VISUAL ARTS

Honoring Wright's legacy — and the power of prints

BY ROBERT AYERS
Special to The Seattle Times

Greg Kucera, who is now one of Seattle's best-regarded gallerists, recalls that back when he was a University of Washington student, of all the Seattle galleries that he frequented, Virginia Wright's Current Editions "was the only gallery here that was showing artists with an international reputation."

Now, almost 40 years after Wright's space closed, Kucera's gallery is presenting a large-scale exhibition of prints that pays homage to Wright's legacy, and extends it somewhat as well.

Current Editions was in business 1967-74 and, as its name suggests, it specialized in the very best of contemporary prints from publishers such as Marlborough in London and Gemini G.E.L. in Los Angeles. This was crucial to Seattle's fast-evolving art scene in two principal ways: It encouraged Northwest artists' ambition to make prints of the very highest order and, perhaps even more important, it stimulated the interest of a circle of collectors, many of whom were Wright's friends who had fallen under the spell of her zealous enthusiasm. A number of these collectors are now among the most important patrons of the arts in Seattle.

EXHIBITION REVIEW

'(Re) Current Editions — 50 Years of Prints'

10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays through Aug. 18, Greg Kucera Gallery, 212 Third Ave. S., Seattle (206-624-0770 or *www.gregkucera.com*).

Part of the appeal of the prints that Current Editions offered was that they were relatively inexpensive. Over the years, however, prints by the likes of Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein have soared in value. And not only that: Wright recalls that when she offered Rauschenberg's 1971 "Cardbird" series — which had been meticulously made in paper pulp to look like discarded cardboard boxes — nobody was interested in buying them, as they seemed to have no long-term significance. Ironically, a set of these very pieces is enjoying pride of place in Seattle Art Museum.

Wright is clearly blessed with the gift of discerning the future importance of art that enjoys current topicality. In this election year, there could perhaps be no more topical image than Mickalene Thomas' portrait of "Michelle O," made in 2008 when Mrs. Obama became First Lady. It is one of the most striking pieces in the show. Picked out in the starkest black, white and sky-blue, Thomas' picture has the appearance and immediacy of a simple woodcut. Look a little closer, however, and it becomes obvious that this is a screen print derived from a digital image. You can even make out the pixelated edges, most obviously in the light falling on the shoulder, and the hairline immediately above it. There is, in other words, considerably more to the print than meets the eye at first encounter. This chimes perfectly with the recurrent subject of Thomas' art: the often underappreciated complexities of black women's personalities — particularly when those women are pictured in popular media.

COURTESY OF GREG KUCERA GALLERY

"Michelle O," a screen print by Mickalene Thomas.

"Michelle O" is perfectly at home in the current Kucera Gallery show, because it is far more than a potted history of Virginia Wright's gallery. It is a celebration of the continuing vitality of printmaking, of its status as a key component of contemporary art making and of the fact that prints played so important a role in the history of the Seattle art scene. No wonder that it makes for such enjoyable viewing.

Robert Ayers: robertayers@mac.com