

Up close

An exhibition of printmaking from across the UK

12 March – 25 April 2011

Printmaking is a diverse process. A lovely print can be made with the simplest of materials and by someone with no prior experience. It does not rely solely on drawing or technical skills and the possibilities of printmaking are quite unlike the drawn or painted mark. As printmaking is mostly indirect, the design is created on one surface and then printed onto paper (or fabric), there is an element of mystery in the process. At the 'advanced' end of the scale, printmaking is an extremely skillful, precise and technical process. Multiple techniques may be used to make a single print.

Up close was selected from an 'open'¹ submission, by Michael Honnor, painter and lithographer, and Richard Anderton, MA Printmaking course leader at the University of the West of England. This is the first solely 2D exhibition held in our gallery and the exhibition is showing work from thirty-two exhibitors. Between them, a wide range of printmaking techniques are used; woodblock, screenprinting, collagraph, aquatint, etching, intaglio, monotype, monoprint, linocut, mezzotint and photo etching. There are also two cyanotypes, a photographic printing process, which gave us the term 'blueprint'.

The five main traditional printmaking processes are monotype, intaglio, relief, screenprinting and lithography. Monotype printmaking (not to be confused with monoprints) produces one, unique print. It can be done with or without a press, simply and quickly, or using several printings on the same image.



This image shows the earliest dated example of a wood block printed book (AD 868). Strips of paper were printed from carved wooden blocks and pasted together to form a 5M long scroll.² Wood block printing originated in China around 600AD and although sometimes described as a simple process, the quality of the block reflects the skill of the carver.

The above illustration shows that the ninth-century carver was someone of considerable skill.

Monotype printing produces unique one-off prints. It can be done in several ways but perhaps the most direct is drawing into a layer of ink which has been rolled onto a non-porous surface. The paper is laid over the ink and rubbed, or put through a press. The resulting print may go through subsequent processes but it will not exist in 'editions'. The mark-making can be free and quick but has all the qualities of a printmaking process.

Several of our exhibitors are showing monotypes, a technique described by Fiona Winning as 'energetic' and a quality that she has translated straight into her prints. Sally Cottis uses the word 'spontaneity'; her print *Trees by a river* reveals a freedom of expression consistent with the process. Rosie Sanders' print, *Gynoecium*, is also a monotype. Based on (the centre of) a painting of a parrot tulip by Rosie, *Gynoecium* is an abstraction of the centre of the flower. This print has gone through the press twelve times, each time with an over-printing of a different colour. Despite the time spent on it, Rosie also describes the process as spontaneous, with elements of surprise and risk attached. A very different sort of printmaking process to 'editions'.

¹ Advertised UK wide

² The Diamond Sutra (Buddhist scripture), ink on paper, The British Library Board. Found sealed up in a cave in north-west China in 1907.



Using acid to bite into metal was a technique known in Europe from around 1400. Daniel Hopfer (1470 – 1536), a German artist trained as an etcher of armour, is thought to be the first to use an etching technique to make prints. Although his works are undated, stylistically they can be accurately placed and he appears to have perfected his printmaking technique by 1500. The first *dated* etchings are by Albrecht Dürer (1515).

Etching with acid is a technique which can pick up very fine detail.

The Soldier and his Wife, Daniel Hopfer

Intaglio printing includes all the 'cutting into' techniques; etching, engraving, mezzotint, aquatint and drypoint. Making the printing plates for these processes is a much more time-intensive activity but, once made, the metal plates can be used again and again. Debby Mason's *Coelacanth* is a mezzotint, a process which Debby says produces the deepest, richest blacks of all. It can't be coincidence that she has chosen to make her coelacanth, a cave-dwelling creature from deep oceans, a mezzotint. Her dark, mysterious fish reflects the depths of its habitat, a worthy recipient of the hours of patient work spent preparing the copper plate.

Rembrandt was a master of etching, devoting a great deal of time to working out the best ways to depict dark and light with the printed line



Rembrandt's self-portrait and a portrait of his mother (done in 1628) show his etching skills.

Martin Barrett's two etchings, *It was always likely to end in tears* and *The Tormentors*, show fine detail and lots of light and dark. Etching lends itself to illustrative imagery; in Martin's case, powerful, symbolic stories with a contemporary, theatrical twist. And he is not our only exhibitor telling stories.

Alice Leach is a painter who started printmaking a couple of years ago. She found collagraphs to be 'as close to painting as printmaking gets' and, for these prints, used mountboard which she cut into. Describing the process of making the block to print from, Alice identifies the black areas as carborundum, the grey tones are made with layers of glue and the lines are achieved by cutting into the 'plate' (block). Of her subject matter she says, 'hyenas are incorrigible survivors and they have an ugly shape. That's why I'm interested in them.'

Sandie Hicks constructs her collagraph blocks from layers of fabric and different papers. She has machined and hand-stitched the paper layers and cut through in places to pick up some of the fabric texture. The ink is brushed on and wiped off the block before being put through an etching press.

Sandie refers to the possibilities for 'invention and trickery' in collagraph printing, an appealing concept for a maker of images.

Several exhibitors have used linocut to make their prints. While lino may not sound like a glamorous material to work with, anyone who has used it will know there is a breathless excitement in cutting into the block and it's not just because the cutting tools are razor sharp. Lino cuts have a quality entirely of their own; bold or delicate, lino declares itself as an unmistakable technique. Myrtle Pizzey's Somerset landscapes show her enthusiasm for 'cutting a block' and the resulting prints evoke the beauty of her watery environment. Mike Tingle's contemporary take on a classical myth, also a linocut, uses a 'reduction' printing process. This is where the lightest colour is printed first and the corresponding area of the block is cut away. The next colour, a darker one, is overprinted on the first and the process continues until the print is complete. This printed labyrinth leads to the obvious conclusion that printmakers choose their technique as a dimension of the imagery they are using.



Another of our exhibitors using printmaking to tell stories is Helen Snell. *Backseat Driver*, a lino cut printed onto wallpaper and fabric, is part of a series of cautionary tales on the subject of driving. She sees these prints as being in a tradition of humorous printmaking first used by James Gillray (1756 – 1815), political caricaturist, satirist, and skilled printmaker. Helen trained as a printmaker and doesn't define herself as artist or craftsperson. She does, however, see 'craft' as taking itself a bit less seriously than fine art and the 'multiples' option in printmaking techniques allows her a more generous and lighthearted approach in her use of imagery and materials.

Very Slippery Weather, James Gillray

Digital printmaking is another category and, although *Up close* has no wholly digital prints on show, it requires a mention. Like many other crafts and fine art disciplines, computers have become an additional and versatile tool. In printmaking, the computer may be used to produce the artwork which is then used in conjunction with 'photographic printmaking', either photo-etching, photo lithography or photo screenprinting. Alternatively, the 'print' may be conceived wholly on-screen and then printed out on an inkjet printer. This results in a 'giclée'³ print – a very different process to relief or intaglio printmaking.

Intaglio, collagraph, linocut, mezzotint, woodblock, aquatint, screenprint, monotype and lithograph, the names of these techniques are mysterious and magical, reflecting the importance we have always attached to the making of images. Today, making an image has never been easier. A phone or a digital camera will give us an instant image and we see hundreds each day. They come and are gone, often before we've even properly registered them. But printmaking gives us carefully constructed, slowly made images; images of ourselves, our landscapes, humour, abstraction and social comment. Our printmakers have given us thoughtful, considered images. Slowly made, with enormous skill, the images in *Up close* give us a considered view of the wonderful attributes of the printed image.

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³ The word "giclée" is derived from the French language word "le gicleur" meaning "nozzle", or more specifically "gicler" meaning "to squirt, spurt, or spray"