



Cover Story



Fourth generation printmaker

Richie Lasansky

-by Nancy Griffin

Richie Lasansky is 38 years old, but if genes and family history count toward artistic talent and expertise, he's much, much older. He's the fourth generation in a family of printmakers — a form his grandfather helped raise to a high art form in the U.S.

While Lasansky is primarily an intaglio printmaker, his first solo show in Maine will feature his large-scale, pencil-on-paper animal drawings. Opening Friday, May 23, at the Jonathan Frost Gallery, 21 Winter Street in Rockland, the "Animal Spirits" show will run through June 14.

"Art should be more poetic and symbolic than literal; the lines in a drawing are important, but it's the tension and space between them that have the power to capture your imagination," says Lasansky.

This philosophy, even when he was too young to articulate it, has underlined his entire artistic life, in which animals have always been important, too. At ages 5 and 6, while living in Latin America with his mother and father, who were serving in the Peace Corps, he would draw animals both real or sprung entirely from his imagination.

He even began rudimentary printmaking then. Using Plexiglas pieces his grandfather would send, Lasansky etched the drawings onto the surface with a cork that had a needle stuck through it. His mother would send the "plates" to her father, who would print them and mail back prints.

"I always drew animals, when I was little, out in the jungle in South America," says Lasansky. "I remember drawing tigers, fish and bugs."

Later, when they first moved to Maine, his mother, Jimena Lasansky of the Lasansky Dance Studio in Lincolnville, used his early animal prints to illustrate posters and press releases for her concerts.

It's the same now, he says. "If I draw a bear, I'm drawing something that's a real experience. Not a moralistic portrait of the plight of bears, I'm just trying to get to the essential bear. I'm not trying to do anything pejorative, cartoonish or undignified."



Whale

Pencil on paper
46" x 93"

He describes the large drawings he will exhibit at the Jonathan Frost Gallery as "life-size, no washes, no color, not photorealistic. The pencil is gray, so you can only see the lines up close, but to see the whole shape, you need to stand back 10 feet or so. You need to keep moving. You can't look at the whole thing at once."

"It's a departure from what I've been doing. I started about a year and a half ago. Before that I was drawing only people. I was heavily influenced by Pa (his grandfather), but I'm breaking out a bit." Since

he moved to New York eight years ago, his work has been “half and half, prints and drawings.”

“Sometimes I pull a print and start drawing on the proofs to see where I want to go next,” he said.

The family business began in Lithuania, with Richie’s great-grandfather, who was a commercial printer. The family history of using art to stand up for principles began there, too. His great-grandfather and his brother got in trouble for printing in the Lithuanian language that had been banned by Poland.

They left the country and went to the Philadelphia mint to print money and from there, they moved to Argentina. Richie’s grandfather, Mauricio Lasansky, born in Argentina, also became a printmaker. He traveled to the U.S. in the 1940s with his two children on a Guggenheim to study the prints in New York City’s Metropolitan Museum.

A second Guggenheim led Mauricio to a professorship at the University of Iowa where another three children were born, one of them Richie’s mother, Jimena. Mauricio, who had begun teaching art in Argentina at age 18, set up a department of printmaking at the university.

Every summer from the 1950s on, Mauricio brought the entire family to Vinalhaven from Iowa where he encountered or invited many other artists who were important to the U.S. art scene.

“It was a burgeoning art scene,” said Lasansky. Along with a few of these artists, “it was his intention to raise printmaking to a high art form.” They succeeded.

When the then ‘New’ Whitney Museum of American Art opened in New York in 1967, Mauricio Lasansky, Andrew Wyeth and Louise Nevelson — all with strong Maine connections — were the first artists to be exhibited. Mauricio became famous for a series known as “The Nazi Drawings,” a powerful expression of disgust and outrage at the brutality of Nazi Germany.

Three of Mauricio’s sons are artists — two of them — Leo and Tomas, — are printmakers. William is a sculptor, Another son, Phillip, runs his father’s business. His two daughters followed other creative paths — Nina is a writer, and Jimena, a dancer, choreographer and dance teacher. Richie’s cousin, Amadeo, is a photographer.

Although Lasansky’s interest in art stems from an age when he could first hold a pencil, for a while he thought his interest in animals would lead him to a career in science. After graduation from Hebron Academy, he studied biology at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass., but upon graduation, moved to Iowa to study art formally with his grandfather.

“I spent eight years apprenticing with my grandfather,” he said. “My grandfather and his contemporaries were not just technicians. His whole deal was to establish printmaking as a medium on par with painting.”



Boar

Pencil on paper
35" x 46"

Many artists have backed away from an important creative aspect of printmaking by sending their work out to be printed by others, but there's a renaissance brewing there as well, said Lasansky. He will appear with two other printmakers — Brian Lynch and Jon Fasanelli-Cawelti — also students of his grandfather's, in a show this fall at Columbia University's Leroy Neiman Center for Print Studies.

All three are printmakers who own their own presses, work on imported handmade paper and do all the technical work themselves. They get together in New York occasionally to mix their own inks from carbonized grape vines, cow bones and oil. Their show will be called, "Drawing Beneath the Surface: Contemporary Intaglio Prints."

"A lot of artists' work is heavily conceptual now, but mine is process-oriented," said Lasansky. "It's mostly figurative, not abstract." He's not one to analyze his art beyond that, however, preferring to quote his grandfather: "Artists and fish die the same way, by the mouth."

Born in La Paz, Bolivia, Lasansky lived in Costa Rica and New Hampshire but was raised mostly in Maine, including a year on Vinalhaven. He now lives and works in New York City, although he hopes in the near future to return to Maine to live.

An opening reception to meet the artist will be held at the Jonathan Frost Gallery Friday, May 23, from 5:30 to 8 p.m. The Steve Lindsay Trio will play.