

THE INVISIBLE PAPER – RECONSIDERING NEWSPRINT IN CONTEMPORARY PRINTMAKING PRACTICE

Monika Rycerz

Paper can serve as an arena in which an artist can be completely free, where one can test ideas, express feelings, or just have fun.

Patricia di Phelps Cisneros

INTRODUCTION

My interest in paper and printmaking began during my undergraduate degree in Surface Design. It was during this period that, for some reason, I gravitated towards paper rather than fabric. I found paper to be more engaging and versatile; it seemed to offer broader creative possibilities and appeared more obedient as a material.

Since embarking on my printmaking journey, my appreciation for paper has continued to evolve. I learned about different types of paper: their weights, colours, textures, and applications. This learning occurred gradually and often incidentally, as my primary focus remained on mastering printmaking processes themselves. Paper, despite its critical role, appeared to function merely as a supporting actor - a bystander to the main narrative of technique. Yet, as printmakers, we all understand that the quality of paper plays a decisive role in the final outcome. High-quality paper undeniably elevates a print.

In this article, however, I will focus not on the archival, revered papers typically associated with fine art printmaking, but on the material that printmakers use in vast quantities and routinely discard: newsprint.

During my undergraduate studies, with the guidance of my tutor, I came to define myself as an artist concerned with exploring the human condition. This was not an easy alignment within the optimistic, solution-driven language of design. The human condition, as I understand it, is complex, dense, and often uncomfortable - a dark matter that is difficult to articulate yet compelling precisely because of its multiplicity and depth.

It may not be immediately apparent what the human condition has to do with newsprint. In my view, however, the connection is considerable. Like human beings, newsprint has the capacity to change. Its surface changes colour over time, particularly when exposed to light. It is fragile by nature, easily torn, and susceptible to damage. These material characteristics resonate strongly with bodily vulnerability and temporality.

As a practitioner, I frequently question the purpose of making work when so much of it remains unseen. Much of it is stored away in drawers, occasionally travelling in a folder between the print workshop and the studio, only to be quietly

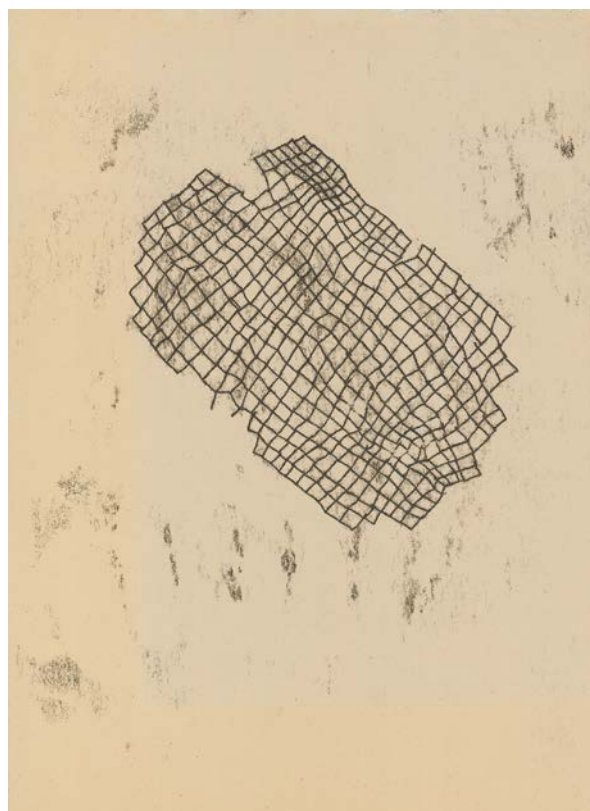


Figure 1

Figure Titles and Information

Fig. 1 Untitled (2024) by Monika Rycerz. Monoprint on newsprint, 250 x 190mm

buried in a plan chest. This feels metaphorical of aspects of ourselves that are never publicly visible - parts we attempt to share but that are misunderstood, rejected, or deemed unsuitable. As a result, we are often only seen to a certain extent.

Alongside this is the pressure to produce work of outstanding quality and value. After hours of planning, thinking, and preparing, the expectation that the outcome should be 'good' becomes almost unavoidable. When the financial cost of studio time and materials is added to this equation, the pressure raises further.

It was only recently that I began to consider newsprint as worthy of serious attention. My research into this material is still at an early stage, and the search engines produce results related to newspaper production rather than fine art practice. What I offer here, therefore, is a series of propositions - speculative reflections grounded in studio experience. These ideas may resonate, or they may appear abstract or even nonsensical. Nevertheless, they form the foundation of an inquiry that seeks to reconsider newsprint's position within contemporary printmaking practice.

LIBERATION

Since the moment I was required to define my practice, the human condition has remained central to my work - more specifically, my own human experience. This includes ongoing struggles, uncertainties, and existential questions: Why are we here? What is our purpose? What happens after we die? From the beginning of my artistic journey, I was never interested in producing decorative or conventionally 'pretty' imagery. While many of my peers found satisfaction in drawing flowers or butterflies, I felt disconnected from this approach. It did not interest me to create pleasing images; instead, I believed my responsibility lay in raising questions - encouraging viewers to pause, reflect, and notice.

The expectation that my work should appeal visually to a wide audience often paralysed me. I found myself unable to create under such pressure. After completing my degree, I gradually moved away from design and towards printmaking, drawn by the alchemy of the process and the uncertainty it offered. Printmaking fascinated me because of its complexity, unpredictability, and the requirement to spend time with the process in order to understand it. It does not reveal itself immediately; it demands attentiveness, patience, and a willingness to look.

I will risk a bold statement and suggest that newsprint saved my artistic practice. It offered a freedom that other papers did not. I could tear it easily into different sizes, but more importantly, it removed my fear of the blank canvas - a phenomenon familiar to many creatives. The light often creates shapes on its surface by discolouration and fading, which felt like a gift that invited response rather than hesitation.

I began by rolling out ink and drawing on the reverse side of the

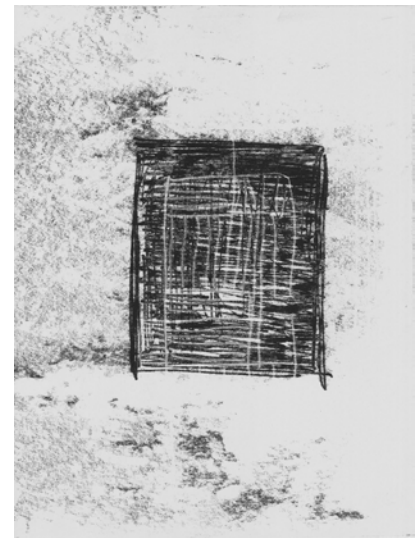


Figure 2

newsprint. The immediacy of the process was striking. My hand moved freely, at varying speeds, applying different pressures in response to something internal and intuitive. The material responded sensitively to these gestures. Working on newsprint felt liberating, perhaps in part because I had no intention of showing the work to anyone. I was simply using low-quality paper to initiate making. I never anticipated that such a humble material could be so freeing. Having been taught - and also teaching - that high-quality paper is essential to producing high-quality artwork, I had never considered a newsprint as anything more than a warm-up tool. I was using it expecting that whatever emerged would end up in the bin. Yet when I looked at the work produced, I was struck by its honesty. It was not trying to be something better, more appealing, more sellable, or more resolved. It simply existed.

Reflecting on David Pye's assertion that 'qualities [of materials] are subjective — they are ideas in people's heads that they project onto the material in question' (Pye, 1968, p. 47), I recognise that this is precisely what occurred. I projected my need for liberation onto a sheet of newsprint, and in doing so, allowed it to take on a new significance within my practice.

THE MATERIAL 'THING'

Joshua Pollard defines materiality as 'how the material character of the world is comprehended, appropriated and involved in human projects' (Pollard, 2004, p. 48), shifting attention away from materials as static substances and towards their relational role within human activity. Materiality, in this sense, is not only about what materials are made of, but about how they are understood, handled, and integrated into human intentions.

Such an understanding allows for a significant degree of interpretive freedom, encompassing how we perceive materials - their texture, weight, value - as well as how we work with them and incorporate them into our projects. Materials are not passive; they are shaped by our thinking, intentions, and purposes. Choosing newsprint over archival paper is not merely a technical decision, it reflects my attitudes towards impermanence, care, and process.

In adapting newsprint as a central material in my practice, an initial intention of play gradually shifted towards a more purposeful engagement. Through repeated use and reflection, the material accrued meaning, moving from a provisional surface to an integral component of how I think, make, and understand my work. This reflects Tim Ingold's (2013) suggestion that humans are conditioned to engage with and transform materials, assigning them intention, form, and meaning. In this sense, my relationship with newsprint exemplifies this process - I have come to attribute to it a range of metaphors - at times referring to it as a saviour, at others likening it to aging skin.

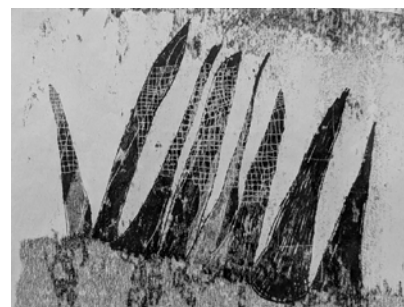


Figure 3

NEWSPRINT AS A THINKING TOOL

I never anticipated that I would come to regard a simple sheet of newsprint as a thinking tool, nor that it would enter my practice at a level deep enough to stimulate critical reflection. Initially, newsprint functioned as a provisional surface - something to be used quickly, without consequence. Over time, however, it began to shape not only what I made, but how I thought through the act of making.

Barbara Bolt describes 'material thinking' as a way of understanding the relations that occur within the very tissue of making. She argues that 'the materials and processes of production have their own intelligence that comes into play in interaction with the artist's creative intelligence' (Bolt, 2010, pp.29-30). This conception positions materials as collaborators rather than inert supports. In this sense, newsprint does not simply receive marks; it actively responds to them.

A line - a simple mark on paper - behaves differently depending on the surface that receives it. Newsprint, with its thinness and absorbency, responds immediately and sensitively to movement. Pressure is registered without resistance; hesitation becomes visible; speed is recorded without mediation. The work sits on the threshold between drawing and printmaking - in fact, it exists as both simultaneously. The drawn gesture produces the print, and the print reveals something that the drawing alone cannot.

Paul Carter proposes that thinking does not precede making, but emerges through engagement with materials, processes, and situations. Knowledge is produced in action, not applied retrospectively (Bolt, 2010). Working with newsprint, I began to recognise how thought unfolded through responsiveness and attention. The material did not illustrate ideas about the human condition; rather, it generated them without needing to articulate them in advance. Meaning arose through doing.

FUNCTION

Newsprint is typically dismissed within fine art contexts for its instability and lack of archival value. It occupies a paradoxical position within printmaking practice: indispensable in daily studio operations, yet rarely acknowledged as a legitimate artistic substrate. It functions as a tool of protection, testing, and troubleshooting - a silent enabler that supports the production of 'finished' works without ever receiving credit. Its low cost allows artists to make mistakes, and relinquish the anxiety that often accompanies more precious materials.

At the same time, newsprint offers far more than its primary function suggests. Within the print studio, it performs multiple roles. It can be used:

- to cover
- to protect
- to wrap

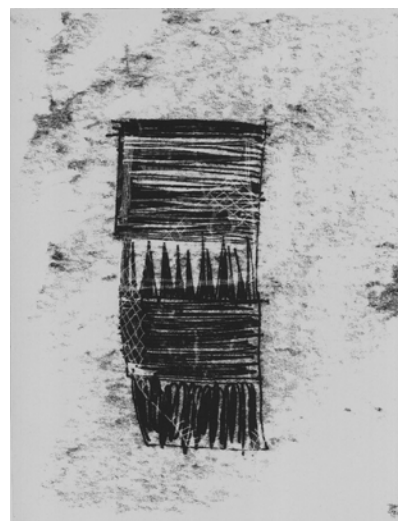


Figure 4

to dab
 to warm up
 to troubleshoot
 to draw
 to print
 to stick

It is used to protect other materials from damage, yet it can itself become the surface upon which images are formed. This duality became central to my studio practice. After experiencing the liberating potential of newsprint, I made the decision to keep it as a permanent component of my work.

However, it was not the newsprint alone responsible for this shift. Equally important was my decision to simplify my process by focusing on monoprinting. The drawn monoprint technique aligned closely with the fragile qualities of newsprint. The two components - process and material - became inseparable partners. The delicacy of the newsprint enhanced the immediacy of the drawn mark, while the monoprint process amplified the material's sensitivity.

Seeking contextual grounding for this approach, I encountered the work of Swiss-born, Brazil-based artist Mira Schendel. Her series of monotypes on rice paper, which she described as having 'emerged (...) out of chance and curiosity,' (Hauser & Wirth, 2015, p. 420) offered a form of validation. These works are minimal, ephemeral, and profoundly sensitive. Rice paper, with its transparency and fragility, allows the viewer to perceive both sides of the image simultaneously. While rice paper differs materially from newsprint, it shares key characteristics: delicacy, responsiveness, and a resistance to conventional expectations of durability.

Schendel (Hauser & Wirth, 2015) herself described the paper as 'useless' because it tore easily and could not withstand water nor handling. Yet it was precisely these limitations that enabled her to produce work of exceptional subtlety. Encountering these monotypes helped me recognise beauty in simplicity and to acknowledge the creative possibilities inherent in fragile papers.

Monoprints might be described as double-sided drawings: one side offering the drawn image, the other an imprint of that drawing. Technically identical, they are nevertheless experientially distinct. The print seems to project more into the world than the drawing intended, as if it included its own layer of interpretation.

IMPERMANENCE

It may appear obvious, yet it was only recently that I realized newsprint is the only paper named explicitly by its function. Derived from its role in newspaper printing - 'news-print' - it is also the only paper that contains the word 'print' in its name. This linguistic observation reveals something fundamental about the material. Newspapers



Figure 5

inherently signal temporality: the passing of time, the fleeting nature of information, the immediacy of the present moment already slipping into obsolescence.

Impermanence is embedded in the material's identity. This philosophical concept — that all existence is subject to change and eventual dissolution — closely aligns with the material properties of newsprint, and perhaps this is one reason I feel a strong affinity with it. Everything changes, and the surface of the newsprint provides a clear reflection of this reality.

To not last, to fade, to disintegrate, is often framed as failure within fine art contexts that prioritise longevity and preservation. Yet impermanence might also be understood as a form of service, particularly to a planet already burdened by material excess. In this sense, the tendency of newsprint to degrade could be viewed as an ethical quality rather than a deficiency.

Newsprint functions as a metaphor for the passing of time. It demands careful handling, attention in storage, and acceptance of its limitations. Reflecting on the Buddhist phrase 'this too shall pass', I am reminded that impermanence is not something to resist, but something to acknowledge. Working with a disposable material introduces a different kind of freedom into the ritual of making. By removing the preciousness associated with precious materials, the process admits a more intuitive, lyrical, and relational mode of working.

On a personal level, newsprint reminds me of my own mortality. Its surface recalls aging skin. It mirrors imperfections, vulnerability, and the inevitability of change. In acknowledging this parallel, I am reminded that my work, too, will pass with time. Perhaps this recognition will allow me to let go of it more easily - to release it into the world.

CARE

Care can be defined as serious attention or consideration applied in order to do something correctly or to avoid damage or risk. To care is to look after and provide for the needs of something or someone. By this definition, newsprint embodies care in a very literal sense.

Within the print studio, newsprint looks after surfaces, press blankets, plates, and tools. It absorbs excess ink, prevents damage, and facilitates clean working environments. Protection is implicit in the act of care, and newsprint performs this function consistently and without recognition.

In fulfilling this function, however, newsprint is rarely considered as a material in its own right. It becomes secondary - a support rather than a subject. Used, discarded, and replaced, it is treated as expendable. Its potential as an expressive surface is overshadowed by its utility, while the finished print on high-quality archival paper receives attention and

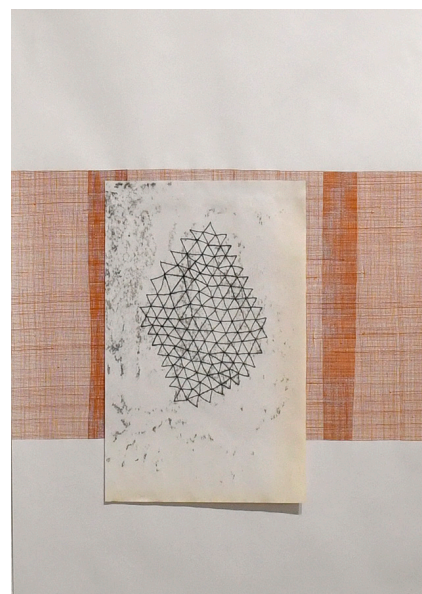


Figure 6

Fig. 6 Untitled (2024) by Monika Rycerz.
Monoprint and screen-print on newsprint,
630 x 900mm

validation. Newsprint remains largely invisible: a second- or third-tier material, defined by its perceived inferiority rather than by the labour it performs.

I would like to propose that we reconsider how we approach this unassuming sheet of paper. Perhaps it deserves some of the attention and care it so readily provides. In my recent exhibition *Handle Me with Care*, many of the works presented were printed on newsprint. I wanted this humble collaborator to be in the spotlight. During the process of making the work, I became aware of how delicately the material must be handled. Like a human being, it is easily damaged. A movement too quick, a careless fold, an unintended gesture can leave a permanent mark. In this way, newsprint demands attentiveness and kindness.

The parallel between material fragility and human vulnerability became increasingly evident. Just as a single word, taken the wrong way, can cause unintended harm, so too can a careless action damage a delicate surface. Working with newsprint requires a mode of engagement grounded in gentleness, patience, and respect.

CONCLUSION

While writing this paper, I encountered the concept of ‘relational labour’, a term used to describe the often-invisible work involved in building, maintaining, and managing relationships. It encompasses emotional, social, and practical efforts that foster connection, support, and care. While typically applied to human interactions, this idea resonates strongly with the role of newsprint within the printmaking studio.

One could argue that relational labour has little to do with art. Yet art is inseparable from life. It fosters connection, invites reflection, and supports the formation of relationships - between people, materials, processes, and ideas. In this sense, newsprint performs a form of relational labour. It supports, protects, and enables without recognition, sustaining the condition under which other forms of making can occur.

Reflecting on my studio practice and research, I conclude that newsprint’s fragility and impermanence invite a more open, generous mode of engagement. Its low cost alleviates the pressure of perfection, allowing for experimentation, immediacy, and responsiveness.

Moreover, its inherent transience encourages critical reflection on the dominance of permanence within artmaking. In a world saturated with material excess, newsprint’s tendency to fade and disintegrate might be reinterpreted as an ethical and ecological position - one that values disappearance alongside endurance.

Ultimately, newsprint is more than a disposable support. It is a vital participant in the printmaking ecosystem, embodying humility,

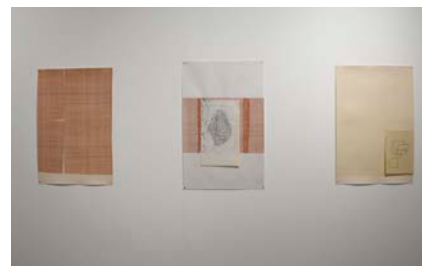


Figure 7

impermanence, and care.

As I reach the end of this paper, a new question emerges: do the materials a practitioner chooses eventually become metaphors for their own being? If so, what does it mean to work with a material that accepts - and even embraces - its own disappearance?

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Monika Rycerz is an artist and educator living in Plymouth, UK, where she teaches Fine Art and Painting, Drawing & Printmaking at Arts University Plymouth. She studied in the UK and USA, completing a BA (Hons) at London College of Communication in 2009, including a semester at the University of Connecticut. In 2015 she graduated from an MA in Multidisciplinary Printmaking at the University of the West of England, where she was awarded the Agassi Book Arts Prize for her postgraduate installation work. She has exhibited nationally and internationally, including in the USA, China and Greece.

IMAGE GALLERY

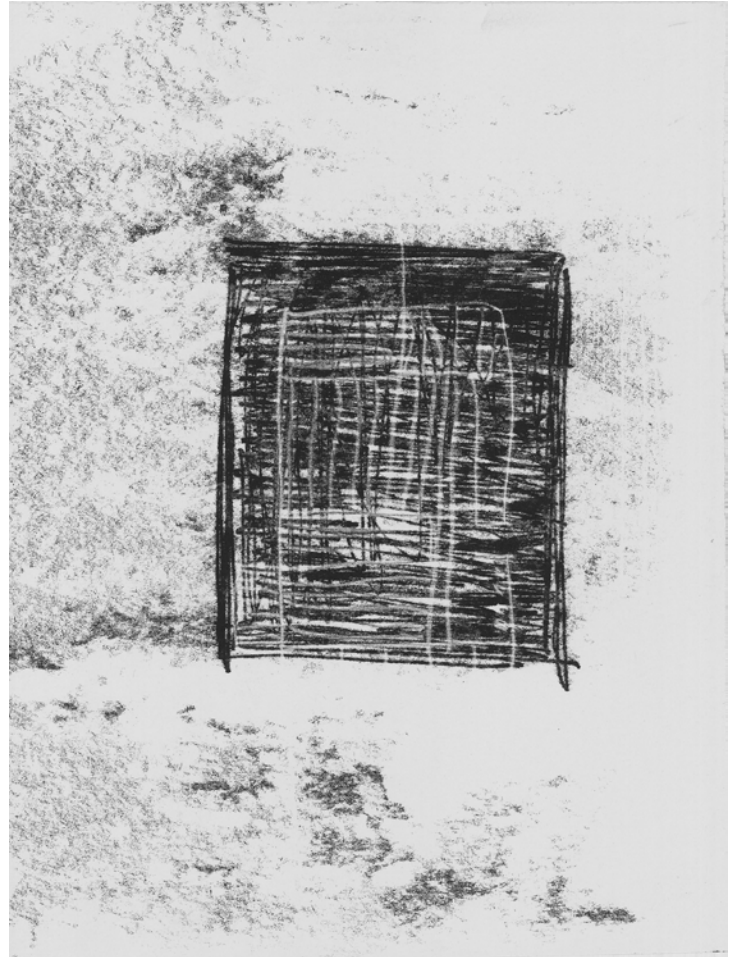
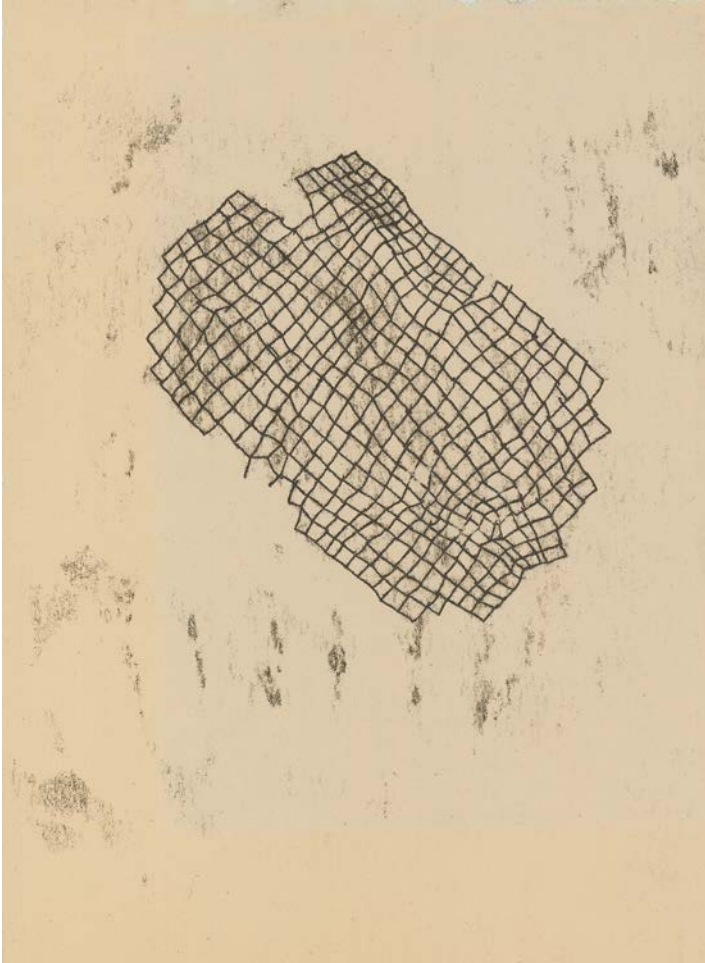


Figure 1. Untitled (2024) by Monika Rycerz. Monoprint on newsprint, 250 x 190mm
Figure 2. Untitled (2024) by Monika Rycerz. Monoprint on newsprint, 250 x 190mm

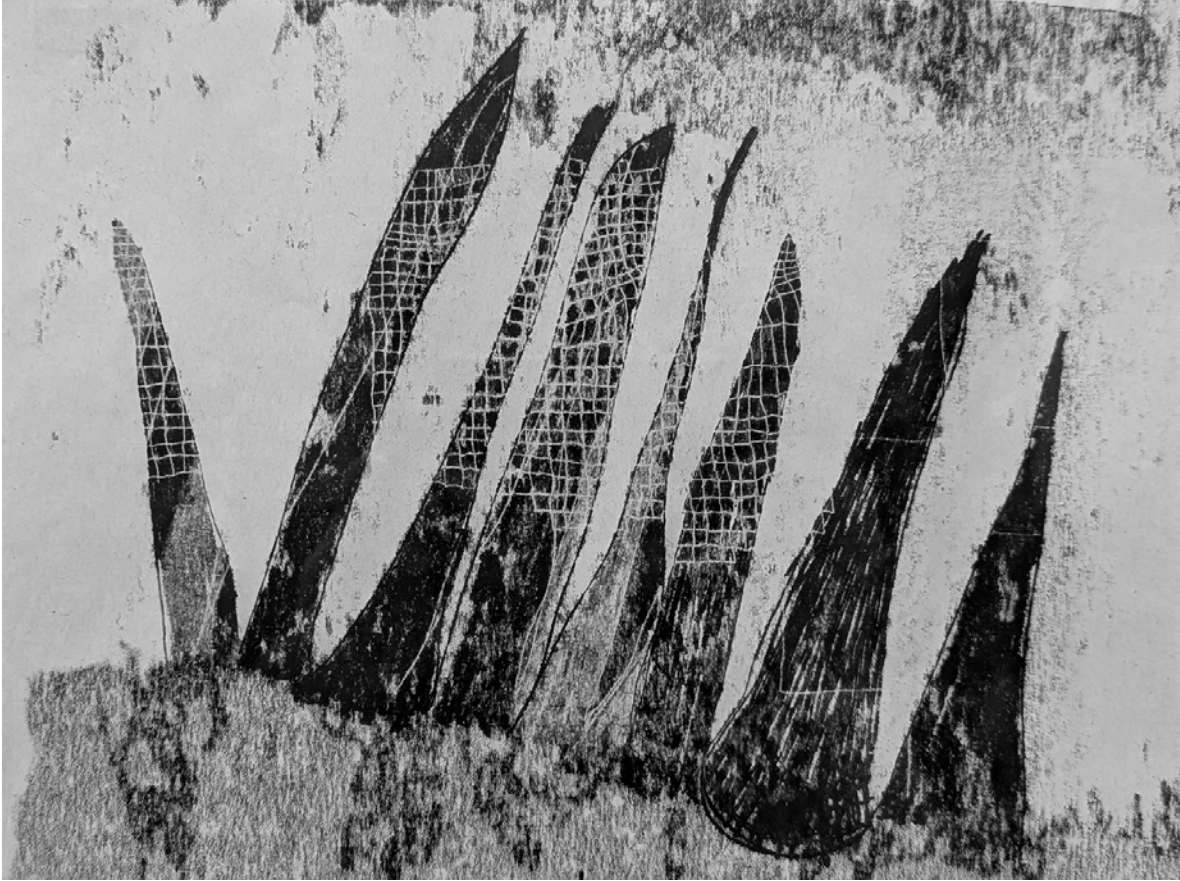


Figure 3. Untitled (2024) by Monika Rycerz. Monoprint on newsprint, 190 x 250mm

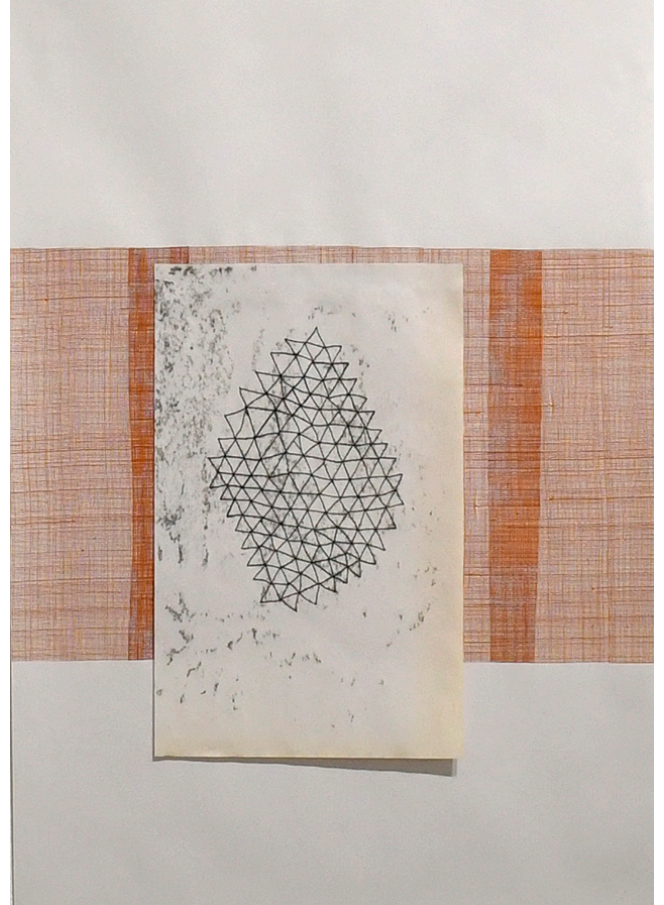
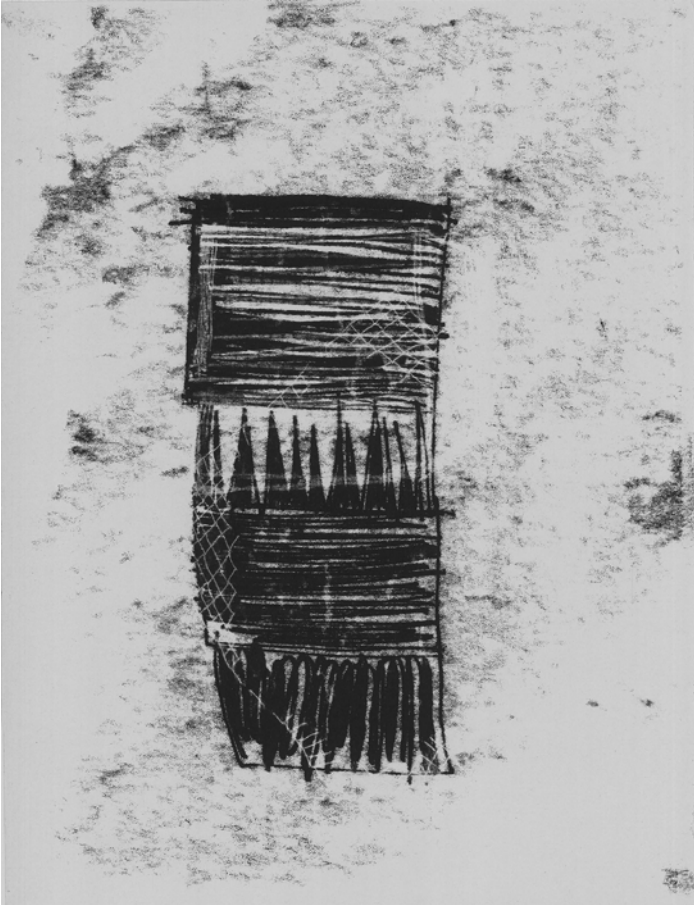


Figure 4. Untitled (2024) by Monika Rycerz. Monoprint on newsprint, 250 x 190mm

Figure 6. Untitled (2024) by Monika Rycerz. Monoprint and screen-print on newsprint, 630 x 900mm

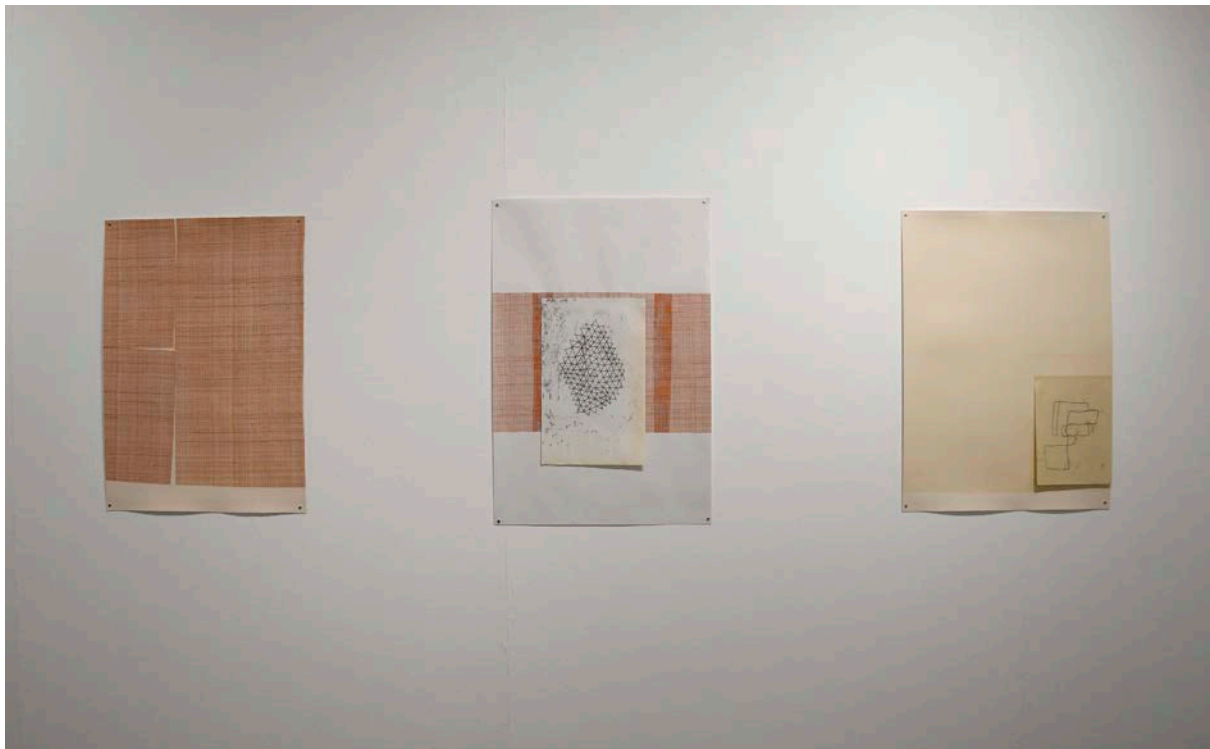
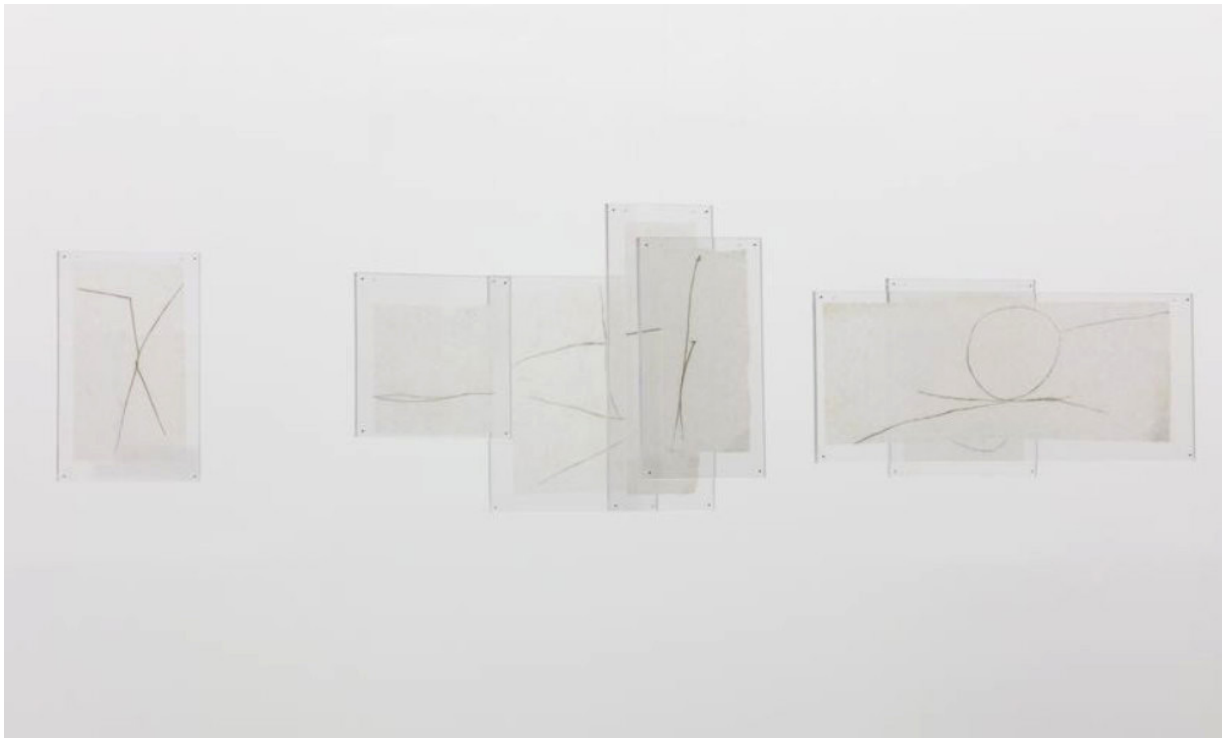


Figure 5. Variantes II (1965) by Mira Schendel. Monoprint on rice-paper © The Estate of Mira Schendel
Figure 7. Handle Me with Care (2024) by Monika Rycerz. Exhibition View..