

Stacy Steers

Art **in** Print

Prix de Print No. 24: *Vital Signs* by Stacy Steers

By Roni Feinstein
From Volume 7, Number 2 (July-August)

SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

WEB

www.cclarkgallery.com



Stacy Steers, *Vital Signs* (2017): Five-color lithograph with digital collage printed from five aluminum plates made from the artist's drawing/painting and photocopies on Mylar on handmade Amate paper, 30 x 22 inches. Edition of 25. Printed and published by Shark's Ink, Lyons, CO. \$1,500

Politics and the world being as they are, I initially responded to this print among the host of terrific works submitted for the Prix de Print because it seemed to offer an escape into a realm of dreams and fantasy. A gorgeous image in apparently constant, even bubbling motion, it presents what I took to be nostalgia-laden images of women, bugs and flowers, together with clusters of planetary bodies, set against the night sky. I was struck by the combining of photographic and engraved imagery and by the rich but limited palette. I noted a few dark (i.e., bloody) elements

and expressions of horror among the women, which I took to be part of the Surrealist nature of the work.

The more I looked at the print, the more fascinating it became and the more intricately layered in form and content. When, after selection, I was told the artist's name and began to read about her work, I learned that she employs imagery from the past to comment on present realities—in this case, the declining bee population. While my attempt at escapism was thwarted, I was delighted to become ensnared in Stacey Steers's universe.

Stacey Steers is a Boulder-based artist best known as an experimental filmmaker, and *Vital Signs*, which she made with master printer Bud Shark at Shark's Ink, is her first print. Steers's animated films have been screened in film festivals across the United States and abroad and have won her numerous grants and awards. Since about 2000, her animations have consisted of thousands of collages she laboriously hand-made by cutting up and reassembling scans of old photographs and 18th and 19th-century book illustrations, each of her stop-action projects requiring about eight collages per second of film time. More recently, she began to integrate photographic images of silent film stars among the engravings and wood engravings, recontextualizing them into narratives of her own invention. In museum and gallery shows devoted to her work since about 2012, Steers has exhibited not only films and preparatory collages but also sculptural objects animated with embedded screens or surface projections of looped sequences from her films.

Steers first collaborated with Bud Shark in 2009 in the creation of a two-sided flip book, *Before the Fall/After the Beds*, derived from two sequences in her ten-minute animation *Phantom Canyon* (2006). The collages that formed the basis of both the film and flip book made extensive use of reproductions of photographs of nude figures taken from Eadweard Muybridge's motion studies.

Vital Signs, Steers's first "static" print, conveys a sense of filmic motion through the unanchored, floating spheres, orbs and rings that make up the composition and through the quasi-narrative of multiple "frames." The print derives from her 19-minute animation, *Edge of Alchemy* (2016), constructed from over 6,000 collages made over a five-year period. It presents a sci-fi, Frankenstein-like fable "starring" silent film icons Mary Pickford and Janet Gaynor made up of individual images culled from numerous feature films. For Steers, the appeal of these actresses

resides in their expressive range, communicated through dramatic facial expressions and body language. In Steers's film, Pickford is cast as a scientist who observes the widespread demise of bees. In her laboratory, she uses a bee to fashion a creature, Janet Gaynor, who wears a hive on her head and has leaves sprouting from her shoulders. At the end of the film, Gaynor is joyously swarmed by bees and raised into the heavens; flowers rain down to earth. With the film as a reference, the composition of the print *Vital Signs* can be understood as an allusion to a hive swarming with bees, the orbs and spheres reminders of our tiny, fragile planet and its place in the solar system.

Each of the eight large rings that appear to float on the surface of the print encloses either reproductions of collages used in the film or composites of elements taken from collages used in the film. Most feature one of the two protagonists in a distinct emotional state. Dispersed among the rings are bees, planets and spheres scanned from the books she used as source material for the film. These various scans were cut and collaged to produce a matrix that was photocopied, transferred onto Mylar and used to make the litho plates. Five colors were used for the final edition: white, dark blue, acid green, a lighter green/blue and black.

While I had initially supposed the collage of found elements in the print to be in the heritage of Max Ernst's and Joseph Cornell's Surrealist dreamscapes, a more pertinent precedent is found in the German Dadaist Hannah Hoch's *Cut With Kitchen Knife* (1919–20), a kaleidoscopic collage and critique of political and social issues, with an emphasis on women as vehicles for change. In Steers's aptly titled *Vital Signs*, the silent film era tradition of the damsel in distress is poetically repurposed to show women in distress over signs of encroaching ecological disaster. They, like Steers, sound the alarm.