

## THE DARK SIDE OF PRINTMAKING

Paula Smithson

This presentation examines print as a platform of multiple dimensions, providing an essential link between the traditions of handmade print and the use of new technologies. Exploring the potential of scale using photopolymer intaglio-type printing, using the material capabilities of the printed surface to connect what is viewed and experienced, I will reflect on my experience of this medium along with the research methods, practices, and technologies. More directly, this body of work considers ideas around the re-interpretation and repositioning of traditional printmaking skills and processes as part of a wider cross-disciplinary art practice. Large intaglio plates incorporate photopolymer technology to offer a view combining digital interpretation with the traditions of the hand-created mark and printed intaglio surface, resulting in a re-imagined vision linking digital aesthetics.

The themes explored in my work focus on the human form, inspired by my interests in theatre, performance, commedia dell'arte, and the carnivalesque. The current body of my work is concerned with performance, in particular spectatorship. I am interested in the tension and atmosphere during circus performances and how the space becomes charged, particularly the effect the aerialists' feats have on the audience and how

"...empathy for the performer generates the accelerated pulse..." (Simon, 2014)

This body of work explores the psychological impact performances have on the audience and how members of the public place themselves in the position of the performer, in particular how the aerialist exhilarates the audience by incorporating purposeful and well-practised mistakes. The pandemic deprived audiences of this tension and immersive experience; equally, performers were starved of the rapture and applause. This was at the forefront of my thoughts as The Big Kid circus was stranded in my hometown of Morecambe throughout the entirety of the first lockdown, further encouraging

me to expand my research and practice on this particular theme as a post-pandemic voice.

Before studying for an MA in Illustration at Manchester Metropolitan University, my practice focused on screenprint and collagraph, often combining the two. My proposal for the MA was to future-proof my practice and teaching career by digitally upskilling. As a result, I spent little time on print but embraced the opportunities of the digital environment to make props for short films. During this time, I attended performances to draw on location, including Blackpool Tower Circus, The Big Kid Circus, Circus Mondao, and the Moscow State Circus, along with immersive performances at carnivals.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and information

Figure 1: Into the void

Figure 2: # Untitled, use of ink marks for positives

Post-MA, I combined digital and analogue techniques to produce plates and positives for printed outcomes, at times deconstructing and reconstructing to make small books and dioramas, not satisfied that the work I was making at the time effectively communicated the concept. Therefore, in November 2019, I moved to the dark side of printmaking to upskill in etching, using copper sulphate solution and photopolymer intaglio-type printmaking as a way of communicating the concept more effectively. Working on small plates of A5 format and a scale of 10cm x 10cm, I had some relatively early success with this medium that encouraged me to embrace the process further, and I proceeded to explore colour combinations and multi-plate prints.

Then in March 2020, remote working and social distancing set in. Devoid of access to workshop facilities during the pandemic and lacking social interaction, I reached out to the online community and entered several creative challenges through social media and online exhibitions, including the IPE #12 Print Exchange and the Miniprint Kazanlak exhibition in Bulgaria. Having access to a portable etching press in my home studio enabled me to maintain some level of momentum by continuing to print the small plates I had made before lockdown. However, it was clear these would not sustain me through the entirety of lockdown so I was drawn to embrace new technologies more readily for image construction.

Drawing and investigating material are fundamental to my practice; I work from direct observation and memory with a focus on the human form. Traditional methods of image-making continue to play a vital role in my practice. I enjoy materiality and media experimentation, and painterly marks, ink washes, and marks left on surfaces from ink tubs in the printmaking studio have all been explored when creating recent positives for print. The use of digital tools continues to gain momentum in image-making; along with laser-cut paper stencils, the aim is to combine analogue and digital technologies to create multi-layered positives to expose to a single plate or create multi-plate prints. I continue to embrace interaction with the physical surface combined in Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator.

The liberation of being able to return to the printmaking studio post-lockdown, with access to the large-scale presses, encouraged me to embrace new challenges. Discussion with Tracy Hill, the lead artist and research associate at ArtLab Contemporary Print Studio, as to how I would move the project forward and set new goals for increasing impact within the work led to the decision to increase format. I made the decision of scale based on the question of 'How big can I go?' I was restrained only by the size of the largest developing tray, the width of the roll film for printing positives, and the bed of the press. The size of the developing tray is 90cm x 90cm, so with an allowance of 5cm on either side of the plate, I ordered plates at a scale of 80cm x 80cm. Herein lay the challenges ahead. Upon receiving my beautifully-cut, large-scale plates of 80cm x 80cm, I set about sourcing photopolymer, only to discover that the maximum

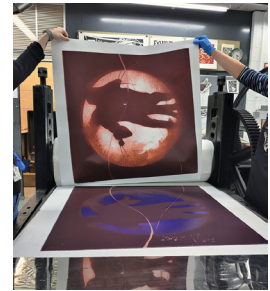


Figure 3

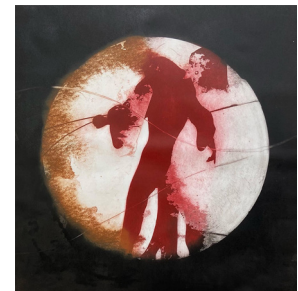


Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3: Pulling the print  
 Figure 4: Layered Intaglio type print  
 Figure 5: Layered Intaglio type plate - inked

width was approximately 60cm. As a result, I concluded that piecing the polymer would be the only option if I were to continue to work at this scale. Embracing the possibility of further enhancing the aesthetic of the plate, I chose to resemble lines within the original positive and somehow capture this essence when cutting the polymer film. More recently, I was informed that the manufacturers had changed the specifications of the film, having previously supplied it at a scale of approximately one metre.

Another challenge I did not factor in was paper size: Many mould-made papers have a width limit of 80cm, which meant I either needed to source extra-large sheets or work off the roll. Storage of large paper became an issue so the roll seemed to be the better option for initial artist proofs.

I explored the possibility of colour and colour combinations, initially exploring blue-black, the colour I had used in the small test plates. However, at scale this did not translate as effectively so I proceeded to experiment with alternatives, moving to the opposite spectrum of red-black, which was more effective, particularly with the addition of red for the inner circle. I felt this decision had a significant impact on how the image read as the inner glow of the print began to communicate an essence of danger and uncertainty.

Satisfied with the choice of colour, I was now keen to exploit the capabilities of photopolymer to investigate the limitations and boundaries of the medium. Many of the developments in my practice-based research have been a chain of events with one experiment leading to another, led by material investigation or an aesthetic sensibility. I started to research layering two positives to expose to the screen, but as they were both relatively consistent in opacity this just resulted in the image merging as one block.

I continued this experiment by creating layered intaglio types discussed by Keith Howard in *Non-Toxic Intaglio Printmaking* (1998). I re-laminated a previously exposed plate with an additional layer of polymer film and exposed a second positive to see how these combined when printed. The results were interesting and presented a shift in aesthetic and more abstract quality. I experimented with inverting the positives for some of the experiments: This was not as effective as using two positive images together as there was insufficient imagery to expose to the polymer film.

All restrictions and social distancing being lifted, the circus stranded in Morecambe during the first lockdown returned. The performance was sold out and the audience anticipation and tension in the big top were greater than before. Perhaps this was due to audiences being starved of live performances or perhaps to my skewed memory. The circus returned with a more vibrant and dramatic performance and received rapturous applause from an attentive audience. The vibrancy of colour within the big top and the combinations of soft and hard light had quite an impact on me. Returning inspired to the printmaking



Figure 6

Figure 6: Layered intaglio type print – Turquoise and Red

studio after the performance, I started to consider the significance of colour further and the impact colour would have on print.

In addition to being inspired by the colours of the circus, the colour of the polymer film was an interesting addition to the choice of colour used to ink the plate. These observations led me to explore the potential of adding blue ink, in particular Turquoise Lake, to the mix. After the colour of the ink, I considered the impact the choice of paper would have on the resulting aesthetic. I researched paper, experimenting with stark white through to soft cream. There was a significant shift in how the image read through the slightest subtle change in paper colour. The clash of turquoise and red was muted on the softer shades and did not yield the more unsettling effects they had on white paper. Earlier I mentioned that I initially used paper off the roll, which was partially influenced by storage and cost. However, in-depth research and discussions with paper suppliers led me to select the Bread and Butter Edition paper.

Not completely satisfied with my newfound knowledge and hungry to exploit the possibilities of photopolymer even further, I chose to introduce another layer of complexity to the process by exploring the potential of replacing the stochastic screen to achieve a more distressed tonal quality. This led me to generate my stochastic screens. My thoughts were to create multiple lines in proximity that overlapped to somewhat replicate the stochastic screen. For this, I produced several experiments. I started with a small-scale aluminium dry point plate where I created multiple scratches, overlapping lines in different directions, and multiple layers of masking tape, again working at different angles with Grain Mark Resist Film, using multiple lines in Indian ink and a permanent drawing pen. This was a huge learning curve, as I had to achieve an accurate density of tone. The initial results varied, and at times strange qualities of marks occurred when printing the plate. The line quality for the permanent drawing using pen and Indian ink with a dip pen on Grain Mark Resist Film was inconsistent. However, they were interesting and an area I will revisit eventually. The dry point was more effective and offered a more consistent tone. The early experiments with masking tape were not so successful as I left too much ink on the plate, and the printed result offered insufficient tonal range when scanned and printed as a positive.

Undeterred by the results at this point, I proceeded to re-make the dry point and masking tape, this time using a scale of A3 for the plate to enable more effective scaling up when scanning at 600 dpi. After consultation with a researcher in this field, I proceeded to remove much more ink from the plate, resulting in greater tonal differences in the printed image. The scanned print needed further attention in Photoshop to ensure the exposure highlighted the greater tonal range within the image. After exposing, developing, and printing the plates, the results were particularly interesting and offered a varied aesthetic.

In summary, I have returned to the printmaking studio with a revitalised and more challenging project that has led me to re-

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align my practice, take greater risks and be more adventurous in my expectations of myself. I continue to explore photopolymer as a medium of expression, setting new goals to exploit the potential and possibilities. All things considered, with hindsight I may not have chosen to work to the chosen scale, but in conclusion, my knowledge of the process and my experience has led to more exciting and innovative results.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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IMAGE GALLERY



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Figure 1: Into the void  
Figure 2: # Untitled, use of ink marks for positives

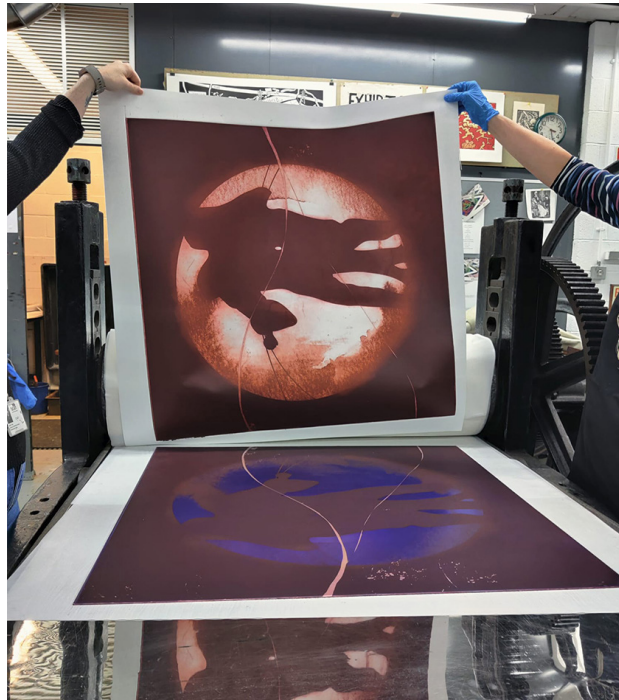


Figure 3: Pulling the print  
Figure 4: Layered Intaglio type print

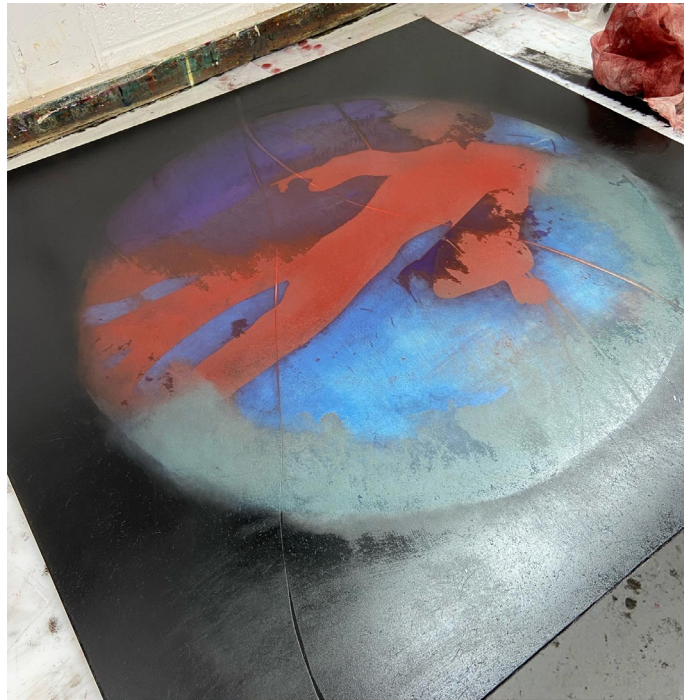


Figure 5: Layered Intaglio type plate - inked

Figure 6: Layered intaglio type print - Turquoise and Red