

PACE/MACGILL GALLERY

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[Tooltax]

Many years ago, when I was only in my twenties, I started to think how nice it would be to classify all the stuff people made as a way of improving my skill in the narrow areas in which I was myself a maker. I got it into my head to make a taxonomy of tools . . .

So writes Benson near the beginning of a manuscript that he left unfinished, titled *Tooltax: A classification of all the things we make*. Here is the paradox at the heart of Benson's genius: does understanding serve making, or is making a way of reaching understanding?

Benson certainly knew how to get things done, and he spent a great deal of his time, boundless energy, uncommon skill, and inexhaustible good humor making things for others—prints, books, and a new building for the Yale School of Art, to name a few. This exhibition presents a tiny sample of the impressively diverse and very beautiful things that he made for himself. When he was the only client, however, the goal of completing the thing sometimes paled in comparison to his thirst for learning—for understanding.

Tooltax indeed includes a taxonomy. Benson constantly revised it—a process that could have been made easier by an array of Post-Its on the wall—but it seems that he had settled firmly on seven comprehensive categories:

- Prepared materials
- Mechanical tools
- Energy tools
- Tools for care
- Organizational tools
- Data tools
- Conceptual tools

The most remarkable aspect of *Tooltax* may be the essay. It, too, was under constant revision over a period of twenty or thirty years, but it does have a beginning and reaches an end. It might be summarized as a sketch for a history of the universe from the Big Bang to the fast-approaching era when machines will leave human beings by the wayside.

Discussing his clocks last year, Benson concluded:

At one point, about a year or so ago, I realized that what I was really doing was trying to understand the making of things, rather than trying to actually make them, but, in life's own perverse way, the understanding couldn't take place without the making.

[Clock]

Excerpts from remarks Benson made last year about the clock displayed here:

I think it is 15 but I lost count somewhere around number 10. . . . The clock has separate units that perform a specific function and these parts can be changed as the construction goes along . . . the electric winding unit, the weight unit, a gearbox, a remontoire, the clock works, and the pendulum. . . . Consequently this is my last clock, simply because it has been built so that it can always be upgraded and as a result never be completed. . . . The whole mess stands about 60 inches high, so that [I can work on the clock] without bending over and twisting around . . .

The clock has no finished design . . . The pieces are only made if I can hold their details in my head as I make them, without reference to any set of external measures. The clock gradually grows through trial and error and lots of physical work with metal, but out of this has come a set of principles of making that were not clear to me before doing the clock. I have finally realized that what I am actually making is a pattern of understandings of the process of making rather than the things that are actually being made.

[Telescope Mount]

Except for boats and cars, Benson's first technological passion was astronomy, and although building clocks eventually outstripped rigging telescopes, he never abandoned stargazing. A telescope requires a very steady mount. (For Benson the mount also had to be adjustable so that he could stand erect no matter what device he was using and where he pointed it.) Benson built this mobile mount to use on excursions that he and his wife Barbara loved to make in their recreational vehicle, which they dubbed the "Giraffe" because it stood tall.

Benson pointed out that the tools of astronomy and photography have both become so good that ordinary citizens can use them in tandem to contribute new

knowledge simply by steadily scrutinizing a neglected corner of the heavens. He tipped his hat to this development by including in his book *The Printed Picture* a photograph of the Orion Nebula made by Steve Cannistra in 2004 with a 3½-inch Takahashi refractor and a Canon digital camera. The exposure time—100 minutes—is a reminder of the need for a steady mount.

[The Photomechanical Revolution]

Benson got involved in the printing industry in 1966—the year he turned twenty-three—when he went to work shooting halftones for the Meriden Gravure Company in Meriden, Connecticut. The picture to be reproduced was photographed through a fine screen that translated the image into tiny dots. When printed in black ink on white paper, the dots emulated the full range of intermediate tones—“halftones.”

Offset lithography was just then displacing letterpress as the industry standard. Because offset (unlike letterpress) does not distort the paper, repeated passes through the press can build up the image. As he worked, Benson recognized that taking the image apart enabled him to control each layer separately, so that when the layers were recombined, the ink-on-paper reproduction could rival the subtle variations of tone that are indispensable to the magic of chemical photography.

The result was a revolution in photomechanical reproduction. Ever the gentleman, Benson himself stressed that other outstanding printers shared in the adventure. But if he had not been seduced by the challenge of leading such a revolution, his probing and wide-ranging curiosity easily might have left printing and photography behind.

Early in Benson’s career, growing demand for color advertising fostered the proliferation of sophisticated multi-unit offset presses. The creative dimension of the photomechanical revolution turned out to lie in making the halftones, which could then be printed by a variety of commercial printers. Benson left Meriden in 1972, after only six years, and began working as a freelance, conceiving and executing reproduction strategies for leading photography books. Among the outstanding titles of the first decade or so of this work are Benson’s own *Lay This Laurel* and Lee Friedlander’s *The American Monument* (respectively 1973 and 1976, both Eakins Press), *The Work of Atget* (four volumes, 1981-85, MoMA), and *Alfred Stieglitz* (1983, National Gallery of Art). Benson’s most remarkable commission was *Photographs from the Collection of the*

Gilman Paper Company (1985), which he printed with Thomas Palmer on a one-color press in his basement, building up as many as seven layers for each image.

The Gilman project proved for the first time that photomechanical technology could produce a perfect facsimile of any photograph. It also opened a new chapter in Benson's personal artistic career, as he explored the potentials of multiple-impression techniques in his own work. A MacArthur Fellowship awarded in 1986 gave him greater freedom to do so. Most of what is exhibited here belongs to this extraordinarily rich chapter of Benson's work, which lasted for more than two decades, until he embraced the digital screen.

Meanwhile teaching came to play a major role in Benson's life. He taught in the photography program at the Yale School of Art from 1978 to 2007 and served as Dean from 1996 to 2006. How he got it all done is a mystery. No doubt it helped that he went to bed early and rose well before the sun.

[Platinum/Palladium Prints and Multiple-Impression Lithographic Prints]

Analogue—that is, chemical—photography and analogue printing are two very different processes. But Benson succeeded in transforming them into alternative aspects of a single pictorial realm. In the 1960s and 1970s, the velvet subtleties of printing in platinum and palladium (separately or together) were widely regarded as the pinnacle of monochrome photography, and Benson soon mastered them. In the 1980s, however, he demonstrated through his own work that multiple-impression prints in ink on paper—not reproductions but original prints from scans of Benson's negatives—were superior to any chemical print of the same image.

Left to right:

53 Tilden Avenue Porch, 1976
palladium platinum print made c. 1985

Rhode Island, 2010
multiple impression pigment print made in 2011

53 Tilden Avenue Porch, 1976
off-set multiple impression print from halftones made from the original negative c. 1985

[The Contraption]

Several years ago Benson reached the conclusion that digital technologies had made photographs on paper—or any other fixed support—obsolete. The screen was now the thing. High-definition screens—nominally for television but in fact for any digital image—had begun to appear on the market. Benson delighted in the fact that the light-emitting screen possesses a range of contrast far greater than any image seen by reflected light, and he designed an integrated system for displaying his own photographs, sometimes accompanied by text. To date, the system has been exhibited publicly only at Pace/MacGill and, in the summer of 2015, at Artipelag, an art center outside Stockholm.

[Photographs in Paint]

Benson's most extreme experiments in analogue imagery were photographs in paint on sheets of aluminum that he began to make in the mid-1980s. As in offset printing, the image was built up from multiple layers but the medium was acrylic paint instead of ink. He laid down successive layers of imagery in halftones of photo-sensitive gelatin, which served as masks for evenly sprayed coats of paint, each in any color he chose. When he washed away the unexposed gelatin, what remained was a fine halftone in the chosen color. As in offset, Benson could repeat the operation as many times as he liked, building up an image of unprecedented richness.

The irony is that the process yielded a singled finished work. If Benson wanted another finished version of the same image, he had to start from scratch. The process is thoughtfully considered in Calvin Tomkins' profile of Benson in the December 17, 1990 issue of *The New Yorker*.

By then the digital revolution was underway, and Benson leapt into it with undiminished enthusiasm.

[Multiple-Impression Pigment Prints in Color]

For 150 years most photographs were in black and white. Color demanded more effort, more time, more money. The digital revolution turned the tables. Henceforth, photographs have been in color. Benson, master of the monochrome, took this sea change in stride.

As he pointed out, the complex software that his Epson printer uses to orchestrate its seven inks foreclosed the sorts of manipulations that he could perform on the different layers of a multiple-impression offset print. Undaunted, Benson modified the printer so that he could build up an image by running the same sheet of paper through it as many times as he liked. The result was a body of digital pigment prints that are more vivid and subtly varied in color than any other photographs.

Benson was always happy to explain how he made things—and so good at doing so that listeners occasionally drew the mistaken conclusion that they could make the same things themselves. He literally unpacked the process of his multiple-impression pigment prints by printing reduced versions of the four layers on a single sheet. Left to right, top to bottom:

The first impression, in which all values of the picture are lightly printed

The second impression, in which the neutral grays and blackest values have been eliminated

The third impression, carrying black and the darkest grays

The finished composite print.

[Further Reading]

Benson the maker and teacher was also an exceptional writer. Some of his best published writing is listed below:

A Maritime Album: 100 Photographs and Their Stories. Photograph selection and introduction by John Szarkowski. Essays by Richard Benson. Newport News, Virginia: Mariners' Museum; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

A Yale Album: The Third Century. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. Photograph selection and commentary by Richard Benson.

Richard Benson, "Working with Lee," in *Friedlander*, by Peter Galassi, pp. 436-43. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005.

Benson made the halftones for Friedlander's first book, *Self Portrait* (1970), and for every successive Friedlander book through *The Jazz People of New Orleans*

(1992). Because he approached each new book as an experiment, his history of working with Friedlander is probably his fullest account of the photomechanical revolution that he led.

The Printed Picture. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2008.

A comprehensive survey of techniques for producing images in multiple copies. Other books cover some or even most of the same territory, but Benson was uniquely qualified to write this one because he had actually practiced most of the techniques, many of them extensively. In addition, unlike many specialists of older techniques, he was equally at home with the digital technologies that have utterly transformed the field.

Benson developed *The Printed Picture* over many years by talking to audiences small enough to look closely at examples of the various processes. He then used the exhibition based on the book as the background of a series of in-depth lectures that were captured on video thanks to the generosity of his friend Alan Chasanoff. The lectures are available online at <http://printedpicture.artgallery.yale.edu>. The whole is eight hours long, but the site is indexed according to the structure of the book, so viewers may go directly any particular subject.

North, South, East, West. Edited and with an introduction by Peter Galassi. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2011. Richard Benson, "Printing and Photography, Photography and Printing," pp. 114-123.

A selection of 108 of the photographs that Benson produced as multiple-impression pigment prints.

The offset press and the Epson printer assemble the image in fundamentally different ways, but Benson was able to make the former emulate the latter by running each sheet through the press twice. Once again, the first impression (in fact composed of separate plates for cyan, magenta, yellow, and black) lightly printed all the values of the picture. The second impression intensified certain colors in certain spots and reinforced the black and darkest grays.

Benson's essay explains the making of both the pigment prints and the offset book in the context of the evolution of his work as a printer.