

Printmaking – Emerging from the Shadows

Seacourt Print Workshop (SPW) is an artist printmaking studio established in 1981 and based in Bangor, Northern Ireland. The organization provides facilities to create original works of art in traditional and experimental print media, including etching, lithography, screen-printing, relief printing and digital printmaking. Professional development, education and research are at the heart of SPW's activities as it forges innovative new partnerships with organisations, educational institutions and communities.

Our central aim is to promote Fine Art Printmaking in all its forms to as wide an audience as possible.

Whether working with community groups, institutions or artists there seems to be a shared set of concerns which emanate from a tension between 'idea' and 'product'. In 'The Hollow Men', TS Eliot states '...Between the conception and the creation... falls the shadow'. I would like to share some experiences from SPW projects that may be considered as providing a means of traversing the shadow. The projects range from community engagement, partnering with non arts organizations and editioning prints for artists working in other disciplines.

From our community programme I will draw on two examples; one was looking at the health benefits of creative activity and an intercultural group seeking to create images that reflected their desire to manage diversity within their group.

Project 1: Health Screening (printmaking can heal?)

The participating group was made up of individuals who were experiencing a range of health issues. They met to share their experiences and participate in creative activities that helped alleviate their condition by basically distracting them for a few hours and in the process this improved their sense of wellbeing. I'm not making a claim for 'art' as a medical panacea; indeed the participants may have obtained similar satisfaction and positivity from a game of cards. What I will claim is that the print programme offered a level of meaningful engagement with issues that affected this group's day to day lives, something you can't get from a game of Poker.

A ten week programme introduced the participants to screen-printing. After learning basic skills the group began discussing themes they wanted to explore. Each participant selected a group of images that held a personal resonance and collaged these to make a single image. Collage was used because none of the participants had any art training and felt intimidated by drawing. The collaged image was photocopied to serve as a 'posi' and exposed to a screen coated with light sensitive emulsion. We discussed colour in relation to their feelings about illness. It was decided that combining contrasting colours would reflect the dissonance between life once lived and the present life confined by chronic illness. This sense of confinement was then extended through the metaphor of being 'boxed in' or placed in boxes of diagnosis by the medical establishment. The images were screened on card and then constructed as boxes. Both the two-dimensional and three-dimensional works were displayed in a range of settings including hospitals and galleries. The form of the final products encapsulated the group's feelings about their health and encouraged them to participate in further print based projects.

Project Two (printmaking can heal the world?)

The second project was with a women's group that was formed to support incomers to the area of North Down in which Bangor is situated. The organization has a diverse cultural makeup with representation from China, The Philippines, Africa, South America, Europe, Eastern Europe, Belarus and Northern Ireland. This is an unusual group; most minority groups coalesce into single identity groups. Managing diversity is probably one of the most difficult challenges of our time and I'm not claiming that art can create world peace but this printmaking project enabled the group to explore issues of difference and similarity which they felt to be core remaining a group.

The participants refined their notion of identity by considering what they shared such as gender, family roles, social roles, and yet expressed differently. To depict this they produced self portraits through dry point around which they screen printed frames compiled from images of cultural significance. The structured composition offered a commonality to diverse elements capturing the group's initial intent. They were so encouraged through the project they are now using printmaking as creative visioning tool through which to plan a three year strategy.

Eliot's shadow played a significant role in a series of partner projects with non arts organisations. These included Arizona State University, Armagh Planetarium and the Wild Fowl and Wetland Trust.

'Response' presents twenty-four original prints inspired by thirty images from The Schwemberger Photographs, a collection of over 1,750 glass slide negatives bequeathed to Arizona State University in 2005 by St. Michaels Mission and the Province of Our lady of Guadalupe of the Order of Friars Minor. This astounding social record of Native American life was amassed by Brother Simeon Schwemberger a Franciscan missionary between 1902 and 1908. Through Dr. Rob Taylor, Director of Entrepreneurial Initiatives at ASU, SPW accessed thirty of the photographs for its members to respond to. By displaying of both the photographic images and the limited edition prints it is hoped that members of the public can get an insight into how source material informs the creative process from concept to product.

Since 2000, creativity has received a lot of attention within Northern Ireland. When devolved government returned to Northern Ireland, creativity became a central part of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's future vision. So much so that the Education and Training Inspectorate have produced Appreciating Creativity, a document which provides a set of quality indicators relating specifically to creativity to assist organisations evaluate their programmes. There is something slightly unnerving about a government department defining what may, and by inference, may not be creative through the provision of a metric against which creativity should be measured. The fear of course is that as with most bureaucratic interventions it's the measurement that becomes the 'thing' and the 'thing', in this case creativity, only exists in as far as it can be measured. If the metric is tied to funding then projects may begin to take a form that best meets the measurements and meaning is lost. To counter this threat of homogeneity the complex nature of creativity needs to be understood. This complexity is evident in the diversity of response the artists present in this exhibition and provides an opportunity to consider the subject more closely.

Graham Wallas, (1926), the author of one of the early classic studies in the field devises a four fold construct, defining four major stages in the creative process;

1. Preparation. The person expecting to gain new insights must know his field of study and be well prepared. People get inventive ideas mainly in their own fields - poets in poetry; scientists in science.
2. Incubation - Wallas noticed many great ideas came only a period of time spent away from the problem. This was certainly the experience of Archimedes when he got his idea in the public bath. Many ideas come to us when we are away from the problem, though perhaps standing in the shadow of the problem.
3. Illumination. The "flash" of a new idea. It's a mysterious phase. Resting the mind by doing other activities was the only suggestion Wallas could offer about how creative ideas form.
4. Verification. In this final step, efforts are made to see if the "happy idea" actually solves the problem. Since "great" ideas don't always work out in actual practice, this final step is vitally important to the success of any project.

This construct holds up in relation to two further projects - SPW members visited the Armagh Planetarium and were treated to a virtual tour of the Universe by its Director, Dr. Tom Mason MBE. A long time advocate of meaningful exchange between science and the arts he encouraged the printmakers to respond to their experience which they did in a myriad of styles, using a broad range of printmaking techniques including etching, relief, digital and screen. The images range from abstract forms, through dramatic space-scapes to earth-bound wonder. Each of the prints was accompanied by text describing the techniques and giving some background to the artist.

For 'Traces' artists from Seacourt Print Workshop visited an important wildfowl reserve in May 2009 and were given a tour of the site by its Director James Orr. At that time there were still a lot of mechanical diggers re-sculpting the landscape, returning it to its natural state pre man's intrusions and in the process revealing stories imprinted in layers of soil, clay, and limestone. It was these stories that the artists at SPW were asked to respond to; the fossil records of sea creatures which swam in warm equatorial waters before the human eye had evolved to witness them, the piles of oyster shells left by Mesolithic hunter gatherers over 9,000 years ago, the early outposts of Christianity which gave Castle Espie its name, the Victorian entrepreneurial spirit that enabled the building of largest chimney in Ireland at Robert Murland's 'state of the art' brick kiln and the present day safeguarding of the site as a protective host for the wildlife that inhabits Strangford Lough. This wildlife includes the 35,000 light bellied geese that make their heroic journey from Canada each winter to feed on the bountiful eel grass that grows on the Lough's mudflats, an astounding story in itself and one repeated over millennia.

Twenty seven artists decided to mine this rich historical seam, exploring the strata to locate those stories that would best suit the printmaking techniques they were going to employ. Certain patterns and forms emerged as significant. The spiral in its concrete form as the structure of a shell and with its symbolism of balanced growth was incorporated by several of the artists. Uroboros and lemniscates point to the cyclical nature of migration and hint at eternal return. Although the past was touched upon by some, the present seemed to resonate more strongly, with most artists being drawn to the birdlife that inhabit the foreshore and are maintained at the reserve.

All the projects described above raise an interesting question for me in terms of choice of technique – that mechanical process that allows the printmaker to emerge from the shadows of contemplation. For this project some stayed with the tried and tested whilst others utilised new techniques that had recently been introduced through a programme of research.

When I took up the post of Director at Seacourt Print Workshop in June of 2006 I was intrigued by the phrase “non-toxic printmaking”, an approach introduced at SPW at the end of the last century. I wasn’t aware of anyone who consciously practiced “toxic printmaking” but as I read about the effects on the nervous and respiratory systems substances traditionally used within printmaking might have, I began to see why the distinction was important. I thought back to my own experiences at Art College in the 80’s when dangerous materials were handled with a bravado borne out of ignorance or machismo. Indeed most practitioners have ‘horror stories’ to tell if prompted. Today there is a greater awareness of these dangers and hence the importance levied on maintaining a safe working environment. There are also legal obligations to be met that can’t be ignored by print studios and the artists who create work in their environs.

It was within this context that SPW began a programme of research into safer methods of printmaking. Through Lottery funding from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland we were able to appoint a research technician on twelve month contract to explore methods that could be effectively introduced to the workshop. We were fortunate to employ Penny Brewill who had previously worked as an educationalist, researcher and a master printer at the Curwen Studio alongside maintaining her own art practise. She was instrumental in introducing TW Graphic water-based inks into the UK whilst working with John Purcell Papers. Brewill was set the task of exploring Galv-etch, salt etch, locating an alternative to lithography and discovering if plates can be machined using CNC technologies.

To support this work we initiated a symposium on safer printmaking methods, inviting Cedric Green and Nik Semenoff to visit our workshop in September 2008. Semenoff has played a major role in liberating waterless lithography from its industrial use to a process that can be engaged in with ease by visual artists. Green has spent many years researching and promoting galv-etch as an alternative to acid based practice. Both men are intensely knowledgeable and freely share this knowledge with a graciousness that is inspiring. Following their visit we hosted Jacob Semko as an artist in residence. Semko studied waterless lithography with Semenoff and has helped to build on the groundwork laid in the symposium to embed the technique as an additional print form offered within our facility. Semko has also provided a short user’s guide to waterless lithography for a publication on our research.

Society’s obsession with removing risk from our lives can sometimes be perceived as a dulling of existence and a taming of the creative spirit which by necessity requires risk taking. SPW members were asked to respond to the word Anodyne. Applying the harmless sense of the word to their technical practice they were encouraged to experiment with some of the safer processes and materials recently introduced to the workshop or use our existent safer processes to engage thematically with the word. For many these were experiments in new approaches and the artists provided short responses to the experience of using the techniques and materials in a catalogue that accompanied an exhibition of the prints. The results show that safer approaches can in most cases be as effective as traditional ones and that printmaking techniques that are harmless do not need to engender insipid art.

The interplay between Idea, image, process and materials creates a matrix of relationships which can illuminate the original concept. This matrix is made more explicit when working as an agent on behalf of artists who do not consider themselves printmakers. These engagements make an interesting lens through which to consider this topic. SPW has been fortunate to work with some interesting artists; Becks Futures winner Roderick Buchanan, Turner Prize nominee Christine Borland, established Northern Irish artists Neil Shawcross, Ian Charlesworth, Darren Murray, Angela Darby and emerging artists such as Miguel Martin and Keith Winter. The process of collaboration is based on a fraternal exchange of the artist’s creativity for SPW’s technical knowledge and resources.

Christine Borland’s exhibition ‘NoBodies’ at the Ormeau Baths Gallery in Belfast included an HD video installation consisting of six monitors display footage of plaster heads, portrait busts of dummies used in medical training. The cast heads had been placed inside glass bell jars and the heat of the forming plaster caused a mist of condensation to form inside the jars obscuring the heads inside. Within the darkened space the video charted the slow formation of water rivulets which ran down the inside of the glass gradually revealing the busts. The installation was stunning, conjuring a transcendental space within the darkened gallery. We discussed the possibility of having Jacob Semko edition a series of stills from the videos as waterless lithographs. This proved a false start with difficulties in creating the subtleties of light and tone that were present in the HD screen grabs. Digital prints created using an Epson 4880 on Somerset Enhanced paper were more true to the HD qualities of the original image but only remained as high grade reproductions, in no way capturing the experience of the installation. Further experimentation with photo-intaglio images printed in pale inks onto black paper is being explored; ‘verification’ has not been reached.

Once again we stand in the shadows awaiting illumination. I feel the challenge for print workshops is to create as many opportunities and technical routes as possible for individuals to meaningfully move from concept to creation. This is a challenge Seacourt Print Workshop is happy to meet by letting printmaking illuminate the path.