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**Fleisher "Challenges" Community in Interdisciplinary Outlet
by Rachel Winters**

In 1978 Thora Jacobson, the current director of the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial (FAM), sensed that the city of Philadelphia lacked an outlet where artists without formal affiliations and technical training could exhibit their work.

One of the Fleisher Art Memorial's primary missions is to make art and the creative process accessible to all who seek it by inviting "the world to come and learn art," and it seems fitting with this trend that Thora Jacobson created the Fleisher Challenge, a competitive exhibition that presents the possibility for even the most underground artist to see their work on gallery walls.

The Fleisher Challenge, which celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary last year, is a quarterly competition that awards selected artists the opportunity to display their work in one of the three Fleisher Art Memorial Galleries. The competition is bipartisan and open to artists of all levels of artistic experience and education who live within a fifty-mile radius of Center City. The only artists restricted from entering the challenge are art students presently enrolled in a degree program, artists who will have their work in another show during the same year, and prior exhibitionists of the Fleisher Challenge.

There are five categories of work from which the jury, comprised of a team of artists with specialties in each category, and a Fleisher curator, select the artists. These categories are: crafts, painting, sculpture (installation), photography, and works on paper. Although the jury has an artist who specializes in each category, the finalists chosen to exhibit their work are selected not in an attempt to balance all five mediums but by the Fleisher Art Memorial's desire to exemplify what they see as outstanding, innovative art.

The applicants, according to FAM's director Warren Angle, are a "mix of people from factories, doctors, lawyers ... old and young, all working together as a community. The 'challenge' to the artist is to do something they wouldn't normally do and to free students who are steeped in a more academic approach...The 'challenge' is looking at different mediums outside of the commercial mold."

The application itself is simple and requires only a \$15 processing fee. Out of the 250 to 350 applicants for each quarterly challenge, only twelve artists are selected to show their work. While the art is for sale during the course of the month-long exhibition, the real prize is the honor of being selected.

What separates the Fleisher Challenge from the wide variety of other galleries across town seems to lie in the founding philosophy of the Fleisher Art Memorial: to serve the surrounding communities by offering exposure and, if desired, a complete immersion in art. In addition to the Fleisher Challenge and a variety of art classes available to public enrollment for both children and adults for a small fee, the Fleisher Art Memorial runs a variety of art outreach programs in public elementary and junior high schools. The outreach programs, the majority of which are after school initiatives, focus on extending artistic license and granting exposure to creativity by supporting inclusive, community learning.

The Fleisher Art Memorial plays host to the Fleisher Challenge for emerging artists, their present Annual Faculty Exhibition installation, various community partnerships, and soon will open its gallery walls to the exhibit *Several Steps Removed*, as part of the Institute of Contemporary Art's citywide *The Big Nothing* exhibit, which will open July 5. FAM collaborated with the Philadelphia Print Collaborative (PPC) to create *Several Steps Removed*, which seeks to interpret the idea of "nothing" by exploring the printmaking process. Artists to be featured in the show were contacted by the joint curatorial committee formed by the PPC, Fleisher (founding partners of the PPC), and the C.R. Ettinger Studio, a local Philadelphia etching studio.

"This exhibition ties into *The Big Nothing* from a printmakers point of view," said Renae Pavlosky, one of the shows curators and director of program design and marketing at the PPC. The idea of the exhibition will be to show the matrixes involved in the print process in an attempt to identify the negative space the artistic process of printmaking itself creates.

"The printing process implies infinity with the implication of making unlimited numbers of a piece, and also the way in which the plates are made show the removal of an image...the negative space," Pavlosky explained. While the *Several Steps Removed* Committee has selected and invited the printmakers to display old plates and matrixes or create new ones for the show, the work and exhibition layout has yet to be selected. This is perhaps indicative of the idea that for the eighteen artists submitting work for the show, the emphasis is not specifically on the work but the process itself.

Several Steps Removed and the PPC's affiliation with the Fleisher Art Memorial relate because the two share an extraordinary common goal, which is to make art more accessible. For the PPC this is accomplished through public art projects, the second of which, *Printing Philadelphia: The Rub* encourages children in schools and community groups to create matrixes inspired by how the Bill of Rights relates to their lives. This project will culminate on September 19 with a public exhibition at the Constitution Center.

The PPC also has an annual Invitational Portfolio, which selects the work of various emerging artists to be published with seven area print shops with two goals in mind. The first is to offer prints as an affordable form of art to collectors, and the second is to provide exposure for Philadelphia printmakers.

The decision of the PPC to participate in *The Big Nothing* will provide an opportunity both to demystify and celebrate the printing process by educating visitors to the gallery through showing the matrixes used to make prints and the subsequent artwork which is created.

This exhibition of not only art, but process, makes for a perfect partnership with the Fleisher Art Memorial by reinforcing the idea of accessibility to the creative process. For more information on the Philadelphia Print Collaborative, visit its website at www.printcollaborative.org or call (215) 557-8833. For more information about the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial community programs, classes, and exhibitions, visit www.fleisher.org or call (215) 922-3456.