

Unfamiliar Ground

New worlds in contemporary printmaking

May – October 2014

An introduction to printmaking

Unfamiliar Ground brings together the work of three innovative young who are challenging the boundaries of traditional printmaking. The exhibition presents etchings, lithographs, screen prints and digital prints, where materials, processes and technology are playfully explored to create wonderfully rich artworks.

Printmaking is the process of making artworks by printing, traditionally using inks on paper. Rather than being a photographic reproduction of a painting or drawing, artists' prints are original works in themselves. An original print is made when an artist creates a new piece of work using methods such as etching, lithography, screen-printing, relief printing, digital, collagraph and monotype.

Except in the case of monoprints (which are one-off pieces), the process lends itself to producing multiples of the same piece. A number of prints of the same image (or 'impression') is called an edition. Each print produced is not considered a 'copy' but rather an 'original'. This is because typically each print varies slightly due to variables intrinsic to the printmaking process, and also because the imagery of a print is not simply a reproduction of another work but rather is a unique image designed to be expressed in a particular printmaking technique.

Printmaking can be a very simple process (such as potato prints we might have made at school) and artists in the 20th century have exploited its potential to make their art more accessible to the public as well as collectors. The 21st century has seen rapid advances in digital and printing technology which artists have utilised to extend the format and distribution of their work.

Common printmaking processes

Relief print is a process where protruding faces of the printing plate or block are inked and recessed areas are ink free. Printing the image is achieved by inking the face of the plate and bringing it in firm contact with the paper, using a printing press or hand using a roller.

Relief printing is created by starting with a flat surface and then removing (eg by carving) areas intended to remain blank. The remaining areas of the original surface are coated in ink. Relief printing includes such techniques as woodcut, linocut, and some types of collagraph. Potato prints are a type of relief printing.

In **intaglio**, the recessed areas of the plate are the printed areas. Intaglio techniques include **engraving**, **etching** and **drypoint**.

Copper, zinc and steel plates are often used in **etching**. The plate is covered in a resin ground or an acid-resistant wax material. Using an etching needle, or a similar tool, the image is engraved into the ground, revealing the plate underneath. The plate is then dipped into acid and this bites, or etches, into the surface of the plate where it is revealed. After the plate is sufficiently bitten, the plate is removed from the acid bath, and the ground is removed. Some artists now prefer to use non-toxic methods of biting the plate instead of acid.

To print a plate, ink is applied to its surface to push the ink into the bitten grooves, and rubbed with cloth to remove the excess and ensure ink is only in the incisions. A printing press is used to apply very high pressure: a damp piece of paper is placed on top of the plate, so that the paper will be able to be squeezed into the plate's ink-filled grooves. The paper and plate are then covered by a thick blanket to ensure even pressure when going through the rolling press. The blanket is then lifted, revealing the paper and printed image.

Lithography is a mechanical process in which the printing and non-printing areas of the plate are all at the same level, and is based on the chemical repellence of oil and water. Traditionally, designs are drawn or painted with greasy ink or crayons on specially prepared limestone (the term 'lithography' means 'stone drawing') which is capable of absorbing grease and water equally. The stone is moistened with water, which the stone accepts in areas not covered by the crayon. An oily ink, applied with a roller, adheres only to the drawing and is repelled by the wet parts of the stone. The print is then made by pressing paper against the inked drawing. Zinc and aluminium are now commonly used for making lithography plates.

Screen printing or silk screening is a technique particularly suited for flat or relatively flat surfaces. The process involves a fine mesh or screen that is tightly stretched around a rigid frame. The areas that are not to be printed are masked out on the screen, and to create the print, the framed screen is

positioned over the paper or item to be printed, along with a dollop of thick ink. A squeegee is then used to press the ink through the screen. The masked areas prevent ink from passing through, but the unmasked areas allow the ink to be imprinted on the paper.

The earliest technique of masking was to cut out a stencil and attach it to the underside of the screen. The development of photo-stencils has allowed artists to incorporate photographic images into the print. The screen is coated with light sensitive gelatine which hardens under exposure (through a photographic negative or diapositive). This is washed away with water, leaving the hard exposed gelatine to act as a stencil.

If more colours are desired in the final design, the process is repeated with different screens. A design that requires four different colours would, therefore, require four different screens. The screens are usually placed on a rotary press that allows the different colour prints to be properly aligned or registered with each other.

Giclee prints can be reproductions of existing artworks, providing high quality colour accuracy and detail. Alternatively, computer-generated images can be seen as 'original' giclee prints. Many artists work with digital photographs or scanned images that are then manipulated by computer programs (such as Photoshop) before they're printed. Digital art of all types is rapidly increasing in popularity, regardless of whether the finished products are reproductions, originals, or some combination of the two, and presents challenges to the conventions of traditional printmaking.

Text by Martyn Lucas