

# ED ESSEX: A Sixty Year Print Retrospective



July 22 - September 29, 2010 | Washington State Convention Center, North Gallery

## Celebrating Sixty Years of Printmaking

This retrospective exhibition reflects the vision of Ed Essex and his many years as artist, printmaker, and art educator. Ed Essex's prints convey the poetic allure of the Pacific Northwest's natural environment, and celebrate the influence of the Seattle area's culturally diverse population on his art and ideas. His images, simultaneously lyrical and forceful, speak dynamically of time and place. The definitive black and whites of his linoleum block prints become forces of nature: light, sound, wind, and water. Marine, landscape,

garden, still life, and figurative images appear and reappear in a continuum across six decades of prints representing Ed Essex's creative life.

This project, which began as documentation of a creative legacy, soon transformed into a reflective journey. In addition to creating new work, Essex has returned to and printed most of the blocks he created during his lifetime. To family, friends, students, and colleagues of Ed Essex, we dedicate this exhibition and book.



(Cover) *Cascade* 1960  
Linoleum block print 21 1/2 x 16 inches  
Edition of 10

*Cloud Surf* 1955  
Linoleum block print 9 5/8 x 20 inches  
Edition of 25

## The Block Printing Medium

A block print can be made with ink, paper, and a few basic tools. Essex chose linoleum block printing as a lifetime artistic medium for its graphic purity. It is a pragmatic alternative to costly intaglio print-making processes requiring special materials and a press. In Essex's words "the blacks and whites are absolute with nothing in between." This medium of absolutes poses artistic challenges because the artist must create an effective composition without the complexities and diversions of color or tonal grays and textural effects of wood grain available to the wood block artist.

The powerful images of German Expressionist block prints and the striking compositions of Picasso, Matisse, and Rembrandt shaped Essex's development of a visual language. His artistic choices encompass a sensitive play of elements with vertical line implying growth, horizontal line, repose, and diagonal line, action. Essex believes "Balance is achieved through offsetting heavily textured areas with solid black or white areas. Curved and straight lines should be combined for greatest effect, and the corners of a composition should not be cut off or ignored."

"Each print," in Essex's words, "represents a distinct compositional problem to solve" shaped by a specific experience, observation or sensation, with an approach to solving it to be discovered in process.

*Arabesque* 1960  
Linoleum block print 24 7/8 x 7 3/8 inches  
Edition of 10





*And Winter Comes* 1989  
Linoleum block print 17 3/8 x 10 5/8 inches  
Edition of 10

The printmaking process often begins with a drawing that can be transferred to the block with carbon paper, or with images drawn directly on the block surface. Different shapes of gouges (carving tools) are used to remove material from printing blocks composed of linoleum mounted to plywood. Making a composition within this process means building an image in reverse by removing the light areas when a natural optical response is to create an image dark against light. The process is, in Essex's words, "one of restraint, requiring planning, where the temptation always exists to carve away so much linoleum that there are no significant expanses of black left." Once a cut is made into the block, it is indelible and cannot be covered up.

When the image is completely developed, the linoleum block is inked with a consistent opaque ink layer using a brayer—a rubber roller tool. Paper is then laid upon the inked block surface and rubbed, using a wooden burnishing tool, to transfer the image to paper.



Photograph: June McKiernan



*On A Chinese Table* 1989  
Linoleum block print 12 3/4 x 21 inches  
Edition of 10

## Midwest Beginnings

Edwin L. Essex was born in the small town of Galesburg, Illinois, in 1924. He was deeply affected by the loss of his brother and mother in 1929, a year heralding generalized despair in America. At age five this family tragedy, accompanied by the onset of the Great Depression, brought displacement and change for Ed and his sister Alleyne. However, his ability to draw well at a young age and his possession of a sometimes disruptive sense of humor provided refuge for Essex as a boy. George Essex, Ed's father, who had attended Chicago Art Institute for one year to study sculpture, encouraged his artistic path.

During World War II, Ed Essex was inducted into the Air Force in 1943. He was stationed in England

with the 389th Bomb Group, 8th Air Force, as a B-24 bomber aerial gunner until 1945. He flew his 21st mission on his 21st birthday and subsequently completed 30 missions. Essex remains deeply affected by participating in combat in the skies over Europe. "*Strike Zone* (1984) is my only anti-war print—war is insane."



Photograph: June McKiernan

Ed Essex at work in his Seattle printmaking studio, 2010.



*Strike Zone* 1984  
Linoleum block print 12 x 18 inches  
Edition of 10



*The White Whale* 1953  
Linoleum block print 18 x 24 inches  
Edition closed  
Exhibited at the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, 1954.



After returning from the war, Essex studied painting at the University of Iowa, where he received a BFA and MFA. There, he was influenced most profoundly by printmaking professor Mauricio Lasansky, an influence which resonated in both Essex's future role as an art educator and as a printmaker.

Printmaking classes at University of Iowa were filled with other post-military GI Bill students like Essex, recovering from time lost to the war. Lasansky, in Essex's words, "radiated energy and was loved. He was always positive, with never a critical word." His classrooms were always buzzing with activity—a dynamic community of people teaching each other, with Lasansky at the center working on his own prints in constant demonstration. Ed took that example into his personal life, his art, and his teaching career, exemplifying the ethic: "You never give up—you work it out."

*"A good print sparkles and jumps off the page."  
— E. Essex*

*Bamboo Window* 1959  
Linoleum block print 24 1/4 x 11 3/8 inches  
Edition of 10

Through Lasansky's creation of the University of Iowa Print Club, his students were afforded a professional showcase, and as a result Essex's early works were exhibited at the Walker Art Center, the Library of Congress, and the Brooklyn Museum.

Essex met and later married Nan O'Connor, a Navy WAVE who also earned undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Iowa via the GI Bill. Both graduated in 1950 and then moved west, settling in Nan's eastern Washington hometown of Clarkston.

After adding a teaching certificate from Northern Idaho College of Education to his credentials, Essex then headed further west for his first art teaching position in Cle Elum, in Washington's Cascade Mountains.

*Windsong* 1953  
Linoleum block print 23 1/4 x 12 inches  
Edition of 25  
Exhibited at the Northwest Printmakers  
International Exhibition, Seattle Art Museum, 1957.



## Pacific Northwest Imagery

The pristine mountains and clear rivers of the Northwest offered an energizing contrast to the muddy waters and flatlands of the Midwest. Solitary summer work as a Fire Guard at Rocky Run Guard Station near Snoqualmie Pass fueled an ardent passion for the outdoors and, above all, fishing.

Six summers of commercial salmon fishing off of Lummi Island in the northern waters of Puget Sound was an early catalyst for marine imagery seen in Essex's prints. Many prints created throughout his life reflect saltwater and freshwater environments and the bounty of fishing.



*Dying Salmon* 1954  
Linoleum block print 8 3/8 x 14 inches  
Edition of 25



*Rising River* 1998  
Linoleum block print 12 x 24 inches  
Edition of 5



*Fish and Net* 1952  
Linoleum block print 7 3/4 x 12 inches  
Edition of 25

Essex describes the allure of fishing streams as  
*“the beautiful swirl of water around rocks, rushes”* and his many  
river and stream print images as *“taking the result all of the places  
I have fished in my mind and putting them into prints in hopes of  
them being like a good poem—saying much with few words.”*

## Cultural Influences

A deeply felt influence of Asian art and culture is tangible in Essex's lifetime creative work. Essex has sustained a strong long-standing friendship with many Seattle Japanese Americans. Essex first met Helene Tsutsumoto, a Seattle teacher, at the Rocky Run Guard Station. Helene later married Art Yorozu. When Ed and Nan moved to Seattle in 1953, where

Essex began teaching at Washington Junior High School, Helene and Art's families befriended them and graciously assimilated them (and later their two daughters) into their own extended families.

In 1960, Essex's "good fortune," in his words, of being friends with the Yorozu family led him to study the construction of the Japanese Tea House and Garden at the University of Washington Arboretum, where William Yorozu (Yorozu Landscaping) was general contractor. Essex observed the construction of the garden intently for days and created two prints—*Cascade* and *Cataract* (1960)—inspired by the garden. Mr. Iida, Japanese designer of the garden, humbly and joyfully accepted the gift of these prints.

Fascination with Japanese gardens and architecture greatly shaped Essex's aesthetic. *Garden Light* (2001), which features delicate linear detail seen in many later prints, depicts a wooden lantern built by Essex and installed in his own garden. The exaggerated vertical format of many prints reference traditional Japanese wood-blocks and paintings.



*Japan Gate* 1995  
Vinyl block print 16 7/8 x 14 inches  
Edition of 5



*Cataract* 1960

Linoleum block print 24 1/2 x 14 inches

Edition of 10

Reproduced and distributed in memory of  
William Yorozu by his family at his memorial  
service, April 5, 2006.



*Garden Light* 2001

Linoleum block print

19 1/4 x 7 5/8 inches

Edition of 20

*“Japanese gardens are composed like a painting or  
a print—they lend themselves to representation.”*

— E. Essex

*The Watcher* 1955

Linoleum block print

14 x 7 1/2 inches

Edition of 25

The role of a “watcher” in commercial fishing was to vigilantly watch for fish as they came into the nets on the headstand on the bow of the reef netter.



## A Community of Printmakers

Ed Essex met artist Glen Alps when Alps first came to the University of Iowa in the summer to study with Mauricio Lasansky. Alps, printmaking professor at the University of Washington, had organized an extensively equipped Seattle print studio and corresponding organization, the Northwest Printmakers Society. Essex became an active member and in 1965 and 1966 was president of the group.

Alps was instrumental in organizing regional and international print shows at the Seattle Art Museum during the 1950s and 1960s, and Essex exhibited in many of those shows. Alps' work ethic and belief that you need to "put in the time" in developing your art—regardless of the reception your work receives—became a lasting message.



Photograph: Austin Killian

Summer stints at commercial fishing provided powerful imagery for subject matter. This photo (c.1947) was taken in the Printmaking Studio of University of Iowa.

*Aquarium* 1957  
Linoleum block print  
28 x 13 inches  
Edition of 25

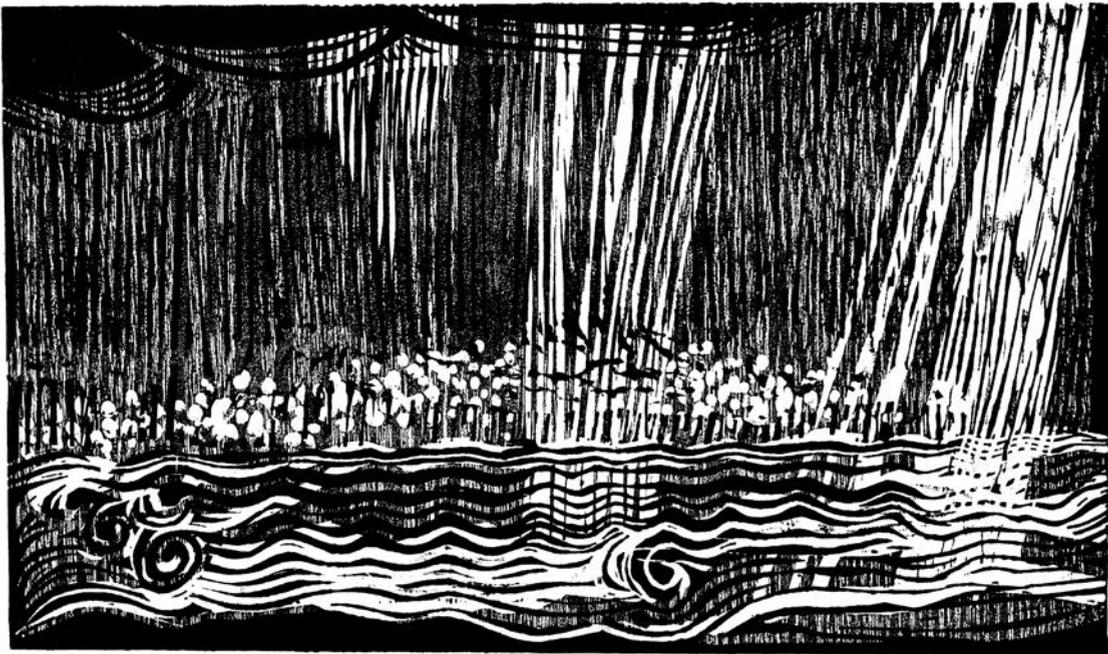


## Introducing Tonalities

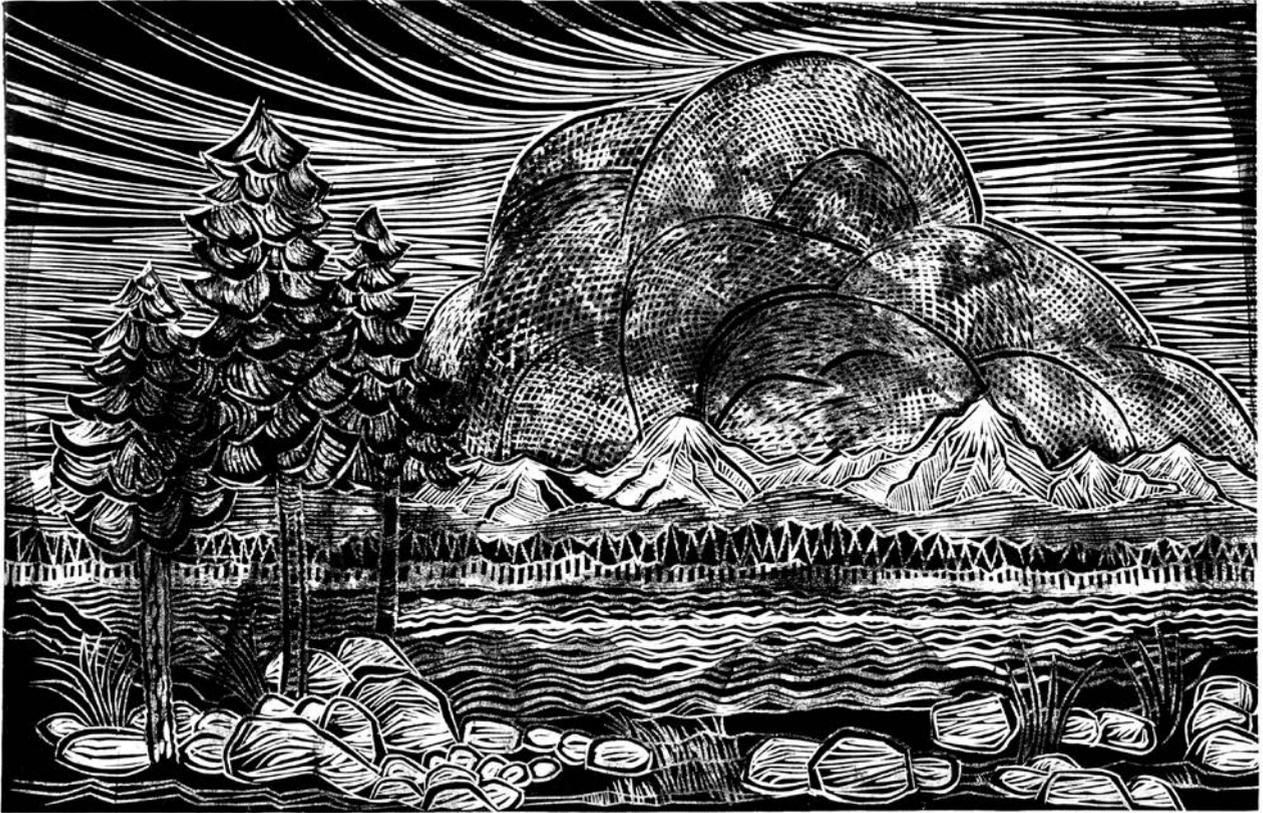
Printing in stark black on white, Essex had become fluent in suggesting the ethereal qualities of light, energy, and space. In later prints, he began to work with added tonal and textural areas. This was accomplished by layering (registering) a secondary wood or cardboard block after the first linoleum block image was transferred to paper. Atmospheric effects in *Rain on the River* (1994), and *Distant Thunder* (1998), show mastery of these improvised

techniques and suggest the unseen and dramatic implications of weather.

Linoleum, vinyl, wood and cardboard prints where the image is printed from raised areas of the printmaking block are known as “relief prints.” As a junior high and high school teacher, Ed found that relief prints using cardboard had a distinct advantage because ordinary scissors and glue allowed even young children to create beautiful prints.

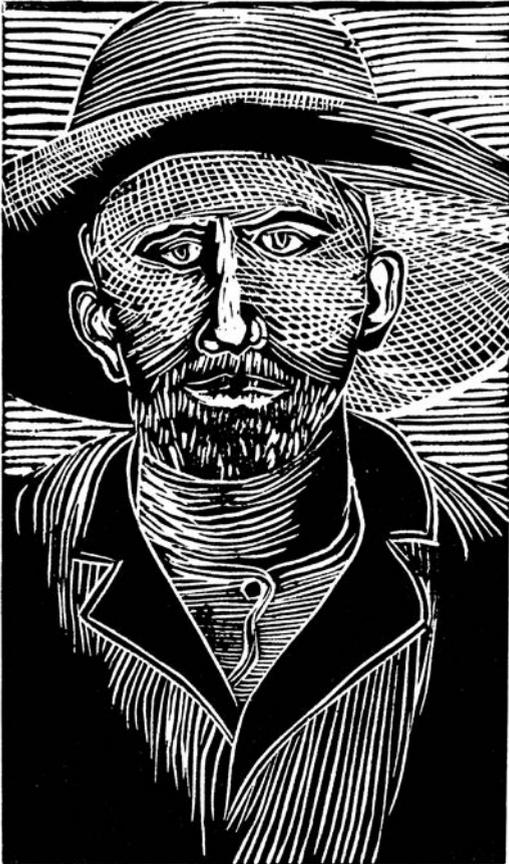


*Rain on the River* 1994  
Linoleum and wood block print 8 3/4 x 15 inches  
Edition of 3



*Distant Thunder* 1998  
Linoleum and cardboard block print 15 1/4 x 23 1/4 inches  
Edition of 5

*“Each print represents a distinct compositional problem to solve.”*  
— E. Essex



*Bridger* 1996  
Linoleum block print 12 x 7 inches  
Edition of 10



*Face* 1987  
Linoleum block print 15 1/4 x 8 inches  
Edition of 10

## Diverse Themes

In the 1940s, Essex became friends with fellow high school student Louie Bellson, a young drummer who went on to play with Duke Ellington's band. This musical exposure, and attending a Louis Armstrong performance in Rock Island, Illinois, sparked a lifelong passion for jazz. Portraits of jazz players, historical figures, and figures expressing transformational themes form a counter-balance to landscapes and still life subjects explored throughout Essex's life.

*The White Whale* (1953) reflects literature and traditional book illustration of the early 20th century. Essex's prints also address contemporary issues. The horror of lynching expressed in the abstract skull-like tree in *Hanging Tree* (1965) and environmental degradation by acid rain expressed in the disjointed landscape of *Sky Thing* (1989) demonstrate the breadth of his social concerns.

*Hanging Tree* 1965  
Linoleum block print  
32 3/8 x 15 1/8 inches  
Edition of 10  
Inspiration for this print came  
from Billie Holiday's brave  
ballad *Strange Fruit*.





*Ribbon Grass and Daisies* 1994  
Linoleum block print 14 x 5 1/2 inches  
Edition of 10



*Falling Leaves* 1998  
Linoleum block print 17 1/4 x 14 7/8 inches  
Edition of 5

# Inspiration

Printmaking as a process of transferring an idea from one entity to another could well be a metaphor for the relationship between art teacher and student. As an artist strives to invoke inspiration through their work, so an art teacher strives to invoke creativity in their students. As a junior high and high school art teacher in Seattle Public Schools for over 25 years, Ed Essex steadily proved a force of

pragmatism, inspiration, and humanity in the lives of Seattle's youth, teachers, and community.

Essex's practical creative approach to his own art was reflected in his teaching. He defines great teaching as "an inspirational message, with clarity in instruction and demonstration." His adage is "draw upon what you know" with the goal ultimately to create "an unforgettable image."



*Sky Thing* 1989  
Linoleum block print 17 x 24 inches  
Edition of 10

## Ed Essex

Born 1924, Galesburg, Illinois

Education: BFA and MFA, University of Iowa, 1950

Teaching Certification, Northern Idaho College of Education

### Selected Exhibitions

Gilmartin Gallery, Seattle, Washington, 2000

Sandpiper Gallery, Tacoma, Washington, 1995 and 1999

University of Iowa Arts Wing Dedication, 2006

Pacific Lutheran University Father/Daughter, Tacoma, Washington, 1990

Seattle Art Museum -

Selected Northwest Printmakers International Exhibitions, 1951 – 1966

Henry Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, 1954 – 1955

Frederick & Nelson Gallery, Seattle, 1952

Selected Iowa Print Club Exhibitions; Library of Congress, Brooklyn Museum,  
Philadelphia Print Club, Walker Art Center, 1947

### Arts Organizations, Residencies, Juror

Artist Residency, LaConnor, Washington, Summer, 1966

Northwest Printmakers Society, Seattle, 1961 – 1966; President, 1965, 1966

Artist Residency, Graysmarsh, Hood Canal, Washington, 1964

Juror: International Print Show, Seattle Art Museum, 1965, 1966

### Art Collections

Art and Helene Yorozu, Seattle, Washington

Mauricio Lasansky, Iowa City, Iowa

Myra Gamburg, Lake Forest Park, Washington

Mr. Iida, Tokyo, Japan

Kitamura Family, Tokyo, Japan

Gary and Laurie Ness, Seattle, Washington

Charles and Barbara Pomeroy, Santa Fe, New Mexico

W.G. Reed, Simpson Timber Corporation, Washington

### Work History

**Aerial Gunner, Flight Engineer:** 8th Air Force, 389th Bombardment Group,  
United States Air Force, 1943 – 1945

**Art Educator:** Cle Elum Public Schools, Washington, 1950 – 1953. Seattle Public Schools, 1953 – 1981

**Fire Guard:** Rocky Run Guard Station, Snoqualmie Pass, Washington, Summer, 1950 – 1953

**Commercial Fisherman:** Lummi Island, Washington, Summer, 1955 – 1961

**Independent Designer Craftsman:** Landscape Design and Construction, 1965 – 2000  
Picture Framing Services, 1960 – 1975

**Aircraft Restoration Aide:** Museum of Flight Restoration Center, Boeing Field, Auburn;  
Payne Field, Everett, Washington, 1985 – Present



*A Path Less Travelled* 2010  
Linoleum and wood block print  
17 x 7 inches  
Edition of 5



*Still Life Variation* 1960

Linoleum block print 8 3/4 x 34 1/4 inches

Edition of 10

Exhibited at the 32nd International Exhibition of Northwest Printmakers at the Seattle Art Museum in 1961.

*Still Life Variation* was selected in 1961 as the nucleus for a showcase of furnishings by Jack Miller. According to Margery R. Phillips of the Seattle Times, “Jack Miller, interior designer, arranged this informal grouping around Edwin L. Essex’s *Still Life Variation*, a semiabstract design in black and white. With the long, narrow, horizontal print made by this Seattle artist, he has chosen furnishings from many parts of the world, proving that an abstract print is compatible with well-designed furniture and accessories regardless of country or period.”

## Acknowledgements

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Photograph: June McKiernan

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*Marshland* 1952  
Linoleum block print 20 x 30 inches  
Edition of 5