



A journey of sacrifice in art and life.

By Colin Dabkowski
Buffalo Sunday News- Commentary
Sunday April 29, 2012

After spending 20 straight months working 80-hour weeks in a windowless print studio in the Arizona desert, Ed Ott had reached his breaking point.

It was the early 1980s, and Ott, a recent graduate of Arizona State University, had been working almost entirely by himself on “The Journey of the Spirit,” an ambitious and complex series of screen prints conceived by his mentor, artist Sandra Hall. His boss demanded much of Ott. And Ott gave as much of himself as he could.

But after nearly two years of painstaking work, during which Ott ran endless tests and invented entirely new printing processes to meet the daunting demands of the project, the print run was only half-finished. He was exhausted.

And one day, as Ott was working on a print titled “Life and Death Confronted,” his girlfriend dropped the news that she was breaking up with him. Ott promptly walked to a pay phone in a 7-Eleven parking lot near the studio to call his bosses and ask for some time off. When they refused, he lost it.

“I started beating the phone [booth] and it just shattered everywhere. I looked around and thought, oh I’m going to get arrested. I walked back over [to the studio] and looked at the press, and all the ink was still in position,” Ott recalled in an interview in the Western New York Book Arts Center, where the series is now on view for the first time in nearly 30 years. “I had run about half of the run, and I just realized, I couldn’t go any further.”

Later that day, Ott checked himself into a mental hospital, where he stayed for two weeks. He eventually finished the project with help from an assistant, but was so scarred by the process that he walked away from it for nearly three decades. Ott will give his version of the harrowing story behind the prints in the Book Arts Center at 6 p.m. Friday.

The series—which consists of 250 editions, each containing 36 intense and luminous prints depicting Hall’s fantastical visions of a single day on earth— has been hailed as a technical marvel and an achievement of craftsmanship with few parallels.

The story of why such an incredible work of art and craftsmanship would vanish from view so quickly after its creation, and after Ott and his mentor suffered so much, speaks to one of the central contradictions in art. Namely, the role of obsession, which applies as much to these prints as to the work of famously obsessive artists like Van Gogh or, to give one of many local examples, Katherine Sehr.

The stunning vividness and luminosity of the colors in Ott’s prints doesn’t show up in reproductions and must be seen in person to be appreciated. In this way, they are not unlike the paintings of Ott’s fellow obsessive Van Gogh, whose painstaking experiments with pigment ensured that his paintings remain far more luminous today than those of his contemporaries.

It’s a fact of art that greatness and enduring success come only through the sacrifice of an important piece of oneself, be it merely time, personal relationships, financial stability or mental and physical health.

That’s exactly what happened during Ott’s 2-year sentence in the Arizona desert. It’s much to his credit that he finished the job. And it’s to our benefit that he has finally come to embrace the work itself, now arrayed across the white walls of the Book Arts Center in all its fluorescent splendor, awaiting the next step in a journey 30 years in the making and not yet nearly complete.