

# Graphic Impressions

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## Katie Baldwin: *There Are Two Stories Here*, The Print Center, Philadelphia

by Eli VandenBerg

**Katie Baldwin:** *There Are Two Stories Here* was an exhibition mounted by The Print Center in the fall of 2012. Baldwin was selected for the solo exhibition from The Print Center's 85th Annual International Competition: Printmaking. I had met Katie years before and invited her to have her prints in The Print Center Gallery Store. After meeting professionally, we became friends and ultimately collaborators, co-founding the letterpress studio Basement Press. Our personal, professional and artistic relationship has given me the opportunity to talk with her in a frank and open exchange about her technique, her creative process and her unique dedication to printmaking. I had the opportunity to watch these works develop from their earliest stages and was excited to talk with Katie and share her intuitive and thoughtful approach.

**EVB:** Can you talk about the inspiration for *There Are Two Stories Here*? What are the stories?

**KB:** In the broadest sense, *There Are Two Stories Here* told the story of the landscape as it progresses through the seasons and the story of people as they progress through time.

In a literal sense the series includes two stories, set with lead type that I cast and printed by hand. One story tells of a father's plan to care for his daughter who will never marry, by building her a studio and giving her a trade. At the end he marvels at the invention of the California Job Case, which will allow her hand to travel 7,080 fewer miles over the course of her lifetime setting type. The second story tells the mother's idea of progress—how learning to print text and words changed everything.

Conceptually, the idea of two stories is based on the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass. Douglass wrote his autobiography three times, each time revising it to reflect his current perspective. I love the idea that the understanding of the past can change based on the present moment. The text of the print entitled *Progress* reveals this inspiration: in it a mother is telling her daughter a tale of what progress means—the daughter, having grown up in a different time, has a different understanding. Both narratives are told with set type, but the distinction between the two is made visible by one being told in letters and words, the other in a visual language.

**EVB:** I don't think your narrative ever seems to rely upon text. It often takes me multiple viewings to finally read the text. I am often surprised by how well you balance the elements so that the words don't overpower the visual narrative. Is writing an important part of your process of image making? Does it remain important to the final piece?

**KB:** I have always been interested in using text in my work—even as a child. This became particularly true during my awkward early days as an undergrad. I often included embarrassing diary-like excerpts that were typed or handwritten on objects and images contained in boxes and found envelopes. It was Olympia, Washington in the early 90's—you can imagine. The early 90's was also the time that I stumbled across letterpress.

Many years later, the interest in words persists, particularly letterpress printed words. Learning to cast type over the past two years has broadened my interest in text. While in many ways, casting type is a technical skill, the experience has given me a greater understanding of the physicality of language, type as object, and the history of the printed word. The most basic notion of text is as a place for narrative to begin. This is demonstrated in the print *Specimen of Bembo*, for which I cast the type face Bembo in 16 point size, filling an entire case. Then I set each letter I cast into the bed of the press, printing every single cast object. The physical limitations of a job case, filled with type offers infinite possibilities of arrangements for letters to make words, words to make sentences, and sentences to tell stories.



*The Distance Between Two Things*, 2012,  
Woodblock  
Plate Size: 17" x 11"  
Edition: 5

**EVB:** What comes first, the words or the image?

**KB:** Both occur simultaneously. In this body of work, I began with freeform drawing. I try to draw ever single day. At the same time I was writing, probably not as much as I should, but at least once a week. Once all the material was generated, it served as the seed for the final images.

**EVB:** Can you explain a little bit about your print process and its relationship to traditional Japanese printmaking? I know you've studied *moku hanga* extensively which is a hand-printed, waterbased process, but the prints you showed at The Print Center were printed on the Vandercook Press with oil based inks. You didn't use Japanese printing methods, but rather applied Japanese print philosophy to your work.

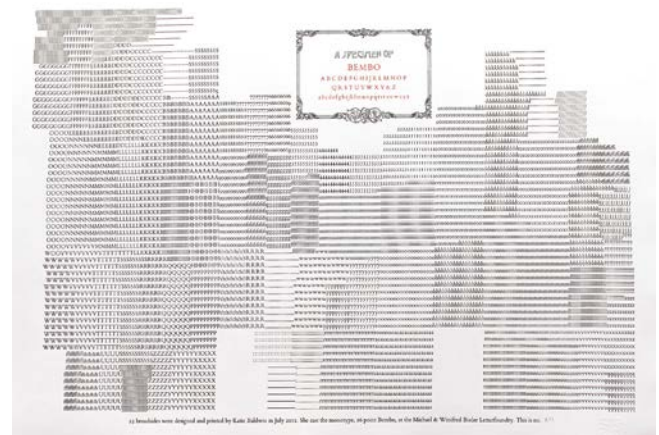
**KB:** My work has a direct aesthetic relationship to Japanese compositional structure. Drama of space can be achieved by the use of blended (or *bokashi*) inking techniques or the Japanese use of line, color, pattern and form; I often incorporate these in my work. I don't want to make prints that mimic *Ukiyo-e* prints. I am not a master carver, or Japanese, or living in Edo during the 1600's, but the work created in Japan during that time certainly influences me.

My work also has a technical relationship to traditional Japanese printmaking in that my carving and printing technique have developed from the instruction I received in Japan. I use very particular carving, printing and registration methods to achieve specific results that only traditional Japanese processes are able to achieve. When I am carving, I use both Eastern and Western techniques and blend the two methods intentionally. In the work from *There are Two Stories Here*, it is really the use of both of these ways of carving that make the work visually interesting.

**EVB:** What role does the figure play in your work?

**KB:**  
Figure = character  
Landscape = stage

The landscape becomes the stage and the figure becomes the characters in the story. Even when people aren't literally present, there is evidence of their having somehow altered the landscape. This could be a fire left burning, a bridge, or fireworks exploding in the night sky. I am interested in representing people who make and build the world around them, altering the landscape.



*A Specimen of Bembo*, 2012  
Cast and handset type, letterpress printed  
Paper Size: 15" x 22.5"  
Edition: 25

**EVB:** You mentioned that your palette shifted when you moved to upstate New York. Were you aware of that while making the work?

**KB:** I didn't set out to shift my palette. I developed the imagery without working out exactly what the color might be. When I moved to upstate New York, near Lake Cayuga, I was very aware of the variety of color in the water—and that it changed dramatically through the seasons, as well as on a daily basis. I think that whenever a person is in a new place, it is much easier to be aware of what is happening in the landscape. You see everything with visitor's eyes. That's one reason I like to travel so much. Whenever I am somewhere new, I have this intense experience of seeing. So being in that new place, it was easy to see the visual variety that Lake Cayuga offered and to be totally engaged with it.

When I started printing, I knew I was going to work with multiple block and reductive methods. One of the great advantages of working reductively is that I don't have to plan—I can work spontaneously. I put all the planning into the multiple blocks, then leave room for the spontaneity in the reduction aspects of the images. This is where I could really explore capturing the color that I was seeing in nature. Each layer would allow for a minor or subtle shift and the layering process allowed the colors to become more complex.

**EVB:** Why do you make prints? What is it about making prints and specifically relief prints that is significant in expressing your concepts and ideas?

**KB:** My initial creative practice was working in installation and sculpture. I came to printmaking for purely practical reasons. My dad had sent me a set of carving tools for my birthday. I had graduated, and was living in Montana in a very small apartment with my young daughter. I had very little space and even less money. Making installation work no longer made sense to me outside the context of art school. As a single mom I found that in order to have any kind of productive art practice it had to allow for interruptions. The two “processes” that worked were sewing and woodblock printing. I could develop images in the evening after Helen went to sleep, and I could carve or sew without needing much space. If I was interrupted, I could pick things up and put them down easily. Even in small increments of time it was possible for the work to progress.

I think my continued attraction to printmaking and the ultimate development of work has been connected to the reality (as well as the idea) of labor. The imagery in *There are Two Stories Here* needed to be made in a medium entrenched in physical labor. The carving and the printing needed to be difficult. At the end of the day I was exhausted because I had to work to make those images.

**EVB:** You are very uncomfortable with comfort. Uneasy with ease.

**KB:** Yes. I will carve until my hands bleed.

*Eli VandenBerg is a printmaker and the Director of Sales and Social Media at The Print Center in Philadelphia.*



*Progress, 2012*  
Woodblock, letterpress  
Plate Size: 17” x 11”  
Paper Size: 22” x 15”  
Edition: 5



*February, 2012*  
Woodblock  
Image size: 16” x 24”  
Paper size: 17” x 25”  
Edition: 5