

Embedded Practices

by Kevin Haas

Presented at the 2008 SGC Panel at the annual CAA conference in Dallas:

Digital Printmaking: A Knight in Shining Armor, a Death Sentence, or Another Tool in the Toolbox for Traditional Printmaking?

Panelists: Kristin Powers Nowlin (chair), Todd D. Anderson, Shaurya Kumar, Kevin Haas & Sandra Murchison.

For roughly two decades, the relationship between printmaking and digital media has been addressed with emotions ranging from trepidation to zeal. The discussion can still provoke a great deal of defensiveness, but has also reached a point of banality. Digital technologies are now embedded within much of artistic practice, paralleling how digital media has effected or changed seemingly every aspect of our culture. The trajectory of print technology through history has been to effectively communicate to greater and greater numbers of people through means that were accepted and understood. Printmaking within the visual arts has also embraced the use of these new technological developments, from aquatint to offset. Regardless of these changes, traditional practices exist alongside newer methods informing one another and contributing to more pluralistic approaches. Rather than divide, or reinforce territorial boundaries, digital technology within a printmaking curriculum can allow for interconnections and broadening dialogues. Inclusiveness and balance, both pedagogic and administrative, are needed to maintain a diversity of practices. This interdisciplinary terrain can yield strong reasons for sustaining printmaking, while provoking new questions that continue to invigorate the field.

There are several things that I focus on when the importance or relevance of printmaking is at issue in light of changing practices and technologies: One is the breadth of print media, that it encompasses a vast array of possibilities, especially when you look outside of the conventions of fine art printmaking, and include all printed materials and forms, from billboards to paper towels. Although we often start with traditional processes in the classroom, connecting these efforts with the broader possibilities of addressing the ubiquity of prints in our lives becomes an important point of departure.

Another is considering the role technology has played in our lives and in our students lives. Did you grow up with 45's, 8 tracks, cassettes, cd's, or digital

downloads? How has your relationship to technology shaped how you communicate and use certain print methods? Why were you taught one method over another? The history of technology in the arts and how it shapes image production is another important aspect of the visual arts that can be addressed in the printmaking studio.

And finally, in our hyper-pluralistic culture interdisciplinary study in academia should not write off one form of artistic practice over another; that all have potential to contribute to the dialogue at hand. If we are to defend the vitality of printmaking, we must be able to defend a wide variety of artistic practice. In this effort we can avoid a skewed view in which printmaking dies or the digital revolution (whatever that may be) wins.

In regards to students and technology, we should acknowledge that for most of them, even though they may enjoy a printmaking course immensely, many will never pull a print again in their lives. The computer, however, will remain central to their lives as a constant tool of communication, and cultural sustenance. The simple act of sending paper and plate through a press must be connected with larger intentions as students move beyond the fundamentals of the processes to maintain the relevance of printmaking. Our students already communicate incessantly through the use of technology: cell phones, text messaging, instant messaging, and email (perhaps more than they should, particularly during class). Printmaking can also satiate this need to communicate and disperse images and messages through technology. So one of the values of printmaking within an academic setting, is how it can expand ones vocabulary and ability to communicate in nuanced ways, as well as slow it down to actually consider what is it that we are communicating.

I feel that looking at the history of printing and technology, also provides an important context for printmaking within academia. The trajectory of technology and communication has been to disseminate information to ever greater numbers at greater speeds while simultaneously putting these means within everyone's reach. Without moveable type and 550 years of page design and typography, we wouldn't be sitting at computer's using Microsoft Word and Adobe InDesign with personal inkjet printers attached. Our desire to communicate images and words, especially with technology, is seemingly insatiable. When viewed this way, the woodcut, the telegraph, and the cellphone camera, don't seem that different in that they all fulfill a similar impulse in different ways. All came into widespread use when not only was the technology mastered, but when they were seen as socially acceptable and needed means of communication. Fine art printmaking already has a complex system of conventions in place, and a position within the visual arts. If we remain open to different technologies co-existing and collectively contributing to art making and

communication, printmaking will hopefully remain an important part of this endeavor.

To see the use of digital media in the arts as a 'death knell' for printmaking is to fail to realize how dominated our lives are by technology and how so many different technologies coexist. Print, radio, the telephone, TV, the internet have all found their roles within our culture, and evolve in relation to one another. The thought that art or printmaking is jeopardized by technology is to assume that art is somehow pure of these intrusions, which it has never been.

The other end of argument, is that the latest and greatest technology, in our case, digital media, is set out to eliminate all other forms of technology. If we consider what it took for most of us to get here to this conference, the dominance of digital technology is mind-boggling and it is easy to see how it can produce fears both real and irrational. We wouldn't be here without the digital tracking of credit cards to purchase flights, access the airline's reservation system, monitor air traffic, track taxi cabs through gps systems, and track the container that came in through the Port of Long Beach, that may have provided some of last night's meal.

The relationship of printmaking to technology and culture is far more complicated than a simple win or lose battle. The omnipresence of digital technology gives new life to the handmade and importance to slowness. Hi-tech and the handmade are not intrinsically at odds with one another either. Utilizing digital technology connects us with contemporary culture in a way that applying a hard-ground cannot - it makes us participants in the present. But it also connects us with a culture driven by technological progress, corporate power, endless marketing and global inequities. And because of these things, we turn to something that has resonance with us individually, and allows us to communicate individually, such as printmaking, regardless of what technology it may utilize, we can use it to contribute to this complex dialogue.

I show a few slides that illustrate how naturally digital media becomes part of artistic practice, but I should first warn you that not everything I'll show will be prints.

I will start with a couple of examples of my work so you have a sense of where my views are coming from. My work typically relies on a careful balance between video or photographs that I take, working with this information in the computer, and print eventually turning it into prints. This wall painting was done to create a mirrored view of Spokane, like a reflection you might find in one of the nearby lakes. But in this instance, the reflected skyline from the highway becomes yet more views of this sprawling built environment. The image is

developed from video stills which have been projected onto the wall and then painted in by hand.

Much of the work I have been doing recently focuses on the interminable sprawl that sprouts up around highways. This lithograph is for an exchange portfolio organized by Shaurya Kumar, which features the gas station sign as the prominent beacon of our landscape.

The artist Christiane Baumgartner, whose work you see here, forces us to reconsider our relationship to time, speed and technology through her large scale woodcuts. Her images are stills pulled from video she often shoots along motorways. The medium of video allows for the easy fragmentation of moments - time and place is dislocated, repeated, accelerated, slowed down, stretched, and compressed. The collision of video and woodcut arrests these images, offering a new power to this age-old method of printing images. The flickering lines across the video monitor, become slow and careful carvings which offer some understanding of how space and time now operate for us in the 21st Century.

These prints by Terry Winters are an amalgamation of organic and technical drawing that would not be possible without an openness to experimentation and what different technologies can reveal in his complex drawings. The series 'Graphic Primitives' make known the interplay that takes place between the hand, digital technology and the machine. His drawings are digitally scanned and used to guide a laser to carve the images into cherry wood. They are then printed with a white ink on handmade paper, which is then painted with black sumi ink and rinsed with water. This leaves an image that is constantly flipping between positive and negative pushing the physicality of these images to the forefront. So they embody the best of all these tools and would not be possible without this careful marriage.

The artist Michelle Forsyth asserts the power of the handmade while acknowledging our reliance on and complicity with digital media, and, in particular, its ability to instantaneously distribute and multiply images of trauma and suffering. Forsyth travels to sites throughout North America where various disasters have occurred and lives have been lost. Her photographs of these sites, taken long after the event has taken place, sometimes up to a century later, are of mundane things such as memorial flowers, the surrounding landscape, or glimpses of buildings. In her ongoing series of cut paper works titled 'ostinatos', which means a continually repeated musical phrase, she transcends the unifying and desensitizing grid of the digital photograph. By breaking the image down into its pixels, she meticulously refashions each one out of numerous pieces of paper and felt cut into circles and flower shapes which are then pinned to the wall. The reassembled images become

painstaking testimonies of color and beauty that speak to the processes of mourning, grief and renewal.

The Bay area artist Lucy Puls scavenges her neighborhood for the detritus of consumer culture. She uses not only the found objects themselves, but also photographs of the items she finds. These photos, printed onto an organza like fabric, are carefully integrated into her installations, becoming both surrogate sculptures and sculptural objects. The image is freed from its preciousness becoming part of the space it occupies rather than only a window onto another space. Devices as commonplace as a digital camera and home photo printer become useful tools for her when she is determining the arrangement of her installations. Here she has worked over several photos placed in her sketchbook to determine how to stack the speakers in this sculptural sound installation. This is the final arrangement of the work titled 'Arma Machina'.

During a two month long journey to the Halley Research Station in Antarctica, British artist Simon Faithfull produced a sketch of his voyage each day on his PDA. The very limited drawing capabilities of this device perhaps best communicate the awesome vastness and isolation of this remote location, the effort it takes to get there and the restrictions the environment places on its visitors. [SLIDE] Each of the 56 drawings he created were emailed day by day to several thousand people, as well as the CCA in Glasgow. Each drawing the CCA received was etched into plexiglas and put on display and one by one gallery slowly became filled with these faint, terse images. To me, this action seems to embody what is so central to printmaking: communication, drawing, materiality and multiplicity. It is another example of how keeping the dialogue open to different technologies, ideas, and circumstances helps us better understand what we are engaged with.

Another quality central to printmaking is the interplay between the matrix and its variability. Perhaps an ultimate example of this is Allan McCullom's 'Shapes Project'. Using the readily available software Adobe Illustrator, he drew several hundred shapes that can be selected and combined according to a system to create unique shapes simply through copying and pasting. He has designed this system so that there can be a unique shape for every living person on earth when human population reaches its peak of about 9.1 billion, predicted to occur at the middle of this century. To make sure there really will be enough, his system will actually produce 31 billion possible combinations. From these digitally hand assembled files, he can produce these shapes through a vast array output devices and various materials. Many have already been produced as inkjet print monotypes, and CNC cut wood, metal and corian.