

**David Graves**

b.1949, Altadena, California, lives in South

Pasadena, California

exhibited in *Biennial I*

*left to right*

*Plateau, 2011*

*Compound, 2011*

mixed-media on paper

*Remote Kintrol, 2009*

reductive block print

## DAVID GRAVES

Born 1949 in Altadena, California  
Lives in Haiku, Maui

David Graves intended to be a cultural anthropologist, obtaining a bachelor of arts degree in that field from California State University, Los Angeles in 1978. However, when he was in graduate school in anthropology, he decided not to pursue it professionally. Graves realized that anthropology didn't allow him to communicate his ideas except in ways that were too dry and academic to fulfill his needs. For the next several years, Graves worked as a field worker in cancer research at the University of Southern California medical school, with time off in the summers to work in the salmon-fishing industry in Alaska.

While Graves had been painting as a hobbyist since the mid 1970s, it wasn't until a trip to New Zealand in 1981 that he first felt the stirrings of wanting to be more seriously involved in art. There Graves was impressed by an exhibition of silkscreen prints and decided to learn the technique. But it wasn't until three years later, in 1984, that he took classes in drawing and printmaking at Pasadena City College. As he started having some success with showing and selling his screenprints, Graves began to think of moving to a place that would have a viable art market for his work and yet be a more livable environment. Impressed by the natural beauty of Hawaii during a visit, Graves and his wife moved to Maui in 1986.

Graves continued to have success with his screenprints, which tended toward representational images of landscapes. Nevertheless, he felt a need to experiment, so he began exploring non-representational modes of expression. As this new direction in his work drew a successful response in juried competitions and other exhibitions, Graves realized that he had a greater creative impetus than he had previously acknowledged. In 1991 Graves stopped doing commercial screenprints and turned his full attention to making work that allowed him to give play to his ideas and feelings.

Having been an assiduous reader of a wide range of art magazines and journals for ten

years, Graves possessed a considerable knowledge of developments in contemporary art and familiarity with the work of many artists. In acquiring and expanding his own point of view, Graves had to first work through the influences of artists who appealed to him visually and conceptually, such as Jasper Johns, Edward Ruscha, Jim Dine—artists variously concerned with perception, the use of language, references to art history, and appropriating elements from everyday life and popular culture. While the visual links between Graves' work and these artists diminished, he kept these shared concerns as the foundation of his own art.

Fascinated with communication systems and the continuous flow of information which confronts everyone in contemporary life, Graves began to think about the different ways of conveying information—words, symbols, diagrams, painting, printing, photography, film—and to explore these in his art. He started collecting images from printed and photographic sources and then playing with these pictorial elements until juxtapositions or associations suggested themselves. Combining these appropriated materials with a range of graphic techniques, Graves created mixed-media collages in which, like the physical process used in making them, he built up layers of meaning. One of these works, *Test of Strength*, includes cutouts of male and female bodybuilders superimposed over images of spawning salmon. At the bottom is a torn reproduction of a 1956 collage, *Just what is it that makes today's home so different, so appealing?*, by English artist Richard Hamilton. In the background float schematic drawings of hands forming random letters in American sign language. *Test of Strength* deals broadly with several themes—concepts of beauty, attraction, success, reproduction and survival—but Graves declines to present them in terms of prescribed notions of significance, value and taste. In this and other works, as the viewer follows the unfolding of Graves' forms and allusions, one is required to decipher what

the meaning might be. Connections are not obvious or clear and sometimes information is withdrawn and denied, rubbed out with solvent and a cloth. For Graves it is important to maintain a certain ambiguity or mystery in his work; one is never on sure ground, for he purposefully doesn't make it easy to decipher what's going on in order to encourage viewers to exercise their critical intelligence and keep judgments at bay for as long as possible. In the end Graves would prefer to raise questions rather than provide only answers.

Several series of work have as their respective subjects boxing speedbags, corners of rooms, and church floorplans, which serve as vehicles for Graves' musings about the nature of human thought, especially as it relates to willpower, contemplation, and belief systems. In its form and function, the speedbag is a metaphor for the human head and, by extension, the brain. In order to place the image further in the context of mental activity, Graves occasionally surrounds the speedbags with clouds of letters, as if to symbolize man's struggle to make sense of things in the face of constant bombardment by the pressures of contemporary society. Similarly, the corners evoke the mind in its meditative capacity, representing the place where the psyche retreats to examine and reflect. The church floorplans refer to man's propensity to construct complex systems around an idea to create a belief system endowed with the most sacred and sublime of meanings.

Although Graves is also a painter, in this exhibition the emphasis has been placed on presenting a large number of his works on paper as a means of conveying the artist's intensive involvement with ideas that spring forth at a quick and steady pace. Graves' works also manifest a connection to his earlier interest in anthropology, for like an anthropologist assembling cultural data, the artist gathers ideas and images with the same goal: to interpret and explain the human condition.