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Pressing Business

by James A. Martin

For a majority of us, a PostScript printer is an Apple Laserwriter or a Linotronic 300; for Julie Holcomb, it's a 10-year-old, 2,300-pound Heidelberg wind-mill letterpress.

Holcomb, who owns and operates a small printshop in San Francisco, is attracting attention in the graphic design and printing communities. She prints computer-generated type and images with a letterpress—a machine that dates back to the 15th century. “Some say what I do is a contradiction,” says Holcomb. “I see it as a way for computers to join the long tradition of letterpress printing, rather than being in direct opposition to that tradition.”

Holcomb and her customers benefit from this marriage between the best of two seemingly opposed worlds: the design flexibility and speed of computer technology coupled with the traditional, fine arts qualities that letterpressing affords. The result, she says, is computer-generated type that literally bites into the printed page, providing strong contrasts and three-dimensional textures not possible with computer printers.

One customer of Julie Holcomb Printers is The Font Bureau, a digital font foundry cofounded by designer Roger Black and type expert David Berlow. Holcomb, who does not use a computer, recently letterpress printed the Font Bureau's promotional brochure. The large, 3-D block type adorning the brochure's cover (see next page) was created by the Font Bureau on a Macintosh with Fontographer, then converted into Adobe Illus-

trator 88 files, where the type was rotated and scaled. The cover was printed on a Linotronic 300 imagesetter, and the printed page was mailed to Holcomb.

Holcomb then sent the Linotronic page out to have a photo negative made. When the negative was completed, she placed it over an unexposed photopolymer plate. The plate and negative were placed into a Polimero A2 platemaking machine, where a beam of ultraviolet light shone through the negative, exposing and hardening the plate. Finally, all of the unexposed areas of the plate were washed away with plain water, leaving a raised plate for printing.

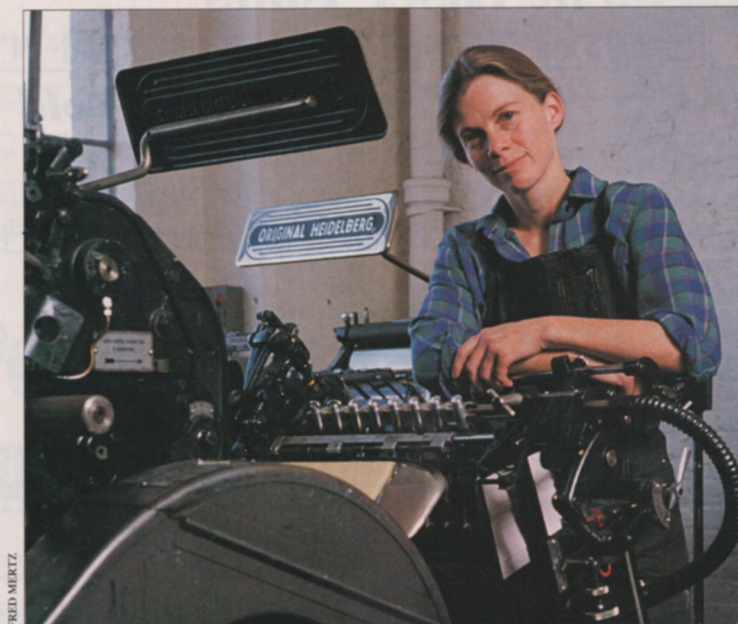
Letterpress machines can handle computer-generated color graphics as well as type. Flip Phillips, a technical director at the motion picture-computer animation studio Pixar, illus-

**Julie Holcomb
prints something
new on
something old**

trated his own wedding invitation with a three-color image of a toy bride and groom.

The twosome began as animated characters in Pixar's Oscar-winning, computer-designed short film, *Tin Toy*. Phillips color separated the image on Pixar's proprietary in-house imaging system and used Illustrator 88 to add type and compose the page. The invitation was printed on a Linotronic 100 and a negative was made from the printed invitation; from that negative, Holcomb made her photopolymer plate. The result was a nuptial announcement that united traditional formality with a whimsical, computer-generated graphic (see next page).

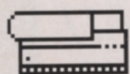
For centuries the dominant printing method, letterpress is today a disappearing art form. By 1990, letterpress printing will comprise only 5 percent



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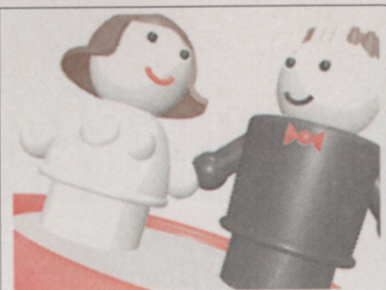
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■ Using a three-color image
originally created on a computer, Julie Holcomb
produced this wedding invitation (top) on her
letterpress. Letterpress printing gave the Font
Bureau's computer-generated brochure (bottom)
a three-dimensional look and feel.

of all printing jobs, according to Inter-
national Paper (Memphis, Tennes-
see), publishers of the *Pocket Pal*, a
graphic arts production handbook. Yet
it still enjoys staunch supporters.
Rather than believing that computer
typesetting will eliminate letterpress
printing, Holcomb feels the two media
can coexist to equal advantage.

"Letterpress printing simply makes
a beautiful piece of paper," Holcomb
says. "And after all, the ultimate goal in
printing, whether the image comes
from a computer or not, is the beauti-
ful piece of paper you end up with." □