

## ARTS & culture

# Nonprofit fills neglected niche of fine art book publishing

BY JOHN TOWNES

Under the best of circumstances, printing high-quality art books requires much planning and research, rigorous attention to detail, and specialized processes to faithfully capture and reproduce an artist's work.

For The Artist Book Foundation (TABF), based in North Adams, the printing of their latest monograph, *Glassworks: The Art of Frederick Birkhill*, occurred under the worst of circumstances.

The book was scheduled in advance to be produced at Elcograf, a printing company in Verona, Italy in March. However, that was when the coronavirus pandemic was breaking out intensely in Italy and other European countries, and when concerns were rising and shutdowns looming in the United States.

"Everyone was running at limited capacity," said David Skolkin, art and design director for TABF. "For the first time ever, we found ourselves wiping down packages and leaving them out in the sun for a few hours. No one was sure how the virus could spread."

Fortunately, despite the shutdown of most activity in Italy, the printing industry was deemed an essential sector and Elcograf was allowed to continue operating. However, they had to adhere to strict limitations, including a requirement that as much work as possible be done remotely. A team of pressman, color experts, and production specialists worked through the uncertainty of the pandemic to produce *Glassworks*.

"Believe it or not, the book went through," said Skolkin. "There was one week they had to close, but thankfully they were deemed an essential business and able to keep a skeleton crew at the printer to keep the project going."

As a result, TABF was able to release *Glassworks* in October. It is being sold by online sites and bookstores, including TABF's website ([www.artistbookfoundation.org](http://www.artistbookfoundation.org)), where it is listed at \$75.

Birkhill is a Michigan-based glass artist, scientist, inventor, educator, historian and collector who has had an influential role in the evolution of glassmaking and theory. In addition to 192 color plates, the 280-page *Glassworks* monograph includes scholarly contributions from other glass experts, a chronology of the artist's life, his exhibition history and a glossary of glass-art terms.

### Emphasis on access

TABF, founded in 2012 as a 501c3 nonprofit organization, specializes in recognizing the lives and work of contemporary and historic artists. It publishes monographs, catalogs, essays, surveys and limited editions.

Its core mission is to document and share vital information encompassing visual and artistic culture through publications, events, exhibitions, educational programs and book donations for the benefit of scholars, collectors, historians, students and others interested in art.

TABF is based in Building 13 on the campus of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in North Adams.



Leslie van Breen, founder and executive director of TABF, says the organization focuses on the publication of fine art books – such as their latest monograph, *Glassworks: The Art of Frederick Birkhill* (top right shelf) – which are often overlooked as unprofitable in the bottom-line world of commercial publishing.

The space, which serves as the organization's office and workplace, also includes a gallery display area and small event space. It has a core staff of five and works with an extensive network of designers and production experts, artists, educators, and other consultants and collaborators.

The organization was founded by Leslie van Breen, who is its executive director. Prior to founding TABF, she was publisher and executive director of Hudson Hills Press, a prominent publisher of fine art books, which was based in Manchester, Vt., when van Breen joined its staff. Previously, she had worked in the world of fine art dealers, including Christie's and Sotheby's.

Van Breen said she decided to establish TABF in response to a change that has been occurring in the book publishing industry.

She explained that fine art books have become increasingly scarce in the bottom-line world of modern commercial publishing due to their production costs and limited market.

"They are not high-volume sellers, and

publishing houses have been doing fewer and fewer of them," she said.

In addition, she said, survival had become increasingly difficult for niche publishers of fine art books. "Being a fine art publisher had become unsustainable in the commercial marketplace," she said.

Because of that, van Breen began looking at alternatives.

"It is important that they continue to be published," she said. "I decided that forming a publishing organization in the nonprofit world was the way to continue to make that possible."

She noted that nonprofit is an apt description for TABF, which relies primarily on grants, memberships and other contributions to fund the organization and its projects. "We could never make it solely on the revenue of book sales," she said.

Sales of the books are generally in the range of hundreds of copies rather than thousands.

TABF has published about 20 titles, at an average of three or four a year. "We also usu-

ally have a half-dozen books in the pipeline at a time," van Breen said.

However, she emphasized that, despite the small numbers of copies, the books are geared to a larger audience, and they are not only for affluent readers or dedicated art collectors. A significant number are purchased by schools, libraries, and other institutions.

"Access is a core element of our vision, and we feel very strongly about that," van Breen said. "Art is not exclusive. It's an important part of our world and it's all about how we live. We believe the art and information in these books should be widely available to anyone."

She added that TABF actively takes initiatives to ensure their books are available. The organization offers a 35-percent discount to members of College Art Association of America, Inc.

They also deliver more than 10 percent of each print run to underserved public, art, and university libraries in addition to prisons across the United States.

TABF also has a program oriented to

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Berkshire County. "For every copy of a book that is purchased directly from us on the website, we donate a copy to a school or library or other organization in Berkshire County," van Breen said.

That also reflects TABF's overall role in the community, she noted. "We publish for an international market, and we work with collaborators and artists all over the world," she said. "At the same time, we have a strong commitment to the community here."

**Good fit at MASS MoCA**

TABF moved to the MASS MoCA campus in 2015. "When they showed me the space at MoCA, I immediately said, 'This is where we were meant to be,'" van Breen said.

She added that the city is also a logical fit, both personally and professionally.

A native of Chicago, van Breen lived in numerous places before moving to southwestern Vermont to work at Hudson Hills Press. But she has long had an affinity to this area. "I've always been drawn to the northern Berkshires," she said. "Plus, my family is from upstate New York state, so in that sense this part of the world is home."

North Adams also has other advantages. "There is a lot of vitality here, and being part of MoCA, people often come to us," she said. "Plus, it's easy to get to New York and Boston and the airport when we have to travel."

In addition to their publishing, TABF's gallery usually hosts receptions, exhibits and other events related to the artists and books they publish.

The coronavirus pandemic has affected TABF in a variety of ways, including placing most of the public gatherings on hold.

"Our studio was closed to the public from March through August," van Breen said. "We've opened since then on a more limited

basis. We're basically open Wednesday and Friday by appointment or by chance at other times if one of us is here working."

She said they have had to make other adjustments to their operations, but overall they have been able to continue working.

"Fortunately, before COVID we already were oriented to working remotely, so that hasn't been a major adjustment," she said. Producing the books

published by TABF is an intensive endeavor. "They're not just picture books," van Breen said. "They're editorially driven. We include content that places the artists within a historic context."

The editorial contributors and advisors include museum curators, scholars, educators and other experts.

They work closely with living artists being profiled in the publications. "They're a collaboration with the artist," van Breen said.


She noted that the artists are not paid, but they are enthusiastic about participating, as such books gives visibility to their work and presents it in a comprehensive fashion.

She added that the artists are selected in several ways. Often, artists will contact them, and TABF determines whether to proceed on a book. In other instances, TABF initiates projects and contacts an artist they want to profile.


In addition to publishing books about established artists, van Breen said they are exploring other options for advancing their goals.

"We would like to start a series focusing on younger emerging artists," she said. "We're also working to develop work in digital form, to share content more universally. That could include material that would be available free to schools. We're also looking into working with teachers to incorporate this material into their curriculum." ♦

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