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Interrogating the Surface

Printmaking has traditionally offered the artist a wide range of possibilities in terms of surface quality and physical presence, while digital output has, by contrast, placed a greater emphasis on fine definition, continuous tone and a perfect, seamless surface. Issues of surface quality in digital print are often resolved by default, involving little more than a selection from a limited range of stock papers. The new family of pigment-based, waterproof inks now gives the artist access to a much wider range of substrates whilst also presenting opportunities to be more physically involved with achieving a precise and individual surface. At present, the digitally printed surface remains a delicate and precious membrane, in contrast to the variety of approaches that the surface is subjected to in traditional practice. In this paper I will consider this dilemma both in terms of my own art practice and in relationship to work made for an exhibition entitled *Interrogating the Surface* that I am curating for the Atkinson Gallery, Somerset, UK.

For the last four years I have been running the MA Printmaking course at Camberwell College of Arts in London. In addition, I lead a joint research project between Camberwell and Chelsea College of Art & Design, entitled 'The Integration of Computers within Fine Art Practice'. Bestriding these two positions is my role as an artist - as a sculptor and printmaker who is engaged with both new and traditional technologies. From this perspective I would like to consider issues around the notion of surface in both traditional and digital printmaking.

In the history of printmaking, technical developments have been driven not by the aesthetic needs of the artist but by the commercial need to service an ever-growing appetite for reproducible images. Etching enabled a far greater number of impressions to be pulled than was possible by engraving. This innovation, around the beginning of the sixteenth century, also dramatically changed the level of skills required to make the plate, meaning that the speed of drawing as well as the

printing of images could be greatly increased. Likewise, the development of lithography, originally to reproduce sheet music for a mass audience, soon became the preferred medium for artist/printmakers. Stanley Jones, writing in 1967, succinctly expressed the relationship between the commercial world and the artist:

'For the future, it must be noted that technological developments in the printing industry affecting lithography will in turn reflect directly on the artist working in lithography. Photo-process, electronically operated scanners, and printing machines, will influence, where available, the work of the lithographic printmaker.'

(Stanley Jones, *Lithography for Artists*.)

Towards the end of the last century, new technology, alongside the advent of the cheap personal computer and the dramatic reduction in costs of desktop printers, has again introduced a whole new meaning around what it is to be making prints as an artist. However, the speed of change that we have witnessed in the last decade has made previous revolutions seem perfectly sedimentary in comparison. This speed of change has encouraged a demarcation between new and old technologies, sometimes with the inference that new technology is synonymous with new ideas, old technology with mere craft skills long past their 'sell by' date. Professor Barto. Dos Santos, one of the most respected printmakers currently working, said: 'It is just as easy to be boring with a mouse as with a burin.'

In this paper I would like to suggest that technology is technology, whether old or new, and that by seeing it as a whole a richer language can be created. One area that I want to consider is that of surface and what this means to the artist/printmaker.

Digital printmaking, as opposed to other, traditional, forms of printmaking has a particular relationship to the surface. The inkjet printer shoots ink from its numerous nozzles onto the surface of the substrate. There is a uniformity of surface that aims to challenge the surface quality achieved through analogue photography. The image is printed in one sweep, translating the coded, digital information on disk into values of colour. I'm sure that we have all been astounded at the quality made possible through this technology and the ease with which an image can be scaled up. But the artist must be aware that the direction of this

technology is towards ever-greater photographic fidelity and that this may actually be in opposition to his or her own personal creative needs. Also, what it means to make an image on screen before digitally outputting is fundamentally different from working directly in traditional practice.

Let me present a comparison. Imagine an artist who works with gesture and mark. I could think of Pollock, de Kooning, Basil Beatie, Paula Rego, Freud, the list is endless. The mark they make has a scale in direct relationship to themselves as physical beings. The mark traces the movement of the wrist, the articulation of the forearm etc. The mark therefore has a scale tied into its meaning. It is also tied to the scale of the image as a whole. The mark refers to the instrument that has made it - a particular brush each time loaded differently, a pencil at a different stage of sharpness. There is a resistance between the tool and the surface. The surface has a physical size to begin with, whether working on Kodatrace or directly onto a litho or etching plate. The surface is the membrane that records this history. Whereas a reproduction records the final surface layer, the original artefact allows the viewer to excavate, revealing sequence, strategies and levels of decision-making.

And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.
(T.S. Eliot.)

This is certainly not to say that digital prints lack qualities of surface, but that the artist must understand that these qualities are different and carry different meanings. There are problems in store for the artist who thinks that making a digital print is simply a cleaner, neater way of resolving an image than traditional practice. For the digital print to have a validity it should be conceived from the outset with the intention of resolving it through that technology, not simply reproducing effects and thinking that the image can exist in any size. This brings me to the point that by seeing the digital within the wider scope of printmaking in general, the artist can use each for its particular quality and not feel that there needs to be a rigid allegiance to either camp. The expression 'not throwing out the baby with the bath water' summarises my position.

Richard Hamilton, in the catalogue *New Technology & Printmaking*, states that:

'A medium need not sit in isolated purity. It has always been my contention that the first objective is to achieve a compelling image, and that aim demands a felicity in its implementation. There is no law that forbids paint and photography from combining on a single surface or requires that silkscreening can never benefit from a liaison with collotype or offset or even etching.'

In my own work I have been determined to position myself as an artist who is able to access what is appropriate for an idea at any given time. The issue of surface has been a preoccupation within this work and as I work more with digital processes so I have become more aware of my need for these prints to have rich physical qualities. All my recent prints have been started on screen. I have incorporated the digital with my need to create a physical presence within the print.

My first images made with the computer were proofed on an ENCAD inkjet printer before making photo-plates. The plates were etched deeply and then printed as conventional etchings. This was a series of prints. I always prefer to work in series as it allows me to take greater risks. Using the inkjet printer as a proofing press enabled me to take each image as far as possible before plate making.

I next embarked on an artist's book, *Freud's Coat*, which once again was resolved on screen before being finally output as hand-printed lithographs. A great advantage of using the computer in this bookwork was that I could keep all the images, some twenty in all, open to change and modification throughout the whole process. The page proofs would continually be laid out across the studio floor and then particular aspects reworked. In a second artist's book, *With the melting of the snows*, all the images were made in layers before being printed in two printings of black in litho. Obviously, since I wanted the book to be viewed, the robustness of lithography had advantages over the more fragile surface of the inkjet print.

Means of escape was a series of six prints which can be seen at www.pauperspublications.com. These four-colour lithographs were produced from disk files. A commercially made line plate was used to print and slightly emboss the dot. The last three prints are part of an exhibition which I have curated called

Interrogating the Surface, where artists were asked to address the issue of surface from their widely differing perspectives. The exhibition opens in November at the Atkinson Gallery, Somerset, UK.

The possibilities offered by new technology for printmaking are wide-reaching, challenging and exciting. If we see this new technology within the broader context of printmaking in general it offers the opportunity to build on an existing, rich language and to extend it further. Artists look forward and backward. Morandi looked back to seventeenth-century engraving to find a language for his radical graphic art of cross-hatching, which in turn influenced the work of David Hockney. Roy Liechtenstein developed the concept of the Ben Day Dot process of crude colour printing into a complex orchestration of visual ideas through screenprint, along with a dazzling array of advanced techniques. Patrick Caulfield has brought together the original practice of hand-cut stencils with fine areas of four-colour separation and photo processes. Damien Hurst brings to his recent screenprints the skills of the designer working on screen to lay out his latest set of pharmaceutical images, whilst Richard Hamilton has shown that the working relationship of the artist with the digital printer can be just as complex and enriching as that with the more traditional kind of master printer. In all cases the aim is to create a rich, potent surface that carries the artist's intention. Technology is just technology, whether old or new.

LINKS

The Integration of Computers within Fine Art Practice

<http://www.research.linst.ac.uk/integration>

Digital Responses V&A <http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/digitalresponses>