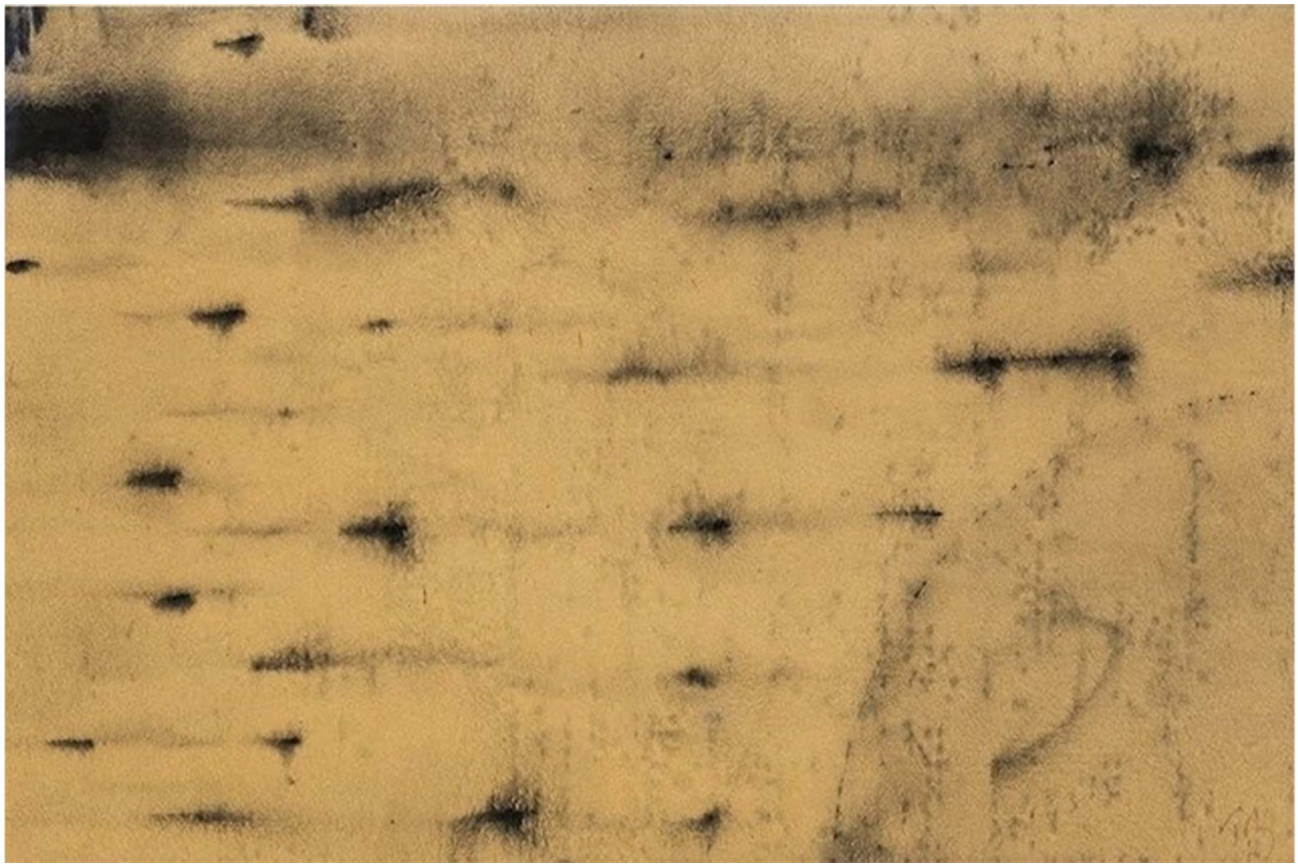
Marquee Print Fair Returns from Corona-Cancellation



Mark Tobey (1890–1976), *Above the Earth IV*, tempera on paper, 1956, photo. (Courtesy of Moeller Fine Art, Ltd.)

By **BRIAN T. ALLEN**
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The first in-person show since Covid draws a big crowd in New York, for good reason.

The International Fine Art Print Dealers Association (IFPDA) fair was this past weekend, the first live incarnation since the Covid calamity. This is one of my favorite art fairs. The association is the anchor trade group for works on paper, so its members buy and sell the very best. When I was in graduate school, I thought I might concentrate on prints and drawings. Both media are intimate since the works tend to be small. Most are made for individual, quiet contemplation. This moved me a great deal, feeling as I did that there's too much big, vulgar visual noise in the world. That hasn't changed.

I worked then in the print room at the Clark Art Institute and enjoyed my daily powwows with the longtime curator, Rafael Fernandez, a mentor of knightly passion and commitment. Rafael was a Cuban refugee from a prominent, affluent Havana family that had fled the country, one suitcase each, when Fidel seized power. Like me, he'd once practiced law but thought art history was a better fit. Portly, brilliant, and loquacious, he cut a unique figure on the Williams College campus. I got my foundation in connoisseurship from him and learned to love Old Master and French Post-Impressionist prints from him and, of course, from the Clark's superb collections in both areas.

Proximity and unfettered access to art defines a Williams art-history education, along with professors and curators who care about students. The Clark print room was a quiet place then, so I spent lots of time with Rafael looking at art. We were comrades-in-arms in despising all things Kennedy. We marched "con brio" from Dürer's *Apocalypse* to the Bay of Pigs, from Toulouse-Lautrec's *Moulin Rouge* to Ted Kennedy's Chappaquiddick. Rafael's version of "Happy Birthday, Mr. President," à la Marilyn, was a spectacle sung in his thick, husky Cuban accent turned breathy and high-pitched. He was a scholar and performance artist. These are also the best teachers.

Alas, I discovered, first from Rafael, that print curators are the Oliver Twists of the museum world. They're courageous, spunky, and sympathetic, but painting curators are the kings. Cry "more, please" as much as they like, print people preside over paper, not canvas; black and white, usually, not color; small, generally, not big; and light-sensitive so they're rarely seen, not done in oil and forever hangable. The hierarchies and politics of museum life usually leave them lonely and feeling unloved. I like underdogs but don't want to be one.

James McNeil Whistler (1834–1903), *The Wine Glass*, etching, 1859, photo. (Courtesy Allinson Gallery)

But I still love prints, print dealers, and the print fair. I saw some very fine things indeed. Last week I wrote about Whistler in Venice. I'll start with a Whistler that's not a Venice scene but still divine. Allinson Gallery, based in Storrs in northeastern Connecticut, offered *The Wine Glass*, from 1859, a spellbinding little thing by Whistler. It's 3 1/4 by 2 1/4 inches and was, for the 25-year-old artist, an experiment. He was already well known in Paris as an avant-garde painter. He'd just finished his "French Set" portfolio, all scenes of everyday life.

The Wine Glass is Whistler's only still life, though his work overall has still-life elements. It's a feast of cross-hatched shadows and abundant detail that, together, give the delicate subject weight but also animation. It's both sparkling and solemn. It sits regally on an English rococo-style silver waiter. Reflections from strong lighting dance in the bowl of the glass. *The Wine Glass* is Whistler's tribute to Rembrandt, specifically to his *Shell*, from 1650, and his *Sleeping Puppy*, from 1640. Both are small prints of round, still, complex objects.

The Allinson impression is on vellum, which, for Whistler, is nearly unique and an unforgiving surface, and this makes it more experimental. It's a one-off, not part of a portfolio, and we don't know how many impressions Whistler made. I think he printed impressions here and there for friends. He never marketed it. It's for Whistler connoisseurs since a still life is unique for him. On the one hand, it takes Whistler to no next step. On the other, it shows his brilliance with ink and paper.

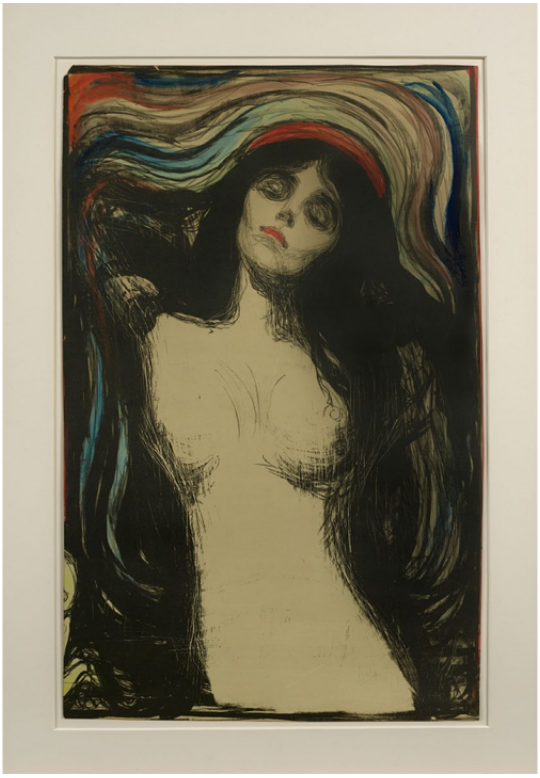
Allinson Gallery is among the founders of the print business. The husband-and-wife team started selling prints in 1978. Their focus, as for many of the best old-school dealers, is specifically British prints and the Etching Revival, though they sell American and French prints from around 1850 to 1950. They sell quietly, and they sell the very best things. The gallery was also the first to develop a website for connoisseur print shoppers. I consider them teachers as well as dealers.

Kerr Eby (1890–1946), *No Man's Land*, mezzotint and drypoint, 1919. (Public domain/via Wikimedia)

Osborne Samuel, the London dealer, has an impression of Kerr Eby's *No Man's Land — St. Mihiel Drive*, from 1919. I'd just watched the new version of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, so I was drawn to this print, one of the very few works of art, cinema aside, that visualizes war as a reality. Goya, of course, does it in his *Disasters of War* prints, but war as a gruesome thing is very hard to convey. Winslow Homer got war, too, as chaotic but also random and ridiculous. For most, art's decorative properties get in the way.

Eby was Canadian but died in 1946 an American citizen. He was an accomplished illustrator whose war work explored the everyday life of soldiers in a matter-of-fact way. *No Man's Land* is an apocalyptic landscape, silent and barren in a Mad Max way. His sky heaves in dismay. St. Mihiel was a late American counteroffensive in September 1918, and a pivotal one since it was the first big American effort. Only weeks later, the Germans cried for an armistice. The print is $7,500. It's in beautiful condition. It isn't the rarest thing in the world but is an important, moving image.

David Tunick is a renowned Old Master dealer who, like the Allinsons, is also a distinguished connoisseur. He's been in business since 1966, so, I believe, he is the Father of the House, insofar as the print fair is concerned. When I was a young curator, Old Master dealers dominated the IFPDA. Now, the ranks of these specialists have shrunk as younger collectors and casual buyers look at 20th- and 21st-century art. Tunick still offers Old Masters, but in the last few fairs I've visited has gone more modern. This year, he focused on Edvard Munch.



Edvard Munch (1863–1944), *Madonna*, lithograph in black with hand coloring, photo. (Courtesy of David Tunick Prints and Drawings)

Love, loneliness, and death are Munch's calling cards and, for better or worse, never go out of style. Tunick's selection is museum-exhibition quality, all-Munch, all woodcuts and lithographs, and capped by *Madonna*, from 1895 or 1896. It's a black-and-white lithograph hand-painted by Munch in brilliant rainbow colors. *Madonna* depicts Mary's moment of climax and conception, when, Munch said, "the chain is completed that binds the thousand generations that are dead with the thousands yet to come." Mary, nude, stretched, eyes closed, and wearing carmine lipstick, doesn't exactly look overwhelmed by piety. Rather, she looks more like Titian's *Danaë* as Zeus descends in the form of golden drops. She's enjoying the party — more Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* than Jennifer Jones in *The Song of Bernadette*.

There are as few as five hand-painted impressions. This one's as fresh as the day Munch made it. It's what Tunick priced as "low seven figures," and it has to be on the fair's marquee. It's powerful.

Achim Moeller's booth offers work by Mark Tobey, who might not have the cachet or fame of Munch but is, like Munch, an artist who's a modern Old Master and as close to timeless as there is. Moeller, with Tunick one of the most distinguished New York dealers, specializes in the German Expressionists and Bauhaus artists but is also a scholar of Tobey (1890–1976).

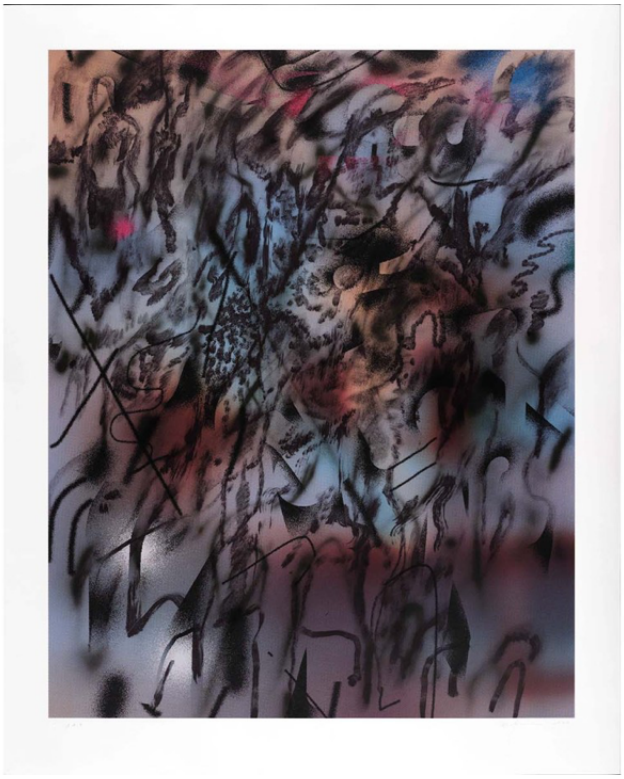
Tobey, in my opinion, is one of the nonpareil Abstract Expressionists, a far better artist than Pollock, Rothko, and Barnett Newman but not as celebrated for a few reasons. His work is inspired by Asian calligraphy and Buddhism. It's quiet, deliberative, chromatically rich but usually muted and tonal. He painted big things, but most of his work is small. Like Pollock, he does allover painting based on small marks that cover the canvas.

Tobey worked mostly in New York, but he was from Seattle. He's been tagged by critics, scholars, and the

marketplace as a Pacific Northwest artist. That hurts. He spent the last ten or so years of his life in Basel, Switzerland, supported by Ernst Beyeler. Beyeler was a great dealer and collector, but Basel isn't New York, and Basel in the '60s and '70s wasn't today's Basel, which is an art mecca. Tobey, unlike de Kooning and a dozen other blockbuster names from the heyday of gestural art, wasn't a diva, persona, or attention-grabber.

Moeller's Tobey selection is from the '50s and '60s. I loved *Above the Earth IV*, from 1956. Tempera on paper, it looks delicate and ethereal and, at about 12 by 18 inches, is Tobey's favorite size, not standard, but preferred. After the '40s, Tobey does non-representative work. There's no subject other than the medium, which usually is tempera or watercolor. *Above the Earth* isn't a Sputnik picture since the first artificial satellite launched into space went up, up, and away in 1957. Rather, it's prophetic, not in a newsy way but in the sense of suggesting what's far beyond us. Moeller's asking $42,000 for it.

I saw lots of Warhol, Alex Katz, and Picasso as well as Barbara Kruger, Judy Chicago, Jenny Holzer, and Nicole Eisenman. These are what I call the usual suspects for appealing to taste that's trendy but cautious and needs ratification. I can't fault the dealers since they're in business and know the marketplace better than I.



Julie Mehretu (b. 1970), *Corner of Lake and Minnehaha (blue)*, screen print, 2022, photo. (Courtesy of Highpoint Editions)

The IFPDA works to appeal to generations with less vintage than mine. That's a good thing. Not only is the number of Old Master dealers dwindling, but most at the fair are very pricey indeed. I saw lots of good, new things. *Corner of Lake and Minnehaha (blue)*, by Julie Mehretu, from 2022, is a layered, abstract, mark-heavy view of an intersection in Minneapolis gutted by Black Lives Matter protesters during the George Floyd riots. Mehretu collaborated on the print, part of a series, with the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and Highpoint Center for Printmaking, a printer in Minneapolis. Highpoint is a printer, publisher, art school, and gallery of the very highest quality.

Mehretu (b. 1970) is a master of controlled chaos. She gets the crackles, whistles, heat, and ash of a dense urban fire, very much *en flambé* since this particular fire destroyed a liquor store, but she locates enough discipline to make sense of what's happening. It's a silkscreen, owing this discipline to endless dots, not lines.

In a few years, no one's going to remember much about the 2020 riots. Fiery riots happen all over the world, somewhere every day. One of Mehretu's strengths is making incendiary dissent universal. The more we've learned about the devastation the riots caused, Floyd himself, the grifters running BLM, cop hating, and the Chauvin trial, the uglier and more depraved it all seems. Still, the print's very good art. It's $45,000.

Kim Keever (b. 1955), *July 3, 2004,* c-print mounted to aluminum, 2004, photo. (Courtesy Jonathan Novak Contemporary Art)

Kim Keever (b. 1955) is a New York artist I didn't know, but this doesn't stop me from finding beauty and mystery in *July 3, 2004*, a c-print offered by Jonathan Novak Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Keever builds landscapes from plaster. He then submerges them in a big glass tank of water that itself has a stage set made from different materials, many painted different colors, and reflective Mylar. He sometimes builds a backdrop behind the tank for another layer of meaning and depth. He then photographs or films the scene. *July 3, 2004* is 63 by 47 inches, so it's big enough to be immersive. Priced at $10,000, it's an edition of only three.

Though the default aesthetic of American art is realism, there's a strong current of ethereal, moody, dreamy art that I'd call romantic, not to confuse it with Romanticism. This starts with Washington Allston, a quiet Romantic painter, and runs through the Luminists, Whistler, Inness, Rothko, Tobey, and artists such as Keever.

Peter Schjeldahl, the *New Yorker* art critic who died last month, said all art, whether five minutes old or 5,000 years old, is contemporary if it lives in the present. One of the characteristics of great art is its elasticity — how it elicits different, layered meanings from different viewers — and its relevance as generations come and go. Can

we, living in 2022, commune in a meaningful way with Whistler, Munch, and Tobey? I'd say yes.

James Gillray (1756–1815), *The Cow Pock*—or—*The Wonderful Effects of the New Inoculation*, ink and watercolor etching, 1802, photo. (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division)

James Gillray's *The Cow Pock–or–The Wonderful Effects of the New Inoculation*, from 1802, is a hand-colored etching and one of the great medical satirical prints. Vaccination as preventive care wasn't new, but using the mild cowpox virus to vaccinate against smallpox was. Smallpox killed tens of millions of Europeans over the centuries and, in Gillray's time, still killed hundreds of thousands yearly. Edward Jenner, an English doctor, had published a paper on his smallpox vaccine only four years before Gillray (1756–1815) published his garrulous, thrust-and-parry print.

Gillray himself takes no position. An indifferent doctor inoculates a woman in slice-and-dice fashion while others who've just been vaccinated sprout cow snouts, bull horns, and udders for eyes. It's art that still lives in the present, and at $3,000 it's the best deal at the fair. Roger Genser, a Santa Monica dealer whose shop is called Prints and the Pauper, is offering it.

I got a press release from the IFPDA after I filed my story but with enough time to add a coda. With 16,000 visitors over four days, the fair's attendance beat the last live fair, in 2019, by nearly 50 percent. This is gratifying. Sales were good, I read, and the release lists the dealers who reported significant sales. Alas, I wouldn't have bought much of anything from most of them. Smiles abound, though. *Oliver Twist* has a happy ending, too. I thought it was a great fair.