

# Layered

## NANCY MACKO, PRINTMAKING, AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

KARIN BREUER

WORKING with digital technology is second nature for Nancy Macko, and digital tools have enabled her to become increasingly adventurous in developing her imagery. But her digital work is built upon years spent learning and exploring traditional printmaking processes. “My approach to using the computer, my lens, was printmaking, especially the layering that is inherent in the process,” Macko says.<sup>1</sup> Macko’s first experiences with printmaking were in etching and photolithography, in classes taught by Patricia Clark at the University of Wisconsin, River Falls, from 1975 through 1977. For Macko, the discovery of printmaking was part of the process of finding an artistic voice. The medium offered abundant possibilities for experimentation and, consequently, was irresistible as an artistic vehicle. “I liked the fact that I could incorporate camera images into printmaking in a process that was not photography,” she recalls. “And with printmaking processes there was a structure and method involved, as opposed to painting, which was so much more open.” Later in 1977 she took a two-week workshop that included both painting and printmaking, taught by Françoise Gilot at the Idyllwild School of Music and the Arts in Southern California. It was an important experience that yielded a suite of small copperplate etchings and that motivated her to apply to graduate programs in printmaking.

The prints Macko made as a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, were far from traditional. She was interested in the visual references inherent in materials such as old wallpaper, scraps of memorabilia, and discarded notes, which, she said, “held a history in them. . . . I liked the fact that I could layer these materials, hiding and revealing different parts of them.” She made inkless embossments from squares of pegboard and a series of color Xeroxes using objects that she laid onto copying machine glass. Sylvia Lark, her mentor and professor at Berkeley, introduced her to monoprinting, a technique that Macko immediately incorporated into her mixed-media work. She embossed, monoprinted, collaged, drew, and painted—all on one surface. This work earned Macko several awards in 1981 from national juried competitions and brought her to the attention of Shackelford and Sears, an art gallery in Davis, California, that later represented her.

Macko graduated with an MFA in 1981 and, since she no longer had access to a press, began to devote herself to painting. It was a comfortable transition because, as she now says, “I never saw myself solely as a printmaker.” She continued to work on paper, making drawings and paintings on paper. This work, along with the monotypes that she continued to create, was included in many prestigious group exhibitions in the Bay Area through the mid-1980s.

After she completed her studies, Macko held several part-time teaching positions in the Bay Area and was an active member of the California Society of



*The Honeycomb Series, No. 5,*  
1999  
Roland ink-jet print  
34 × 46 in.

Printmakers (CSP), frequently exhibiting with the group and later becoming historian and then president of the organization from 1983 to 1985. In 1986 she was invited to join the faculty at Scripps College in Claremont, California, where she has taught for twenty years.

At Scripps, Macko spent her first year teaching printmaking and drawing. In 1987 she was asked to teach computer graphics, an “unbelievable opportunity,” as she describes it today. At the time she didn’t have a computer herself, but she took evening classes at Otis/Parsons in Los Angeles for two years to familiarize herself with the tools and technology. In 1990 the college acquired three computers equipped with graphics software, and Macko began teaching computer graphics classes. She also began to incorporate digital technology into her own work, and her earliest explorations referenced her paintings of the time (1988–92). Employing a software program that allowed her to use a mouse to create painterly effects, she developed her ideas on the screen. The end results were large Cibachrome prints.

In 1992 Macko’s research into bees and bee worship in ancient cultures led her to produce digital images that explored the inherent connection between the natural world and technology. Digital media allowed her to work quickly and provided numerous options. The *Honeycomb Series*, a suite of large (34 x 46 in.) ink-jet prints made in 1999, was a direct result of her work on *The Honeycomb Wall*, part of an ensemble installation entitled *Dance of the Melissae* (1994). *The Honeycomb Wall* consisted of one hundred hexagonal wood panels, each echoing the pattern of the honey cell. The panels held found objects related to honeybees, the geometry of hexagons, the chemistry of honey, and also scanned and layered computer-generated images. These images were then translated into digital prints. It was the first time in Macko’s work that a multimedia installation resulted in a series of prints, bringing the exchange of ideas across media to another level.

“Intaglio prints also created an important intersection between my digital prints and my installations,” Macko says, describing her work at a Crown Point Press summer workshop in 2001. It was there that she combined digital imagery with traditional printmaking techniques in creating *Namaste*, a suite of four prints that she completed at Mahaffey Fine Art in 2004. Each of the prints includes some combination of aquatint, spit-bite aquatint, and etching, as well as a delicate layering of digital printing, rubber stamp images, and page reinforcements. Some of these