

The Empreinte in Sculpture and Printmaking

Jacques van der Merwe

In this paper, I will define the word empreinte and explain its functions, inspired by Georges Didi-Huberman's formulation of the empreinte. Furthermore, I will argue that there are similarities between my sculptural work *Selfportret | | Self-portrait (Suspense)* and that of printmaking concerning the empreinte.

In an anamnestic attempt to recall my past, I am constantly challenged with disremembering. As an immigrant, I am interested in how memories function, specifically the fading of memories. It is not necessarily the lost memory I am interested in but more the visualisation of a fading memory.¹ My attempts to visualise a fading memory seem to resonate best when I make art. Through this journey of tracing my fading memories, I came across Didi-Huberman's concept of empreinte. I found that the empreinte directly evokes the function of memories. In the words of Georges Perec, "An artwork is always done in relation to something that no longer exists, which may be fixed for a moment in the visual process, like a trace, but which has vanished" (Perec, 1997, p. 133).

When defining the empreinte, Didi-Huberman considers two aspects. First, he states that the purpose of the empreinte is to "produire une marque par la pression d'un corps sur une surface" ["produce a mark by the pressure of a body on a surface"]² (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p. 27). Such an action will leave behind an indentation or embossed mark. A direct translation from French to English is difficult. The term empreinte encompasses more than just imprinting. The entire operational chain or mechanical process of pressing onto a substrate and leaving a mark or a trace is the closest description to an empreinte. As a result, it combines 'print' or 'motion', 'imprint' or 'mark', and 'impression' or 'trace' into a single movement and idea. In one motion, the referent presses down onto a surface. At that moment of contact, the referent covers the imprinted surface until the referent moves away from the impression, leaving a trace. After the origin is lost or destroyed, the empreinte can continue

to imprint until the embossed or stamped mark becomes a vestige. This complete process is known as the empreinte. Therefore, when materiality meets temporality, it leaves a mark as an empreinte.

As such, Didi-Huberman argues that the empreinte achieves a "contre-modele dela notion d'art" ["counter model to the idea of art"] (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p. 27). For *L'Empreinte*, an exhibition that Didi-Huberman and Didier Semin curated at the Centre Pompidou in 1997, they consciously avoided selecting artists using traditional artmaking procedures, focusing on those using discarded or neglected art materials and artefacts. Examining the natural transference



Figure 1



Figure 2

1 A neurochemical 'memory trace' is formed when we learn something new. This trace gradually disintegrates with time. The term decay theory was first written about in *The Psychology of Learning* by Edward Thorndike in 1914. This theory states that if someone does not use or access the memory information they have developed, the memory trace will fade and erode with time.

2 Translations from French to English are my own.

Figure 1: Jacques van der Merwe, installation view of *Selfportret | | Self-portrait (Suspense)*, 2019-2020. Plaster, cotton wool, bandages, water, ink, beeswax, and glass, (52cm x 52cm x 120cm) x 2, Pop Gallery, Brisbane, Australia.

Figure 2: Jacques van der Merwe, detail of *Selfportret | | Self-portrait (Suspense)* shows the residue of the figure's materials caused by the water current, 2019-2020. Plaster, cotton wool, bandages, water, ink, beeswax, and glass, (52cm x 52cm x 120cm) x 2.

of form from one surface to the next, the exhibition featured moulds, markings, traces, prints and impressions. One year before *L'empreinte*, Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois curated an exhibition on formlessness called *L'informe* based on Georges Bataille's concept of *informe*, which intended to dismantle categories in art. Because these exhibitions depend on materiality as an operational base and use the trace or imprint, they are worth mentioning when writing about the *empreinte*.

The second part of Didi-Huberman's definition of *empreinte* finds its inspiration in two prominent twentieth-century theorists. The first is Aby Warburg, who believed that the past could haunt the present by reappearing after long periods of absence, causing images from the past to interact with the present, opening an eerie form of temporality. Objects such as moulds, plaster casts, and votive objects sparked the concept of "survival" *Nachleben*, the ghostly survival or afterlife of images (Didi-Huberman, 2017, p. 26). So formed a modern model of temporality through the return of these objects and images. The second influence is Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin, images recur in time, where the past intersects the present in a "flash". When an image flashes up from the past and alters or modifies the present moment into a "constellation" of images, it generates a dialectic image (Benjamin, 1999, p. 463). Didi-Huberman refers to the recurring image from another time or existence as an "anachronistic point of view" (Pelzer-Montada, 2018, p. 185), where an origin is more of an anachronism – a dialectical departure, a break in history itself – rather than an object from which everything originates. Alternatively, a dialectic image is when changes in an image of an object take place through the lineage of time. Therefore, history can influence an image or object through time, recreating multiple versions of itself.

The *empreinte* "cuts across time" anachronistically, harkening to age-old family and religious rites (Didi-Huberman, 2007, p. 7). Therefore, *empreintes* are not only from our era but also from the beginning of time and will exist well into the future. When looking at the *empreintes* in this way, it is easy to see that they are dialectic. In this essay, I will refrain from discussing the anachronistic aspects of the *empreinte* and only concentrate on the mark-making side of the *empreinte*. Although Didi-Huberman stretches the point that "we must so to speak, play with both these timeframes if we want to think" of "the *empreinte*" (Pelzer-Montada, 2018, p. 185), it must be remembered that the origins of both printmaking and mould-making are not contemporary, and therefore, the *empreinte* as an anachronistic tool is hard to ignore. However, I will focus on the methodologies of these two practices of printmaking and sculpture and how they use the *empreinte* to create agency.

The *empreinte* starts as soon as one enters the conceptual stage of an artwork: the moment a person draws from past experiences and therefore from memories. These experiences can be post, collective, fictional, traditional or mundane everyday occurrences. Visual ideas typically start with thoughts that are translated into thumbnail

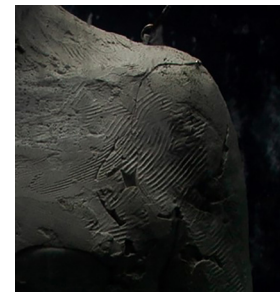


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3: Jacques van der Merwe, detail of *Selfportret | Self-portrait (Suspense)* shows the hatching shadows on the surface of the sculpture, 2019–20, plaster, cotton wool, bandages, water, ink, beeswax, and glass
 Figure 4: Jacques van der Merwe, detail of *Selfportret | Self-portrait (Suspense)* of ink stamp, 2019–2020. Plaster, cotton wool, bandages, water, ink, beeswax, and glass
 Figure 5: Jacques van der Merwe, detail of *Selfportret | Self-portrait (Suspense)* shows the mould and casting process, 2019–20, plaster, cotton wool, bandages, water, ink, beeswax, and glass

sketches or maquettes. As a result, the action of image production finds its foundation in the empreinte, imprinted from memories within our consciousness, as a method of duplicating one's thinking moves from consciousness to paper or objects, empreinting our knowledge and surroundings creates a "presence" (Brusatin and Jean Clair, 1995, p. 68).

I drew from my experiences of immigration to form Selfportret | | Self-portrait (Suspense), which consists of two figures cast from the same mould, hanging inside separate but adjacent glass containers. In a rhythmic motion over 45 minutes, the left glass container steadily fills with water rising from the bottom until the figure inside becomes submerged. The water then switches sides to the right glass container and repeats the pattern. This flow continues in a see-saw motion throughout the exhibit, causing the materials to erode slowly and leaving the inside of the glass walls covered in sediment. The current produced by the water flow slowly leaves its empreinte in the form of erosion. This action is like an etching plate entering an acid bath. On a microscopic level, the acid slowly eats away at the surface of the metal, just as the water erodes the surface of the plaster, wax, and cotton wool to produce an effect that symbolises the fading of memories. The index is always subject to 'degradation', and it rarely exists in its purest form (Gibbons, 2008, p. 30). The sediment that forms through the operation of empreinte and "slippage" makes the erosion visible as something "formless" (Bois and Krauss, 1997, p. 15).

Location, texture, and form play vital roles in the appearance and individuality of the empreinte. Each place where an empreinte occurs is unique, based on the texture, materials and malleability of the substrate and the actions, gestures, and procedures used to generate it.

When I produce a form in sculpture, not only the shape is important but also the textures. Placing textures in the correct positions on the surface of a sculpture concerning the form activates the sculpture and gives it life. For example, when one inscribes a sculpture's surface, the grooves form shadows similar to engraved tonal lines. The deeper the scratches on the sculpture's surface, the darker the shadows appear; the deeper and more frequent the engraving lines in an etching plate, the stronger the representation of shadows will be as empreintes in the printed editions.

To finish a clay sculpture, I smear and smudge the surface to create highlights, before making the mould. With the correct lighting, the empreinte of the smear forces the forms forward, creating highlights on the sculpture's surface. In intaglio printing, an artist will use plate tone by smearing or smudging the ink just the correct amount to create the desired outcome.

A substrate in printmaking acts like an original sculpture in clay or plaster just before the mould-making process. The mould is in direct contact with the empreinte, making it "heavily impregnated with memory" (Gibbons, 2008, p. 30). Like a sculptor's mould, a



Figure 6: Above Right Tim Mosely, materialising my fear (on display in Mirror Image: Prints and Plates, Gympie Regional Gallery, Queensland. Australia), 2014, Vanish of alcohol aquatint on copper bleed printed onto Hahnemuhle paper, (34cm x 25cm), Edition: Variable edition of 4, Printed by the artist at QCA Print Studios,

Above Left Matrix: Copper plate, (34cm x 25cm) Photographer: Mick Richards. Figure 7: Jacques van der Merwe, detail of Selfportret | | Self-portrait (Suspense) showing the flanges on the sides of the figure. 2019-2020. Plaster, cotton wool, bandages, water, ink, beeswax, and glass, (52cm x 52cm x 120cm) x 2. Figure 8: Jacques van der Merwe, detail of Selfportret | | Self-portrait (Suspense) showing symmetry caused by the rising water. 2019-2020. Plaster, cotton wool, bandages, water, ink, beeswax, and glass, (52cm x 52cm x 120cm) x 2.

printmaker's printing press forms an integral part of the artmaking process for creating a print or a copy of a sculpture. On the other hand, it produces a lining, a kind of protective casing, a matrix in which the form appears to be protected by its counter form for a brief instant. The mould always hides the form; this process is part of the nature of the empreinte. The moment the mould contacts materiality – in this case, the sculpture – the mould starts the empreinte, and this is the same for a substrate and the printing press. "The invisible leaves its trace" (Larsson, 2020, p. 102) inside the mould or between the plate and the paper, ready for the empreinte that forms. The plasticity of the mould, be it rubber or plaster, makes close contact with the sculpture's surface, narrowing the gap between the sculpture and the mould to virtually nothing. This action enables the mould to translate into a negative empreinte of the sculpture, akin to when a printmaker lays a prepared paper onto an etched copper plate for the press to squeeze the two surfaces closer, narrowing the gap between them so much that the ink transfers onto the paper substrate as an empreinte. This leaves a negative image on the paper, just as the inside of the mould captures the textures and form of the clay. The mechanics of printing and moulding may initially appear unsophisticated since it might be considered child's play.

However, Didi-Huberman considers moulding and printing a highly sophisticated activity, which he refers to as the "cette valeur heuristique de l'empreinte" ["heuristic worth of the empreinte"] (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p. 31). Moulding creates something comparable to the original. However, when the original is the negative, the mould is different from itself. In this way, the empreinte reveals its theoretical and heuristic worth and functions as a dialectical mechanism. The dialectical function never alters the empreinte of recollection or the resemblance by contact. The empreinte always leaves a difference between the mould and the casting or the etching plate and the print; no empreinte is ever the same.

For a length of time, the mould and press cover or coat the substrate's surface, generating a matrix. This operation means the substrate becomes protected by the counter form, shielded from its outside environment. However, the same process turns on itself when the mould or press loses its grip. The process of taking an empreinte needs to tear off the resemblance

from the substrate it has taken hold of; the empreinte is therefore "predatrice" ("predatory") (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p. 240). It takes away from the substrate and isolates the surface. The revealing process even tears or breaks the resemblance to the substrate it once carried. This predatory behaviour is evident when one witnesses how small sculpture bits or even more significant parts of the master break off during the de-moulding process. The faded ink on an etching plate after it passes through the press also shows the devouring behaviour of the empreinte.

Using a rubber stamp in my work, I am directly and obviously involved with the empreinte. In this instance, the stamp signifies experiences in my life. This action of stamping ink onto the surface of my sculpture is a direct comparison to printmaking, where the action of stamping transfers the ink from one substrate to the next. Here again, we find an example of the predatory behaviour of the empreinte, where it takes ink from the inked surface and gives ink to the imprinted surface.

Didi-Huberman (2008, p. 242) writes “L’empreinte renverse tout” [“The empreinte reverses everything”]. The idea of the negative or inverted image has been with printmakers and sculptors from the beginning. The inside of a mould is mirrored for the sculptor. The sculpting process goes from positive to negative and back to positive. After my mould is clean and prepared for casting, the inverted process starts. I place materials such as cotton wool, plaster or wax into the mould. While doing this, I need to think in the positive while working in the negative. This upside-down thinking leads to having the materials in the right place once the cast is de-moulded and the empreinte reveals itself. This operational chain of the empreinte also mirrors itself in printmaking. The printmaker will mirror the images onto a copper plate so that the image becomes positive once printed.

I find it necessary to leave the flanges intact after de-moulding my work. The flanges reference the mould-making procedure and therefore carry a memory of the making process. In this way, the empreinte directly communicates in terms of past events to the viewer. Just as the flanges of the mould press the plaster past the contours of the sculpted form, bleeding occurs when ink appears in unintended areas on the sheet in printmaking.

The empreinte doubles. In *Selfportret || Self-portrait (Suspense)*, when you look more closely at the water’s surface, a fold is formed in the reflection of the water. Symmetry is also evident in printmaking in the Rorschach test. The term “split representation”, first discussed by Franz Boas and later by Claude Levi-Strauss, is almost a universal observation (Morphy and Perkins, 2006, p. 58). On the one hand, this type of empreinte produces a duplicate, a similar one; on the other hand, it generates a duplication, division, and symmetry in the image. This doubling of the empreinte is also evident in the title of my work *Selfportret || Self-portrait (Suspense)*. The double vertical bar becomes a hinge between Afrikaans and English and in turn, South Africa and Australia.

Furthermore, etching and sculpting both rely on the three-dimensional form. Although the sculptors’ tools look dissimilar to the tools of the printmaker, they both break the surface of the substrate to create an empreinte. This mechanical operation of removing or adding material to the substrate in printing and sculpture is essential for the empreinte to exist.

In conclusion, printmaking and sculpture are not that different in practice regarding the empreinte, although printmaking operates

in two dimensions and sculpture in three dimensions. In both cases, the empreinte works with the substrate, leaving a mark or a dent as evidence of past actions. Furthermore, the empreinte links intrinsically to time and materiality through the actions of the body when impacting a surface through motion.

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Jacques van der Merwe immigrated from South Africa to Australia in 2008. He now lives and works near Brisbane, Australia. Sculpture is his primary practice; however, he also draws and occasionally enjoys painting. Van der Merwe completed a first-class Master's in Visual Arts (MAVA) at Queensland College for Art (QCA) in 2020. Currently, he is enrolled at QCA for a Doctor of Visual Arts Degree.

Van der Merwe participated in various group exhibitions in South Africa, France and Australia, including several solo exhibitions in Australia. In 2020 he received a Griffith University Postgraduate Research Scholarship.

Later this year, van der Merwe is looking forward to attending an artist residency at The Centro Cultural La Cupula in Mexico.

IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1: Jacques van der Merwe, installation view of Selfportret | Self-portrait (Suspense), 2019-2020. Plaster, cotton wool, bandages, water, ink, beeswax, and glass, (52cm x 52cm x 120cm) x 2, Pop Gallery, Brisbane, Australia.

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