

Everett Ruess - A Vagabond for Beauty

Introduction

Everett Ruess was young artist for whom nature was the greatest inspiration in his art. He traversed much of the California coastline, from Los Angeles to San Francisco, and a great part of southern Utah and the entire Four Corners area of the southwest. In 1934, at the age of twenty, while traveling near Escalante, Utah, Everett mysteriously disappeared. His letters to friends and journals leave a well-documented history of his philosophy, his views of art and the wilderness, along with his distaste for civilization and urbanity. John Nichols states in the introduction to *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty*, "his determination to plod alone through the southwestern wilderness was so fierce and arrogant that at times he seemed to be utterly consumed ... The documentation of his pursuit of enlightenment, as contained in his letters and journals, is the valuable gift of Everett."(p.ix)

Everett's Beginning

Ruess was born in Oakland, California in 1914 to Stella and Christopher Ruess. He had one brother, Waldo, four years his senior. As a family, they lived in different parts of California, finally settling in Los Angeles. His mother was an artist and arts educator, as well as a writer who subscribed to the philosophy of Isadora Duncan, the free-spirited dancer of the early 1900s. Stella Ruess was a romantic, devoted to the arts and seemed to have the greatest influence on Everett's attitudes and lifestyle. She encouraged him in his quest for art, beauty, and the pursuit of a meaningful life. Everett's father, Christopher, helped Everett to develop philosophically and intellectually. His professional career as probation officer, minister, and social worker was guided by his interest and devotion to education and philosophy. Waldo, his brother, had secured a career in government, and later, as a businessman. He offered stability and support to Everett, both emotionally and financially. The family all supported Everett in his odyssey through the wilderness because they believed he would emerge a more capable, refined visual artist, able to definitively interpret his surroundings and experiences. As a matter of fact, Everett's aptitude and forte turned out to be his writing, even though his block prints were executed with finesse. The following poem seems to describe best his deeply felt need to continue his sojourn and follow it to its end.

Pledge to the Wind

*Onward from vast uncharted spaces,
Forward through timeless voids,
Into all of us surges and races
The measureless might of the wind.*

*Strongly sweeping from open plains,
Keen and pure from mountain heights,
Freshly blowing after rains,
It welds itself into our souls.*

*In the steep silence of thin blue air,
High on a lonely cliff-ledge,
Where the air has a clear, clean rarity,
I give to the wind... my pledge:*

*"By the strength of my arm, by the sight of my eye,
By the skill of my fingers, I swear,
As long as life dwells in me, never will I
Follow any way but the sweeping way of the wind*

*I will feel the wind's buoyancy until I die;
I will work with the wind's exhilaration;
I will search for its purity; and never will I
Follow any way but the sweeping way of the wind*

*Here in the utter stillness,
High on a lonely cliff-ledge,
Where the air is trembling with lightning,
I have given the wind my pledge."*

- Poem by Everett Ruess (p.10)

The Odyssey Begins

In 1930, at the age of sixteen, Everett set out on his first solitary trip along the Pacific Coast. He hitchhiked from Los Angeles as far north as Carmel, introduced himself to the photographer, Edward Weston, and painted, wrote and worked out some block prints. He slept by the sea, met and socialized with various campers and hikers, sold pieces of his art and described his experience in great detail.

He returned to Los Angeles and finished high school then prepared for a subsequent journey to Monument Valley, Utah. He hitchhiked and walked and arrived on the Navajo Nation with no money or food, only the pack on his back with his personal belongings and art supplies. He traveled throughout the Four Corners area, eventually acquiring a pack burro and a pet dog. He survived by working odd jobs, selling a little artwork, and bartering (such as a shotgun for a donkey). He also received packages regularly from his family, which included money, clothing, food and other niceties such as puppy biscuits for his dog. He continued to write letters, journal his experiences, and work at improving his visual art.

He returned to Los Angeles for the winter, and then set out again the following March 1932 to the Salt River Valley. He continued on through Arizona until he reached Ganado, traveling onto Chinle, Mesa Verde, and the Grand Canyon, boldly meeting artists, archaeologists, and continuing his warm and friendly connections to the Navajo people. He lived with them for several days, and on subsequent trips was to spend more and more of his time with them. He felt a kinship to the Navajo people, their ways of life and their culture, as they lived very close to the earth, respectful of its beauty and resources.

In September 1932 Everett returned to Los Angeles to enroll at the University of California at Los Angeles, presumably at the suggestion of his father. He was not comfortable, nor very successful in college, and after one semester, he began to make plans to continue his journeys, this time to see the Sierras and San Francisco. During the Christmas vacation, he headed up the coast to return to Carmel. He rekindled his friendship with the Weston family, sold some Christmas art prints, and then returned to Los Angeles until June 1933.

In June, he began his California trek, visiting the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Sequoia and Yosemite National Parks, all the while "passing time pleasantly, reading copiously, studying personalities, working out block prints, and dabbling with the typewriter" (p. 97). In addition, Everett pursued his love of music, attending yet more concerts and taking time for evenings of musical enjoyment and appreciation.



Everett's love of the wilderness, the direct contact with nature and the indescribably beauty he encountered seemed sometimes to drive him on further and deeper into remote areas, untouched by man. "Oh, I have lived intensely, drinking deep!" and "I have been filled for three days with a dreamy intoxication from the serene beauty and perfect solitude."(p. 104-105)

When he arrived in San Francisco, he spent a great deal of time with the artists in the close-knit community, attending operas, concerts, parties, movies, art galleries and continuing to work at his art. His reading and writing continued to be one of the most important aspects of his life. The artist, Maynard Dixon and his wife, Dorthea Lange, the photographer, were the two important influences on Everett during this time, as they mentored him and took great interest in his artistic progress.

In addition to the urban artist's life Everett had in San Francisco, he continued to venture out into the surrounding mountains, lakes, and coastal wilderness areas to maintain his contact with that which he was most connected.

The Final Venture

Everett returned to Los Angeles and made plans to return to Monument Valley. His brother, Waldo offered to drive him to Kayenta, Arizona. Everett wrote to him, "I look forward to the time when we will be going places, together on the road. You are surely a good brother to me (p. 138)." In April 1934 Waldo dropped Everett off at Kayenta. It was the last time he would see Everett.

Everett continued to spend a great deal of time with the Navajo and Hopi people, whom he loved and respected immensely. He continued to work at his art, work odd jobs, and communicate his thoughts, experiences and feelings to his family and friends through his letters. He continued to experience life at the edge, taking risks as he traveled and hiked alone, and he conveyed that he was, "...roaring drunk with the lust of life and adventure and unbearable beauty."

He wrote a friend that "I narrowly escaped being gored to death by a wild bull," and, "on a nearly vertical cliff ... escaped unscathed ... One way and another, I have been flirting pretty heavily with Death, the old clown" (p. 190).

The last known letter to be received from Everett was to Waldo on November 11, 1934, expressing how he preferred the wilderness to the city life, his love for the Navajo people and his happiness at living the life of vagabond, in communion with nature, having experienced life's "exhilarating beauty."

Epilogue

The last persons to see Everett were two shearherders, Clayton Porter and Addin Lay on November 21, 1934. Everett, after camping with the two men for two nights set out for the Hole-in-the-Rock.

When in February 1935 his parents had not heard from him for over three months, they began the long and unsuccessful search for him. His burros were found on the trail to Davis Gulch, as well as Everett's tracks, empty milk cans, candy wrappers and bedroll marks in the dirt. However, none of his belongings were found.

Where Did Everett's Journey End?

It was conjectured that Everett had fallen from a high cliff into a canyon where searchers were unable to find him. But where were his belongings?

Perhaps rustlers killed him, when he inadvertently stumbled upon them stealing cattle. There were two men convicted of rustling cattle, one of which boasted on several drunken occasions of having shot the "artist kid." In 1982 W. L. Rusho, author of *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty* interviewed this thief, but found him failing in

his memory due to his age. He denied any knowledge of the incident and of any cattle-rustling going on during the 1930s.

Did Everett decide to join a Navajo family and leave behind his identity and life as an Anglo? This is another of the conjectures of how Everett may have disappeared. After several inquiries that were conducted, it was believed that this was not a plausible explanation, as no white man could have entered and stayed on the reservation without knowledge of the Navajo people.

In September 1941 Jack Crank, an outlaw Navajo was suspect in Everett's death. However, he was never tried or convicted of this crime, since there was never enough evidence to bring him to trial.

Perhaps Everett planned and "orchestrated" his disappearance to make a new life for himself: unattached to anyone or any lifestyle. But why would he leave the family and few close friends and the wilderness life he loved so much. Was he feeling pressure from his family and unable to meet their expectations artistically? Could it be he wished to "burn out completely to ash" in the Buddhist tradition, having lived in an enlightened state of mind and knowing the "depths of life already ... [preferring] anything to an anticlimax." (p. 211)

The Legacy of Everett Ruess

Everett was a romantic, one who could be considered "too good for this mundane world." His spirit of adventure, his lust and quest for beauty in all forms and his desire for knowledge of the world - nature, art, literature-are an inspiration to us all as we seek to navigate the dot.com world of today, so far removed from nature. He experienced life in its most basic form, close to the earth, living by his wits and the good relations he had with others, relishing the gifts of nature that have been developed and depleted by our "progressive" world. His sensitivity to the landscape and the living earth can incite within us all an appreciation we might never experience, but for peering through the lyrical lens of Everett's eyes and heart as he recorded his experiences and feelings in written and artistic form.

Bibliography

Everett Ruess: A Vagabond For Beauty

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Gibbs-Smith Publisher, Peregrine Smith Books, Salt Lake City, Utah,

Copyright 1983

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Ruess, Everett, Introduction and editing by; W.L Rusho

Gibbs-Smith Publisher, Peregrine Smith Books, Salt Lake City, Utah,

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Classroom Activities:

ART:

Study the prints of Everett Ruess. Point out how he uses positive and negative design to create his prints. Ask the students to come up with their own designs on paper, then try one of these printmaking techniques.

Printmaking- there are many different techniques for basic printmaking - below are a few of the easiest forms.

1) Printmaking with Vegetables-

Materials: Potato, apple, etc., kitchen knife, paper towel, Styrofoam tray, construction paper, paint.

Instructions: Use a variety of vegetable shapes to make prints. You can use a bell paper that is cut in half to make cool shapes, shamrocks or hearts.

With a potato, cut in half or lengthwise for larger patterns. Transfer a design to the potato. Cut out the potato around the pattern, so that you have a raised design. Fold a paper towel in quarters and lay it in the Styrofoam tray. Pour paint in the center, making it into a stamp pad. Dip the cut side into the paint, dab it around the paper towel to wipe off excess paint, then stamp your construction paper. Make cards or prints that can be mounted on mat board.

2) Printmaking with Cardboard-

Materials: cardboard, string, scissors, glue, paper towel, Styrofoam tray, construction paper, paint or ink, roller/brayer.

Instructions: Cut cardboard into different shapes. Glue the pieces of the design onto another piece of cardboard. You can also glue string or noodles on a piece of cardboard to create your design. This will give you a printing plate with a raised design. Cover the design with paint or ink, using a paint stamp pad (described above) or rolling on with a brayer. Print away!

3) Linoleum and Woodcuts Prints- These printing techniques are a bit more advanced and are best done with older students who can handle a sharp carving tool.

Materials: See materials list on the following page. Pre-cut wood blocks

or linoleum, roller/brayer, ink, paper, transfer paper, black markers, carving tools.

Instructions: Start with a small block of soft wood (pine) or linoleum that is glued to a board (6"x 6"). Have the students transfer their designs with transfer paper onto the block. Using a black marker, have them shade in all the design that they would like to appear on their print. Instruct them to remove, by carving, all the negative areas (background white areas but not the blacken design itself). Roll ink onto the block with a roller or brayer. Lay a sheet of paper on top on the print. With a clean roller roll the paper that is in contact with the woodblock. Peel off the paper carefully and place it on a rack to dry. Repeat the printing process. Make sure to sign and number your prints (Signature 1/25)!

4) Journaling Making

Materials: stacks of precut lined paper and covers front and back. Take paper to a copy store they can cut and drill them to your specified size. Magazines gift wrap for collages, scissors, glue, paints, markers, stamps, multi color embroidery floss.

Instructions: Precut and drill all the parts (copy store as mentioned above) of a journal for each student. Have, the students assemble and decorate the covers in the most creative way that they can imagine. Magazines cut outs and gift wrap shapes make great collages. Stamps also make great boarders. After they have decorated their cover teach the students a basic sewing technique (loop stitch or flat edge stitch) and have them assemble the journals by sewing through the drilled areas. Use the journals for creative writing mentioned below.

CREATIVE WRITING:

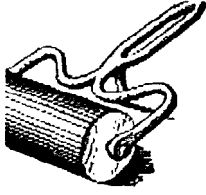
1) Creative Writing - What Might Have Happened to Everett? (4th grade and above). Read the final 4 chapters of *A Vagabond for Beauty* pp 182 - end. Discuss the life of Everett Ruess and his mysterious disappearance into the Southern Utah wilderness. Tell them the possible explanations for his disappearance. Ask them to write a creative short story that comes up with a new explanation for his disappearance. *My theory of what happened to Everett is...*

2) Journal Writing (fictitious) - Have the students make their own journals as explained above. Have them make up a character and story about a fictitious person's life. Have them write a daily journal entry pretending to be that person.

3) Journal Writing (autobiographical) - Journals are a simple and effective tool for self-discovery; who we are; what we value; what our goals are etc. Some ideas for journal entries are: "Today I am grateful for..."; "Right now I am feeling..."; "I am most like..."; "If I could travel to one place it would be..."; "My high and low for today are...", etc. Teachers keep in mind that there are privacy issues with journals, especially with older students. Let the student invite you to read parts of their journals if they are willing.

4) Newspaper reporting - Pretend you are a newspaper writer or private detective from Everett's hometown. Research the letters that he sent to his family and write a small newspaper article or police report about what happened to Everett, the poet, adventurer, artist and lover of nature.

5) Wilderness Poetry & Haikus - Spend some time in nature and then write a short poem or haiku about one thing that strikes you most about nature. For example; the wind, the smell of nature, the sun, the textures of sand, the colors of the season, etc. Use metaphors to convey your feelings.



You don't need a lot of expensive, hard-to-locate materials in order to teach printmaking. In fact, most of the lessons listed in Kinder Art, make use of recycled materials that can be found in any home. If you are working in a classroom setting, simply make up a list of goodies that students can collect and bring in from home.

Basic Printmaking Supplies List:

- **Old shirts or garbage bags** with arm holes cut out of them to help keep clothing clean.
- **Newspapers or plastic grocery bags** will keep work surfaces clean.
- **Ink.** This is the substance that will be added to the printing plate. Water-based block printing ink can be purchased from any art supply or educational supply store. It can be used for most of the printmaking activities listed in KinderArt. If you don't have access to printing ink, you can substitute paint that is thick and sticky. If you have poster paint that is too thin, add some regular household flour or even white glue to thicken the paint.
- **Old cookie trays** or pieces of plexiglass. You will need several of these later on to use as ink trays.
- **Soft rubber brayers.** These are special printing rollers but you can also use small painting rollers instead.
- **Printing surfaces.** Construction paper, manilla paper, cartridge paper, newsprint, fabric etc.
- **Sponges.** Collect a variety of sizes, shapes and thickness'.
- **Rags.** Any old fabric will do.
- **Books** and pictures with examples of prints.
- **Towels.**
- **A source of water.** This could be a sink or a bucket of water that is brought into the classroom as needed.
- **Paintbrushes.**

Printing Using a Brayer (roller):

Some of the lessons in KinderArt refer to **printing with a brayer**. The directions for doing so are as follows:

1. Place a small amount of ink on the plexiglass, cookie tray or glass sheet.

2. Roll both ways to allow the roller to evenly pick up the ink. Roll until the ink comes up in little "points".
3. Roll away from yourself slowly - to pick up ink.
4. Roll toward yourself quickly - to remove excess ink.
5. Once the roller is "inked", roll onto the printing plate. You probably have to go through this process several times before enough ink is placed on the plate.
6. Once the printing plate or block is "inked", place paper on top and using either your hand or a wooden spoon, rub lightly over the surface of the paper.
7. Remove paper and repeat process for more prints.