BIOGRAPHY

Born and raised in rural Pennsylvania and based in New York, Rob Swainston is an Assistant Professor of Art+Design in Printmaking at Purchase College and Master Printer for collaborative printshop Prints of Darkness. His art sits at the intersection of printmaking, painting, installation, and sculpture. Rob received a BA in Political Science and History from Hampshire College and an MFA in Visual Arts from Columbia University. With this dual focus, Rob claims: "All images are historically negotiated assemblages between humans, machines, materials, and social structures. In a society where social knowledge and power have become pure image, the print technologies historically central to this transformation can act as double-agent. Artists working in print media can be chameleons moving between image-makers and image-reproducers." Rob has been awarded numerous residencies including Skowhegan, Marie Walsh Sharpe, and the Fine Arts Work Center. Solo and group exhibitions include Marginal Utility, David Krut Projects, Bravin Lee Programs, Socrates Sculpture Park, Smack Mellon, Munson Williams Proctor Museum of Art, Provincetown Art Association and Museum, IPCNY, Canada Gallery, Queens Museum, and the Bronx Museum. Rob is presently the Ludwig Foundation Professor for Printmaking at the Weissensee Kunsthochschule Berlin for 2020-21.

ARTIST STATEMENT 2015
Rob Swainston reminds us we are not just consumers of icons, but producers and observers of images. All images are historically negotiated assemblages between humans, machines, materials, and social structures. In a society where social knowledge and power have become pure image, the print technologies historically central to this transformation can act as double-agent. Artists working in print media can be chameleons moving between image makers and image reproducers.

Image reproducers are technocrats, proto-machines, and images-smiths in building the spectacle world order. In their perfection they ask no questions. Artists are image makers showing an image constructed, built, repeated, overprinted, coded, decoded, and endlessly negotiated. For the printmaker, the press bed is not a window of illusion, it is the space of social tinkering. The artist is a hacker.

Rob Swainston performs this hack through two interrelated bodies of work—series of unique multiples and printstallations. Installations such as 'A New System Every Monday' and 'All that is Solid Melts into Air' mix print media, sculpture, painting, drawing and video to point out architectural, institutional, historical, and social spaces.

Series of standardized works such as 'Who Owns the Sky?' and 'Propositions' move between representation and abstraction such that neither of these categories are important. The viewer participates in an "archeology of uncovering", discerning numerous processes and images containing multiplicities of narratives culminating in an uncovering of the "significant image" and the realization "I see myself seeing myself."

ARTIST STATEMENT 2014

Innovation, technology, and the social use of the printed image make the borders of printmaking fluid. I am a committed printmaker and I respect the tradition of prints. However, the motivations for artists making prints, showing prints and teaching printmaking in the year 2014 is necessarily different than the historical uses of the medium.

Of course printmaking needs to grow to integrate new technologies. But, more importantly, printmaking also needs to reconsider its allegiance to the exact copy. Master printers were once proto-machines, using Taylorist modes of production to repeat the same motion/mark/image again and again. Now that we have invented near-perfect image-making machines, why are printmakers still tied to the exact copy? It is time to be humans again, to observe and synthesize instead of just consume. The human hand is now seen in imperfection, in mistakes, and in difference in repetition. As images all around us have been evacuated of meaning, the printmaker can reinsert history in the picture by repeating, by stopping, and by saying 'look at this one, and look at this one'.

The basic print on paper remains the core of my practice even as I mix printmaking with installation, sculpture, painting, drawing and video. Printmaking process—woodcut, etching, lithography, silkscreen, inkjet—are both artistic and social media. While artistic concerns are aesthetic, formal, and material, the social use of print media relates to image production, image propagation, image use, and image meaning (the icon). What we now call 'traditional' print processes were once cutting edge technologies. Printmaking's innovative history continues today with photography, video, photomechanical, and digital printing. These technical accomplishments also have parallel social innovations—the rise of mass culture, mass media, and the visual display and ordering of knowledge within our visually saturated society. I was first attracted to print media through my interest in social sciences and political philosophy. By working with prints and the multiple I could cut up, overprint, combine, repeat, and reassemble work in multiple ways. I embarked on a constant rebuilding and reassembling of work while adding new components and destroying old. I see this artistic process as an analogy for how our social world is constructed.

As I continue to work in print media, mastering new processes, teaching and mentoring students, and working with other artists as a master printer – I have become more focused on the printed image as a key concern in understanding our contemporary condition. My current work encompasses large-scale installations (indoor and outdoor, gallery and public), as well smaller works on paper, and fabric. I am interested in the meaning of the image; image use, the icon, propaganda, mass media, the artistic field, the politics of representation, the ubiquity of the image, the spectacle perfected as image, and ultimately the fragmentation and disappearance of the image. Print media is a deep reservoir, a wellspring for intellectually rooted practice, with easily forged links to active material/process-based practices.   I am using this dual approach to ask the question: 'what is the significant image?'