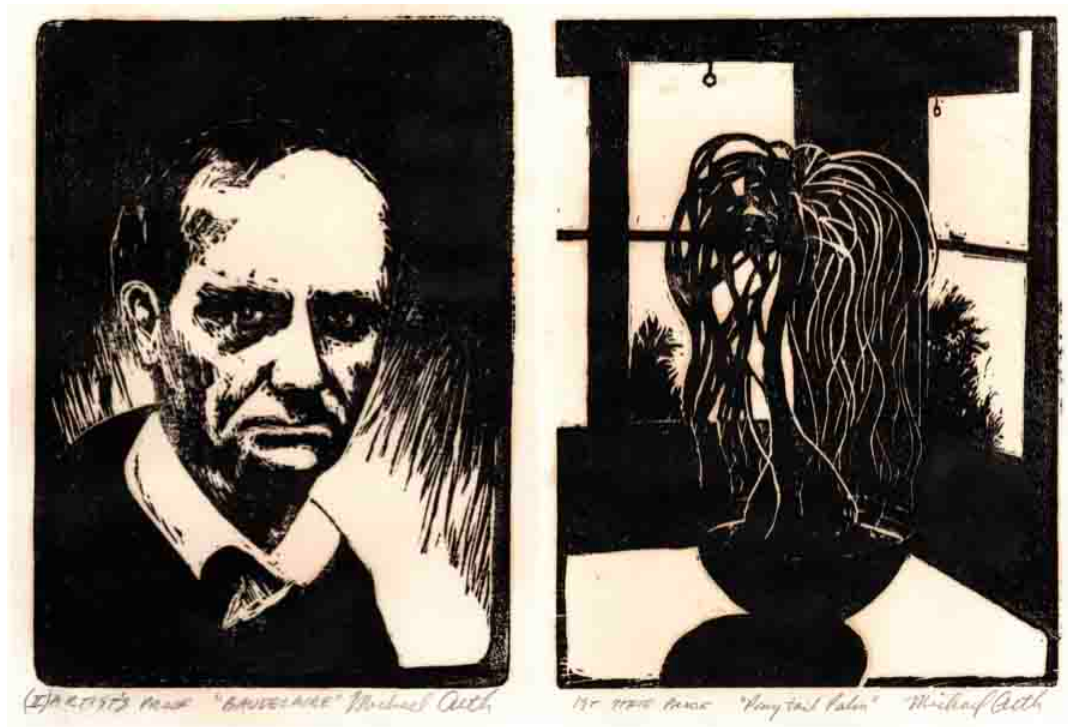




Ch.21. "Nebula Sunset," acrylic on canvas, 1975.

21.3 - An Artist's Life



Ch.21. Woodblock prints of Charles Baudelaire and a Ponytail palm, 1974.

I got a creative high from drawing and painting, and it more or less solved my money worries, so I threw myself into my work. I noticed that many, if not most, artists would find a niche and stay in it if it was even marginally profitable. I could not bring myself to do this. I wanted to try out all kinds of things. In terms of income, it was hit or miss, but I had my dignity and continuing to experiment with all different media and styles kept me engaged. I never burned out on art, but I found the business side of it boring, even depressing, and it took me away from the creative side. I could see why the few artists who can make a living at it would keep doing what sells and become less experimental. I did take the occasional commission, such as the portrait I did in London, so I was not a purist, and I did not have family money to enable me to be one.

In Arlington, I had done a small, airbrush acrylic painting of a sun setting over large waves. In the sky was an embryonic bubble containing me as a young surfer. In Austin, I did a large version of it in early 1974, where I ditched the surfing embryo, and brought in the Crab Nebula. I called it "Nebula Sunset," and I liked it so much



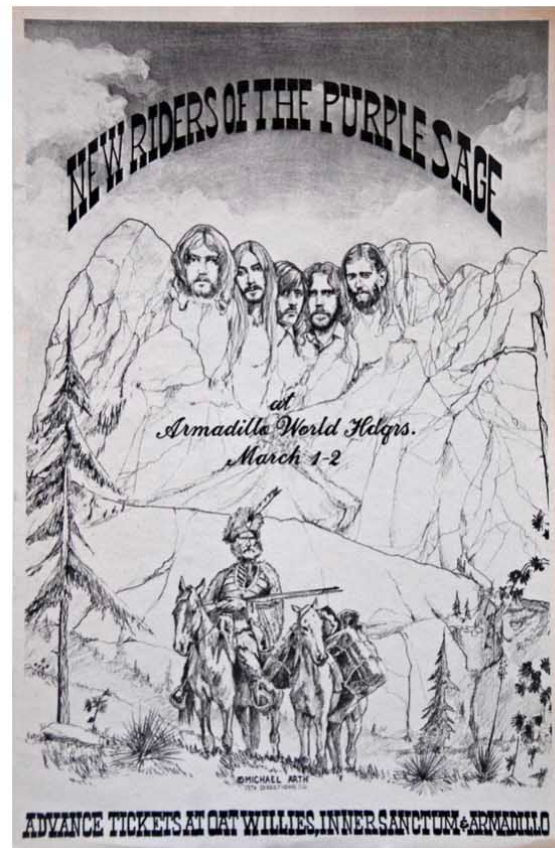
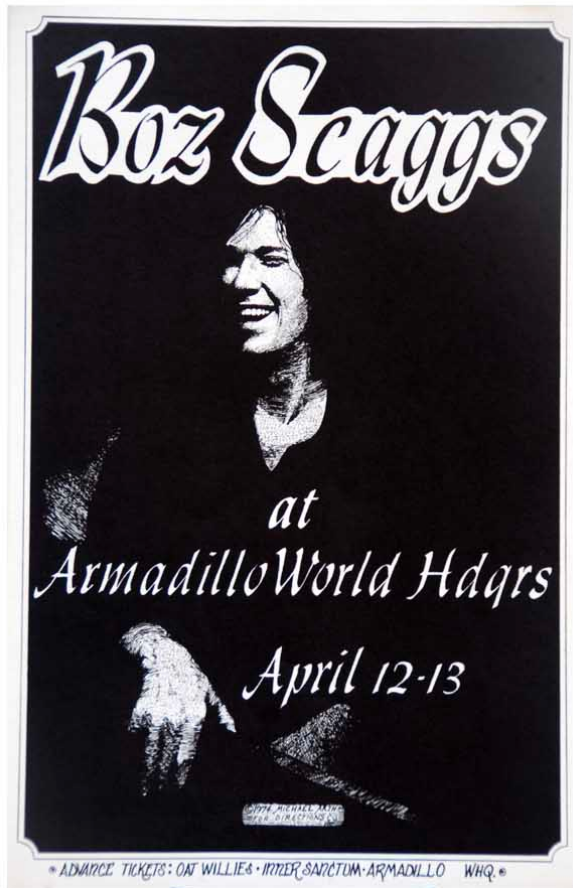
Ch.21. "Mt. Bonnell October" Oil, 1975. My muse at the time, Suzanne, is sitting on top of Mt. Bonnell. The hills and lakeshore of Lake Austin are now covered with houses including podcaster Joe Rogan's mansion and studio.

that ten years later I would do another version of it with the Orion Nebula. All versions depicted a shore on a watery planet close enough to a nebula, so that the shock wave of the exploding star would partially strip away the atmosphere of the planet. The moment occurred just at sunset, so the viewer on the hypothetical planet would see an exploding star just above a setting sun. Over the years these three paintings would become personal touchstones, and I still have them.

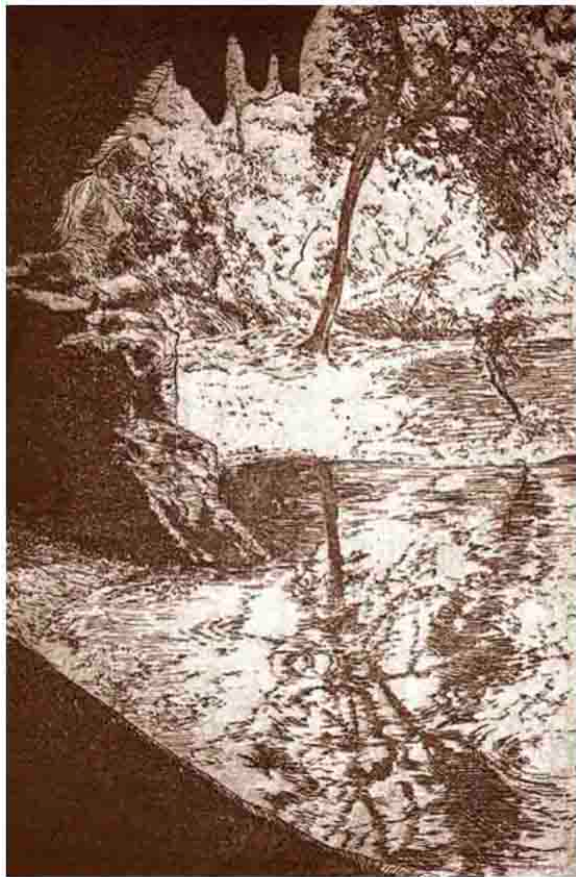
Richard Hansen and I rented a cumbersome black and white video camera from the local cable access TV station that included a camera attached by a cord to a large, over-the-shoulder, reel-to-reel video tape deck, with one inch video tape. We filmed a mock-serious show titled *Cosmic Dialogues*. We used *Nebula Sunset*



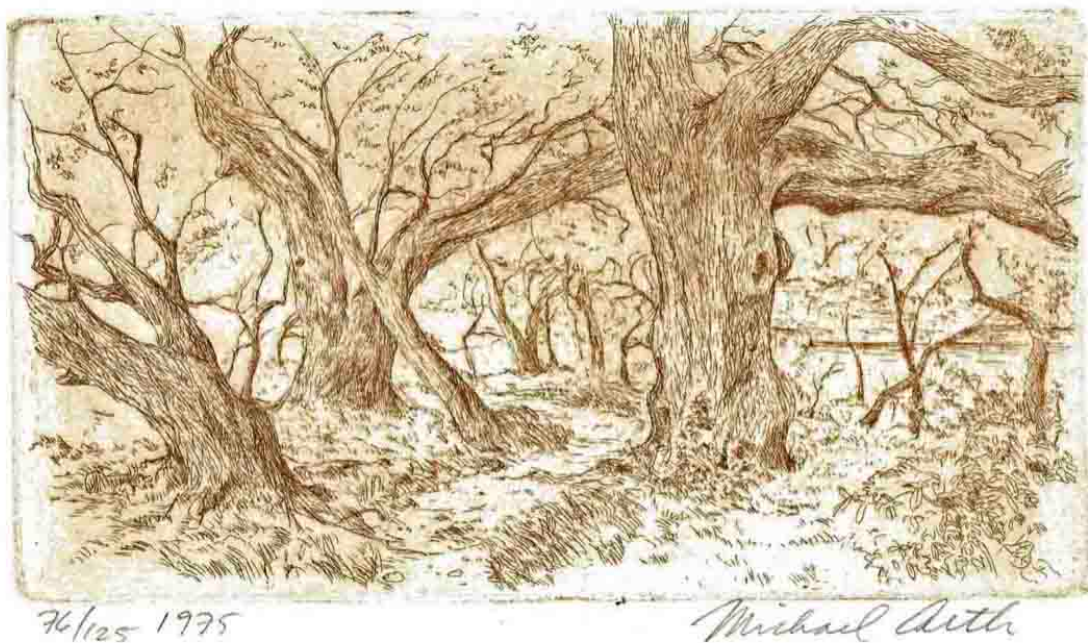
Ch.21. Earliest version of "Nebula Sunset," Acrylic. 1973.



Ch.21. Concert posters for the Armadillo World Headquarters in Austin, featuring Hoyt Axton, Boz Skaggs, and Riders of the Purple Sage. Pen and Ink printed on 11" x 17" card stock. March-April 1974.



Ch. 21. *Hamilton Pool* etching, with the photo reference showing my friend Richard jumping for joy. 1974.
An etching becomes a mirror image when it is printed.



Ch.21. *Live Oaks at Laguna Gloria*, 4 x 7 in. 1975.

as a matte painting for the opening shots with Richard Strauss' "Thus Spake Zarathustra," borrowed from Kubrick's movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It seemed self-conscious and derivative, even then, but the sentiment was based on genuine awe at the evolution of human consciousness.

While pursuing my fine art, I was also, in 1974 at least, drawing rock concert posters for Boz Scaggs, Hoyt Axton, New Riders of the Purple Sage, and others. There was a huge auditorium and hippie beer garden called the Armadillo World Headquarters, operating out of an old National Guard armory without air conditioning. Concert promoter Eddie Wilson, who later dated my sister Michele, discovered the cavernous building while taking a leak behind George's Cactus Club in South Austin. He subsequently co-founded the Armadillo in that building in 1970. It was considered a marijuana oasis, and the cops never once staged a bust there in its ten years of operation. It was believed this was because they did not want to catch their fellow officers, or their own kids, in the roundup.

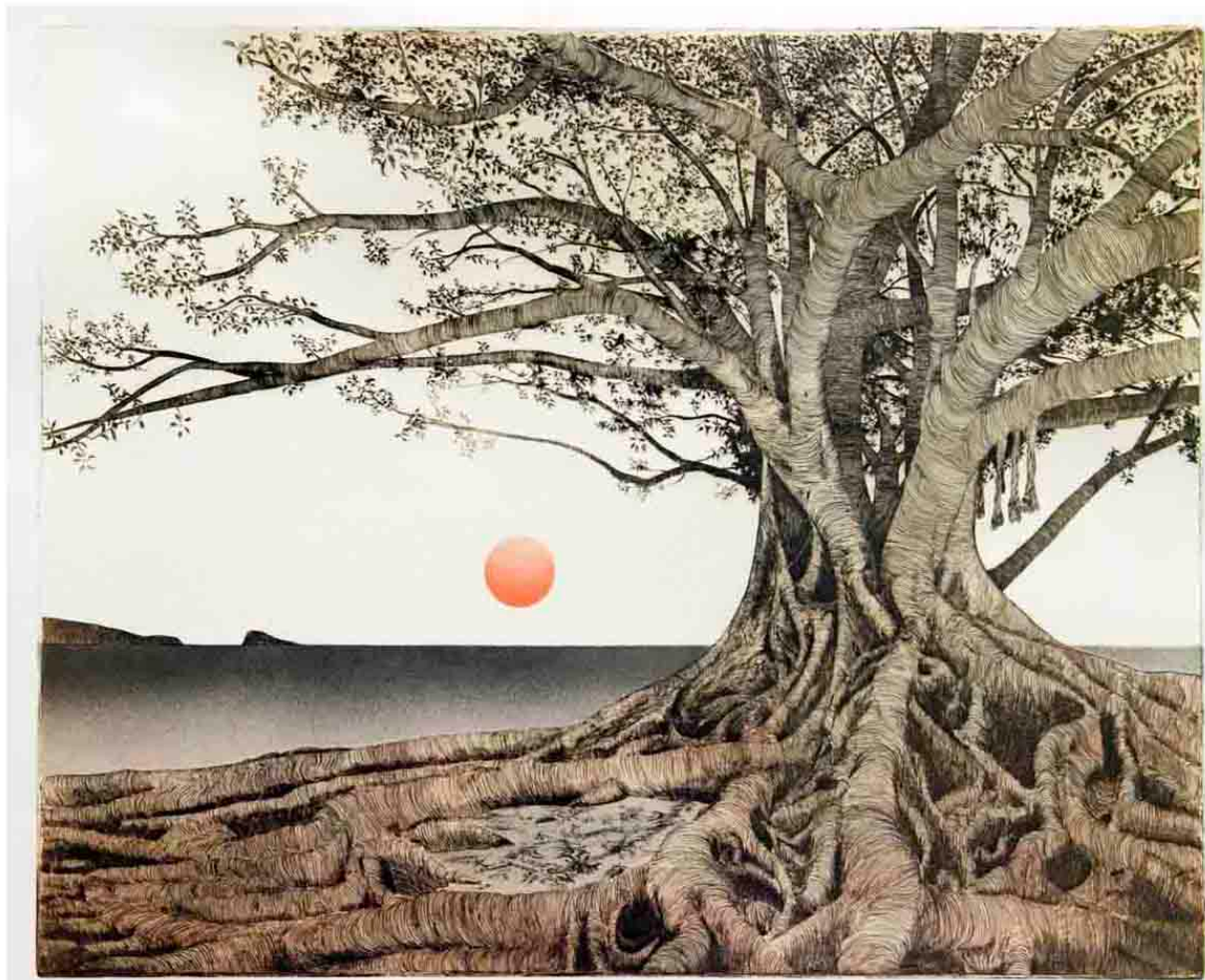
The Armadillo had me, Ken Featherston, Micael Priest, Jim Franklin, Guy Juke, my future brother-in-law Kerry Awn, and others,



Ch.22. *Linear Energy*, etching, 12 x 9 in. 1976

designing their 11" x 17" pen and ink posters. I was the greenest of that bunch, and only did four posters before moving on. Ken Featherston was quite talented in the genre, and also filled in on security detail at the Armadillo. Tragedy struck during a Pointer Sisters concert, for whom Ken had previously done a poster. An expelled patron returned to the Armadillo with a gun and killed the first employee he saw, which happened to be Featherston.

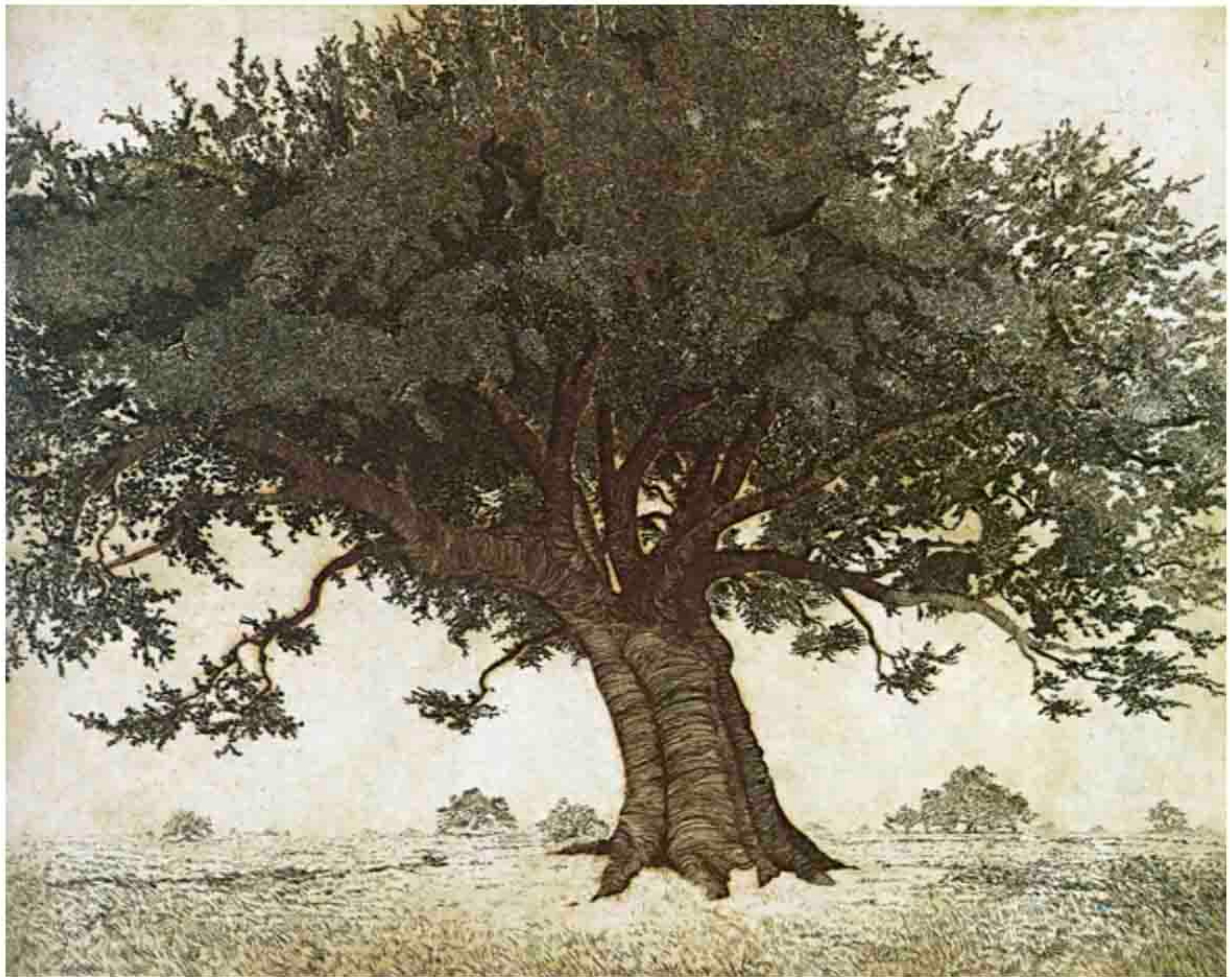
Like other Austin poster artists, I received my commissions through Micael Priest, the high priest of the rock posters. Besides his parents not spelling his first name properly one of them bequeathed him with color blindness. Micael channeled his talent into black and white illustrations, but occasionally he would make strange, thought-provoking attempts at color painting. The artists in his stable got \$75 per poster, and I usually only had one or two days to get it done.



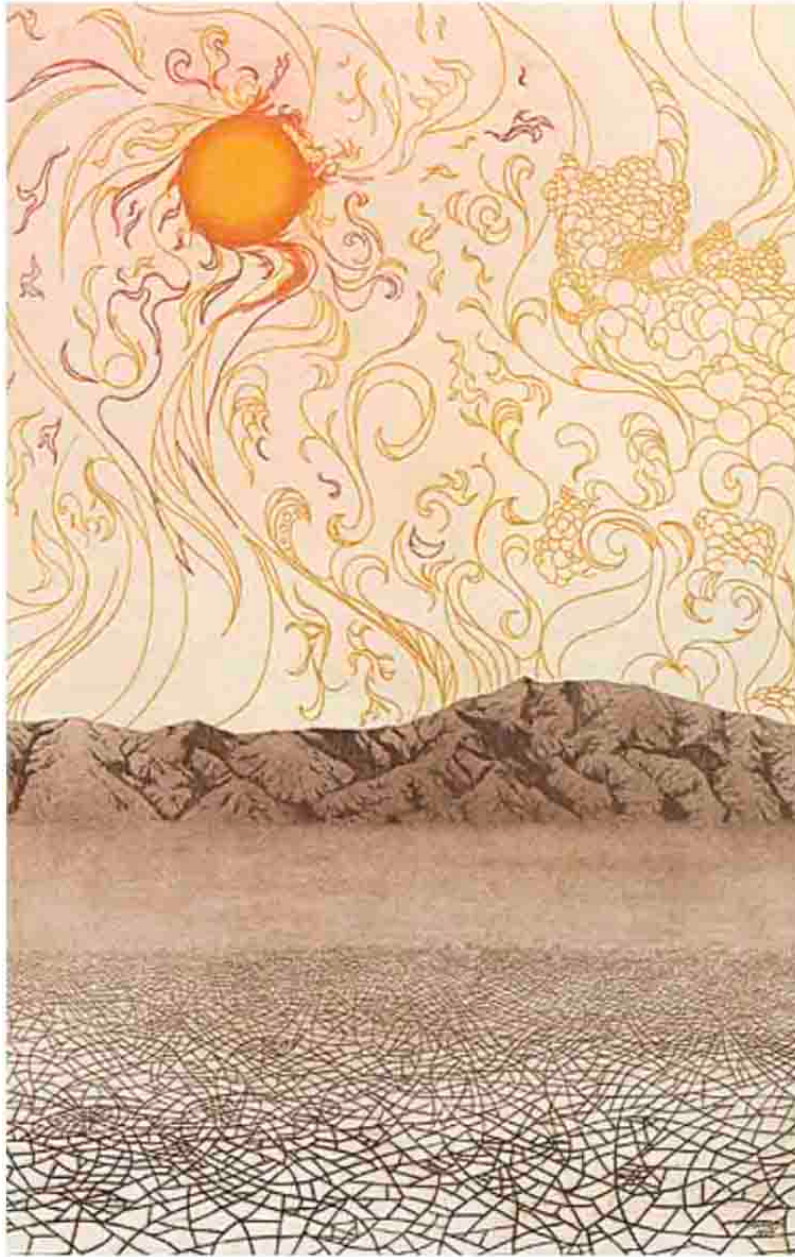
Ch.22. *Tropical Fig Tree*, 18 x 22 in., etching with acrylic airbrush. 1975.

One of the better known artists was Jim Franklin, who grew up in a small town. According to my brother-in-law Kerry Awn, Franklin's parents were so reactionary that they had him committed for shock treatment for having attended a Bob Dylan concert. Franklin lived in a cavernous garret above the Armadillo where he airbrushed large, surrealistic murals of various rock legends and attractions, including Austin's mascot, the nine-banded armadillo.

The humble, armored, 50-million-year-old mammal was honored by Franklin and other hippies because it was peaceful, minded its own business, and often sacrificed himself under the wheels of technological hegemony. Legend has it the armadillo was first homaged a few years before by Gilbert Shelton, who contributed in the early Sixties to *The Texas Ranger*, the University of Texas cartoon and humor magazine. Later Shelton was to achieve unprecedented counterculture cartoon acclaim with the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, Wonder Warthog, and Fat Freddy's Cat. Fat



Ch.22. *Quercus Virginiana*, two-plate etching. 22 x 28 in., 1975



Mojave. Two-plate etching and aquatint, 1975.

Freddy's cat once suffered the humiliation of being beat up by a Texas cockroach of scarcely exaggerated proportions who was sporting six-guns, a ten gallon hat, and cowboy boots.

In 1962, Singer/songwriter Janis Joplin fell in with Shelton and other "Rangeroos" and got honorary mention on the *Texas Ranger* masthead even though her sole contribution to the paper was wild partying and cohabitation with the staff. After some UT fraternity brothers nominated and voted for Joplin in their annual "Ugliest Man on Campus" contest, she left for California, along with Gilbert Shelton.

There was always a source of money no matter

what my level of effort was. Sometimes I felt like the archetypal poor, struggling artist, but I soon realized that my sense of struggle had little effect on how much money I made. Being self-employed in a such a speculative profession taught me to take things as they came, and I got better at not worrying about money as the years rolled by. To make matters even more difficult, I was reluctant to sell out my talent or work for wages. This led me into publishing, where I could cut out some of the middle men.

I began by printing up reproductions of two of my paintings, “The Fool” and “Mt. Bonnell October.” Conrad Levenduski, the president of Best Printing Company, agreed to extend me credit. After a few thousand of each image were printed in January 1975, I drove out to Los Angeles to find a publisher. In Beverly Hills a major art print publisher and distributor, Ira-Roberts, agreed to send them around to get reactions.

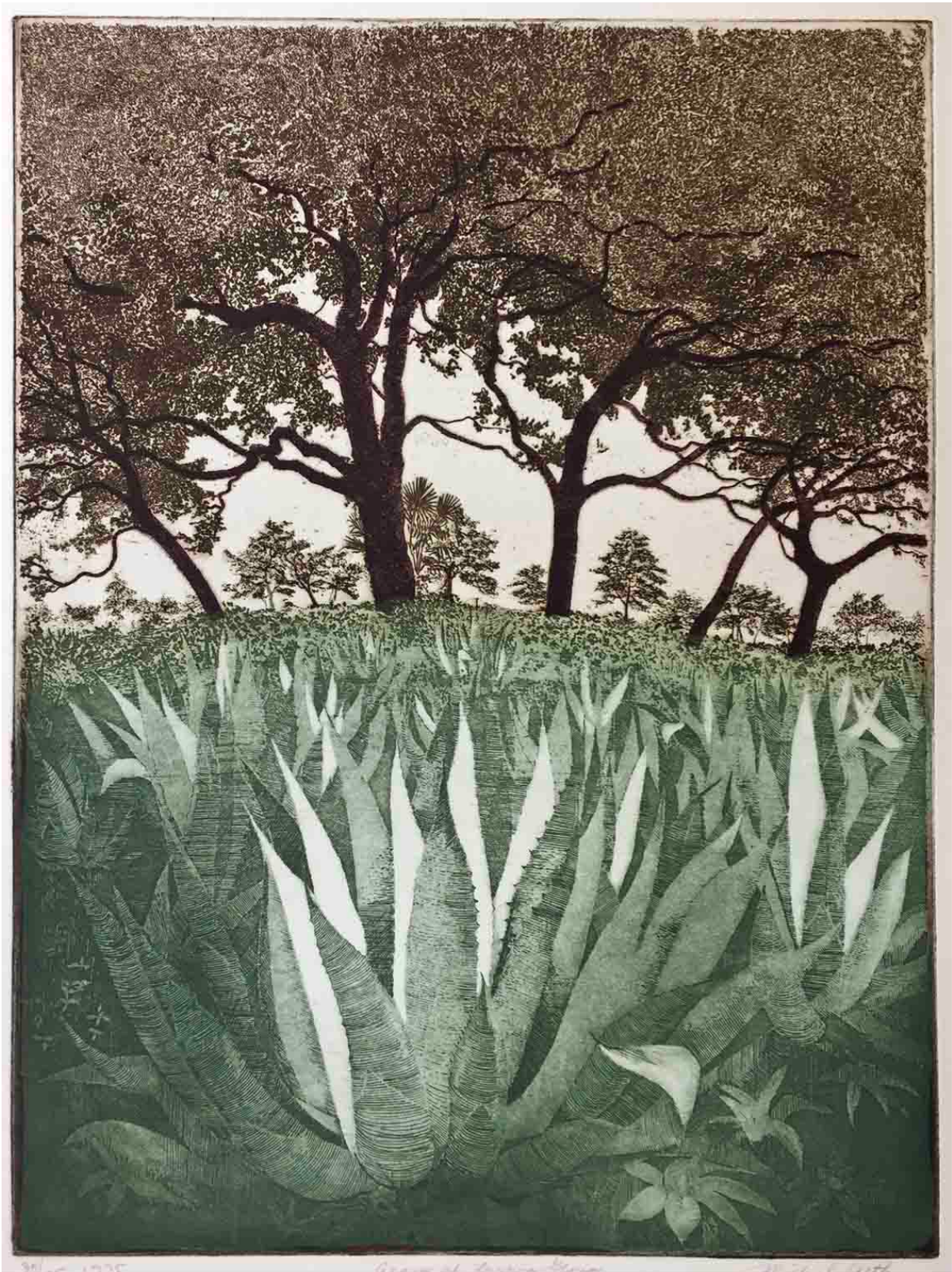
They could not do much with their images, but the trip was a success in another way. While in California I went to the San Diego Zoo and took some snapshots of a magnificent *Ficus macrophylla* (Moreton Bay Fig Tree). This magnificent tree is related to the Bo tree under which the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment. I drove home with the burning idea to do a series of etchings, including one of the tropical fig tree. My battered and nearly broken Mustang got me within a block of the house before dropping one of the front wheels, but I was ready to try something new.

At the corner of 34th street and Lamar there was an old stone building belonging to a western-style painter and printmaker named Chuck Bryan. It was a trip into the 19th century inside his art gallery, printshop, and studio. He called it The Lone Star Gallery and Galahad Press. He wore a long beard, blue jeans, pearl button shirts, and a cowboy hat. With his help, I was able to expand my printmaking skills beyond what I had learned in college. He generously extended me credit to do a series of small etchings and lithographs on his hand presses. I pulled the prints through the artist’s proof stage before he took over and hand-pulled the edition as I sold it. The fine-detailed etchings I was doing then took a lot of time, and there some false starts, but I was inspired and driven to succeed.

With his small offset lithography press, Chuck also printed up a brochure for me to promote the first series of etchings. While doing these small original prints, I got word from California that Ira-Roberts did not want to distribute the two prints I had left them.

22 - “Come up and see my etchings”

I made a trip around Texas in March selling the etchings and some of the reproductions to various galleries. It was satisfying to be doing what I liked, and making a living at it. I resolved to keep it that way. I traveled throughout the U.S., and parts of Canada in 1975, and made many gallery and publishing contacts. Merrill Chase in Chicago, who published Leroy Nieman (whose sports-related serigraphs I



Ch.22. *Agaves at Laguna Gloria*, two-plate etching and aquatint. 27 x 18 in., 1976

detested) wined and dined me, and offered to finance a series of serigraphs for them for a tiny flat fee. I sold them some etchings and turned down the serigraphy deal. My first one-man show was held in Austin, in May, at Astarte Gallery.

I did an etching of the *Ficus macrophylla* and called it “Tropical Fig Tree.” This was followed by “Strangler Figs and Palms,” which was inspired by the Mexican jungle that Mimi and I had visited about two years before. After that, I made an etching called, “Quercus Virginiana,” which was a huge live oak tree in Shipe Park near my house. These etchings were followed by “Agaves at Laguna Gloria,” and “Cypress Trees and Boulders,” for Fidelity Arts in California, which bought the whole edition. Associated American Artists in New York City also bought the whole edition of “Linear Energy.”

I sent some of these original prints to the same Beverly Hills distributor. They liked the prints and wanted to publish them. I did not like the royalty arrangement of five cents per print. I wanted to be the publisher and have them only handle the distribution. They liked the images, and agreed to give me a fifty-cent-per-print profit if I took all the risk and paid for the printing. They gave me an advance order of five hundred each, which was not enough to cover the initial printing costs. I already had a \$1,900 debt with the printer, and they understandably refused to print any more on credit. My cousin, Dan Stephens, came through with a loan for the first \$5,000, but it was still not enough money.

22.1 - Millionaire for a Day

In the summer of 1975, I went down to Austin National Bank, where I had my checking account. I walked into the office of the vice-president, Jim Hawley, and asked him for a \$5,000 loan to pay for reprints of my etchings. He reminded me of the financial facts of life in his East Texas twang: “Do you have some collateral?”

“I was hoping for a personal loan.”

“Any property?”

“I bought a house last year.”

“We don’t want your house,” he said. “See if you can find someone to co-sign for you. Do you have a rich aunt?”

“No. I don’t know anyone rich, or anyone who can put up the security,” I said.

Feeling dejected, I deposited a check for etchings I had sold to a gallery. The next day I got a deposit slip in the mail, but it was not for the meager amount. It was for

**Austin
National
Bank**
Austin, Texas

P.O. Box 908/(512) 397-2200/Austin, Texas 78781

CHECKING ACCOUNT DEPOSIT

Subject to verification and conditions appearing on deposit slip.
Always obtain an official printed receipt for your deposits.

The bank symbol, transaction number, date and amount of your deposit are shown below:

~~85~~ 75 5 5 1 AUG 28 9 9 9,4 9 9.99 D57

THE AUSTIN NATIONAL BANK
AUSTIN, TEXAS

Gentlemen:

The receipt for your deposit number 551 on account number 106-344-5, issued by teller number 57, was verified as \$ 999,499.99. The correct amount of your deposit is \$ 400.00. Please adjust your records accordingly.

Michael Arth
4510 Avenue G
City 78751

Entry by JWH Mach 5
FORM 2

Aug 28 19 75

Very truly yours,
THE AUSTIN NATIONAL BANK
 P.O. Box 908, Austin, Texas 78781
 (512) 397-2200

MAIL COPY

Ch. 22. My bank mistakenly put \$999,499.99 into my checking account. Me returning the money before they caught the mistake made the vice-president of the bank trust me enough to approve an unsecured (previously denied) loan, which helped my art publishing business get off the ground.

\$999,499.99!

My fixer-upper in the coveted, close-in Hyde Park neighborhood, had cost me \$17,500, so in those days, a million was a huge fortune. I went down to the bank and approached a young, attractive teller. I casually asked her to confirm my checking account balance. She rang up the accounting department, while hardly looking at me. She looked up with eye contact that told me she thought she was talking to a lean, not-bad-looking, millionaire about her own age. Batting those baby blues, she handed me back a slip of paper with the staggering sum neatly written on it. Dismissing the fantasy of basking in the sunshine at my hideaway in Rio de Janeiro, I took my deposit slip upstairs to Mr. Hawley's office. Upon seeing me, he asked, "Mike, so what

kind of collateral did you come up with?”

“Well Mr. Hawley,” I said as I handed over the deposit slip, “I have a million dollars in my checking account.”

He was a busy man and in no mood for kidding around, but he stared hard as the color drained from his face. “May I borrow this for a minute?”

He marched over to the accounting department and was gone for a good, long while. After he returned to his desk, the gruff Texan pulled out a loan application. He filled it out, signed it, handed it to me, and drawled, “Mike, if you screw this up, I’m going to get a gun and shoot you.” Later he said of the loan: “I figured if I can trust you with \$1,000,000, I could probably trust you with \$5,000.”

Postscript

When I reviewed this story in 2008, I assumed that the deposit and correction slips pictured above, and initialed by the bank V.P., gave the correct date of the million dollar deposit. Furthermore, in 2008, I also visited Mr. Hawley in Austin while he was in retirement. He remembered the incident very well and he granted me a video interview describing the incident, while also holding up the receipts for the camera.



Ch.22. Me in the Grand Tetons. August 28, 1975

However, when writing this autobiography, I checked my journal and inexplicably discovered that on the same day I was returning the million dollars, I was also on a well-documented hiking excursion, in the Grand Tetons in Wyoming, with my cousin Dan Stephens. It was hard to dispute the evidence that I was in two places at once, separated by over 1,400 miles! I experienced a perplexing couple of days reviewing photos, ledgers and journals, and racking my brain over events that took place a half-century earlier. I even called my cousin to confirm the dates of our trip and that we had been at his home in Minneapolis both before and after the trip.

I finally remembered there were *two* deposits of \$999,499.99, but I had thought

that the second time it happened was later and it was hardly worthy of note, so I did not keep the deposit slips. Actually, it was the other way around. The first time it happened, I apparently lost track of the deposit slip. This was the event described in my story. The second time it happened, I apparently put the deposit slips in a photo album so I would not lose them. I had previously assumed that I made the \$400 deposit in person, which further convinced me that on August 28, 1975 I had been in Austin. Then I read in my journal that I made some art sales in Minneapolis, and I must have mailed checks and a deposit slip to my bank just before we drove to Wyoming. As much as I wanted to believe in a mix-up in parallel universes, a time-travel paradox, or at least an unsolvable mystery, I was forced to finally uncover a conventional explanation to a mystery on top of an unconventional occurrence.

My memory, now back on track, asserts that prior to August 28, 1975, I deposited the loan, and within a month the first reproductions were being shipped all over the world. I nearly passed out from glee when I got back a second order for 10,000 "Tropical Fig Trees" and 10,000 "Quercus Virginianas." I made other etchings, and the distributor accepted reproductions of nearly everything I did. From this point on, the bank and my printer would coordinate the financing to keep my art publishing business on track even after I took off traveling.

Eventually more than 200,000 prints were sold. I learned a lot about production, merchandising, and sales from this experience. The high-quality prints cost me twenty-five cents to print and ship. I got 75 cents per image, giving me a fifty cent profit. My distributor sold them for three dollars to other publishers and retailers for a \$2.25 profit. At the end of the line, customers paid around a hundred dollars for a framed reproduction, mostly through Transart Industries out of Georgia.

Many of my prints went to Europe, including England. It was gratifying for my father to tell me that, in London, he walked into the art department of Harrad's, and saw several of my prints framed up on their walls. "I wanted to tell anyone who would listen," he said, "That's my son's artwork up there!"

"Everything happened this year career wise," I wrote. "It was the culmination of all those years of portraits, painting, life drawing, printmaking, illustrating, and doing all those intricate drawings of maps. The possibilities have opened up and in one year I've gone from totally lost to firmly on course."

During those many lonely hours driving from city to city, I reviewed my life, my

beliefs and ambitions. My ultimate ambition was “to become an ephemeral spirit” that feels substantial to itself, “with an endless memory, capable of limitless fantasy.” This was the result of thinking as a child that heaven was every good person’s birthright. But since high school, I was hoping that future technology might ensure that we could live as long as we want to live in good health.

My prints began turning up in remote places. My aunt Mona said she had seen them hanging in her hotel in Durban, South Africa, for example. It felt good, and it built up my confidence, but I was ambivalent about drawing attention to myself. I often did not sign my paintings, or signed them on the back. I thought my name scrawled across the bottom was superfluous and distracting. It bothered me that people often judged a work of art for who did it rather than how good it was. Many people were intimidated into allowing the authority method of epistemology to take over. I noticed that even mediocre work signed by Cezanne or Picasso would be prized and praised.

Pablo Picasso, a strutting darling of the media, was the best example of this. Picasso was at his derivative best when he was copying the impressionists, and at his worst when he locked himself into a million variations of one idea in cubism, which he developed with the quiet, withdrawn Georges Braque. Picasso was given credit for being an innovator, when, instead, he spent a lifetime clinging to various cartoon versions of cubism. I discussed this with an art dealer in Ft. Worth, who told me he could show me examples of Picasso that were masterful and stood on their own.

I did not believe him, and assumed he would show me more stale, hackneyed cubism. The dealer led me, along with his son, into his master bedroom. There, above his bed, were four etchings, seemingly related to the Vollard Suite, signed by Picasso. The works depicted lusty satyrs frolicking with robust young maidens.

I was stunned. They were inspiring pieces, brimming with frivolity and erotic sensuality. The spare, but voluptuously suggestive lines were a marriage of Rubens and Hans Bellmer. I could not believe such gems were hidden away in a private collection and they had not been published and celebrated. Finally, I had to admit to the dealer that I was tremendously impressed, and that he possessed Picasso’s greatest works. He shook his head and chuckled, but I insisted that I was serious.

“I know, I know you’re serious—I agree with you. If Picasso had done these they *would* be his best work,” he said, carefully weighing his words, “but it wasn’t Picasso.”

He savored my confusion before proudly waving his hand toward his son and saying, "My son did these etchings in his college printmaking class."