

Question: when is a print not a print?

● *When it's a reproduction, says militant traditionalist Ken Pattern. LLOYD DYKK investigates*

HERE'S A joke on the bulletin board at Malaspina Printmakers, an artists' cooperative at Granville Island. It's a boxed "Genuine Oil Painting" available at your neighborhood grocery, cheap, cheap.

The cardboard box simulates an oak frame. Inside is an unframed canvas slicked down with a lurid autumn scene. Technically, it's a genuine oil, all right, says artist Ken Pattern: there's oil paint, there's a stretched canvas, and who knows what assembly line of shift-work artists applied the rock, the water, the psychedelic poplar. . . .

But Malaspina Printmakers, and Pattern in particular, are waging their own rather similar war against the exploitation of the misunderstanding as to what constitutes an original limited edition print as opposed to a reproduction. Almost any art-multiple continues to pass for a print, Pattern says.

Briefly, the difference is that in a limited edition print, every print is the the real thing, inked and pulled by the artist himself. The concept of "original" and "copy" cannot exist, since every print — a layered synthesis of processes — is that original.

A reproduction, on the other hand, is just that — a reproduction (photographic) of an image that existed previously in its entirety. The distinction eludes many artists themselves, Pattern says.

Pattern, 40, is a scrapper, "a militant printmaker," he laughs. Patiently, politely, archly, he writes government agencies, artists' associations, galleries, anybody, to clear things up.

WHAT broke the camel's back, he says, was a brochure distributed by Canada Permanent Trust. Prospective account openers were being offered "for a limited time only," a "Permanent art offer" of "limited edition signed art prints" — limited to a run of an elite 3,000 each and consisting of Canadian scenes by 16 relatively unknown artists.

Really, they were photo-reproductions put out in great volume at a fraction of the effort that real printmakers put into their work. That fraction of effort is represented by the artists' hand signature at the bottom before writer's cramp sets in.

Pattern got on it with a protest to Canada Permanent, who had implied that clients would be receiving original works of art. ("An artist's signature can be very valuable," says the brochure.) An apology from Canada Permanent ensued, admitting ignorance on the printmaking process and promising that should the company use these reproductions again in the future they would be properly described.

Pattern also wrote the Ontario Society of

Artists, whose president was one of the artists represented in Canada Permanent's Group of 16. In his reply, OSA president Kemp Kieffer said: "People who buy this form of art would not buy the quality and higher price originals anyway, and only sophisticated, knowledgeable collectors would understand the difference." This, from an artist!

In his letter, Pattern included, as usual, the Print and Drawing Council of Canada's definition of prints:

1. The artist alone or in collaboration has created the master image in or upon the plate, stone, woodblock or other material for the purpose of creating the print.
2. The image is conceived and developed within the print medium and does not constitute a reproduction of any image which existed previously in total in another medium.
3. The print is made from the said material by the artist pursuant to his direction.
4. The finished print is approved by the artist.

"The confusion about prints in this country exists because we presently have no legislation or standards with which to protect consumers and artist-printmakers," Pattern says.

"The state of New York recently passed a bill introducing a strict liability standard in place of buyer-beware practices with regard to prints. According to the legislation, when art multiples are marketed, the dealer/publisher must disclose whether the multiple is a reproduction of a work formerly created by the artist in a different medium."

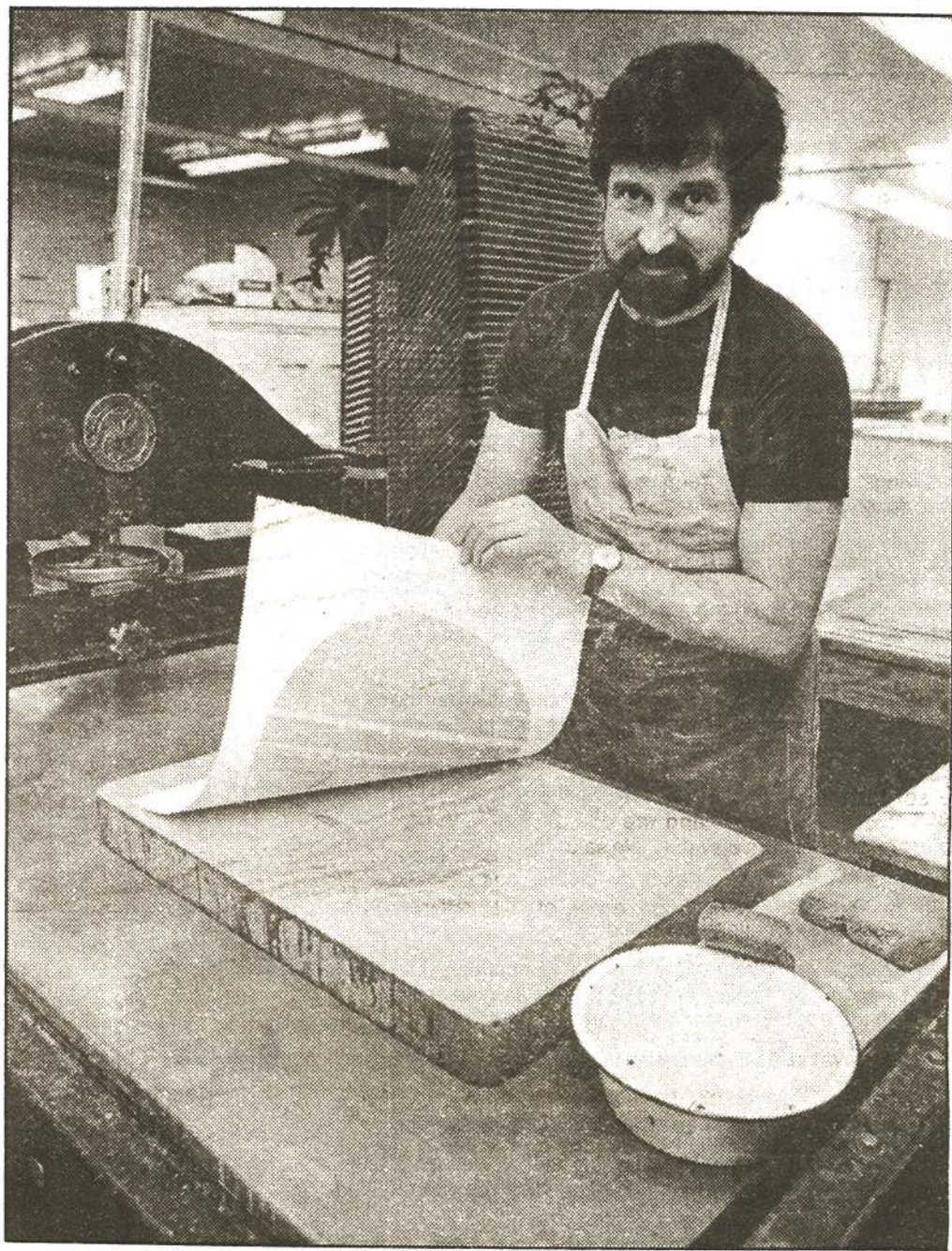
If all reproductions being passed off as prints were being offered free, like Canada Permanent's collection, you could conclude that you get what you pay for and leave it at that. But big names are doing the same thing for big money.

Pattern wouldn't buy a print by Dali, that superannuated but still smirking kewpie of the surreal, a sphinx who hasn't had a secret in 40 years and whose art is now supposed to consist solely of his signature on blank sheets of paper that he farms out to other artists.

As a prime example of the prints-reproduction snafu, Pattern brings up Robert Bateman. "There are no Bateman prints. There are only Bateman reproductions. It astounded me when they had the show at the Vancouver Museum — which I enjoyed very much, by the way.

"But when it comes down to it, they are marketing reprints as prints, in very large editions of 950, and they're several hundred dollars each, which is what you can easily pay for a real print. In most cases, it's a reduced photo-image of one of his paintings, but he numbers and signs them and once an artist's signature is on it, voila, it's magically transformed."

Pattern and people like him are "thinking simplistically," Bateman says. "There are actually two kinds of prints — original prints and reproduction prints. And as far as the



KEN PATTERN: art is not produced on an assembly line

DAN SCOTT

market goes, Pattern's implication is dead wrong. The public is not being hoodwinked. I'm selling reproductions and I make no bones about it."

He claims the public knows they are reproductions because they see the originals in galleries. Bateman says he numbers his reproductions to control the quality of each edition, and signs them to enhance their value. His large editions are necessary because of his expansive network of dealers. "You know, 950 may seem like a lot but many dealers can't even get one of the series."

But it remains likely that a lot of so-called printmakers are baffle-gabbing their way through a confused art marketplace, relying on the letter of the law to get spurious products through. The Federal Combines Investigation Act contains provisions designed to protect the public from misleading advertising and deceptive marketing practices, but Consumer and Corporate Affairs Canada seems to be in a quandary as to what a limited edition is.

THEIR definition is so vague, Pattern says, that it only leads to the continued abuse of the term. He says that virtually any glorified poster can get through with the certificate of art; that a lot of people are paying for a pencilled number and signature and little else.

"Even artists will walk into Malaspina requesting copies of a drawing, painting, whatever, and ask to have copies made, not knowing that printmaking is something that's derived from within its own realm."

The reproducers and the real printmakers are competing for the same market, with the spoils mainly going to the photo-mechanical

knock-offs. "When reproductions are marketed as prints, the consumer is ripped off and artist-printmakers are the victims of unfair competition in the market place," Pattern says.

"The craft of printmaking is very old and time-consuming, probably the most disciplined and exacting of all the visual arts."

Because of the gruelling exactitude that goes into printmaking — the demand that a hand and an eye be present in every stage of the myriad processes toward the final product — hand-pulled editions are generally small. Pattern reckons the largest he's ever made was 125 and the skin of his palms was shredded from the ink roller. He remembers a Safeway cashier recoiling at the sight. "It's just work," he said to her, preferring a simple explanation.

Just a run-down on a fine stone-lithograph called Spanish Banks at Low Tide that Pattern has been working on for weeks, is enough to spell the point: the grinding down of the limestone block with carborundum until it's perfectly flat; the applications of dust-fine rosin powder, talc, water, nitric acid and gum arabic, the repetitive laving and slaving. . . .

This is quite apart from the matter of the design itself: the series of images laid down one upon the other, the gauging of colors and the piecing together of components from the master image, which is only a blueprint projected toward a theoretical goal and worked from in reverse, mirror-image-wise.

It is a precise and very technical medium. One small edition can take from weeks to several months, Pattern says, and many decisions pivot on critical judgments of time.

Reproductions, Pattern thinks, should not be signed. There are limits.