

THE SUBTLITIES OF COLOUR: CAN COLOUR BE USED TO EVOKE SUBLIME QUALITIES?

Fiona Hamilton

ABSTRACT

The book "Finding the Mother Tree" by forest ecologist Suzanne Simard explores how trees communicate through mycorrhizal fungi to exchange water, nutrients, and warn of impending danger. Ancient and mature trees nurture their offspring through these networks, exchanging water and nitrogen with other species. The discovery of the "Mother Tree" theory is a positive message of connectivity, education, and knowledge, but it is undermined by the fact that woodlands and forests worldwide are under threat, and the implications for the environment are significant.

I question whether it is possible to evoke the concept of the sublime to make us consider our place in the natural world and the importance of mature mother trees in healthy ecosystems.

My prints display a subtle but intentional use of colour. The relationship between colour and tone is intrinsic to the sublime qualities I aim to invoke in the work. I use drypoint etching, primarily employing subtle earth tones with additional colour in the form of chine collé or lithographic ink.

I draw on Joseph Albers' Interaction of Colour experiments to examine how my use of colour, tone, light, and dark has an effect on the feeling of an image and of what I am trying to convey. The concept of the sublime is ultimately highly personal. I draw on Roland Barthes' "punctum" to analyse my own response.

COLOUR AND PAPER

Since colour has always been an intrinsic part of my artwork, I regularly used it without question. When I started my MA in 2021, one of my tutors suggested that I remove all colour from my work,

I considered this seriously and began working in black and white. At that point, I was concentrating on etching and wood engraving, so this seemed a straightforward task. However, I faced a challenge when chine collé with its soft natural tones caught my attention.

I became intrigued with chine collé while working on this monochrome landscape. The technique added a variety of tones and textures to my prints. By using different types of printmaking paper, I could change tones and achieve various shades of grey. The qualities of the tissues seemed to add another dimension to the work. Fine tissues can



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 1. Ashton Court 17th October (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Digital photograph
 Figure 2. Ashton Court 7th December (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Digital photograph

have a sheen when printed that when coupled with transparency, seem to add an ethereal glow. On the other hand, warmer toned tissue can add texture and warm up the colour palette. The tissues provided an additional dimension that black and white alone couldn't achieve, leading to the effect I was looking for in my work.

I began exploring the concept of the sublime in contemporary art and how artists and printmakers addressed climate issues. Intaglio printmaking and the sublime share a connection through the heavy use of dark and light.

RESEARCHING TREES

In the summer of 2022, I discovered the work of Suzanne Simard. Her book *Finding the Mother Tree* (2021) describes her discovery of the way trees communicate through the mycorrhizal fungal network to exchange water and nutrients, and even warn of dangers. Simard's concept of 'The Mother Tree' highlights a positive message of connectivity, education and knowledge. Unfortunately, this is overshadowed by the widespread threat to woodlands and forests, which has massive implications for the environment

I had already been exploring trees and their connections to the sublime, but this theory made me consider how I could use it to draw attention to the challenges faced by trees. In Emily Brady's *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, Brady (2013) writes about how the sublime can be used to develop "a moral attitude toward nature" and that our attention should be directed at "natural qualities" that evoke strong sensations

So for this body of work, I aimed to evoke a connection between the viewers and the artwork. I achieve this through highly detailed drawings for my prints. I work with drypoint etching that requires many hours of meticulous work, which can be tough on the hands and often frustrating, but results in a personal connection with the prints. Although I do not work in photographic detail, I strive for realistic representation, using light and dark, and using photographs as reference.

COLOUR, MEMORY AND THE SUBLIME

I have a vivid memory from my childhood of looking up at a weeping willow tree in the village I grew up in in Wiltshire. It was an enormous and very old tree. I remember looking up and watching the wind blowing the branches from side to side like hair. I really enjoyed looking up at this tree, I connected with it at a young age, and the memory has not left me, even though the tree has since been cut down.

I realized that one's own experience of the sublime is very subjective, I may not necessarily create artwork that is considered 'sublime', but



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3. Greville Smyth Cedar (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Drypoint with chine collé, 460 x 630 mm
 Figure 4. Scots Pine trial proofs (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Drypoint with chine collé, 460 x 630 mm
 Figure 5. Scots Pine (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Drypoint with chine collé, 460 x 630 mm

I can explore sublime qualities such as dark, light, vastness, fear, awe, and an environmental message (ecological sublime). The subjects I chose are also personally significant to me. I considered Roland Barthes concept of punctum. In *Camera Lucida* (1980, p.27), Barthes defines the punctum as the point of interest or the traumatic point. He describes it as “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)”. Therefore, each subject I choose must hold that ‘punctum’ for me.

I spent a lot of time in Ashton Court and Greville Smyth Park photographing the environment: the trees, the undergrowth, dead logs, light through branches. I make these trips regularly to record the changes in the differing seasons and weathers. A crisp, bright winter’s day has a cool blue sky and harsh shadows on naked trees while an autumn day has rich oranges, yellows, reds and browns. If I were to attempt to replicate these scenes in an etching with black and white, and the tones in between, could I capture the experience? Photographs serve as a record of the moment, but memory is a powerful tool at my disposal. For me, memory brings out specifics and can exaggerate colours, as well as the cold or sunny disposition of the day, all of which will influence the final piece.

The beauty of Japanese tissue was that I could use it to achieve the desired feeling in my artwork. My etching Greville Smyth Cedar is a very detailed drypoint which I initially printed onto white paper. This resulted in a stark black and white print. My second attempt used a pale, thin Gampi paper which had a slightly more muted but similarly harsh feel due to the shiny tissue. My third and more successful attempt involved a warm Kitakata paper which resulted in a more muted print that blended better with the paper.

I didn’t realize immediately that my memory was taking over and influencing what worked. But it quickly became apparent which type of tissue worked for which print. The amount of negative space had an influence too, if there was too little, the shiny Gampi would often be lost.

I began to look at Josef Albers to find out how these tones were influencing the feel of the pieces along with the black and white. In *Josef Albers Black and White*, Weber discusses how black and white can be used to give artwork a “rapid pulse” or a “chemical spark” and how tones of colour can be used to warm and cool the image (Waddington Custot, 2014, p.5). It is true that the starting point of the black and white etching has quite a pulse (to me).

When looking at the addition of colour, especially with chine collé, Albers explains in *Interaction of Color* that “color paper is preferred to paint”. He lists several reasons which include: speed, colour consistency, repetition, and the lack of texture from brush marks. He also discusses how we can “choose from a large collection of tones, displayed in front of us, and can thusly compare neighbouring and



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure 6. *Interaction of Color* (1973), screen printed book

Figure 7. *Autumn Light* (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Drypoint with chine collé, 460 x 630 mm

Figure 8. *Winter Chestnut* (2023) by Fiona Hamilton. Drypoint, 320 x 440 mm

contrasting colours". (Albers, 2006, pp. 6,7) This advantage of using tissue means that I can experiment with different papers until I'm satisfied, and I get to know each paper and its qualities.

Different papers react differently for each print. There are various factors to consider including the memory of the experience, and how much dark or light is present in the artwork. This can be partly explained by Albers when we consider how colours appear when next to one another and how the size of the colour area influences this effect (Albers, 2006, pp. 84, 85).

I wanted to explore this further and I employed the use of a gold pigment lithographic layer in the print "Autumn Light". This is a drypoint with lithographically printed Kitakata chine collé. The lithographic layer is created from a photolitho plate of a painting of the same scene as depicted in the drypoint layer, but at a slightly different angle. My objective was to make the image appear as if it was in motion; the litho layer was the trace of where the trees in the print had been. The gold ink was chosen for a subtle sheen and the tone being close to the Kitakata paper. Perhaps the time of year, autumn, also influenced my choice. Similarly, Albers would apply veneers to paint colours to change the appearance as the sheen would add an extra dimension (Malloy, 2015, p.6). This additional layer indeed enhances the print.

Winter Chestnut portrays an old sweet chestnut tree that I encountered on a bright November day. In this piece I utilized the starkness of the black and white of paper and ink only. The bright light created very dark shadows and bright light. I challenged myself to avoid using chine collé and to make use of the lack of any tonality to create this "rapid pulse" (2014, p.5).

I exhibited a selection of this series at an exhibition at Frankenstein Press, Bristol, in March and April 2024. Importantly, they were exhibited unframed so the raised textures from the plate and the chine collé layers were easily accessible. During the private view, I spoke to several visitors who shared their responses to the artworks. Some of the comments included that they felt a sense of movement, and that the pieces evoked memories of experiences: particularly the haptic memory of how tree bark feels, and the experience of being in nature. I couldn't really have hoped for more as this is exactly what I hoped to convey through this series. I feel that the tones, subtle as they are, make all the difference here. I wondered if anyone felt a similar sensation to my own, when I looked up at the willow, all those years ago.



Figure 9

Figure 9. Westonbirt Oak (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Etching with chine collé, 560 x 760 mm

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Albers, J. (1973) *Interaction of Color*. Starnberg: Josef Keller Verlag.

Albers, J. (2006) *Interaction of Color – Revised and Expanded Edition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Barthes, R. (1980) *Camera Lucida*. London: Vintage.

Brady, E. (2013) *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy : Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature* [online]. New York: Cambridge University Press. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139018098> [Accessed 04 January 2023].

Malloy, E., ed. (2015) *Intersecting Colors: Josef Albers and His Contemporaries* [online]. Massachusetts: Amherst College Press. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10033673> [Accessed 06 May 2024].

Simard, S. (2021) *Finding the Mother Tree*. London: Penguin Random House.

The Mother Tree Project (2023) *The Mother Tree Project* [online]. Available from: <https://mothertreeproject.org/> [Accessed 06 May 2024].

Waddington Custot Galleries (2014) *Joseph Albers Black and White*. London: Waddington Custot.

AUTHOR

Fiona Hamilton
fiona@fiona-hamilton.co.uk
www.fiona-hamilton.co.uk

Fiona Hamilton is a Bristol based multi-disciplinary printmaker. Her work explores the ecological sublime and an appreciation of the majesty of nature. She uses detailed intaglio etching, drypoint, lithography and chine collé to draw the viewer into an ethereal landscape that has an impact on our sense of place in relation to the natural world. She primarily uses black and white, utilizing the natural tones of chine collé and sometimes layers of lithographic colour, to introduce warmth to the stark palette. The harsh contrasting tones of black and white are used invoking a sublime emotional connection.

IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1. Ashton Court 17th October (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Digital photograph
Figure 2. Ashton Court 7th December (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Digital photograph



Figure 3. Greville Smyth Cedar (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Drypoint with chine collé, 460 x 630 mm
Figure 4. Scots Pine trial proofs (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Drypoint with chine collé, 460 x 630 mm



Figure 5. Scots Pine (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Drypoint with chine collé, 460 x 630 mm
Figure 6. Interaction of Color (1973), screen printed book



Figure 7. Autumn Light (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Drypoint with chine collé, 460 x 630 mm
Figure 8. Winter Chestnut (2023) by Fiona Hamilton. Drypoint, 320 x 440 mm



Figure 9. Westonbirt Oak (2022) by Fiona Hamilton. Etching with chine collé, 560 x 760 mm