

Creative Spark

Throughout her career, printmaker Allison Bianco '01 has blended curiosity, whimsy and cataclysmic events in her acclaimed work.

BY AMY LOVETT





Stand to Sea 2023
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Cade Tompkins Projects

**Catch You on
 the Flip Side 2025**
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Cade Tompkins Projects



T

his past November, **Allison Uttley Bianco '01** had a full-circle moment.

The award-winning visual artist spent a day on Mount Holyoke College's campus sharing her latest work and tips on printmaking with students in the Printmaking I and Advanced Studio courses.

"The art department felt so familiar," says Bianco, who majored in studio art and Spanish. "The students and faculty were super welcoming. ... They were really engaged. I felt very comfortable and at home."

The experience also sparked a memory from Bianco's senior year, when Kiki Smith spent a week as artist-in-residence at the Mount Holyoke Printmaking Workshop. Smith brought along her master printer, the late Carol Weaver, a co-owner of Harlan & Weaver, a New York City workshop and publisher that specializes in etching and intaglio. Bianco remembers looking on in wonder as Smith, who was working with the College's taxidermy collection, sketched an intricate dead bird at the bottom of a zinc plate.

Bianco says she remembers thinking, "Oh my gosh, what's happening?" It was another world. This is an artist. This is also someone who's really made it. They've got their master printer traveling with them. ... We were observing Kiki in her element."

The Printmaking Workshop was led for nearly 30 years by studio art professor Nancy Campbell, who brought in guest artists such as painters

Bianco working
 on a press
 in her home
 studio in Rhode
 Island.



Bianco at MacDowell during a two-week artist residency in September 2025.

Elaine de Kooning and Faith Ringgold to share their craft with students. Bianco is still in touch with Campbell, whom she sees at art fairs in New York City.

“She made me fall in love with screen printing,” Bianco says of her former professor. “That and intaglio are the core of what I still do today, 25 years later.”

Growing up, Bianco recalls spending a lot of time working at a small art table that her parents gave her and declaring in elementary school her plan to be an art teacher. She has a photograph of herself at age 3, “getting watercolors for Christmas and being so excited.” Family photographs would become a foundation of Bianco’s work early in her professional career.

A native of Smithfield, Rhode Island, she says she chose to attend Mount Holyoke because she wanted a wide-ranging education that didn’t require her to specialize right away. The College’s generous financial aid

was another important factor in her decision.

She found the College to be a supportive environment with professors who got to know her quickly. “In my first year, my painting professor said, ‘You’re an art major right?’” Bianco says. “I hadn’t made that decision yet. ... I felt really supported right off the bat.”

Bianco returned home after graduation and reconnected with a Smithfield friend named Todd, who was pursuing a Ph.D. in Hawaii. They began dating, and she found a three-year Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa in Honolulu. Shortly before she moved to Oahu, however, her father died.

Poring over her family’s photographs at the time, Bianco began to think about what is seen versus unseen. Photographs usually focus on “happy moments,” she says, especially back in the “analog” days of limited film

exposures. With her father’s death, she says she saw the images in a new light, “looking for clues of the things that weren’t happy or celebratory in those photos. I started using printmaking as a way to talk about that with the material, making things cloudy, not wiping the ink off very well, making it look more ominous [contrasted] with the celebratory nature of the bright, screen printed colors or the silhouettes [of figures].”

The blend of the ominous and the celebratory — of cataclysmic events and whimsical, cartoon-like characters, of dark colors and bright — soon became a throughline in Bianco’s artistic work.

“The characters are like me,” she says. “I had no control over what was happening. [The characters] just have to be affected by the weather or the psychology of the moment. ... It’s carried me through many years of inquiry.”

Bianco graduated with an M.F.A. in printmaking from the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa in 2010. She and Todd married and, apart from stints in Hawaii and Washington, D.C., they made Rhode Island their home. Over time, she broadened her subject matter to include what she calls “the collective Rhode Island family photographs,” delving into the state’s shifting coastlines and weather events. Thanks to her gallerist, Cade Tompkins, her work now appears in collections including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Honolulu Academy of Arts; University of San Diego; Philadelphia Museum of Art; and The New York Public Library. For her first public art commission, “Curious Tide,” completed in 2022 for PS 958 in Brooklyn, Bianco screen printed a repeating pattern onto paper panels. She then added different images and elements to the panels so they would form a cohesive mural, which was translated onto porcelain tile in its final iteration.

Her work caught the attention of **Mary Steele ’86**, a producer with the arts and culture team for what was then Rhode Island PBS. Steele says the work was “very different than anything I had seen,” and she was “intrigued by [Bianco’s] exploration of memory ... and shifting perceptions.”

The two learned of their Mount Holyoke connection while filming an episode of

“ART Inc.” that focused on Bianco’s artistic process. “It was really a joy to find out she’s a Mount Holyoke alum,” says Steele, adding that Bianco not only invited her to art openings but also to events at the college. Bianco also sent Steele photographs of her visit to campus.

Their shared liberal arts background, Steele says, provides them with “a curiosity” and a “certain freedom of thinking that pushes boundaries and doesn’t accept ... limitations or preconceptions.”

Bianco is “a spark of a human being,” Steele adds. “It’s amazing when you go to one of her openings — the people who surround her and the warmth. She is beloved in her arts community.”

During the episode of “ART Inc.,” entitled “Allison Bianco: Imagining the Storm,” which aired in 2024, Bianco discusses her current area of inquiry, The Great New England Hurricane of 1938, which swept from Long Island in New York up to Canada, leaving a swath of devastation. To mark the hurricane’s 90th anniversary in 2028, she is preparing a traveling solo exhibition informed and inspired by archival images and photographs of the storm’s aftermath.

Tracing its track, she has already made five prints from images collected in Providence, Rhode Island, and another print from photographs at MacDowell in Peterborough, New Hampshire, where she had a two-week residency in September. She is also planning to explore archives in Connecticut, Long Island, Vermont and Massachusetts.

While she was at Mount Holyoke, she visited the Archives and Special Collections to look through the scrapbooks of alums who were students in 1938. “We found a couple of cool photos of the aftermath on campus, like some of the trees that were down,” she says. “Full circle.”

Bianco made another discovery during her visit: the Dining Commons. Having attended at a time when students ate meals in their dorms, she says the current model offers “so many great options.” Particularly exciting, she adds, is that students can “have ice cream at any meal. ... I put ice cream in my coffee every day. So I had it when I was there.” 

 Learn more about Bianco’s work and find a link to the “ART Inc.” episode at allisonbianco.com.