



HC Cassill
selected works



Cover:
untitled, c. 1950
intaglio, 7 x 5 in.

Above:
untitled, c 2000
print drawing, 12.25 x 25 in.

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William Busta Gallery
2731 Prospect Avenue
Cleveland OH 44115

W williambustagallery.com
T 216.298.9071
E bustagallery@gmail.com

The interstate keeps pace with the Missouri River as both wind down toward the southwestern corner of Iowa. Late in the year, when the corn and alfalfa and soybeans are long gone, the night-colored dirt is as dark as potting soil, mile after mile, like etching ink spread thick on a copper plate. At once calm and stark, this land, even now in an era of agribusiness and GM crops, seems tucked into its own dimension, outside the dome of mainstream modernity.

The American printmaker H.C. (Carroll) Cassill was born here, about two miles from a short bend in the Missouri, at Percival, Iowa, a town which is now home to fewer than 90 people. Probably it was larger and livelier in 1928 when the Cassills lived there, but as it happens the family didn't stay very long. Cassill's father was a state school administrator, and his mother was, as Cassill's wife, the artist Jean Kubota Cassill recalls, a controversial figure known for her radical political convictions and connections. "She frequently raised enough animosity that she was asked to leave," Jean laughs. Whether it was on that account or for other reasons, Percival wasn't the first or the last place, big or small, that the peripatetic Cassills left behind. Carroll's older brother, who would become the notable writer, artist, and editor R.V. Cassill, had been born ten years earlier in Cedar Falls, a much larger town near Des Moines.

Some of these circumstances may be coded into the psychic substructure of Cassill's mature work, which is often inflected with political concerns, and can convey a sharp sense of personal isolation, and of flight. Yet even more fundamentally, Cassill's process was defined by a stubborn, lifelong insistence on the importance of the decisions and choices that individuals make. Above all his subtle, expressive, scarred and weathered-looking plates and prints, the products of what he described as "abstract-expressionist printmaking," insist on their own unique path toward significance. It makes sense to trace the emotional roots of such a heroically existential sense of independence and responsibility back to Cassill's upbringing, at least in part. But much of the form his aesthetic radicalism would take, especially in the 1950s, owed even more to the heady influence of Mauricio Lasansky, his mentor at the University of Iowa and one of the preeminent printmakers of the period. Lasansky's broad impact on American printing philosophies, studio practices, and techniques was, for at least a decade, second to none (as late as 1961 *Time* could still refer to him as, "the nation's most influential printmaker"), and understandably he made an ineradicable impression on the 20-year-old Cassill.

Following R.V. Cassill's example and advice, Carroll attended Purdue University in Indiana briefly, then traveled to Iowa City where he studied at the University of Iowa. He received a BFA there in 1948, an MFA in 1950, and eventually was named an Instructor in the printmaking department in 1953. The Argentinean artist Mauricio Lasansky had arrived at the University three years earlier after working at New York's seminal print studio Atelier 17 as a Guggenheim Fellow. At that time the Atelier, transplanted from

France during the war under the leadership of Stanley William Hayter, attracted a number of New York School artists, including Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. Cassill soon became a convert to Lasansky's philosophy, which was daring at the time partly because it confronted academic paradigms; Lasansky's ambition was to redefine printmaking as a primary artistic medium, on a par with sculpture and painting. In practice this was partly a matter of physical presence—his often heroically proportioned prints were printed in a full range of color; and his subject matter could be ambitiously allegorical, as in his famous print *España*. But these qualities are actually secondary, and misleading. Lasansky taught that attitude was the key to redefining the medium and its role. His concept of the gravity and rigor of art amounted to a kind of doctrine, in some ways perhaps even a lifestyle or spiritual technique, at least within the confines of the print studio. He believed that the purpose of making a work of art was to achieve new insight. He taught his students, who he always regarded as fellow artists, to slow down and look at what they were doing. He also encouraged them to experiment, as he did himself, with multiple plates and unusual papers, mixing many techniques in the course of printing. For Lasansky the goal was not mechanical uniformity or standardization, but just the opposite. Each product of the press was a singular creation, like the hand that made it, imbued with its own truth. The work was all about the unanticipated mark or series of gestures that turned the print aside from its influences and intentions, steering it into the unknown. Artistic process was for Lasansky the field in which this crucial event could happen. He wrote, "There are no formulas. Freedom, backed by self-discipline, will eventually help the student to find himself in his work. If I teach anything at all, it is the sense of responsibility one must have as an artist." (*A New Direction in Intaglio: The Work of Mauricio Lasansky and His Students*, catalogue, Walker Art Center 1949, pg21)



Soon Cassill was winning prizes, most significantly The Tiffany Prize awarded to him in 1953, coveted both on account of its prestige and the fact that it came with a \$2,000 stipend—a sizable amount of money in a market where an artist as esteemed as Lasansky might offer his prints for \$60 at a museum exhibit. By the mid-1950s Cassill had been on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. His work was purchased by (among others) the Library of Congress, the Brooklyn Art Museum, and the Oakland Art Museum. Cassill was just 22 years old in 1950, but he found himself abruptly in the thick of a career in the arts. It was also in the early days of this pivotal, highly successful year that he made the acquaintance of another artist who would change and enrich his life.

Jean Kubota Cassill was a Japanese-American artist from Newport, Washington, who had followed her older sister to the University of Wisconsin in Madison as the war continued to rage in the Pacific. Jean received her MA from Wisconsin in 1950 and later that year moved to continue her studies in Iowa with Lasansky. Two years older than Carroll, she was already a notable young printmaker in her own right whose work had been purchased in 1949 by the Library of Congress. The two had ample reason to be impressed with each other—but they also fell in love, and were married

about a year later in 1951, and stayed married. By the end of the decade their children Sarah and James were ages five and two, and the Cassills' careers had continued forward in lock step. Both had been included in group shows at MoMA and numerous other museums of fine and contemporary art around the country. By then they were also becoming standby younger talent at the Cleveland Museum of Art's annual May Show exhibit, after moving to Cleveland in 1957—the year that the Cleveland Institute of Art hired Carroll to head its Printmaking department. It was a post he would hold until his retirement in 1991, influencing generations of artists and manifesting in his prints a bone-deep, reflective love of his chosen medium.

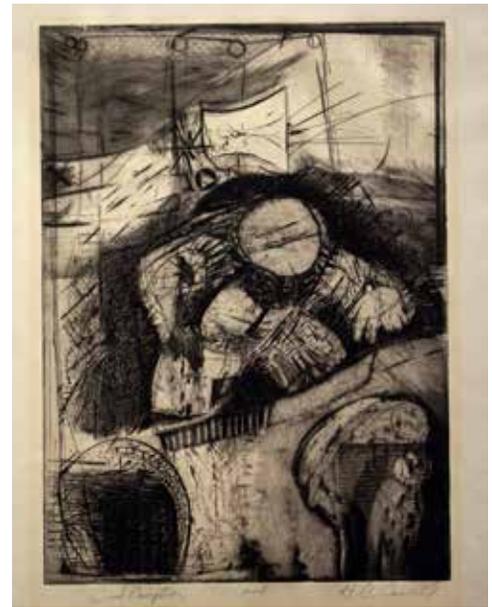
“In a way I’m a contradiction,” Cassill once wrote, sounding a little puzzled, in a typically brief, self-searching artist statement. “I’m too much interested in formalism to be a social romanticist, and too much interested in social romanticism to be a formalist.”

To audiences familiar with Lasansky and other notable midcentury American artists, like Leonard Baskin, who was occasionally part of the high-profile shows that included one or both of the Cassills, H.C. Cassill's images were plain expressions of the postwar zeitgeist. Embedded in his prints' shifting scale of blacks and his fine rain of articulate marks, were concerns common to most serious art and thought during the Cold War. It was a time of big, serious questions about the human condition. The Korean War began in 1950, a few seconds by the terrible clock of history after Belsen-Belsen and Hiroshima and Nanking. And geopolitical matters still hung in the balance, increasingly under threat of universal nuclear annihilation, or so it seemed. In Iowa and in every other state, Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist crusade had left-leaning artists worried about job security. It was an era, or at least the first harsh phase of it, framed by Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *The Crucible* (1953). Any ambitious show of prints or paintings or sculpture was certain to have a somber existentialist and psychoanalytic tone.



Left:
The Great Gates on the Dneiper at Kiev, c. 2000
 print drawing, 12 x 17.5 in.

Upturned Canoe + Rowboat,
 1978
 woodcut, 11 x 14 in.



Cruel Deception, 1962
 artist's proof, intaglio,
 16.25 x 12 in.

Probably the shape and feel of Freudian theory can be discerned also among the pedagogical roots of Lasansky's working methods, shaping his notions of aesthetic insight. Echoes of tribal art and mythological tropes were part of this mindset, as were ideas about deep family structure, sexuality, and the tenuous structure of identity. In such a milieu, gazing at the state of human nature in the shade and wreck of cataclysm, it was perhaps hard not to resemble Picasso, Moore, and other modernist pioneers, at least a little. In any case Lasansky embraced the inspirational images of earlier masters in what seems now an almost postmodern spirit, as invaluable nourishment for the artist. For Cassill also the emergent, quietly revelatory events that occurred as the work developed were by far the most important occurrences in art. Theirs was a subtle conception of originality, one that valued subjectivity as a kind of ideal. To Lasansky and his students, stylistic points of departure were just that—pretext for an artistic journey that was crucially abstract in spirit, and psychologically transformative.

The print that Cassill exhibited in 1949 at the Walker Center's *A New Direction in Intaglio* show was called *The Sophisticate*. Cassill—who was, just as he said, always caught between romance and form (and I would add irony)—in *The Sophisticate* intended to comment on the way that such a psycho-cultural split plays out, or “plays out,” as musicians say when they’ve got a gig. It shows a gnomic, almost alien figure blowing down into some kind of wind instrument. This is a jazz musician, but one haunted by ancient, musical gods. A TV-like screen (this image dates from a time when TV sets were still cutting edge) edged with three circles that look like knobs, hangs in the darkness behind his egg-shaped head, framing it like a Bauhaus halo. He’s wearing glasses, and the lines of a fashionable suit with wide lapels are sketched over the plate’s lighter half-tones. His fish-like, childish left hand swims limply across the downward streak of the proto-clarinet, while his right hand is barely visible, clutched farther down. Most of the

background is a dense, black field of ink. In the darkness a few shapes stir dimly, but Cassill’s eccentric device here, delivering an itchy liveliness to the work’s pictorial space, is an all-over underlying field of irregular horizontal marks, like static. They might be the grain of prevailing ideologies: obscuring images, warping perceptions, disrupting historical connectedness. It’s a foreboding yet oddly charismatic image, strengthened by the synesthetic tendencies of Cassill’s marks, which here hover at the edge of vision while tapping into a broader pool of sense perceptions that includes hearing and touch.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s Cassill alternated between figurative and abstract subjects and images, producing a variety of prints that included three-quarter-length portraits of himself with Jean, Ukiyo-E influenced studies of their children, classical themes, and dramatic abstract-expressionist-leaning sea- and landscapes. An outstanding image from 1953 is *Toro*, a study of a bull which inevitably calls to mind pillars of modernism both literary and pictorial like Hemingway and Picasso, as well as Goya’s bullfight lithographs and ultimate precursors in mythology and prehistoric art. But Jean reports that this picture and others related to it mainly sprang from several trips to Mexico that Cassill made in 1950 and after, either



Pitcher, Pear, Plant, c. 1960
artist's proof, 2 color intaglio,
17.75 x 17.75 in.



Strong Swimmers, 1983
sumi ink over intaglio,
19 x 23.5 in.

traveling with her or hitchhiking with a friend. On one occasion he spent some time working at a Quaker camp near Rio de Bravo, southwest of Mexico City. They went to many bullfights, and whatever anyone thinks of that sport, the strength of Cassill's vision here is rooted in primal responses to the age-old spectacle. Jean remembers, "Carroll was fascinated with the struggle. At the actual bullfight there's a pageantry that's just stunning. It was easy to become involved in the whole idea of man facing nature."

Cassill presents his bull in full profile, like a map. Sturdy, sinuous with murderous horns, he whips his tail in a tough parabola, his head turned aside as his hooves shift warily. Beside and behind him we glimpse two steps, a window, and a door. Midway between observational study and archetype, Cassill's bull is death anyway you look at it—a youthful, muscular death, waiting in a battered courtyard, preparing to turn and charge like a shadow cut loose. It was included in the show *Intaglios*, which opened in Buenos Aires in 1959 and toured throughout South America and Mexico. It was sponsored by the U.S. State Department, which also published an extensive catalogue.

Even in the most disheveled-looking of Cassill's often deceptively informal prints there is an undercurrent of rare awareness, a mix of tactile sensitivity and the ghostly outlines of age-old thematic material. Prize-winning works from the 1950s, like *Seascape #6* purchased by the Oakland Municipal Museum in 1955, still tend to adhere to traditional compositional strategies, offering a template within which Cassill's marks and gestures appear to play a secondary role. Yet it's really the roiling depths of his blacks, and the randomness of drips along the moonlit horizon, those scratches in a narrow cloud, that matter the most, if you look long enough. Or in *New World and Old*, from a few years later when the Cassill children were toddlers and often served as models, which has something Velasquez-ish about it, there are smudges and blots and furry abrasions like the back end of a bear on a wall, and a scrim of inchoate shapes that clots like trash along the curb. The longer you look the more you see, and while the eye may come for the three principal figures in this sketchbook-like page, it stays for the mysterious wealth of downright funky detail.

By the 1990s the situation had progressed or deteriorated much further, depending on your perceptual bias. Cassill was never very shy about adding painterly or graphic flourishes to his prints, additions that had nothing to do with printing, but the late works often are mainly watercolor, rhapsodizing on top of a dim ground of plate textures. You find yourself peering at them, fascinated, willing them to stay still, which they won't. One undated tondo-shaped image executed in dirty blue and red watercolor, which is only a print insofar as it may think it is, could be anything; but it might be two birds in a bush—the "two birds in a bush." Let's call it that, because, like those birds, the image isn't really there anyway. The other bird, the one in the hand, in this case would be the rather Sufi-like personality that prints and draws and stops—the man who scratched or brushed these bundles of slight pigment and vibrating tenuous line. Presence is deceptive, and absence even more so: that may be the gist of all human activity. Certainly it is the unwritten epitaph of this extraordinary printmaker, who remains very much here.



Child's Profile, 1993
print drawing, 18 x 24 in.



untitled, 1992
print drawing, 8.75 x 12 in.



untitled, 1993
woodcut, print drawing,
15 x 27.5 in.

Right:
The Sophisticate, 1948
intaglio, 16 x 12 in.



HC Casill

Born 1926, Percival, Iowa
Died 2008, Cleveland Heights, Ohio

Education

- 1950 MFA, State University of Iowa
- 1949 Travel in Mexico, American Friends Service Committee Scholarship
- 1948 BFA, State University of Iowa

Selected Exhibitions, Solo

- 2008 *H. Carroll Cassill: Memorial Exhibition and a Career Retrospective*, William Busta Gallery, Cleveland, OH
- 2001 *H.C. Cassill*, William Busta Gallery, Cleveland, OH (also 1996, 1994, 1990)
- 1982 St. John's University, Collegeville, MN
- 1971 Fort Wayne Art Institute, Fort Wayne, IN
- 1970 *H.C. Cassill: Etchings and Woodcuts*, Van Zoeren Gallery, Hope College, Holland, MI
- 1968 Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN
- 1967 University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI
- 1966 Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH
- 1964 Hanamura Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1960 The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH
- 1956 Oakland Art Museum (currently Oakland Museum of California), Oakland, CA

Selected Exhibitions, Group

- 2003 *Faith in My Possibilities: Mentors and Apprentices in Printmaking*, Lafayette College, Easton, PA; Brandywine Workshop, Philadelphia, PA; Heights Arts, Cleveland Heights, OH
- 1995 *S.W. Hayter's Legacy in America*, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH
- 1995 *The Spirit of Cleveland*, Cleveland Institute of Art, OH; Canton Museum of Art, OH; Riffe Gallery, Columbus, OH
- 1991 *Northeast Ohio Print Annual 1991*, William Busta Gallery, Cleveland, OH (also 1994)
- 1985 *Nocturnal Impressions*, Cleveland Museum of Art, OH
- 1983 Blackfish Gallery, Portland, OR
- 1978 *The Printmaker's Work*, Bonfoey's on the Square, Cleveland, OH
- 1977 *May Show*, Cleveland Museum of Art, OH (also 1976, 1975, 1974, 1973, 1972, 1971, 1968, 1965, 1964, 1963, 1961, 1960, 1959, 1958)
- 1970 *Artists for Peace*, The New Gallery (currently MOCA, Cleveland), Cleveland, OH

- 1966 *Printmaking—A Family Affair*, Pratt Institute, New York, NY; Cleveland Museum of Art, OH
- 1963 *American Prints Around the World*, selected by the Society of American Graphic Artists, Venezuela, Guatemala, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru
- 1963 *Biennale de Paris*, Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris, France
- 1960 *75 Grabadores NorteAmericanos*, Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas, Caracas, Venezuela
- [1957] Traveling exhibition, American Federation of the Arts, organized by the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY
- 1955 *Modern Art in the USA*, traveling exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, Barcelona, Spain; London, England; Belgrade, Serbia
- [1954] Watercolor, print, and drawing exhibition, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City
- 1949 *A New Direction in Intaglio: The Work of Mauricio Lasansky and His Students*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN

Teaching

- 1957–91 Head of Printmaking, Cleveland Institute of Art, OH
- 1953–57 Instructor of Printmaking, State University of Iowa

Selected Public Collections

- Brooklyn Art Museum, NY
- Cleveland Art Association, OH
- Cleveland Artists Foundation, OH
- Cleveland Museum of Art, OH
- Joslyn Art Museum, NE
- Library of Congress, Washington, DC
- Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY
- Museum of Modern Art, NY
- [San Francisco Art Museum], CA
- Syracuse University, NY
- Wichita Art Museum, KS

Honors

- 1991 Named Professor Emeritus, Cleveland Institute of Art
- 1971 Cleveland Arts Prize, Visual Arts
- 1953 Tiffany Fellowship