

Lou Stovall and his Workshop, Inc.: The Printmaker as Catalyst

Danielle O'Steen

In 1973, *Washington Post* critic Paul Richard wrote in an exhibition review: “As much as any man, and as much as any institution, Lou Stovall and his Workshop are responsible for that friendly spirit of sharing and cooperation. Stovall is not just a printer, an artist and a teacher. He’s a catalyst.”¹ Stovall has been living and working in Washington since 1962, when he arrived as an undergraduate to study at Howard University. By 1968, he established his screenprinting shop: Workshop, Inc. Within a few years, Stovall had made an enormous impact on the city, its communities, and the realms of artmaking. He was producing his own vibrantly-colored prints inspired by the natural world, while building a hub of artistic activity at the Workshop, along with his wife, collaborator, and fellow artist Di Bagley Stovall.

Since its inception, the Workshop has aimed to reach a wide range of audiences, connect with political movements, and create new opportunities for artists to explore their work in the medium of screenprinting.² Stovall built his printshop to support a diversity of artists, and he quickly became sought after for his vibrant colors, delicate washes of pigment, nimble layering of forms, and inventive textures and surfaces. Artist Sam Gilliam, who worked with Stovall to create 21 prints over five decades, wrote: “The desire of Lou Stovall to open a printing workshop may have been more important than the Washington Color School in painting. The workshop allowed things to happen beyond printmaking.”³

This exhibition focuses on Stovall’s approach to and expansion of screenprinting as a medium and his decades- long study of color. The show opens with a selection of Stovall’s works over four decades, including large, brightly-colored compositions, intimate, finely-rendered screenprints, intricate studies and drawings, and experimental monoprints. The second part of the exhibition brings together a group of prints by artists who have collaborated with Stovall over the years: Gene Davis, David Driskell, Louis Delsarte, Sam Gilliam, Lois Mailou Jones, Minnie Klavans, Jacob Lawrence, Samella Lewis, Gwendolyn Knight, Paul Reed, and Di Bagley Stovall. *Lou Stovall: On Inventions and Color* brings together these two parts of Stovall’s artistic practice in order to understand the sheer innovation behind his work.

Stovall was born in Athens, Georgia in 1937, but moved to Springfield, Massachusetts at four years old. He developed an interest in the arts as a child and discovered screenprinting at age 15, while working for Growers Outlet Super Market in Springfield. There he met the store’s sign printer Al LaPierre, who had a silkscreen shop in the basement. He recalls being immediately enamored with the process of screenprinting.⁴ After graduating high school in 1957, Stovall first attended the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence on a scholarship, but returned home after a semester to support his family after his father passed away.⁵ When he returned to college in 1962, Stovall decided to attend Howard University instead, drawn to Washington as a center of social and political change. He was greatly impacted by his professors at Howard,

including James Lesesne Wells, David Driskell, Loïs Mailou Jones, and, especially, James A. Porter, the celebrated scholar of African American art history. A photo of Porter has long graced the walls of the Workshop, as a reminder of his impact.

While attending Howard, Stovall continued his connection to commercial screenprinting, finding work at Harvey Botkin's Sign Shop in Silver Spring, Maryland. By the time he graduated, Stovall was foreman of the shop.⁶ Early on, Stovall was printing posters for political groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and local spots like the influential jazz club Bohemian Caverns and its performers Roberta Flack, Wes Montgomery, and Miles Davis.⁷ In 1965, he was asked to create a print for the Josef Albers show at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, marking an early foray into fine art printmaking.

In 1967, Stovall met fellow young artist Di Bagley, who lived in the same apartment building. Bagley arrived in DC to study at the Corcoran School of Art and joined the staff at Botkin's print shop, working with Stovall on his posters after hours.⁸ Bagley, whose work is also represented in this exhibition, later joined Stovall's Workshop team and, by 1971, the two artists married, marking the beginning of a remarkable partnership in art and in life.⁹

Stovall established the Workshop in 1968, three years after graduating from Howard, with a grant from the Stern Family Fund, allowing him to build equipment and open a space on M Street in Washington.¹⁰ Then in October 1969, Stovall moved to the newly opened Corcoran Dupont Center, an experimental artist space driven by curator and Corcoran Gallery of Art director Walter Hopps.¹¹ In establishing the Dupont Center, Hopps placed Stovall—then 32-years-old—in charge of the four-story building, filled with a wood and metal workshop, classrooms, exhibition space, and a screenprinting studio.¹² In the first year, Stovall produced approximately 150,000 posters, cards, and fine art prints.¹³ In 1972, the Dupont Center closed and, within a year, the Stovalls found the permanent home for the Workshop: a 50-foot-long converted garage behind their house in the Cleveland Park neighborhood of DC, where they still reside today.¹⁴

In his history of African American art in Washington, artist and curator Keith Morrison wrote that Stovall “established a foundation for printmaking in the city.”¹⁵ In 1972, Paul Richard echoed that sentiment in *The Washington Post*: “If there is such a thing as a recognizably Washingtonian print, it is not an etching or a lithograph but a Workshop silkscreen.”¹⁶ Throughout the Workshop's history, Stovall has been known for his complex methods of screenprinting that are graceful, nuanced, and even painterly.

Silkscreening was first adopted by artists in the United States around the 1930s, after being primarily used for commercial purposes. The medium increasingly found recognition from artists in the 1960s, during what has been deemed the “printmaking renaissance.”¹⁷ Artists such as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, and Ed Ruscha are often discussed as key figures in the rise of screenprints, in a narrative that rarely acknowledges artists of color—Elizabeth Catlett, Romare Bearden, Rupert García and William T. Williams, among many others—who also innovated in the medium in the 1960s and 1970s. Stovall's Workshop alone supported a remarkable group of Black artists in their exploration of screenprinting, including Elizabeth Catlett, Louis Delsarte, Jeff Donaldson, David Driskell, Sam Gilliam, Loïs Mailou Jones, Jacob Lawrence, Samella Lewis, and Gwendolyn Knight, many of whom are represented

in this exhibition. A closer look at the contributions of artists of color is essential to a fuller understanding of the history of screenprinting in the United States.

Stovall elevated screenprinting beyond what was described in *ARTnews* in 1972 as “the anonymous, manufactured, smooth, mat [sic] deposit of ink.”¹⁸ Instead, he developed techniques to bring depth and delicacy to his prints: using opaque and thin layers—or “glazes”—of color; applying sponges, brushes, scrapers, and even his own hands as well as the traditional rubber squeegee to push the ink through the mesh; and inscribing fine lines using specially-designed wooden tools. These techniques allowed him to create imagery that echoed drawings, paintings, watercolors, or even collaged and sculptural surfaces. Instead of seeing printmaking as a system of distinct relationships, Stovall developed an entirely fluid approach that was able to adapt to any visual source.

Lou Stovall: On Inventions and Color begins with a selection of prints by Stovall from the 1970s, showing the artist building his imagery through complex layers of color. The show opens with the intimate print *Little Love* from 1971, which depicts a tree-like form swooping upward, evoking movement or even the long hair of a figure. In the image, orange hues are layered with expressive dabs and smears, contrasted by a fine network of lines defining the branches and shaded trunk, as a demonstration of Stovall’s early experimental compositions.

After *Little Love*, Stovall’s prints follow along two general but interconnected paths: prints inspired by the natural world—from elegant trees to intricate floral studies—and abstracted works that explode in choruses of color. Artist and art historian David Driskell, a mentor and close friend of the artist, wrote that Stovall “sees nature as an unending source for his own work.”¹⁹ Stovall’s dreamy compositions of earthly forms appeared on a large scale in the 1970s. In *Spirit* from 1971, measuring more than three feet tall, the central tree shape sprouts a balloon-like top, delineated by pink and blue surfaces that appear more sponged and dripped than pressed and flattened. The trunk, detailed with Stovall’s signature fine lines, seems to reach up and grasp the globed top, while the word “Love” appears in the tree’s branches in yellow pigment. Stovall recalls that with *Spirit*, he was teaching himself “to make volume” by layering opaque colors.²⁰ In *Glazing* from 1972, Stovall expands his technique further by using a lacquer substance applied to the silk as a stencil instead of cut film. This technique allowed him to create more painterly and wispy shapes, printed with “glazes” of translucent color.

The exhibition continues with Stovall’s more intricate screenprints created in a circular format that show his skill as a miniaturist, particularly in the prints of flowers he calls “portraits.”

²¹ In *Three Alstromeria with Two Orchids* from 1981, the flowers are bundled together in a complex network of lines and overlapping shapes, almost entirely filling the frame with color and life. *Breathing Hope* from 1996, a portrait of a black orchid, is a study of delicacy and intense color, and was commissioned to commemorate the inauguration of Howard University’s 15th president, H. Patrick Swygert. Birds also often appear in Stovall’s works, evoking “the freedom to exist, the freedom to have an imagination,” as seen in two prints made to support President Barack Obama: *Sea to Shining Sea* from 2008 and *Into the Light* from 2009.²²

The final works by Stovall in the exhibition are recent monoprints: one-of-a-kind prints that appear as abstracted landscapes, where color expands to the edge of the paper. *Vespers* from 2010 has a glowing, speckled halo above a lush field of blues and greens, as if an enormous, rising sun, while *Secrets of the Day* from 2010 abounds with colors that emerge like bubbles

rising to the surface. Using different tools to pour, splatter, and splotch pigments, Stovall created spontaneous—even, sculptural—surfaces in these prints, which he described as “a history or record of my movement over the screen.”²³

Stovall’s collaborations at his Workshop offered another rich field for him to experiment with the abilities of screenprinting. He worked with many prominent figures in DC, including Paul Reed and Gene Davis—artists associated with the Washington Color School—and more under-recognized artists such as Minnie Klavans. Gilliam has had the most extensive exchange with Stovall over 50 years of friendship, represented in three prints: *Much* from 1980, *After Smoke* from 1985, and *For Xavier* from 1990. Stovall reflected on his work with Gilliam being defined by the “thrill of the unanticipated.”²⁴ The surfaces of Gilliam’s prints are restless, with frenetic, layered colors, and speckled and mottled textures, evoking the surfaces Gilliam used in related assemblages of painted wood and metal.

Stovall has described silkscreen as “an interpretive medium,” where he can create prints that can take the appearance of watercolors, collages, or paintings. While Stovall’s work with Gilliam was more experimental, his collaborations with other artists often started with a specific work in another medium. Curator Ruth Fine writes about this process of “translation,” where Stovall turns one artist’s material into a form that could only be made in screenprint.²⁵ David Driskell’s screenprint *Dancing Angel* from 2002 was created in connection to a 1974 work with the same title made with oil paint, fabric, and collage elements.²⁶ The painted work depicts an angel-like figure constructed with both Christian and African imagery, which includes a collaged picture of an Ife mask adhered to the face. To create the screenprint, Stovall meticulously built the image with seemingly limitless layers of opaque and translucent colors, with some distinct visual differences. For instance, the collaged half of the head transforms into an image etched in gold pigment, lending a heavenly effect unique to the print. In crafting Gwendolyn Knight’s *The White Dress* from 1999, a striking portrait of a woman in profile, bisected by fields of deep red, Stovall used his wife Di’s collection of lace to create the stencils for the delicate patterning of the dress, which appears almost embossed on the surface.²⁷

Stovall’s work with Jacob Lawrence is also represented in this exhibition by two of the fifteen screenprints they created together between 1986 and 1997. The prints were adapted from Lawrence’s earliest series *The Life of Toussaint L’Ouverture* (1937–1938), composed of 41 gouache paintings on the leader of Haiti’s independence from French colonial rule and the 1791 Haitian Revolution to abolish slavery. One print, *The Burning* from 1997, depicts a vista with cabins aflame in the background and a complex network of grassy forms that consume the composition, as if a verdant tidal wave echoing the Revolution. Lawrence, then based in Seattle, worked out many details in this print over the telephone, finding rhythm in the composition by counting blades of grass together. Stovall recalled: “We were creating meaning, in other words, making an art language that would take us beyond conventional expectations of what was possible in the silkscreen medium.”²⁸

Stovall worked with Lawrence to expand his compositions through the print medium, a collaboration that is essential to understanding the master printer’s methods of screenprinting. Stovall wrote: “Collaborative work requires a concept that goes beyond the self, beyond one’s role as the painter and beyond one’s role as the printmaker...Collaboration after mastery is the

single most rewarding experience for an artist.”²⁹ It is this approach to printmaking that has driven the energy of the Workshop and established Stovall’s role as a “catalyst” among artists.

Lou Stovall: On Inventions and Color starts in the 1970s, when Stovall was developing color-saturated, fantastical visions of the natural world during a moment of civil unrest and social change. The show traces a path of seemingly limitless hues and textures on prints made throughout the Workshop’s long history. Certain themes remain consistent, including Stovall’s fearless use of color, his radical style of printmaking, and his deep appreciation for the value of collaboration and community-oriented work. This exhibition follows the impact of Stovall’s expansion of screenprinting, driven by the sheer force of the artist’s innovations.

NOTES

- ¹ Paul Richard, "The Community Art Spirit," *The Washington Post*, March 2, 1973: B1.
- ² Screenprinting has certain fundamental components, starting with a fine mesh fabric stretched over a frame. The fabric, traditionally silk but now most often a woven synthetic material, is the foundation. I use the terms "screenprint" and "silkscreen" interchangeably because Stovall has always used silk.
- ³ Sam Gilliam, "In Workshop, Inc.," in *The Art of Silkscreen Printmaking* (Washington, DC: Howard University Gallery of Art, 2001), 9.
- ⁴ Patricia Dane Rogers, "A Workshop-Atelier Comes to Life in NW Washington," *The Washington Post*, March 26, 1987: T18.
- ⁵ Larry Saxton, "Making Magic," *Washington Informer*, February 7, 2008: 39.
- ⁶ Richard, "Lou Stovall, Prince of Prints," *The Washington Post*, October 4, 2001: C5.
- ⁷ On many early posters, he collaborated with artist Lloyd McNeill.
- ⁸ Rogers, "A Workshop-Atelier": T20–21.
- ⁹ For more on the Stovalls' history, see: Will Stovall, ed., *Of the Land: The Art and Poetry of Lou Stovall* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022).
- ¹⁰ Richard, "Corcoran Draws the Line," *The Washington Post*, April 15, 1972: E3.
- ¹¹ The building was formerly the home of the Washington Gallery of Modern Art.
- ¹² Richard, "Corcoran's New Workshop," *The Washington Post*, October 10, 1969: B8.
- ¹³ Richard, "Corcoran Draws the Line," E3.
- ¹⁴ In May 2020, a large tree behind the Stovalls' house fell during a rainstorm, crashing through the Workshop's building. The collection of prints was safely transferred to their home and the Stovalls' began the process of rebuilding, as a new Workshop studio was being constructed as this catalogue went to press.
- ¹⁵ Keith Morrison, *Art in Washington and its Afro-American Presence: 1940–1970* (Washington, DC: Washington Project for the Arts, 1985), 60.
- ¹⁶ Richard, "Corcoran Draws the Line," E3.
- ¹⁷ Ruth Fine, "Double Vision," *International Review of African American Art* 18, no. 3 (2002): 38.
- ¹⁸ Richard S. Field, "Silkscreen, the Media Medium," *ARTnews* 70, no. 9 (January 1972): 40.
- ¹⁹ David Driskell, "Lou Stovall's Visual Voice," in *The Art of Silkscreen Printmaking* (Washington, DC: Howard University Gallery of Art, 2001),
- ²⁰ Lou Stovall, interview by the author, October 22, 2020.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Stovall, interview by Larry Crowe, September 27, 2003, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive (A2003.236), accessed September 17, 2021, <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/lou-stovall-39>.
- ²³ Stovall, "Vertical Views: Notes on the Views," in *Vertical Views: Silkscreen Monoprint Collage* (Washington, DC: Katzen Center, American University Museum, 2012), 11.
- ²⁴ Stovall, "Working with Jacob Lawrence: An Elegy," *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, no. 36 (2002): 195.
- ²⁵ Fine, "Double Vision," 38.
- ²⁶ The print was made to raise funds for the 2002 National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta.
- ²⁷ Stovall, interview by the author, October 22, 2020.
- ²⁸ Stovall, "Working with Jacob Lawrence," 196.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 195.

Conversation with Lou Stovall

Anne C. Smith

I first met Lou in 2010, when I began working as his studio assistant. I was introduced to his experimental approach to silkscreen printmaking, exceptional craftsmanship, and generous spirit of community that he and his wife, the artist Di Bagley Stovall, have shared with so many people. During my time in his studio, Lou was developing his monoprint series and experimenting more than ever in his process. In this conversation, Lou and I discuss the technical aspects of his process that he has invented over more than 50 years.

ANNE C. SMITH: When I started working for you, I was amazed at how many systems you had for everything that we did. Where did you get your spirit for innovating and experimenting? When did you realize that you wanted to make silkscreen printing your medium?

LOU STOVALL: Well, I saw the potential that silkscreen had to be the agent of invention. I liked that term—the agent of invention—and I wanted to be part of that and involved in that. It was also the fascination with color in general, and how to achieve certain effects. I really loved doing that.

ACS: That term, ‘agent of invention,’ is that something you came up with?

LS: Yes.

ACS: I like that take on it. I don’t think a lot of people would have characterized silkscreen printmaking in that way early on.

LS: Well, what I mean by the agent of invention is that silkscreen had so many possibilities that had not been explored. It was the possibility of invention. Especially in Sam Gilliam’s work, but also David Driskell, Louis Delsarte, and Jacob Lawrence. So many artists had various things that they had experimented with and tried. So, affecting those techniques and getting them from the screen onto the paper, and of course, printing one color at a time made a huge difference in the possibility of it being an agent of invention.

The editions that I did for artists in the late 60s were mainly hard edge, with artists like Paul Reed and Gene Davis. It was very important to me to print them with no overlap of color. Perfecting registration and exact stencil cutting were equally important. The next challenge was printing a soft edge for other artists. I would develop various techniques doing my own prints, like *Spirit* and *Glazing*.

ACS: So you were given these basic tools of silkscreening, and then you made them your own. It must have been very exciting to think about all of the possibilities—

LS: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, it was so interesting to develop something—like, develop an image and then go away from it for a minute, or for lunch, or just the rest of the evening. Then, suddenly to wake up and think, ‘this is what I should have done.’ A lot of that came because of working with some of the artists who were looking for ways of doing things, and I was there to help them achieve it. It was more of an adventure than anything else.

Lou and I get technical here, so I want to offer a quick primer on silkscreen printmaking. One begins with a finely woven mesh stretched over a frame, taut as a drum. A stencil is adhered to the screen, which blocks areas of the mesh, making them impenetrable to ink while leaving other areas “open” to whatever shape the artist has designed. Ink is pulled smoothly over the screen

and pressed through the mesh by the downward pressure of a squeegee, thereby printing a thin, even layer of ink onto the paper in the shape of the stencil. Usually, the artist prints one color per stencil, and a multi-colored image is built by layering colors onto the paper through a series of stencils.

Most screenprinting set-ups these days use water-based inks. By contrast, Lou's practice has always been oil-based, and benefits from the stunning richness of color that oil-based inks offer, a vibrancy that is maintained even when the inks are thinned and new colors created by printing translucent inks over top of one another. Lou and his assistants meticulously hand-cut stencils from stencil film using a swivel knife with a 1/8-inch blade. Texture in the image is created by carefully cutting and hand-altering the stencil. He built his own screens, stretching a very fine mesh of silk over wooden frames. His largest and most-used screen measures four by eight feet.

One of Lou's major innovations is how he made use of various solvents, such as applying a lacquer thinner to dissolve or "soften" the edges of a stencil. Lou also concocted a thick, screen-blocking fluid—stencil film dissolved in lacquer thinner—that could be brushed, stippled, patted or otherwise patterned onto the screen by hand to create printed textures. This technique became extremely important and versatile for him. Another technique was to coat the screen with a thin layer of screen filler, then partially dissolve it with lacquer thinner using a brush or other tool to create texture. Over the years, Lou's innovations have resulted in a seemingly endless vocabulary of textures and painterly qualities in his prints.

ACS: In the oil-based method of silkscreen printmaking, you've got your stencil film that can be dissolved with lacquer thinner. You've got the ink, which can be thinned with turpentine. And then xylol, which would clean up the ink without altering the stencil. You took all of these basic ingredients and thought of different ways to recombine them, like taking lacquer thinner and softening stencils, or dissolving stencil film in lacquer thinner to use for stippling or brushing directly into the screen.

LS: Right, yes. And the brush. The brush was a very important part of everything that I was doing. I had special bristle brushes that were used, generally, for oil painting. The brush, wet with lacquer thinner, would soften the edges of the stencil. The ink printed with this manipulation was fascinating in terms of how the edge would come out.

ACS: Do you remember the first print where you made some of these alterations?

LS: Well, it's a funny story. I was working with Sam Gilliam. There was something that he wanted to do, which had to do with fusing the ink, one color of ink into another. I needed to slow down the emulsion, the silkscreen filler. I needed to slow it down, so that I could make that effect. As soon as I had accomplished that effect, I said, 'Okay, this is it.' 'It' was successfully transferring the brushstroke from my hand and brush to the stencil.

As I finished making that transfer—because we were just proofing, we weren't making a print—Sam said, 'Now what?' And I said, 'Okay, let's erase it.' And I quickly picked up the lacquer thinner, which is how you dissolve your stencil, and he says, 'Wait, wait, what are you doing?' By that time, I had already poured the lacquer thinner on the screen. And he said, 'Lou!' *[laughter]* 'We just went crazy making that stencil and now you're gonna destroy it?' And I said, 'Well, Sam, now that we've done it, we can do it again, you know?' That was one of the fun aspects of printing. Sam says, 'Okay.' *[laughter]* He just backed off and let me at it.

ACS: You and Sam really had and still have a special relationship in terms of feeding off each other's energy in the studio and arriving at some pretty wild printmaking solutions. Was it always that way from the time you became friends?

LS: Yes. Sam was also very, very willing to see where I was going with it, and how it would result and so on. I needed a willing partner. Even though we were working on his art, I wanted Sam to know when I had a new way to make stencils for him and how it could work with his art.

Probably the most important thing to understand is that Sam is essentially a natural born artist in terms of putting things together. I was the same. His sense and feeling of trust, that it's going to be okay, was something that fed us both.

ACS: Can you say more about color and how you experimented with color and layering and glazing?

LS: Well, the layering and the glazing—that was all technical. It had to do with mixing a color that would be thin enough so that once it was printed, it wouldn't cloud up.

ACS: Cloud up, like dry up in the screen?

LS: Not drying up in the screen, but as it dried on the paper, the color that was printed before would come through clear. You want the overlay of one color over another to be clear and give you the desired results. That's what printing transparency was all about, so that each color would keep its sheen. Without the right balance the overlay can become dull in color. That was something that I was learning and doing for myself. Then I would show Sam and he would say, 'I love that.'

So, it was less interaction with other people than it was just myself and the medium that I was working with. I don't want to take too much credit for myself, but there had to be an open-mindedness. It was discovery, and then satisfaction.

I think of the subtlety of color and my mind goes to something poetic, like the essence of what it would be like to have a sense of transfer. That is, a change that is perceived or imagined but not definite, like changing the color violet with a shade of ink so subtle that one would associate it with a scrim, like a very light shadow.

ACS: Were you thinning the inks using a transparent base or turpentine or a mixture?

LS: I was using transparent base, turpentine, xylol—anything that would thin the ink so that we could go on to the next stage. A lot of it had to do with the technology of the ink itself and what that would allow me to do.

ACS: What were you using castor oil for?

LS: I used castor oil to slow down the [drying time of the] lacquer-based screen filler. Getting the stencil made just right was very, very important. It was the castor oil that made it possible.

ACS: How did you ever come up with castor oil?

LS: Through doing research. I tried every oil that you can think of. It was amazing. I was looking in the Ralph Mayer handbook [*The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques*] for information. It was very important to have access to that reading material, and it said that castor oil is a slow drying oil. I then experimented using it with lacquer filler for stencils.

ACS: So the idea is that if you slow down the drying, you've got more time to alter the stencil.

LS: Yes. The time was limitless, you could wet an area over and over. That was very useful for complicated stencils, like with Louis Delsarte's print *The Letter*.

I first did this research for my *Of the Land* series in 1973 because I wanted more depth and variation, especially in the clouds. Castor oil opened up many possibilities. Slowing the drying time of the lacquer helped create more textures and was easier to control. I discovered that I could build on that with each color applied.

ACS: That was an important series for you. Were there other parts of your process that you experimented with to make those prints?

LS: I also wanted a finer line, as thin as possible. I adapted a swivel knife with a very tiny looped cutter to cut lines. You can buy a larger stationary line cutter but with the swivel, it expands the variations of lines.

As he gradually altered his stencils, Lou layered many translucent inks to build subtle gradations in color and density. Lou and I looked at a few prints together to talk about how he developed each one.

ACS: [Looking at *Spirit*, 1971] Can you tell me more about making this one? I don't know how you did this blue, splashy texture. I definitely see thin layers of ink, layers to make new colors.

LS: A lot of it had to do with layering the one light color, printing that, and then going into the edge of that stencil, and printing a slightly deeper color, or different color. In a lot of the prints, the exchanges of color are so subtle, because we're using the same color over and over again. Sometimes it is exactly the same color. Other times it's a mix that makes it darker or deeper, or redder or bluer, you know.

ACS: But what baffles me is that these blue areas look like drops and splashes.

LS: Right. I'm dripping from a distance. So I've already mixed a color and printed. Then I am standing over the silk with the lacquer thinner and dripping into the stencil. That's how I created that effect.

ACS: Then this peachy color, it looks like something was pressed into the screen to make that texture?

LS: That, too. But also, it's a matter of printing it and letting it dry or almost dry. Then printing on top of it again. So a lot of that happens in the interaction of one color over another. That's why oil-based ink is so important.

ACS: [Looking at *Glazing*, 1972] Do you remember what's going on here, Lou? How did you get these striations in the mountain range, with that kind of pink color?

LS: That was just working on the stencil and opening it up for different dynamics.

ACS: Were you using a certain kind of tool to get that texture?

LS: Well, I was using a brush to open up the stencil. You have to think of this stencil in terms of the whole thing being blocked out, but it's blocked out with a very, very thin layer of screen filler, so that when you have your lacquer thinner and you're opening up a part of it, it happens very quickly. As I dropped and splattered lacquer thinner, I could see areas start to open up. I could then blot those areas in a controlled way in order to remove some of the filler, to both stop any more spread and to add texture. I would look closely at the screen to check the stencil and then open it more. Like painting or watercolors, you can use a brush or other tools to create the textures you want.

This revelation took me by surprise. Lou was describing an experimental way of creating a stencil: rather than the usual method—cutting a shape from stencil film and adhering it to the screen—Lou first closed off the entire screen by applying a thin layer of his liquid screen filler mixture.

Then, he reversed the process by opening up select areas of the screen with lacquer thinner and various tools, such as a brush, resulting in a stencil that is painterly, textured, and somewhat accidental.

ACS: Okay, so that's actually different from what I was picturing! So you would close off the whole screen and then open it back up.

LS: Exactly. Except the method was to have the screen either completely filled, or completely open or some stage in between. So, every way that you can think of treating the silk, I used that.

ACS: Yeah. No rules.

LS: No rules. Right.

ACS: Well, where should we go next?

LS: Oh, take *The Burning* [Jacob Lawrence, 1997]. He was inventing, and I was inventing. What I was really doing was inventing as his vision suggested. He wanted to have these colors represent the density of the grasses, because in his original, he wasn't able to do that.

ACS: I remember you saying that when you printed the [*Toussaint L'Ouverture*] series, you printed the colors multiple times over to build up a density using opaque ink.

LS: Right. Opaque ink, but also thinned down.

ACS: The color is so rich.

LS: You can probably feel the rise of the ink, especially on the red over the roof. The prints feel like the richness of Jacob's gouache. Jacob loved that.

ACS: The two of you became such great friends. I mean, my imagining of it is a different feel from say, your friendship with Sam, just in terms of the way that you work together, but as deep of a friendship.

LS: Exactly. But the thing to remember is that I was working as hard as I could for each individual artist, experimenting, and also trying to pretty much read their mind as to what they would want. And I would do it that way. You can probably see that in *The Letter* [Louis Delsarte, 2003] more so than in the other print. I wasn't interpreting from his instructions as much as I was from the original painting he had delivered to me.

ACS: So the goal in the print is to achieve the same effect rather than an exact likeness of the original.

LS: Right.

ACS: I'm noticing a sense of depth in the image, using different densities of ink, different opacities.

LS: Well, the stippling was printed with ink straight out of the can just mixed, you know, so that it would have that thickness. But the translucency, like in her face—those inks were water-thin, like watercolor. And the same is true through the window.

So many tools were used. Everything that I had in my studio, including little bits of toweling, or washcloth. Di would give me a washcloth that she was no longer using. I would cut it up so that I would have that texture to stipple with. I made pounce bags with fabrics of different textures.

ACS: Anything that could make a texture.

LS: Anything to make a texture. But that's the way Delsarte painted, you know?

ACS: One of the more recent developments you made happened in the early 2000s, when you started making these monoprints that are very painterly, where you're working over an open screen without a hand-cut stencil applied. Could you describe the process of making the monoprints?

LS: Well, I never thought of it as open or working with an open screen because I would always section off the screen and print what I wanted to print. I was using it as a total medium.

Lou's process of making one-of-a-kind silkscreen monoprints such as Evening Suite (2004) looked very different from the traditional method that produces an edition of identical prints. For one, he would develop prints that became "totally saturated with oil-based ink." Using various tools—spray bottles, brushes, stir sticks—and thinning his ink with turpentine, he orchestrated the dripping, dashing, splashing, and spraying of multiple colors directly onto the working area of the screen. He controlled where and how the ink fell, but also let it be spontaneous and painterly. Lou sometimes printed these without a squeegee, instead pressing the ink through the screen using a second piece of paper on top, resulting in two related but unique impressions. Often, Lou used a squeegee in unexpected ways, zigzagging the tool or making quick chopping strokes to produce different rhythms and textures. In Winter Roses (2010), for example, he used the squeegee to drag the ink in a controlled way.

LS: You have to trust yourself, that you will know what is good and interesting after you've done it. Your process is putting enough stuff on that paper or on that surface so that when you get to the end, you know that you'll have something.

ACS: That's interesting, because I think of when you were teaching me silkscreen printmaking—there's quite a lot of planning that goes into making the print from the beginning, but to leave open the possibility for things to change is another skill.

LS: Yes. And when you get to the end, do you like it? Or do you not like it? And if you don't like it, then you change it. If you do end up changing it, often, whatever you end up changing it to or the process thereof, gives you something that's totally different but that's also interesting.