

Prints & Pinwheels: Envisioning a Sustainable Future

By Kelly M. Nelson with Carol Pulin



Longwood University's *Pinstallation* began as an invitation to Dr. Carol Pulin, director of the American Print Alliance, to jury and invite artists for a print and paper show titled **Sustainable Source**. The impetus for the invitation was a collaborative effort of three professors at Longwood: Assistant Professor of Art, Kerri Cushman; Associate Professor of Biological and Environmental Sciences, Dr. Ed Kinman; and myself, Kelly Nelson. The faculty collaborators organized multiple events involving sustainability, Longwood University's 2008–2010 theme. Ed had previously met artists from The Beehive Design Collective, a cooperative which passionately disseminates socially conscious information, and he wanted to introduce the organization to our students. We applied for and received funds from the American Democracy Project Grant, our Art Department and the Biological and Environmental Sciences Department to make this sustainability project happen. The interdisciplinary grant involved the **Sustainable Source** exhibition, **Soap Box Prints for a Cleaner Environment** (the American Print Alliance portfolio show), The Beehive Collective lecture, and drawing and printmaking workshops with Carol, all in early October, 2008. The culminating activity, in December, was a *Pinstallation*, an installation of pinwheels that support, interpret and inform sustainability, an idea Carol proposed when we exchanged emails before her trip, so I'll let her explain its source.

Debates about energy policy, especially around election time last year, sparked several companies to advertise their "alternative" energy sources. Wind turbines became a symbol of the efforts of conservation groups and advocates for concerted efforts against global warming. But even people who apparently supported these ideas complained about the appearance of wind turbines. I was hearing the usual NIMBY chant: not in my backyard. People didn't want a windmill to change their views of the ocean from Martha's Vineyard or the open range of a cattle ranch. Years ago, when I first saw wind farms in the passes of the California mountains, I was enchanted by the clean, crisp geometric forms, following each other single-file along the ridge lines or gathered in casual groups like a grove of trees. From the distance, they reminded me of white paper cut-outs standing against the green and gold hills, strikingly beautiful, not ugly.

OK, not everyone is excited by simple geometric shapes. People like colors and patterns. I had an epiphany. Why were windmills uniform, stark white? Why couldn't artists design them? I thought of pinwheels, those wonderful, spinning childhood toys, and envisioned pinwheel farms on the scale of turbines, aesthetically pleasing with appropriate ecological messages in the imagery. I could use the workshops I would teach at Longwood to try out the idea, giving students an opportunity to work on real 3-D design challenges, learn simple monoprint techniques, and consider how to engage the public in the sustainable energy issue — all at the same time.

Carol Pulin

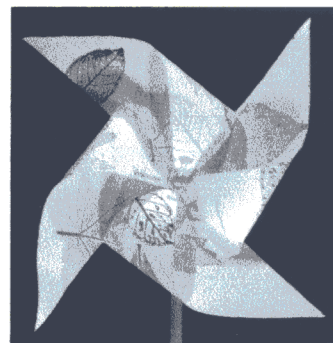
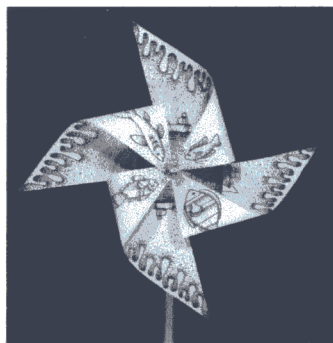
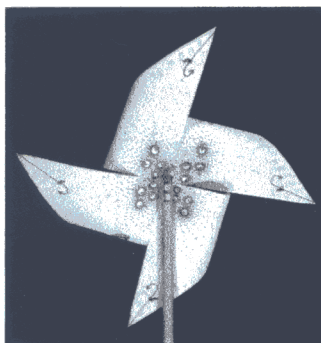
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For more about prints, pinwheels, pinstallations and workshops promoting our PrintSpin challenge, please see the Alliance website, www.PrintAlliance.org.



Jessica Yoakam and Kristen Rawls, Diorama with pinwheels, 2008. Charcoal landscape drawing and pinwheels: ink on paper, pushpins, pencils. All pinwheels 6" square.

Jim Merkel, *Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints on a Finite Earth*. New Society Publishers, 2003.



We talked about photocopies as reproductions, but the students' two-sided pinwheels are original prints because they exist only in their printed form.

A technical issue arose in photocopying. Generally, students drew with marker because it photocopied better than ballpoint pen. This required drawing on two different pinwheel sheets to prevent bleeding through the paper, then registering the front and back when photocopying, another skill to be learned for printmaking.

In preparation for Carol's workshop, my drawing students created fantastical charcoal and lumber crayon drawings based on their memories of landscapes, at times combining multiple memories to create an unusual scene. Next, students explored Farmville, a rural community that houses Longwood University, to photograph their surroundings and create a photo-inspired charcoal landscape drawing. Simultaneously, in the Longwood Seminar class, the students were reading *Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints on a Finite Earth*, a rich source of sustainability information.

Carol introduced her pinwheel-windmill idea to the students and included photocopying collaged plant detritus (fallen leaves, seed pods, etc.) found outside the art building as well as drawing. Students quickly discovered that successful two-dimensional designs do not necessarily translate into successful pinwheel designs. Jigs and templates were made and tested before a final product resulted.

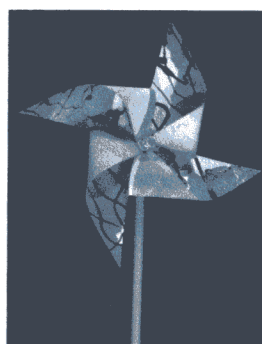
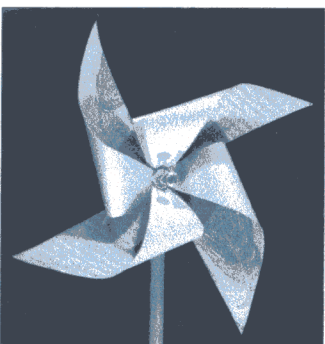
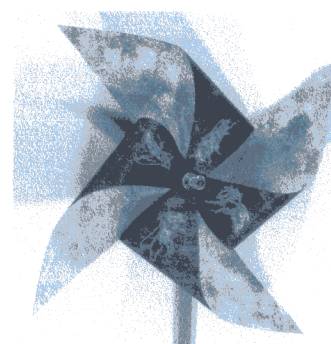
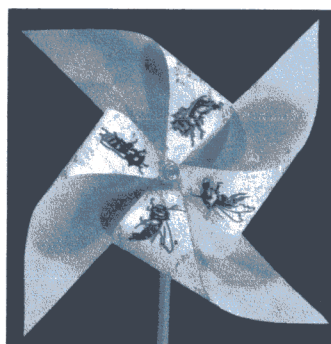
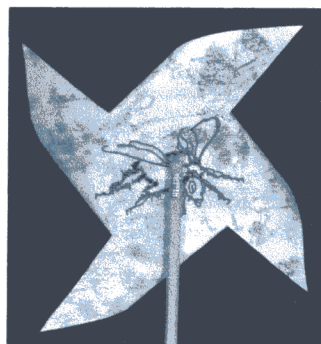
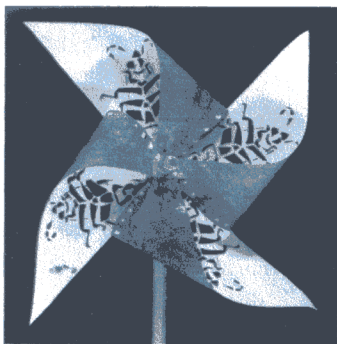
Pinwheels are designed flat and transform into three-dimensional forms — a tricky design problem for beginning artists. They had to pay attention to where the paper would be cut and the visibility of parts of the front and back at the same time (which changed with the viewer's angle), and think of smooth curves instead of sharp folds. The students were excited to break out of the two-dimensional framework and tackle these issues of form and time. I imposed an additional challenge, to keep everything black and white so images could be reproduced by photocopy, an economical way to make multiples. Such inexpensive multiples are democratic: an egalitarian way to spread the sustainability message. A bridge between drawing and printmaking emerged with the simple copier technology.

Content was drawn from Longwood Seminar class, and Elizabeth Roger's pinwheel communicates the issue of fossil fuels and corn as alternative fuel. Nancy McDonald's pinwheel interprets water quality and fishing sustainability. One of my pinwheels involves birds, seeds and human activity. I drew on paper of handmade cotton, abaca, tea bags and birdseed. I also created a pinwheel with imagery based on human interference and bees: for one side, I photocopied a bouquet of flowers, purchased from a greenhouse, which was not naturally pollinated by bees; the other side has my drawings of the insects.

Later in the semester when they had enough work done, my class created dioramas with their pinwheels and landscape drawings. Brandon Hennessey blended his memory of several road trips into a vision in which you are driving fast and endlessly down a deserted road; two pinwheels punctuate the road's edge. Will windmills become a more common occurrence? Olga Knop, a German exchange student, drew a landscape by the Appomattox River in Farmville and placed a pinwheel in the corner, forcing an intimate interaction with it. One day, will pinwheels commonly appear where any amount of wind creates energy?

In other workshops, Carol taught my printmakers, demonstrating monoprinting with found objects and plant detritus and trace drawing. Rachel Hammet was inspired by Carol's demonstration, leading her to recycle rejected prints into some of her pinwheels as well as monoprinting from natural objects. Charles Haley brings attention to the increasing toxicity of the planet through his use of monoprinting and stenciling. Later in the semester, Francesca Starr used photosensitive film intaglio to capture close-up the transitory quality of a dandelion in a field. Melissa Dorton abstracted Dutch windmills using stencil relief, expressing wind energy's historic roots, overshadowed by new technology. Due to light pollution, fireflies have increasing difficulty finding each other for mating. Angela Tudor expressed her concern for the plight of the firefly using glow-in-the-dark ink to screenprint abstract fireflies.

Kerri Cushman's pinwheels are made with recycled paper, letterpress printed with "cuts" mimicking whirling steps on the dance floor and feathers floating in the wind. My print pinwheels involve bees again, but with images executed as trace and ghost trace monoprints. The ghost trace monoprint is black with a solid yellow back. The ghost pull is particularly compelling as the light and fuzzy-whitish line that is created lends an ephemeral quality that fittingly describes the disappearance of bees.



After both classes created their pinwheels, we installed a *Pinstallation* outside the art building. A total of 300 pinwheels were installed for three days, December 3–5, 2008. We angled the pinwheels to pick up the wind in any direction. We also ensured all pinwheels spun (enlarging the hole around the pin). Fellow students, faculty and staff, and campus visitors enjoyed the *Pinstallation* and the message of sustainability. The artwork affected Longwood University's local and regional community, encouraging sustainability dialogue from a variety of perspectives, highlighting artists' perceptions. *

Print green. Pulp with sustainability. Press propaganda. Using the theme of "sustainability," democratically portray your interpretation through a variety of imagery, text, paper and print media. Sustainable Source [will show] the resourcefulness of contemporary printmakers and papermakers.

From the exhibition prospectus

Angela Tudor, color monoprint and screenprint with glow-in-the-dark ink.

Kelly Nelson (back and front), color trace monoprint.

Kelly Nelson, color ghost trace monoprint.

Kerri Cushman, letterpress on hand-made bluejean paper.

Kerri Cushman, letterpress, relief and rub-off text transfers on handmade garbage paper.

Robert Clark Barkley, monoprint.

Opposite page:

Nancy McDonald (back & front), ink.

Elizabeth Rogers, ink.

Rachel Hammet, color monoprint.