

Maryanne Ellison
Simmons in front
of a work of art by
Valerie Hammond



THE POWER OF ALCHEMY

With her giant etching press and a healthy dose of alchemy, Master Printer Maryanne Ellison Simmons works with artists to bring new beauty to life.

By Alexa Beattie / Photography by Carmen Troesser

It all starts with sunshine. It begins with raw material brought from a faraway place, cooked to a pulp in a vat, strained and laid out on boards to dry. The main ingredient of this particular paper may travel all the way from Thailand but it reaches its fullest potential in a sunny suburban garden somewhere in North County.

“Yes, the investment begins here,” says Maryanne Ellison Simmons, owner of St. Louis’ Wildwood Press. She’s smoothing her palm to the top sheet of a 6- by 4-foot stack. The sheets – once the interior bark of a mulberry tree – are raggedy at their edges, beautifully “stitched” in imperfection; as soft and pliable as summer-weight cotton.

Wildwood, in operation since 1996, is a collaborative press. This means that Simmons, a Master Printer with the right tools (a behemoth 5- by 10-foot etching press chief among them), teams with artists to “reimagine” their work. In those 27 years, she and 21 co-minded, bold *Indeterminists* have (in the name of art and the acceptance of printing’s *rascally* nature) willingly submitted to the edgy unknown.

“You never know what you’re going to get,” she says.

Making beauty is in Simmons’s bones. Like the paper she makes, she also “came to be” in natural light. It was a raggle-taggle childhood played out – from sun up to sun down – in the sylvan nooks of the (then) bucolic Detroit suburbs.

“We were a gang of three,” she says. “Me and my brothers in the fields and woods.”

Until it was time to come in for supper and their mother’s voice was cutting through the dusk, the outside world was her oyster. This artist – surely any artist – is all about possibility.

The orientation to beauty is also in her blood; the needle, in this family, always pointed there. Her father was an automotive engineer with a heart for pastel drawing; one of her two brothers – a design engineer who worked all over the world – began woodworking in resin in China where he was first inspired. He continues the practice in his retirement to this day, Simmons says.

Her mother, meanwhile, was more niche. Principally a ceramicist (but skilled as well in copper and enamel), she was a member of the Midwestern Egg Guild. And no ostrich egg, no goose or even quail egg was safe from her dentist’s tool, her jewels, or her sequins. By the time she died, eggs of inconceivably intricate design had squeezed the pots and pans from their cupboards and crowded the surfaces of the Mid-Century ranch house they lived in.

“It was a strange, secret society,” Simmons says, adding that her mother never sold a single one. But that wasn’t the point. She just had to do what she had to do.

“A *fetish*,” Simmons says.



“Alchemy,” is how this master printer describes the Wildwood process which can take years to complete and – like oven + baker = bread – can produce something greater than the sum of its parts.

For instance, when artist Valerie Hammond brought her wax-dipped transfers of the tiny, traced hands of her dying mother to the table, Simmons – using four full lithograph plates – rolled them to eight times their original dimension. The results – dark and inky, speckled, and embellished with flora – are huge, and heartbreakingly sublime.

Michele Oka Doner’s works also become more breathtaking than before. These imposing panels of seaweed and twisted roots of the banyan tree now reach almost floor to ceiling in Simmons’s lofty City Museum studio.

This isn’t where the alchemy actually takes place. (Her press, made locally by L.E. Sauer Machine Co., lives in South City). But it’s where two massive (11- by 5-foot), glitteringly white ‘flat files’ house the collaborative work she has done with those 21 artists since her press’s inception.

“I never throw anything away.” Simmons pulls things out of these drawers as though they were gossamer underclothes; carefully, carefully unwrapping their tissues to reveal – one after another after another – some shiveringly beautiful “slip” of art.

“I liken print-making to factory work,” she says (in an about-turn). She means the physicality required, the muscle, the messy process of “slinging paint.” And she also may mean the grit needed to be present with dilemma and uncertain future. For, in this business, there may be no clearer example of art imitating life.

“This is not for the faint of heart,” Simmons says, talking about the moment (“of all moments”) when the machine is turned off and the paper is turned. “But it’s thrilling.”

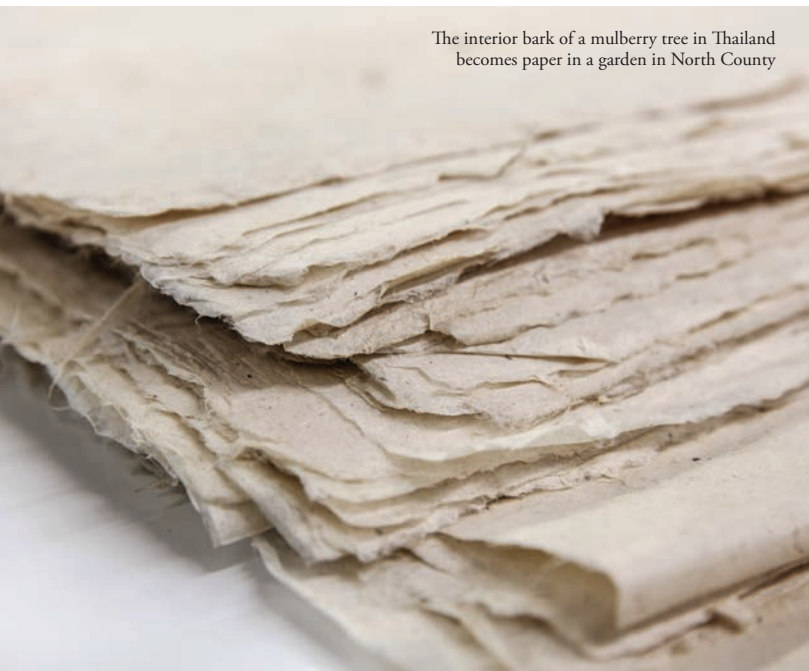
Simmons and her husband, Ted, a former Cardinals player and member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, are both from Michigan. They met in junior high (he was her first ever date) and much later, with a common sensibility for beautiful things, began a life of collecting.

“We started with early American furniture and went from there,” she says.

Simmons in her lofty City Museum studio
in front of art by Michele Oka Doner.



The interior bark of a mulberry tree in Thailand
becomes paper in a garden in North County





Ellison Simmons' own desk with pieces of art and a photo of her husband, Ted Simmons, early in his baseball career.

In 2020, the couple donated 833 pieces of art to the Saint Louis Art Museum, which then, in honor and celebration, held an exhibit. *Catching the Moment* presented 190 pieces of contemporary art collected by the couple, and did exactly that – captured a moment, opened a shutter on the pivotal historical moments in their lives: Vietnam, civil rights, gay rights, feminism and AIDS.

“We like art that has something to say,” Simmons says. “But it isn’t always pretty.”

The permanent Ted L. and Maryanne Ellison Simmons Collection – a dizzying assemblage of prints, collages, photographs and sculpture – could be seen as the Simmons’ own time capsule – art from days of their lives.

“This collection of works by so many politically engaged, contemporary artists significantly contribute to the Museum’s collection,” says Clare Kobasa, associate curator of prints, drawings and photographs. “It activates a lot of possibilities for us.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Simmons says St. Louis is exceptional for being an affordable place for artists. Indeed, a studio like hers – four floors up in a staggering monument to creativity – would cost the earth anywhere else.

“And printers need space. When there’s a cumbersome press to house, size matters.”

Simmons double-majored in painting and printmaking at the University of Michigan, and went to Washington University for graduate school. She taught at that institution from 1996 to 2002.

She gestures around her studio which is a stunning gallery in its own right.

“My journey here was preordained,” she says. She’s thinking back on that childhood again – her playmates, her ‘building blocks’ of pebbles and stones; that classroom of light and air.

“I don’t think it could have been otherwise.” [sl](#)