors, all of them laid down one color at a time, yet all in precise register. In Downing's "Grid Forty" (1970) the yellows are so close in hue you have to squint to see them. Jacob Lawrence's "Forward Together" is a major Jacob Lawrence. Stovall in such pictures steps into the background, generously, modestly submerging his technique in other artists' visions. This spirit of beneficence prevails in his show.

**Lou Stovall: The Art of Silkscreen Printmaking***is at Howard University Gallery of Art, 2455 Sixth St. NW, 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday, 12:30-6 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, through Oct. 14, 202-806-7070.*

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