Jonas Wood
in Conversation with
Ed Hamilton

JONAS WOOD Ed, thanks for doing this interview with me.

ED HAMILTON Well, thank you. It's been a wonderful experience working with you.

JW So how did we meet?

EH Ed Ruscha came to me and said he thought that you would make a nice print. I hadn't been aware of your work. I guess he was renting you a space.

JW Right. That's how I met Ed. In 2007 I rented a space from him on Blackwelder Street and was there for around ten years.

EH Really?

JW Yeah, before we met each other. That was 2007, and we did our first print in 2011. So Ed said, "Hey, do you want to make a print with Ed Hamilton?" And I said, "Heck, yeah."

EH [*Laughs*.] Well, you'd previously made prints with Jean Milant, right?

JW Yes, he was the only person in town I'd made prints with at that point. And then I started working with you and Jacob Samuel—of Edition Jacob Samuel—around the same time.

When we began working on our first print together, you guys first looked at my work and I explained what I was interested in doing. We used lithographic crayon to re-create the texture of a drawing from my *New Plants* series. I remember we used colored paper for that print.

EH I remember thinking that the gray needed something more than just the gray of the drawing, and I could either print a color underneath it or use colored paper. I had this blue Magnani Pescia paper, and I tried it just to see what it would do for the crayon part of it. And it ended up not looking like a blue piece of paper. People are really astonished when they turn it over and see the blue.

JW I never even thought about what color the paper could be, other than some version of white. You introduced me to this whole new way of seeing paper as being part of the print as a color, not just as paper. It seems obvious in retrospect, but at the time you were the only person I knew who was doing something like that. It was so subtle, the way the paper was working with the image.

EH The blue of the paper is potentially very difficult to work with because it's so obvious. But in this case it wasn't, and it really worked.

JW Right. It glowed differently.

EH The other thing is that your drawing, the crayon, worked really well with the process. I got my start as a printer at Tamarind Lithography Workshop, which was set up for traditional lithography. And I learned how to bring up a drawing, either sparse or what they call blossoming, depending on how much pressure I put on the roller or the period of time that it takes to go over the drawing. That way you can manipulate it, since some images, especially washes or crayon drawings, need fuller detail, and some need to be more open and sparse. For instance, with your plant lithograph, I'd pull a print and see what it looked like in relation to what you were going for. And in this case the best approach was to blossom the print. So each time I'd pull a proof, I'd ask myself what I could do to make it just a little bit better. And of course Tamarind also trained us to collaborate.

JW When did you start working there?

EH In 1969.

JW Where was it located?

EH It was in Hollywood then. That was the year before it closed and moved to New Mexico, where it became the Tamarind Institute.

JW Right. How many printshops do you think were created from people working at Tamarind?

EH Oh, quite a few, the most prominent being Gemini and Cirrus.

JW And your shop, Hamilton Press.

EH Yes, Hamilton Press. All over the country there were shops that opened up, like Shark's Ink in Colorado.

JW Who was running Tamarind when you were there?

EH June Wayne was the director of Tamarind. I was given a grant, entered the program, and learned about collaboration. It was quite a jump because I had trained in intaglio printing with two printmakers who had studied under the master printmaker Mauricio Lasansky. It was a very solitary and isolated discipline, as opposed to the interaction with artists and other printers that happened at Tamarind. I had to set aside my own ways of thinking and making art, to adapt to many other artists, who sometimes had wildly varying ways of making art.

JW Well, that's a major thing; what you and I have been doing the whole time is collaborating. Our process has always started with something that you saw in my studio, and then we've gone back and tried to pursue those things. We've collaborated on twenty-two editions in eleven years.

EH That's a major accomplishment. I remember, with our first print, I did some research to find out what your art was about. What I found was pretty straightforward, so I assumed that in order to get you the results you wanted, we could vary the prints only slightly. It was only later that I had the audacity to try some wild variations in order to show you some new possibilities. Those different possibilities are what makes proofing so much fun.

JW [*Laughs*.] Audacity. Right. I think it always starts with having you over to the studio a couple of times, showing you stuff, and seeing what you guys gravitate toward.

I'm totally in awe every time we make something. I'm excited to see how you're going to enhance the print or suggest something that ends up making it so much better. I remember making the *Double Basketball Orchid* prints in 2017. We were talking about how the leaves were lighter at the top than at the bottom, and you showed me how you had achieved that by using a gradient of color. It was way better that way.

EH Well, one thing that kind of astonished me was that I would have a number of different proofs that I'd worked on to show you, thinking that, well, you'd pick one of them. But time after time you seemed to pick maybe two or three versions from each edition.

JW I'm OK with that because some of the images work when they're printed with different color variations. And though we aren't changing the shape of anything, just the colors, the prints can feel profoundly different even though they're the same image.

EH And, for instance, when we made prints on black paper, I had to use colors that were radically different from those we would use for other papers, and I had to print the same color more than once in order to keep it from sinking in too much. Because when I would pull a print, the colors would just be so vibrant, especially on the black; they just glowed. But then, within a few minutes, they would sink in and become dull. I'd have to print it a second, sometimes even a third time so that it would

Ed Hamilton (left) and Tyler Ferreira proofing *Double Basketball Orchid 2* at Hamilton Press in Venice, CA, August 2019

sit on top of the black without becoming too glossy. I had to do a lot of experimentation with the color and the printing to get it to work.

The way that the transparent colors are layered allows the other colors to come through. And it was really fascinating that you actually drew parts of the image to imitate that. It's carrying it a step further so that it wasn't just the way it was printed. It was the drawing that accomplished that as well.

JW Exactly. And interestingly enough, it makes sense with that print because the ball is supposed to be sort of like a translucent sphere hovering around and over this flower, with bits of it peeking through. I was aiming to get to that in the painting I was making—trying to create that overlap and thinking about how the color would change when it was inside the ball versus outside the ball—and then the printmaking process revealed that even more.

EH So this is something that you did in your painting as well?

Yasu Shibata working on *Four Landscapes*, a series of woodblock prints, at Pace Editions Inc., New York, October 2019

JW I made a painting that was a version of this image and incorporated the colors based on the print.

Initially the prints I would make were all coming from paintings; it was always about starting with a painting idea and taking it to printmaking. Then at some point what really revealed itself to me was that there were ideas and choices happening in the printmaking that I was then taking back to painting. But I remember specifically with the *Double Basketball Orchid 2* print on the black paper, you made a version with a different colorway from what I had brought you. I really liked it, and I thought, I'm going to use that color in my painting.

EH Oh, really?

JW Yeah, just based on the kind of color conversion that had happened when we were trying things out. Painting and printmaking have always gone hand in hand for me. Jacob Samuel first proposed that I learn how to etch from images of my paintings. The idea was not to make exact replicas of the paintings but to use the painting as

a model for an etching. We were just working from my paintings and bringing the ideas to printmaking in that way. And the conversations with all the print houses are a little bit different. Like with you and me, it's mostly a lot about color and paper and making sure that we're making a print that you are interested in and that I'm not totally forcing myself on the printer. I know some people will just be like, "This is what I want to do," and I always want to make sure it was something that we were both into doing. Sure, the process begins in my studio with my drawings and imagery, but you will have to live with it and work through it for a lot longer than I do. So that is always important to me with anybody that I'm making prints with.

EH Well, you have collaborated with quite a few printers by now. There must be a lot of different ways of approaching it.

JW Definitely. And I always ask for thorough feedback. I don't want anybody to hesitate about being critical or having a dialogue. I'm not a print expert, but I work with a lot of experts, and I like learning about it.

EH You seem to have many different kinds of collaborations in your life. Your wife, Shio [Kusaka], has obviously had a big influence on your work. I remember seeing a pot that she had made, which had an image of an archaeopteryx, and saying that it would make a good lithograph.

JW Yeah, we did make it into a lithograph.

EH Do you and Shio grow the plants you draw and paint?

JW We do. We have a bunch of plants at the studio and in the house, and taking care of them is sort of a collective project. I definitely got the plant-collecting bug as a young artist. I was painting primarily still lifes, doing similar stuff to what I'm doing now, but when I moved to LA from the East Coast, I was struck by how prehistoric, insane, and wacky the plants were here. I had never seen anything like them.

EH Both my parents were botanists.

JW Right! You gave me that amazing print that you made for your mom.

EH Yes. And now my wife, Pat, and I are doing it together.

JW Really? What do you guys grow?

EH Well, we're on kind of a tillandsia kick right now.

JW Ooh. What's a tillandsia like?

EH Well, they're weird because they don't have roots that go into the earth. They're air plants. So they have a very particular surface to the leaves that attracts the water, and they come out so that the water will go down into the plant. But they are not taking nutrients from the soil. It's all from the air.

JW Wow.

EH We just stick them onto pieces of wood or something, with moss around them so that they'll stay moist. They take such a variety of forms.

JW Do they flower at all?

EH They have gorgeous flowers.

JW Are they very short-lived flowers, or do they kind of grow out and then open?

EH Well, our son, Todd, just gave us one that has this beautiful—it's hard to describe it—growth that comes out that's kind of a pink-green, and then these beautiful purple flowers come out of that. And it keeps going for a long period of time: these

flowers keep blooming, and then they die, and more come out.

JW Wow. Maybe that's what I should make next.

EH Oh, I'd love that.

JW I've got to do some research on those. Maybe send me some pictures.

EH I will.

JW Shio and I have shared a studio for a long time, and I like having the whole family around, kind of growing up at the studio. I'm curious, what was it like raising a kid in the art world in the 1970s and 1980s? I always think it's really interesting because kids have such good ideas too.

EH They do. Todd had exposure growing up to what was happening in the art world at that time, mostly through all of the discussions that I had with Pat but also from the artists that came to our house. Many of these discussions were influenced by June Wayne's and Judy Chicago's passion for women's rights. He also had a photograph of the earth from space that an artist friend, Jerry Anderson, had given us, which he kept over his bed. And Beatrice Wood got Todd to apply for a grant to attend a private school in Ojai that was started by Krishnamurti and Aldous Huxley. Todd regarded June as someone similar to a grandmother. When he was about six years old, he gave her some of his art. She told him that she treasured it. Todd has since become quite an accomplished artist.

JW That's incredible. My kids make some really amazing stuff that's so inspiring. I have a whole wall of their greatest hits in my studio. I recently incorporated my daughter's drawing into a painting I made. She had drawn a cat, and I sort of based the cat on her drawing.

EH A lot of collaborations going on.

JW A lot of collaborations in my life, yeah. But printmaking is fully collaborative. I first started making prints through a collaboration, actually. I was making T-shirts and different prints with my friend Dan Phillips. It was called Dan and Jonas's Printshop, or DJ Printshop. I would make most of the drawings, and then we'd make the screens together and print them. And we did that for maybe a year after college, just for fun. We didn't make any money. Then I made a print with my friend Matt Johnson when I first moved to LA, *Wicked Curse Reversed* [2004], which is in my first *Prints* book [Gagosian, 2018]. It was in celebration of the Red Sox winning the World Series for the first time in eighty-six years. In the future I'd like to collaborate with people and make editions with them at the printshop I'm building.

EH I wanted to ask you about that. How is that coming along?

JW I've been talking about this for a while, that I want to start a printshop. It seems like something cool to do. I love the tradition of it. From working with different print houses and printers, I've gotten to see how things are set up and run. I'm interested in having a printshop and having it be integrated as part of my studio practice. And the second thing I want to do, which is more of a long-term play, is to make prints with artists I admire. That's in the future. First I'll just make my own prints there, and once I get everything rolling, I'll start inviting people to make prints.

EH But you already have an etching press, right?

JW I've had an etching press in the studio for a while. But in the new building we'll also have lithography and screen-printing setups.

EH Do you have a lithography press?

JW Not yet. I've got to look into getting one.

Shaye Remba reviewing *Clipping 3* (from *Three Clippings*) at Mixografía, Los Angeles, January 2019

EH What kind of press will it be?

JW I'm not sure. I like your press; I like Jean's press too. That's all I really know.

EH Well, you have to get a printer who knows how to make hand-printed lithographs.

JW Yeah, it'll be a proper business. There will be printers, apprentices, and a shop manager too. I can't wait to show it to you.

EH I'd like to see it.

JW I've always wanted to have my own printshop because I just love the tradition of printmaking. It's great to bring printmaking to the forefront and get more people involved. I feel like it's a dying art form, and I want to keep it going. Recently somebody asked me why I wouldn't digitally print the background color for a print I was working on, instead of using lithography or screen printing, as I was planning to. Nothing against digital printing, but I like the handmade. I'm cool with printing

From left: Nico Hernandez, Jean Milant, Jonas Wood, and Lino Martinez at Cirrus Gallery & Cirrus Editions Ltd., Los Angeles, signing *Shelf Still Life*, November 2018

presses as a kind of machine because it has to be operated by hand. You know what I mean? There's something rugged about it that I really appreciate. You have to build the print piece by piece. I just love the way it looks, the process, the whole feel of it. It's irreplaceable.

EH There's a purpose to different kinds of prints, even posters. When June Wayne and I ended our stint after fourteen years, I didn't think I'd ever print again. It was actually Pat's idea to keep printing, and she was insistent that I talk to Ed Ruscha, which was logical because I had a history with him. Also the way June had set me up was—she couldn't keep me busy all the time, so she invited other artists to come in and work with me. And Ed liked that idea. That's why we set up our shop the way we did. He wanted to keep it small, so I was the only person working there. I didn't have any assistants, and at that time Pat wasn't working here.

JW Were you just making prints with Ed at first?

EH No, it was always with a lot of different artists. Ed would make only a few prints a year. Hamilton Press was built on a similar system that June and I had of making my services available to many artists and splitting the edition.

JW Right.

EH So sometime after 2000, we opened our current space. It was perfect for Pat to come here to run the business and to sell the prints. But she also gave something else to the business that I couldn't provide, which was a kind of warmth. I can collaborate with printers, but she really developed relationships with them.

JW Yeah. I just always think of you guys together.

EH It worked out really well.

JW Did you already know Ed Ruscha from making prints at Tamarind with him?

EH I never made prints with Ed at Tamarind. We met there in 1968, but I didn't start working with him until 1970 at Cirrus. He was doing those drop words, you know, the "liquid word" series, and rubbing crayon on stone, which was not an easy thing to do. It took a lot of skill, from both the printer and the artist. And then I was working with him part-time while I was working for June Wayne. Eventually it just kind of transitioned into a workshop. So I've had longtime collaborations with June and with Ed. It's been a great honor to know them and work with them for such a long period of time. They've had an enormous influence on the print world.

JW Of course. When did you work at Cirrus?

EH From 1970 to about 1974.

JW And then what happened after 1974? Where did you work after that?

EH Oh, just for a few months at Gemini before they downsized. It was a difficult time for selling prints. And when we opened Hamilton Press in 1990, it was not easy. We didn't know from one month to the next whether we'd continue doing it.

JW Right, because in the late 1980s there was that huge stock market crash.

EH Yes.

JW And so you started the printshop in 1990. How fast did you say yes when Ed Ruscha said he wanted to open up a printshop with you? Were you hesitant?

EH I had to convince Ed. When he saw it as something for other artists as well, that's what convinced him. And it has been very convenient for him to do his own prints.

JW That's how I feel, but I'm going to do it a little bit in reverse. I want to make sure everything is running smoothly and not get too communal about it right away. I want to come at it from a different angle. But I get what Ed was saying too, because it would be impossible for me to just make prints all the time with that big of a printshop. I would be only a printmaker, and that's not really what I'm looking for. So that's why I want it to be forward-facing, but I have to build up to it.

EH Of course.

JW How many artists do you think you've worked with?

EH I've never counted.

JW Yeah. But when I first looked at Hamilton Press, I remember seeing the Raymond Pettibon prints, the Ruscha prints. Did you make prints with John Baldessari?

EH Just one.

JW What were some of your favorite prints you've made with Ruscha? Do you remember something being a pivotal moment?

EH You know, every time he made a print, it was interesting in so many different ways. He has a way of considering everything in advance. He works it all out ahead of time.

JW Prepared.

EH Yes, he's very prepared.

JW I feel like he's not a freestyler in a way. He has an idea, and he figures out how to execute it. It must take some practice to figure out how to execute it, like where the shadow goes and so on.

EH There have been a few instances where he's allowed me to make an edition so that each impression is unique, like the sky will be different on each print in the edition.

JW So it kind of does change. Does the practice and the process change depending on the artist you're making the print with? How would Raymond [Pettibon] make a print?

EH He's had me print something over and over again, and then he'd take it and do a watercolor on top of each print, something like that, something unique. He did an edition with Ed Ruscha, *Holy Bible* [2003], and he brought in these notes that he had taken and reproductions of texts that he had categorized—there were just hundreds of them. So he's very free and loose about everything. And he'll have some idea about something, but it will just be at the moment that he's drawing that it'll come out.

JW It's more spontaneous. That's cool. You've talked about why you like working with lithography. It covers almost everything—like pencil lines, brushstrokes, and photographs. It can have the feel of most printmaking techniques. You know what I mean?

EH Yes, it adapts to what the artist wants to do more than others. And that's a lot of what collaboration is, adapting to whomever it is that I'm working with.

JW Right. Exactly.

EH One of the many things I like about your 2018 *Prints* book is that credit is given to every one of the printers that you had worked with. In the past it was not seen as an option.

JW It's significant to me, so including it was always important. I was a studio assistant before I was a professional artist. You worked for other people before you ran your own business. We saw the different ways people treated their employees. I thought it was important to acknowledge who made it; it's an integral part.

Most of the time the people working in the shops are other printmakers or artists; they're not anonymous people, you know what I mean? The print isn't just the artist's work; it's a collaboration. It's the whole printshop, the whole process of the thing. You can't take full credit.

You had mentioned that back in the 1970s and 1980s many museums refused to give printers credit in their publications and in the labels on the gallery walls.

EH Well, it has changed quite a bit.

JW Yeah, I've noticed it's becoming pretty common now.

EH Certain people have been very good about being aware of and acknowledging the total process.

From left: Jonas Wood, Emmett Walsh, and Kevin Giffen at Wood's studio, Los Angeles, reviewing proofs of *Kitchen Interior*, March 2021

JW How do you feel that printmaking, and specifically lithography, has developed in LA? I mean, you've been in LA for—fifty years?

EH Since 1968.

JW So how would you say it's developed since you opened your shop in the 1990s? Or even since you got here in 1968?

EH At that time there was a lot of enthusiasm, through Tamarind, for opening up your own shop. That has abated considerably. It's a very difficult business to be in. And it's amazing to me that places have been able to keep going. I don't think there's much chance of new workshops opening anymore.

JW That was one of the reasons, when I was younger and started talking to you and Jean and Jacob, I kept saying I have to start a shop, because I want to keep the practice going. I think we're due for a renaissance in printmaking. I got into printmaking because I went to Cirrus, saw their

printshop, and looked through their archive. I think everybody who sees printmaking wants to get into it, so it just needs to keep happening and continue developing. It's not that accessible to a lot of people because there are only a couple of places. But there are probably some younger places starting that you and I aren't even aware of.

EH The other thing I think is different is that there is a changing attitude toward digital printmaking.

JW Like that it's more acceptable? Or the same?

EH I think it's becoming more accepted. And it's kind of sad because there are so many artists missing out on a good print experience.

JW Yes, because making it is the key thing. If you can just develop it and then press "print" on the computer, it's not the same thing as drawing the plates out and having the hand still be involved. The touch of the hand ends up being removed.

EH What role has printmaking played for you?

JW Personally, printmaking is like a crazy expansion of my studio practice and understanding how things are made from the ground up. I'm like a painting builder. I'm not spontaneous. I have an idea, and I have to kind of build it from the back to the front, from general to specific. And that relates so much to printmaking. That's how you make a print, from general to specific. You build it up through layers. You have to have multiple colors; you have to have different kinds of shapes coming together to create something. You can't just make it all happen on one plane. That has played a huge role for me, obviously. That's why I'm here talking to you.

EH Do you think LA is a hub for printmaking?

JW I do. I see Los Angeles as a huge hub for printmaking. The fact that Hamilton, Cirrus, and Gemini are here within like a fifteen-mile triangle of one another is major, you know? And the archives of those printshops are in the museums here. Like Ed wanting to open a shop where other artists could also print, I'd like the same thing. I'm happy to carry the torch and bring more people together. I want to teach more people about printmaking, I want to get people to expand their practices through these different techniques and see what happens. I'm curious about that. You know, for friends who don't make prints or other artists I admire who maybe don't make prints or who already do but want to keep making more, that's what I'm excited about.

EH Well, don't you think that more artists now are thinking of printmaking as being an integral part of their practices?

JW I think so. It's also a way for viewers to access the work and have it on their walls and live with it. When you make an edition, it means twenty-five, fifty, one hundred people can have a rad print. It seems like a great way to get yourself and your practice out there. There's a more viable, serious, sophisticated collector base and an understanding that prints are an important part of people's practices.

EH Yes. The press has been very fortunate to have a base of quite a few collectors who are really interested in collecting and keeping your art, along with that of a lot of other artists we've published. There are always going to be collectors who see it as an investment, something they can make money off of. But it's more important for us to have collectors who really love the work.

JW Right. People who want to live with prints. I grew up with a Sister Corita Kent print, *New Life* [1966], and a very specific Matisse print. In retrospect, I think that was really important to me. Not only for the aesthetics of those things—because they're all very flat and cut out, which is interesting because my work is somewhat flat and cut out too—but also because prints have always been an integral part of my life.

Hamilton Press came into being in 1990 as a result of a collaboration between Tamarind master printer Ed Hamilton and the Los Angeles artist and avid printmaker Ed Ruscha. The two had worked together on about forty prints, and both had a great respect for the idea of producing original artworks in a multiple form.

The printer and artist worked out what they thought would be the best situation for the creation of art in this medium, which would be limited to traditional lithography. The concept of the business would be to encourage artists, both those new to printmaking and those already familiar with the process, to produce art in a peaceful, unhurried atmosphere. The press opened its doors in a small space on Washington Boulevard (soon to become Abbot Kinney Boulevard) in Venice, California.

Hamilton Press still occupies the same space it did in 1990; by 2000 it had produced a rich abundance of prints, and Pat Squires Hamilton came aboard to organize, archive, and sell the lithographs. In 2001 an adjoining space became available, and a gallery was added to showcase the art of the lithograph and the talents of the artists who have adapted so well to the medium.

The press has added the lithographer Tyler Ferreira and an assistant printer, Jeff Cairns, to the workforce, and it continues to function as a publisher and maker of fine art lithographs. The star of the operation is the imagination and creativity of the artists. The shop was inspired by that spirit of collaboration in printmaking and remains dedicated to it.