

ART & DESIGN

Richard Benson, Photographer and Printer, Dies at 73

By RICHARD SANDOMIR JUNE 27, 2017

Richard Benson, a stonecutter's son with the skills of a master machinist who developed innovative techniques to print photographs that had the artistic depth of paintings, died on Thursday in Providence, R.I. He was 73.

His son Daniel said the cause was heart failure.

Mr. Benson, known as Chip, believed in the painterly impact of reproducing the work of photographers like Irving Penn, Lee Friedlander and Helen Levitt on an offset printing press. A photographer himself — as well as a longtime teacher at Yale and for 10 years the dean of its school of art — Mr. Benson was no stranger to the darkroom. But the offset press — and, later, inkjet printers — fueled his fascination with using new mechanical forms to recreate photographic images. He called it his fantasy world.

“When you make a print in the darkroom,” he said in a video produced by the photographer David La Spina in 2011, “you turn the lights off, you go into a room where you can't see anything, which is stupid to begin with; you do something to a piece of paper and then you find out if it's any good or not. And if it's not any good you throw it away and make another one.”

He likened his approach to the cumulative effect of a painter adding colors to a canvas, each brush stroke influencing the next.

“I can honestly say that I'm the best printer in the world,” he told Calvin Tomkins of The New Yorker in 1990. “It's my gift.” Mr. Tomkins noted that Mr. Benson had made his boast sound self-deprecating.

In 1981, Mr. Benson was asked to reproduce 200 historic photographs from the immense private collection of the Gilman Paper Company — including works by Mathew Brady, Henry Fox Talbot, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Diane Arbus and Alfred Stieglitz — that had been displayed at the company's Manhattan headquarters.

He persuaded the company and its curator that the best solution was to make offset copies in ink — and for the company to buy him an offset press that would give him great control over color and tone.

He and Thomas Palmer, his assistant then, needed four and a half years to complete the project: a hulking limited-edition book that used a secondhand German Miehle single-pass offset press in Mr. Benson's basement.

"It began with the idea of reproductions for Gilman to put on the walls, and then they said, 'Why not make a book?'" Mr. Palmer, who became a photographic printer, said in an interview on Monday. "It took so long because Chip didn't know what he was doing when we started — and he would be perfectly happy to read that."

Mr. Benson joked that hardly anyone bought the Gilman book, and that he contemplated screwing legs into his three copies and using them as a coffee table.

Sarah Meister, a curator in the Museum of Modern Art's photography department, called Mr. Benson's reproductions of the Gilman photographs an "incredible achievement." In a telephone interview on Tuesday, she said: "Richard was as gifted a technician and inventor as he was an artist. He really breathed life into photographic reproductions."

Mr. Benson also produced the halftone negatives used in the museum's four-volume history of the French photographer's Eugène Atget's work.

Richard Mead Atwater Benson was born in Newport, R.I., on Nov. 8, 1943. His father, John, was a renowned stonecutter who owned the John Stevens Shop, which opened in 1705. His mother, the former Esther Fisher Smith, took over the stonecutting shop after her husband's death in 1956.

He dropped out of Brown University after a semester when he told its president that he was leaving to work with his hands and see the world. He enlisted in the Navy, where he studied optical repair, and fixed telescopes, cameras and binoculars on a ship in Norfolk, Va.

Mr. Benson's ambition to create with his hands found outlets beyond photography. He built intricate clocks and steam engines. He restored and drove Ford Model A pickups from the late 1920s.

"He was fascinated with technology that came out of America in the 19th century, like steam engines," his son Daniel said. "So he maintained a steam plant in the backyard."

In addition to Daniel, Mr. Benson is survived by his wife, the former Barbara Murray; two daughters, Abby Benson and Sarah Warren; another son, Luke; six grandchildren; two great-grandchildren; and a brother, John.

Mr. Benson, who taught at Yale for more than 30 years and was its art school dean from 1996 to 2006, was a MacArthur fellow in 1986 and received two Guggenheim fellowships. His books include "The Printed Picture" (2008), a history of photographic printing, and "North South East West" (2011), a collection of his photographs.

Don Burmeister, who reviewed "North South East West" on The New York Photo Review's blog, said that Mr. Benson's pictures of everyday scenes were filled with a "preternatural richness of color" and were "gloriously and painstakingly crafted."

In the early 1990s, Mr. Benson embraced digital photography.

"The new digital technologies are, to my mind, the finest printing processes that have ever existed," he said in Mr. La Spina's video. "So I find myself very, very excited to use this new technology that's going to destroy photography to make the best versions of it I've ever seen."

