

A Layered Practice

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This paper will consider, through the authors practice, the role of the digital in the production of print based artworks. It will focus on research made within the University of the Arts research project, The Integration of Computers within Fine Art Practice and include artworks that have been presented at the following exhibitions, Computers & Printmaking (Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery 1999), Interrogating the Surface, (Atkinson Gallery 2001), Digital Responses (V&A 2002), Case Studies (Queens Gallery Delhi 2002) and Beyond the Digital Surface (Ewha Korea 2004).

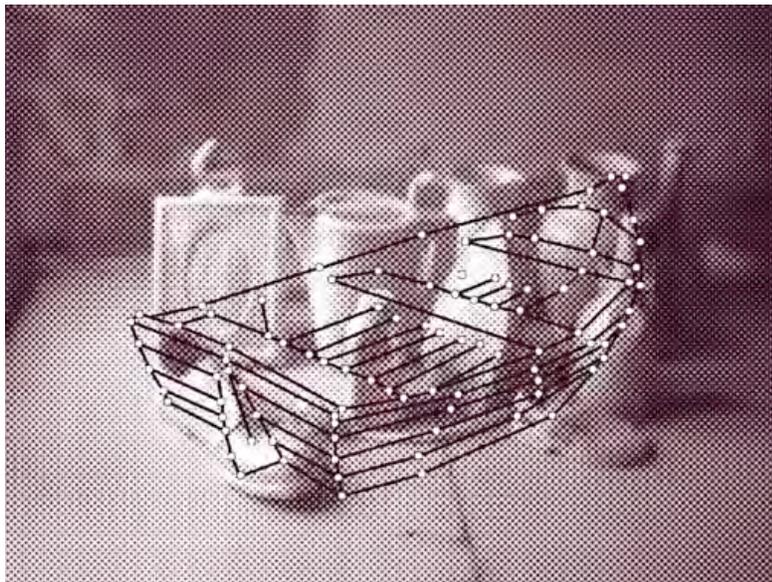
Developing out of training in traditional printmaking, the paper will discuss how this physical engagement with 'making' impacts on the decision making when working with digital technology. This includes a number of hybrid practises where both forms of working are exploited to produce the final artwork. Notions of scale, presence, layering and surface will be considered when explaining the thought process behind particular artworks and the authors need for the subject matter to determine the final output. The paper will also discuss how through the digital, photographic and autographic languages have become fluid, and the potential this holds for new meaning.

One of the key drivers in the development and promotion of digital print has been the way that it empowers the user and extends the creative engagement. The artist working digitally with a home computer and even just a desk top printer has the capacity to produce, promote, print and distribute their images across the globe with an ease that is totally without precedent. While this is self evident, it is worth noting how the companies have changed from looking to profit from hardware to a realisation that ink and substrates offer far greater profitability. But along with this expanded possibility of practice can be the implication of a detachment by the artist from the specific qualities of the particular artwork, the technology overriding the artist's vision. While printmaking has always had to justify itself against the accusation of technique over content, now this new technology can be seen by sceptics as a further distancing from the artist's hand. It is also perhaps worth saying that the act of printing, seen through the eyes of an ordinary person printing out their family photographs, can seem to be devoid of skill or judgement, a matter of simply pressing 'print'. And while in the 17th century the etching presses were confined to specialist print houses and individual artists, the digital printer is now a part of the everyday households essentials.

I want to talk about my own practice within the realms of what can be considered printmaking. Firstly it is worth remembering that our notion of print as limited editioned signed artefacts is a relatively recent construct. Printmaking has always operated on the margins of commerce, profit and technologies. Prints would be evaluated on their demonstration of craft skills as much as their artistic content. In the majority of cases these involved highly skilled craftsmen, interpreting an artists work, translating from oil on canvas to generally a black and white image, dramatically reduced in scale, in ink on

paper. Degas, whose own prints today are regarded as amongst the forerunners of the modern experimental approach to print, had very little success or even opportunities to exhibit in his own lifetime. Instead, prints made by professional engravers from his paintings were those seen as having value and qualities. And today, the majority of fine art prints produced by established artists are still made through this collaboration between artist and technician.

But the digital does result in a differing set of relationships, both in terms of the artist's relationship towards final output and in the way in which artist and technician might work together. The consequence of this can be a very different physical relationship to the work. It is not the purpose of this paper to outline how the differences might occur or be manifested, each artist will present a different set of problems and solutions, but I want to use my own practice to discuss ways, strategies that I have adopted in order to retain a physical contact with my print work, irrespective of the technology.



Constellations:boat

My approach to print has always been to extract and work with, what I perceive to be intrinsic qualities of whatever media I select. In the series, *Constellations*, made with the assistance of Barbara Rauch (Research fellow FADE), the prints were made totally within the computer. They began with digital photographs, directly inputted into photoshop, the photographs themselves being the result of numerous photographs, each image being viewed on camera and re-photographed until the correct image was achieved. No delay as in analogue photography. No wait for processing and darkroom chemistry. In many ways digital photography allows for a more physical engagement with the act of achieving the photograph than was previously allowed. The photograph becomes an immediate response to the event seen, which in turn can then be held up for immediate comparison and then acted upon until an image is captured that is either ok or contains sufficient information to begin manipulation.

Once in the computer, the next decision is to ascertain the dimensions of the work. This I find the most difficult and creates the greatest risk of disembodiment. Relating the image on screen with the actual dimensions of the image is hugely problematic and whilst continually referencing screen size, decisions about the image invariable have to be made based on seeing a fragment rather than the whole. Working as I do with the half tone, this only makes sense at the correct size.

A further issue is the relationship to edge. While in traditional practice the edge is a physical boundary, on screen it is merely a decision to be responded to intellectually, but not as an event in itself. Working both on screen, image size and actual size printouts, the reality of the image can be fixed in the mind and decisions on screen projected onto the imagined finished artwork. In the case of these prints, the scale of the half tone dot became crucial as a screen through which to read the image, but also as a surface layer to respond to and initiate the constellations.

The computer also brings together the languages translated into code. Of interest to me at this juncture is the way photography and drawing, before very separate activities with their own histories, studio requirements and meanings, become part of the digital soup, photography loses its adherence to truth, drawing its connection to time, both becoming infinitely malleable.

In contrast, in a series made whilst on a residency in Venice, the images were always intended to be outputted as intaglio prints. Work on the computer took the images to a point of establishing the elements and their internal relationships but the physicality of the image became dependant on the manner in which the plates were etched. Using lazertran, the computer outputted image was transferred onto plate before beginning the process of etching. Many of the plates were very deeply etched, allowing for them to be surface rolled and printed to focus on the surface, embossed into the paper. I wanted these images stamped down, a far cry from their virtual beginning. The imagery of memorial seemed to demand this physicality, the etched surface a reminder of the presence of time passing.

In *Means of Escape*, (see the Gallery at www.creativity-embodiedmind.com) the strategy was to use the notion of layering and build it into the actual prints. Most programmes use layers as a principle of allowing for the construction of an image but it is only the illusion of layers that is presented. In the digital image an evenness of ink deposit testifies to the fact that there is no physical layering and that across the surface information is laid out side by side, not one on top of the other as would occur in traditional practice. But I wanted the fluidity and speed of image production that working digitally allows.

These images were extensively worked on, on screen before being reconstructed through colour separation as photo lithographs. The dot layers were made separately and depending on the image were produced as a screen-printed layer or as a line block which was surface rolled, printed and embossed onto the lithograph. In this way, I literally remade the physical layering, proceeding from what was a flat virtual image on screen, to

prints built up from differing deposits of ink, and a surface that bore the marks of its making.

The inkjet digital print in many ways presents the artist with a *fait accomplie*. The print has a perfect even surface across the plate, suggesting that the image has been resolved from the outset. This can sometimes be in opposition to the meaning in a piece of work which might want to indicate a gradual resolution, difficult areas, problem bits and passages that have been revisited. This also correlates to the way that time is presented within a work, a culmination of a series of decisions and revisions.

The artist may also want to introduce a more personalised surface to connect with a physical approach. In addition, the tools as presented within drawing programmes are generally based on look as apposed to feel and touch. The difference between using a pencil on one hand and a soft brush on the other is as much to do with a very different kind of control and body contact. Likewise the resistance when drawing on rough sized paper as apposed to gliding a needle through hard ground is intricate to the selection of tools and materials. The software programmes focus on look, rather than the mark being the consequence of a more complex set of relationships. In an AHRB funded research project with Dr Angie Geary, we are exploring the possibilities of using haptec technology to create a personalised set of tools for printmakers. These will be predicated on ideas that different tools require differing effort and as a consequence, require differing control.

This paper is a contribution to FADE (the Fine Art Digital Environment) a joint research project between Camberwell college of Arts and Chelsea College of Art & Design, University of the Arts London.