Modular Font for Letterpress

Letterpress is a five hundred fifty year old printing process that is actively employed today by artists, designers, and specialty printers who appreciate its highly engaging detail-oriented process and its beautiful result: type and image impressed into paper.

The resources of what to print from using letterpress are limited. Used metal and wood types are available, often in small quantities, or overly worn from decades of use. It is possible to order new metal type cast at one of the last two foundries in the world, (located in New Jersey and Barcelona), but this can be prohibitively expensive. Most printers today use photo-polymer plates, which are printing plates typically made from digital files. However these plates are more wasteful than movable type, as they can only be used once for an individual job and cannot be distributed into individual component parts and reused.

As a practicing letterpress printer, I wanted to develop a new printing resource that was reusable and modular, like wood and metal type. But I was also interested in developing a system that functioned as a set of building blocks that could be used to compose either words or images.

I first investigated a simple type and image system on the computer using Adobe Illustrator. Here, as in cross-stitch, an X can be manipulated to create either word or image. This system with its modular composition and strict right angles could translate well to the letterpress process. The X could be replaced by a block.

In late 2009 I was invited to produce an edition at Small Craft Advisory Press (SCAP) at Florida State University; I suggested creating a new modular font for their collection instead, and to create an edition by re-purposeing the first experimental prints as invitations to use the font. I traveled to Tallahassee in January 2010 to begin work on the font. SCAP published my book documenting the project in summer 2011.

The system is based on two half-inch square modular units made out of wood: a type-high (0.9718" printing height) unit and a shorter, non-printing unit. Pictured above is Graduate Assistant Dan Hall, who cut the units in the university’s wood shop. Printing units are in the cardboard box, non-printing units are in the bucket.

I returned all type-high pieces into the press bed to take proofs of the entire inked-up surface, revealing more inconsistencies. I then set and printed type to turn the experimental prints into an edition of invitations to use the font. The font is housed at SCAP, for use by visiting artists as well as FSU faculty and students.

For further research: if the wooden units were smaller, an 8th of an inch square, the image would have a finer “resolution” & more detail could be achieved.

see more of this project at www.redcharming.com