

# PRINT, BODY, AND MEMORY: HAPTIC ENGAGEMENT WITH LARGE-SCALE PRINTS

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## ABSTRACT

When I started my Master of Fine Arts degree in 2020, I was interested in how the way memory is perceived and experienced can be expressed through printmaking, both in method and in content. Two months into my studies, South Africa entered a hard lockdown, and universities were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I lost access to my studio and had to pivot from my usual practice – which required the use of presses, darkrooms, and solvents – to one that could easily be undertaken in a small apartment. I shifted to creating detailed linocuts, which eventually culminated in the production of several large woodcuts in 2021. The production and printing of woodcuts of that size required an unexpected degree of physical engagement. Due to the size of the blocks, I was unable to visually resolve the image I was working on. Touch and frottage became the only way for me to ‘see’ the image I was working on. The haptic engagement with the woodblocks, both in terms of production and perception, inspired the creation of a large-scale installation consisting of 150 graphite rubbings taken from the block, which were exhibited together with the prints and the woodblocks. My heightened awareness of my physical body during the production of the blocks, the subsequent labour of hand printing, and the creation of the frottage installation led me to reconsider my theoretical approach to memory and incorporate its material and physiological aspects into my work.

When I started my Master of Fine Arts degree, I was broadly interested in how the visual language of printmaking could be used as an analogy of the processes of memory, in particular, one that incorporates its nuances. My work responded in part to Brollo’s (2013) essay *Untying the knot: Memory and forgetting in contemporary print work*, in which Brollo pointed out the problematic nature of the platonic metaphor of memory as an imprint. I set out to investigate the philosophical parallels between the processes of memory and printmaking through content and methods. I titled

my Masters of Fine Arts *Absent Presence*, to refer to the intertwinement of forgetting and remembering. Simultaneously, the title refers to the interwoven relationship between absence and presence that is at the core of printmaking. As Didi-Huberman (2018, p. 188) wrote:

I would say that an [imprint]<sup>1</sup> is a ‘dialectical image’, [...] something that is as related to contact (a foot sinking into sand) as it is to loss (the absence of the foot in its impression); it is as related to contact with loss as it is to loss of contact.



Figure 1



Figure 2

### Figure Titles and information

Figure 1: A chair, empty by necessity, 2022, Woodcut, ink on washi paper, 90 cm x 120 cm

Figure 2: The summer garden, 2022, Woodcut, ink on washi paper, 90 cm x 120 cm

1. Originally “empreinte”

Most forms of print rely on contact, or touch, between at least two bodies: the matrix and the substrate. Reeves (1999, p.70) stated that "That printmakers equate the print with the body is not in doubt". Reeves pointed out several metaphorical connections between print and the body, such as the ability of the print to "bleed" over the margin or for the matrix – a late Latin term for womb – to reproduce. The printmaker's reliance on touch as a means of reading the matrix further connects their body with the print. This is by no means unique to printmaking, especially when considering the plastic arts, but a print differs in that touch is employed to read an abstracted two-dimensional image on the three-dimensional surface of the matrix rather than a three-dimensional object.

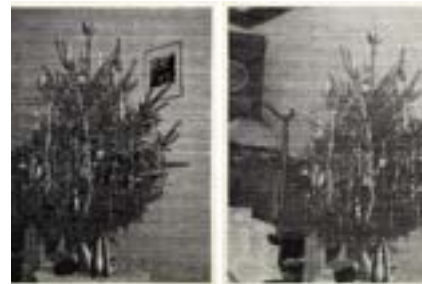


Figure 3

While the body of work I produced as part of my MFA included a variety of media and processes, for the purpose of this essay, I will focus on the creation of four woodcuts and the subsequent production of a frottage installation, and how this raised an awareness of my body and sense of touch. I will also reflect on how such a haptic engagement informed my theoretical approach to memory.



Figure 4

Two months into my degree, South Africa entered a hard lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and universities were closed. For about six months, I lost access to my studio and had to pivot from my usual practice which required the use of presses, darkrooms, and solvents to one which could be safely undertaken in my apartment. I started creating detailed linocuts that took weeks to complete, a meditative process that helped me cope with the uncertainty of the pandemic. Once I was allowed access to my studio again, I extended this form of printmaking to produce four large woodcuts.



Figure 5

The pandemic made me aware of the heightened awareness of touch that most printmakers already have, as they have to be vigilant of what they touch at all times in order to prevent ink transfer or skin contact with toxic chemicals. A cognisance of touch as a vector of contamination and as potentially hazardous is inherent to working as a printmaker. Conversely, touch is a crucial tool for the printmaker to gain knowledge of the matrix they are producing; Marks (2008), for example, recognised that the proximal senses, not just the distance senses of sight and sound, can be epistemological in function.

It is not unusual for most printmakers to privilege touch over sight when reading a matrix, especially a relief cut. The raised areas and grooves of a relief or intaglio matrix that hold ink are difficult to perceive visually. The quality of a mark is easier to determine by running one's fingertip over the matrix or testing the depth of the grooves with one's fingernail than merely by sight.

The creation of the four large woodcuts specifically required that I rely on my sense of touch more than any other prints I produced, including the linocuts. *The summer garden* and *A chair, empty by necessity*, both feature an outdoor scene with several people sitting around a table. The prints are large, with the image measuring 1800 cm x 90 cm,

Figure 3: Christmas tree after Boltanski (Diptych), 2022, Woodcut, ink on washi paper, 90cm x 80 cm each  
 Figure 4: Woodcut Production 1  
 Figure 5: Woodcut Production 2

rendering the chairs almost life-sized and letting the viewer imagine themselves taking a seat. *Christmas Tree after Boltanski* is a diptych composed of two woodcuts, each measuring 80 cm x 90 cm in image size. It is based on two separate family photographs of the same Christmas tree, differing only slightly in crop and brightness. The work was created in response to a black-and-white photographic diptych by Christian Boltanski – simply titled *Christmas Tree* – that shows the same Christmas tree in two different states.

The images of the woodcuts were translated from black-and-white photographs into a digitally generated linear halftone. The generated image was subsequently transferred onto a woodblock and cut, thereby retaining its photographic quality. All four pieces were printed in black ink on cream-coloured Japanese paper.

The carving and printing of the woodcuts required a higher than expected degree of physical activity. All physical actions were exponentially larger when compared to the linocuts I had produced before, which measured no more than 40 cm x 30 cm. I became acutely aware of how touch was integral to all stages of the production process, from the preparation of the blocks to the final print. I started with the initial sanding of the block, where I used touch to read the quality of the grain, followed by transferring a laser print of the reference image, which needed to be rubbed onto the wood with the right amount of consistent force. The pressure and movement of my hands determined how clearly the image would transfer, which in turn informed the precision with which I was able to cut the block.

To achieve the resolution I wanted, I had to cut the very fine lines of the linear halftone with a 1 mm v-gouge. This meant that I had to be very close to the surface of the wood and use a magnifying visor to cut it accurately. The scale of the block determined that I could only work on small, isolated sections at a time, and was unable to visually resolve the image as I was working on it. I relied on the transferred print to guide me, and even that was not always easy, as often the toner did not transfer evenly. Thus, I had to use alternative means to evaluate the accuracy of my work. Specifically, I had to supplement my sight with touch. Due to the size of the blocks, I was not able to use any of the available presses to print them. Therefore, I ended up hand-printing all four editions with a Japanese baren and burnisher. Each print took me about 45 minutes to complete.

The repetitive motions of the cutting and printing of the woodblock frequently inflamed my joints and ligaments and caused backache. Even after I stopped actively thinking about the work performed that day, my body retained a visceral 'memory' of the production process. The memory of my labour seemed to be distributed throughout my body as if it was residing as much in my joints and muscles as in my mind.

As I was initially dealing mostly with photographic images and their relationship to memory, before the production of the woodcuts, I only considered the evocative, mnemonic qualities of sight<sup>2</sup> in my work.



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

2. Sound was also included in the exhibition through a soundscape that accompanied a film that kept repeating, which permeated the different rooms of the gallery.

Figure 6: Detail of The summer garden  
 Figure 7: Printing  
 Figure 8: Print and woodblock

The physically demanding production and lingering physical discomfort forced me to reconsider memory as embodied, and its creation, retention, and recall were not constrained exclusively to the distance senses of sight and sound. To create art that responds adequately to the nuances of memory, I felt it necessary to acknowledge the physiological and material aspects of memory. Specifically, I realised that if I were to comment on the physiological nature of memory and its analogous relationship to print, I needed to reference the role that tactility and hapticity played in the creation of my prints in the final presentation of my work. Involving a sense of touch would add an embodied dimension to my work. As Marks (2008, p. 128) wrote:

While vision and hearing can be experienced as bodily senses, as we've 'seen' they are strongly associated with abstraction and transcendence because of their ability to seem independent of the body. The embodied nature of the close senses of touch, taste, and smell is more evident, and thus they link us to the material world, indeed bringing it close to or into our bodies.

I would often refer to my work as being printmaking about printmaking. For the viewer, who might not be familiar with the process of printmaking, to understand how the print can be used to create nuanced analogies for memory, they would need to get a 'sense' of the matrix, and its relation to the final print.

Print is usually perceived to be, as Pelzer-Montada (2008b, p.75) put it, "an art of the surface"; a notion that often conflates it with superficiality in a metaphorical sense. However, the processes of printing, particularly relief and intaglio, rely on depth in a very literal sense. To printmakers, it is obvious that a matrix and a print are fundamentally dissimilar, but those unfamiliar with printmaking often do not recognise that they are spatially, materially, and visually<sup>3</sup> different. A print reduces the depth of the matrix to two dimensions and loses the dimension of tactility that is crucial to the production of the matrix.

To illustrate this point, I chose to exhibit the woodblocks of both *The summer garden* and *A chair, empty by necessity together* with their respective prints, facing each other on opposite sides of the room<sup>4</sup>. Pelzer-Montada (2008a, p. 4), referring to an artwork by Friedhard Kieheben titled *Line Reflection*, commented that "the presence of plate and print together, performs an 'outing' of that big taboo, the hidden generative principle of the print, the plate". The viewer is invited to compare the two and to seek out similarities and differences. During the exhibition, visitors were encouraged to touch the woodblocks. Their reactions were varied, interesting, and often surprised. Many would close their eyes and run their fingers over the carved grooves, or they would turn around and focus on detailed sections of the prints on the opposite wall, simultaneously feeling the same area on the block and exploring the relationship between their senses of touch and sight. Some visitors told me that the blocks did not feel as they expected them to<sup>5</sup>. I assume that many experienced a dissonance between touch and sight. What could be felt and what could be seen were difficult to



Figure 9



Figure 10

Figure 9: Graphite rubbings  
Figure 10: Loss of contact, contact with loss, 2022, Frottage, graphite on tissue paper and museum board, 2.4 m x 4.5 m installation, 120 cm x 90 cm per panel

3. In the sense that they are mirrored.

4. Additionally the installation also revealed the mechanisms of the printing process. One can imagine the walls moving towards each other and the block meeting the paper exactly as it did during printing, i.e., the earlier mentioned contact between two bodies that I described as being axiomatic to print.

5. Interestingly, several visitors also mentioned that they expected the black, inked areas to be sticky, even though they knew that the ink must have dried long ago.



correlate. Two-dimensional simulations of three-dimensional objects and scenes by way of raised lines on a flat surface – mimicking the projection of visual information on the retinal plane – are generally perceived as too abstracted and arbitrary to be interpreted correctly as an image (Klatzky, Lederman, and Metzger, 1985). The haptic experience of the viewer accurately reflected my own experience of cutting the woodblock, where, while using touch to read the surface of the block, I was not able to form an image of it in my mind's eye. Additionally, the difficulty or inability to resolve the image up close, coupled with an interest in how the woodblock was cut, prompted viewers to walk back and forth and alternate between looking at the complete image and at its isolated visual syntax. The viewer had to engage their whole body in viewing the print and matrix.

Another way I referenced tactility and hapticity in my body of work was through the inclusion of an installation of frottage prints. As mentioned earlier, touch was instrumental in reading the woodblocks as I was cutting them, since the scale was too large for me to make out the image by sight alone. Therefore, I routinely made graphite rubbings on scrap paper, which I then taped to the walls in order to visually review my progress. As more rubbings accumulated on my wall, they started to read as a single piece. This inspired a large-scale installation of graphite rubbings taken from the blocks, titled *Loss of contact, contact with loss*<sup>6</sup>. The installation consists of ten 120 cm x 90 cm panels of graphite rubbings on tissue paper fixed onto the museum board. The whole installation is about 2.4 m high and 4.5 m wide, covering almost the entire wall opposite the entrance to the gallery. Each panel is composed of fifteen 24 cm x 30 cm horizontal pieces of graphite rubbings taken from the blocks of *Christmas tree after Boltanski*, *The summer garden*, and *A chair, empty by necessity*, and arranged in a three-by-five grid. The rubbings are scrambled and rearranged, though not randomly: they are placed in such a way that there is a continuation of the halftone lines where possible. Some details, such as hands, pop out and give the impression that there is an overall image that sits just on the edge of perception.

The process of frottage on tissue paper is very delicate, and much more adept at picking up the textural subtleties of the woodblock than the prints I produced. I found the directness of frottage very attractive. It allowed me to visually suggest the hapticity of the production process and mirrored the way I would repeatedly move my fingers over the grooves to test them. The very term "tissue" paper invites comparisons to skin and touch. Additionally, the rubbings are not reflected impressions – as the prints are – but rather untransformed indices of the matrix. My hand is made visible through marks in the graphite that show the direction, pressure, and speed at which the rubbings were made. If my wrists and hands were tired or hurting, my mark-making changed, reflecting my physical state at that moment.

*Loss of contact, contact with loss* was the first work that visitors would see upon entering the gallery. The viewer was confronted with it before they were able to see the woodcuts. In the context of memory,

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6. The title is a reference to the previously mentioned quote by Didi-Huberman (2018, p.188): "I would say that an empreinte is a 'dialectical image' [...] something that is as related to contact (a foot sinking into sand) as it is to loss (the absence of the foot in its impression); it is as related to contact with loss as it is to loss of contact."

the installation was intended to speak of its fragmented nature. It is intended to parallel the process of remembering and the formation of a full memory through the stitching together of disparate impressions. When viewing the piece, pareidolia fills in missing parts as the mind tries to find sense, in much the same manner as missing elements in a memory are filled in through imagination. As the viewer leaves the exhibition, the images of the woodcuts disintegrate again. In the same manner that the viewer “remembered” the image upon entering, they “forgot” it again on exit.

In summary, the production of large woodcuts raised my awareness of how important an engagement of the full body is in printmaking. This made me conscious of how I employed touch throughout the production process, and caused me to re-evaluate my theoretical approach to my work, placing greater emphasis on the physiological aspect of the processes of memory. The intimacy of the proximal senses has a different impact on memory than the distance senses (Marks, 2008). Since touch (a proximal sense) played such an important role in the creation of my woodcuts, I felt it necessary to acknowledge and include it in the final presentation of my work.

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IMAGE GALLERY



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Figure 1: A chair, empty by necessity, 2022, Woodcut, ink on washi paper, 90 cm x 120 cm  
Figure 2: The summer garden, 2022, Woodcut, ink on washi paper, 90 cm x 120 cm





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Figure 3: Christmas tree after Boltanski (Diptych), 2022, Woodcut, ink on washi paper, 90c m x 80 cm each  
Figure 4: Woodcut Production 1





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Figure 5: Woodcut Production 2  
Figure 6: Detail of The summer garden



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Figure 7: Printing  
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Figure 9: Graphite rubbings

Figure 10: Loss of contact, contact with loss, 2022, Frottage, graphite on tissue paper and museum board, 2.4 m x 4.5 m installation, 120 cm x 90 cm per panel