

Vibrant Transience: an embodied lens for digital print making.

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This paper draws on grants received from the Arts and Humanities Research Board in the UK for practice based research into ‘Creativity and embodied mind in digital fine art’ www.creativity-embodiedmind.com The paper discusses my digital fine art printmaking focussing on the idea of the **vibrant transience of reality** viewed through an **embodied lens**.

Vibrant transience

My creative practice making digital art prints uses a wide range of materials, computer software, and printers from small to large format. Printmaking has long been my chosen medium because of the potential it offers for the exciting exploration of delicate surface properties. The digital print medium is for me particularly attractive as a conduit for the idea of the vibrant transience of reality. This idea has arisen gradually and is still evolving.

An ‘idea’, if well articulated, may give some organising force to interaction. In this case a feeling for ‘vibrant transience’ may resonate with particular potentialities of the digital medium. However, the idea may be influenced by personal history, and shaped by geographical place, culture and events. Expression of the idea is also influenced by past traditions in art and by current opinions and opportunities, whether these are supportive or conceived as challenges to overcome. While the digital print medium greatly enhances freedom for exploration it is also influenced by constraints, whether these are technological or conceptual, and whether they are consciously or intuitively applied [1]

My prints are influenced by the populist nature of the multiple; and by the practice of the agency I work with showing prints in restaurants, pubs, offices, hotels etc. Examples can be seen at www.commeccaart.com They have also been shown in the Art and Technology International Digital Print Award exhibitions for 2001, 2003 in London, and 2004/5 in Jakarta, this also being sponsored by the British Council.

An embodied lens for interacting with the world

In the ‘Phenomenology of Perception’ Merleau-Ponty argues that our fundamental knowledge of the world comes through our bodies’ explorations of it. The body is not primarily a thing observing the world and being informed by its motivational and emotional state. Instead, primary meaning is reached through co-existing with the world in distinction to intellectual meaning which is reached through analysis. Primary meaning is brought about mainly by pre-reflexive thought in distinction to reflection.

The body has its world or understands its world without having to use its symbolic objectifying function, ‘...to perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body’ and ‘consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think’, but of ‘I can’ (p 137). [2]

Meaning is not found pre-existent in the world, but called into existence by bodily activity, with inter-subjectivity resulting from the communality of the body.

This constitutes an embodied lens for interacting with the world. Merleau-Ponty in his writings on the embodied nature of creativity and consciousness emphasises that an artist’s style is not

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Impact 4 International Printmaking Conference, Berlin/Poznan, September 2005

something developed consciously in order to depict the world, but is an 'exigency that has issued from perception'p49. [3]

Print making

In making prints I keep a log of both the technical and thought processes involved. Notes are kept on the interaction with the medium, and on the development of the work and emergent meanings. An account of this follows in relation to some of the prints.

Fragmenting Square

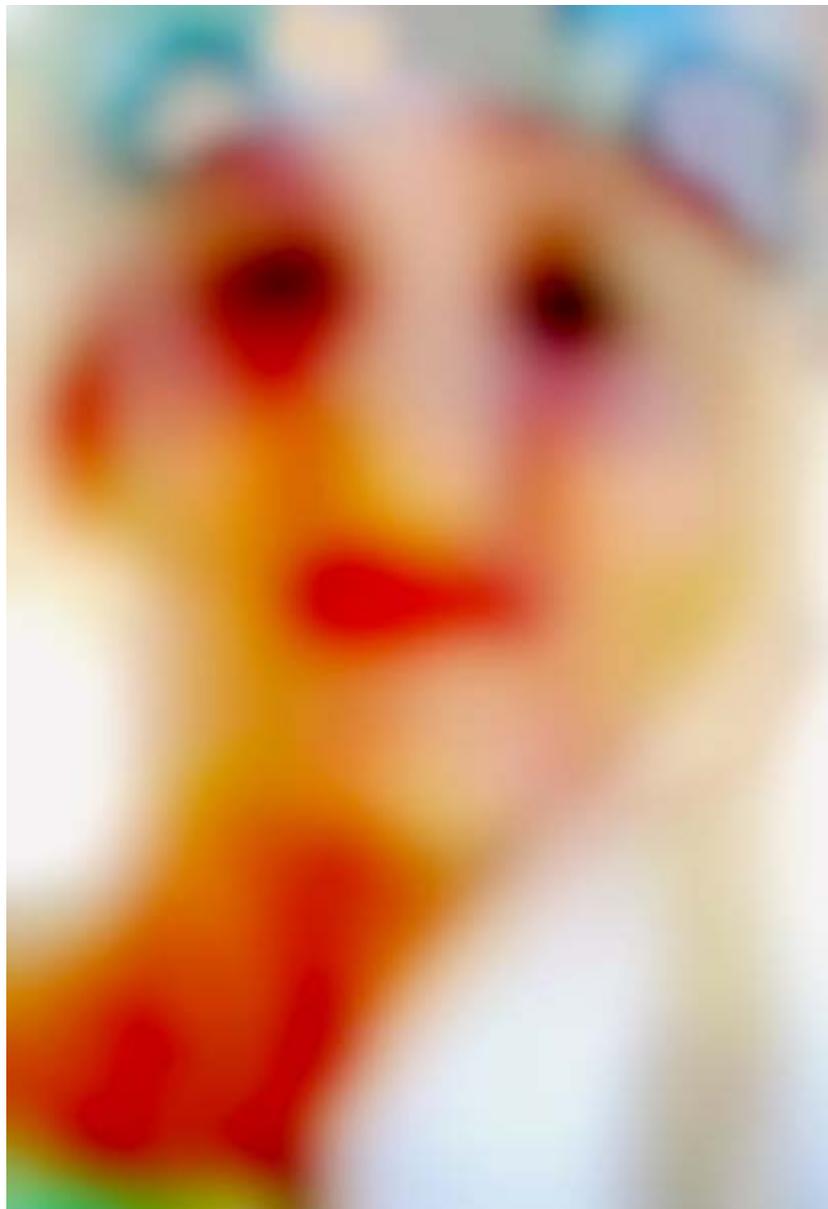


Fragmenting Square

'Fragmenting Square': (90cm x 90cm on canvas) This print was made shortly after the tragedy of September 11th in the USA. However, it drew on elements which had been worked on before that date, and imagery that emerged afterwards. It is composed from four prints done separately, but with an overarching concern. These were: fading edge, fragmenting edge, broken edge, and fallen square. Some of the material and imagery in these prints came from scanned textures and colours I had made using turpentine on printing inks on large pieces of paper, making marks with broad palette knives. Other imagery was from the light of the sun setting on water on a harbour front, the surface of which was whipped by the wind. Some of the colours and lines came from front page pictures of the September tragedy. A previous edge print I had done was about the contrasting sharp glow of life in the Arizona desert. The fragmenting square

was in-part about the break up of this. When the four prints were put together and printed the image looked uninspired compared with each of the individual images. The combined image was altered using the auto-levels and equalise functions, and the gaussian blur filter which helped to combine and change some of the shapes, while at the same time integrating them. The contrast function was then used to reduce most of the blur which seemed excessive in this print. Various areas of the print were then selected and colours changed. As is well known, the square has been an important element in the work of modernist artists searching for pure form and beauty, and absolute truth and meaning. The post-modern age questioned the viability of this. September 11 saw further crumbling of the certainties. But perhaps the print contains delicate potentials for growth and relationships.

Dancer:head



Dancer:head

‘Dancer: Head’(74cm x 103 cm wood frame) This started as a digital photograph I took of a belly dancer at a village fair in Tunisia. Her dress was predominantly yellow, with green, red and white sections. The colour was vibrantly enhanced by the bodily movement. In the computer the photo was examined and cropped down to the figure. This was blown up to life size and explored. At first the figure had been more appealing. But the head called for further examination, and the image was cropped and saved as an alternate. To get away from the very particular face, and attempt to make the image more ‘universal’, the ‘posterise’ and ‘gaussian blur’ filters were used. The tones on the head-dress were altered. The shape of the head was changed slightly to see how the image looked at 58 x 85 cm, which was the maximum image width I had been working with on a HP 500 design jet printer, and which sat nicely in a 70cm x 100cm beech frame. Using ‘contrast’ and ‘variations’ filters, different strengths of yellow were explored, the main colour of the first visual sensation of the dancer, and Tunisian red was added. Considerable effort was made to save in the corner of the image some of the bright green from the dress. Several tonal variations of the image were printed and tried in the wooden frame. Whilst the palest image looked insubstantial out of the frame, it looked the best in the beech frame, drawing from and resonating with the wood. The Tunisian red enhanced this. The print seemed to echo the proud, colourful striving of Tunisia and its people in the context of economic difficulty. The print has both a fragility and strength resulting from the use of the digital medium, pertinent to the subject. In particular, the moire patterns formed by the gaussian blur filter amplify the vibrant transience at the particular size of the framed print. Arguably, the overall presence of the print would be unobtainable by means other than the digital medium.

Since producing this print, several large format prints have been made of other images, facilitated by the AHRB award. Examining work on the original head of the dancer, as part of an editing review of images, the head was taken up to large format. What at first sight at a smaller scale had seemed to be blotchy imperfections became interesting in their own right at this larger scale, particularly when examining the print at a distance of about four or five feet, dissolving the head into an abstract. At a greater distance the image was obviously that of a head. Overall, the print began to approach a vibrant edge on the cusp of form and attractiveness.

SEE PRINT BELOW: Dancer



Dancer

Transitions



Transitions: triptych

Stone Flower

Tree

Perched

‘Transitions’. (large format) Each of these three prints was originally conceived independently, and each one can stand alone. Stone flower was based originally on a photograph of a pile of multi-coloured salt slats, reminiscent of an exotic flowering plant, by the side of a salt lake in Tunisia. The salt lake itself was made up of striated colours. Many variants of the ‘flower’ and salt lake were explored in photoshop, and are still available as potential prints. The striated print was always available mentally, as I had previously done several prints in this manner based on salt water estuary scenes with which I was very familiar with in North Wales. The striated, or banded, format is one which has been explored by several well known artists. Perhaps the difference here is that ‘Stone flower’ is based on geological time.

The tree is based on one of a series of photographs taken by the side of loch Lomond in Scotland. A white bird was perched on one of the branches. Earlier that morning several pictures had been taken of similar birds perched on posts in the edge of Loch Lomond. Very little manipulation of the tree image was done in photoshop. Significantly, however, the image was examined at large format in the computer, where the undergrowth beside the tree began to resemble lines done with a drypoint, which contrasted with the mountain wreathed in mist. The whole image was indicative of ecological time

The perched print was based on the photographs of the birds perched momentarily on posts. Having examined the tree at large format, the perched birds were also examined at large format. Because the digital camera used to take the photos was a very early model without a zoom facility, small images taken up to large format change radically, and can take on striated characteristics, with parts of the image hovering on individual pixels. In this case, this seemed particularly appropriate to the momentary nature of the image. The vertical striated nature of the perched image called forth a complementary horizontally striated image.

The subdued colour of the perched and tree images also suggested being shown alongside a colourful image, hence the striated ‘Stone flower’. Each of the three images was printed at large format (33 inches square), and framed in a similar way in robust white wood. They were displayed together in a gallery show. Information I presented on the three prints indicated that together they were concerned with transitions over time, and fitted in with my general concern for the vibrant transience of reality, which seemed appropriate to the digital medium. In line with the philosophy of the multiple, it was indicated that they could be purchased individually or as a triptych. From the time of printing the three images separately, it had occurred to me to combine them, print them together, and frame them as one. This would certainly fit in with some exhibition requirements. The perched image presented above in the

triptych is only a section of the actual large format image, as the characteristics of the large image are lost when the image is reduced to a small scale. The final selection from the large perched image will depend on the size of the combined triptych.

Discussion

Scattered throughout the writings of Merleau-Ponty is an embodiment theory of art, which he uses to support his embodiment theory of perception (Haworth [4]). This views the artwork as 'enriched being' in its own right, as distinct from an analogue for an external truth or essence, as traditional aesthetic theory claims. It 'gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible' (Merleau-Ponty [5] p 166). It contains 'matrices of idea' and symbols whose meaning we never stop developing (Merleau-Ponty [6] p 77). Merleau-Ponty [7] claimed 'that modes of thought correspond to technical methods, and that to use Goethe's phrase, 'what is inside is also outside' (p 59). The description of making these prints shows that technology influences perception and thinking; while at the same time concepts, ideas, and feelings influence the use of technology, operating through an embodied lens.

In the use of technology in the process of making art many unexpected effects can occur. These can be critical to the creative process, enhancing freedom of choice. In turn, however, choice can be tyrannical, if it is not embedded in constraints, which may originate from the individual, group, and society. Johnson-Laird [8] argues that freedom of choice occurs par excellence in acts of creation, but that the set of choices is constrained by largely tacit mental criteria that determine the genre, shared by other practitioners, and the individual style. Simonton [9] proposes that creativity can be viewed as a constrained stochastic process; that is something which is characterised by conjecture and chance (stochastic) but is not totally random or capricious, instead is constrained. Creativity involves learning the skills of the domain. Yet as Simonston argues, the multidimensional and configurational nature of the creative product (the interaction of different aspects) makes it extremely difficult for the creator to learn what reliably works. He also notes that the creative domain defines constraints; and that creators cannot judge the value of their works in isolation from the rest of the world.

In the posthumous publication 'The Visible and the Invisible' Merleau-Ponty [10] viewed his theories as incomplete. He indicated that one of the areas destined for review was a study of the imaginary, 'which is not simply the production of mental images, but the baroque proliferation of generating axes for visibility in the duplicity of the real' p lii. Understanding the nature of the embodied lens is, arguably, crucial to this.

The AHRB projects, on which this paper is based, show that the process of exploration with the computer in making digital art prints generates and reveals possibilities and visual experiences, as well as speaking to initial expectations. The process of exploration becomes a vehicle for seeing which is influenced by the technology. Visual explorations undertaken with the computer can influence what one 'sees' in the world, what comes into focus and what demands attention, influencing what is recorded experientially, mentally, and digitally. In turn, this influences further explorations with the computer. Artistic vision is constantly reshaping itself in interaction with the world, including technology, geographical place, culture and events.

Notes

[1] An AHRB invited workshop I organised recently explored issues of freedom and constraint in the creative process in digital fine art. Papers from this can be found on the website www.creativity-embodied.com e.g. Haworth, J.T., Gollifer, S., Faure-Walker, J., Coldwell, P., Kemp, T., and Pengelly, J. (2005) Freedom and Constraint in the Creative Process in Digital Fine Art: an AHRB Invited Workshop. Proceedings of Creativity and Cognition 2005 Conference, Goldsmiths University, London, UK, pp 310-317. ISBN: 59593-025-6 The

workshop proceedings and papers are on the CD 'Creativity, Technology and Embodied Mind' ISBN 1-905476-04-3. This is obtainable from the author: e-mail haworthjt@yahoo.com

[2] Merleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of perception*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.

[3] Merleau-Ponty, M. 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' in J.Wild, ed *Signs*. Evanston, IL, North Western University Press. 1964).

[4] Haworth, J.T. Beyond reason: pre-reflexive thought and creativity in art. *Leonardo* 30, 2, (1997), 137-146.

[5] Merleau-Ponty, M. The primacy of perception, in J..M. Eddie. (ed.) *The primacy of perception*, Evanston: North Western University Press, 1964.

[6] Merleau-Ponty [3]

[7] Merleau-Ponty, M. *Sense and nonsense*, Evanston: North Western University Press, 1964.

[8] Johnson-Laird, P.N .Freedom and constraint in creativity, in R.J. Sternberg (ed) *The nature of creativity: contemporary psychological perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1988 pp 202-219

[9] Simonton, D.K. Creativity as a constrained stochastic process, in R.J. Sternberg, E.L. Grigorenco, & J.L. Singer (eds) *Creativity: from potential to realization* Washington, D.C. American Psychological Association. 2002 pp 83-101

[10] LeFort, C. (ed.) *The visible and the invisible*, Evanston: North Western University Press, 1968.