

From lines to dots and beyond

Anne Heyvaert in conversation with Sylvie Karier, around her exhibition “I’ll be back” at Fyns Grafiske Værksted, Denmark. 7/02 – 3/03/2020

*‘WE MUST ALWAYS SEEK THE DESIRE FOR THE LINE, THE POINT WHERE IT WANTS TO ENTER OR DIE’
HENRI MATISSE ACCORDING TO THE NOTES OF SARAH STEIN, 1908*

*‘NEW ARTISTS MUST REDISCOVER THE POINT OF CONVERGENCE BETWEEN TRADITION AND INVENTION. (...) CONVERGENCE DOES NOT MEAN AN ECLECTIC COMPROMISE BUT A CONJUNCTION OF OPPOSITES.’
OCTAVIO PAZ, 1996*

ABSTRACT

For her third exhibition, at Fyns Grafiske Værksted, the Danish print workshop located in Odense, Sylvie Karier exhibited a selection of works, engravings and monotypes created between two separate periods of almost 20 years. The selection demonstrated a great cohesion and showed how she continued to make works along formal and technical constraints. Through a conversation with the artist, Anne Heyvaert explores how Sylvie balances traditional values of printmaking of etching and aquatint with a larger sense of graphic potentials, from using the line to a mass of dots and intensely velvety solid areas. Sylvie shows how her predominantly black prints are a play between figure and ground, and exploit aspects of printmaking such as reduction, repetition and progression. Anne Heyvaert points out how Sylvie Karier eventually breaks the limits of the discipline, by exploring the materiality of inks and paper using monotypes and stitching.

INTRODUCTION

Collective print workshops such as the Fyns Grafiske Værksted (FGV) in Denmark are workspaces, often also exhibition spaces, and above all meeting places. They allow exchange in the gaps of time between the different technical processes, the sharing of acid baths, and the washing of inky hands. Sylvie and I met in 1989 at the School of Arts and Crafts in Luxembourg, and continued to get to know each other at the

Summer Academy with printmakers Ondřej Michálek and Bo Halbirk who, in 1994, with a group of regulars, founded Empreinte Atelier de Gravure Luxembourg, of which she is still a member.

From these first years of experimentation, we both shared values of certain intaglio processes: slowness, precision, concentration. Speaking formally, it is discretion and the choice of simple and everyday subjects that united us.

Since then, we have kept in touch, sometimes by



Figure 1



Figure 2

Fig 1. Fyns Grafiske Værksted gallery, view of the front with works from the exhibition ‘I’ll be back’ by Sylvie Karier (7.2.-3.3.2020)

Fig 2. Behind the Golden Fence- Fairyland I, detail (2019). Etching on copper, gel pen, 690 x 490 mm (paper) 600 X 500 mm (plate)

meeting around an inking table, though now more often at a distance. For my part, my printmaking work has combined with a theoretical reflection on media (in a broader sense) within a research group at the University of Vigo, Spain. As for Sylvie, her artistic evolution has continued as part of her regular practice, in no small part due to her contact with many artists in different collective workshops in Europe, Canada, South Africa and so on, and her keen interest in contemporary art.

Sylvie's approach to printmaking, in particular the techniques she uses, including etching, aquatint and dry point as well as stitching, are of particular interest to me, for their rather traditional appearance. She does not seem to use complicated techniques, but favours qualities specific to intaglio: the predominance of black, the sinuous line, solid colour, ...) which serve her everyday subjects and simple forms.

The critic Pierre Kremer wrote of Sylvie in 2001 that:

'Her favourite techniques create a meditative and intimate mood, rather than a spectacular and lyrical one; by expressing herself in different graphic disciplines, with scraping, rubbing, drawings in empty Bic pen, she always stays close to intaglio techniques with its transfer of the forms and the action of engraving. The relationship to time and space, to the surface of the paper, are also constants.'

I find these interests run throughout her practice. Sylvie's approach seems to be based on the 'material and symbolic presence of the print' of which Nicole Malenfant (2002) speaks in the introduction to her book 'L'estampe-objet rare', print which, she says, must be renewed with an individual aesthetic experience of the artist: I'd like to focus this interview around her most recent solo show 'I'll be back', which consists of a selection of 37 engravings and monotypes presented at the gallery of FGV.

During this dialogue I will try to discern her formal and conceptual motivation. I will try to understand how the work is supported by traditional values of printmaking and at the same time transgresses its limits.

DIALOGUE

Anne: First of all, let's start with your relationship to collective workshops, like that of the Fyns Grafiske Værksted which hosts this exhibition.

Sylvie: Since the end of the 1990s I have done several residencies and the exhibition titled *I'll be back* is my third in the gallery. (fig.1) I have also participated as a member of FGV in numerous group exhibitions in Denmark and abroad. The association, with some 300 members, is very active with a busy calendar.

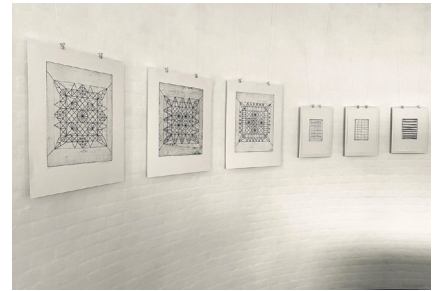


Figure 3



Figure 4

The FGV gallery is on the ground floor, with additional hanging space on the 1st floor, in the same building as the workshop, well located in the historic Odense district, very close to the HC Andersen Museum. It is not very large, but bright with large windows on the street, which attracts passers-by who come in to see the exhibition in progress, but also to browse through the portfolios of the artists.

In fact, I learned about this workshop thanks to the late Bo Halbirk, a Danish artist. His workshop in Paris (where I also am a member) is a very international place. It raises the question why travel hundreds of kilometres to find oneself in a print workshop abroad? In my experience, being in a foreign city, there is a different atmosphere, and for me, coming from Luxembourg, there is another language to speak. Above all, it means getting out of my comfort zone, which certainly shows in some works. The geographical and historical location can count too, especially in Odense with the ever-present HC Andersen. In 2005 I participated with two prints (*Big Claus* and *little Claus I-II*) in an exhibition FGV had organized for Andersen's 200th birthday.

In 2020 for another exhibition titled *This is true – HC Andersen* at the Dronninglund Art Centre, I present the series *Behind the Golden Fence-Fairyland I-III* (fig.2). I looked at the theme land of fairies or wonders, aware that this term is topical by its reference to the issue of migrants.

Anne: You are exhibiting this recent series with other works from previous eras and very different techniques such as etching and aquatint, monotype and stitching, yet the whole show has a great cohesion.

Sylvie: In each exhibition, I make sure to present a set of works that interact well with each other. In 2019 I organized *In Situ II – Back to the Future*, an exhibition at the Empreinte workshop. I decided to use a somewhat similar formula with a selection of older engravings, in particular the large lace prints (which I had created in Quebec at the Atelier Presse Papier in 2003). They constitute a set of key pieces due to their fairly large format and the delicacy of the drawing in my research around the line. They also maintain a formal and constructive relationship with the other series, including examining the Morphology of the Net and Rectangular Grids. Indeed, the trajectory of my work always builds on previous works. The title 'I'll be back!' also alludes to the fact that my engravings somehow return to themselves.

Anne: We could start by talking about your predilection for the line; a subject treated wonderfully by Tim Ingold, and a motif specific to engraving, the quality of which depends on the tools and processes: expressive for dry point, fine and flexible for etching. This quality of the line has been exploited by many engravers, notably since John Flaxman, who anticipated the refining of the patterns by enhancing the liveliness of the pure line; followed by Matisse, Picasso and Louise Bourgeois, whose work of the line you particularly admire. Tracing the line directly on the plate, allows for a gestural liberation and brings graphic and abstract quality to the lines.



Figure 5



Figure 6

Since your first dry points, you have used expressive lines to draw ornamental patterns on draperies and wefts on the folds of curtains. And then, to use a favourite term of ours, *de fil en aiguille*, [literally 'from the thread to the needle', meaning, 'one thing leading to another' Ed.], here you are with etchings, drawing lace as well as weavings and nets.

Can you explain this relationship between line and thread, and your motivation for representing weavings and lace? (fig.3)

Sylvie: Like many children of my generation who were born in the 1950s, knitting and crochet were part of my family heritage. Wool or cotton thread has a tactile quality, and its twisted length was transformed into knitting or lace thanks to the knowledge of generations of women. I must say that as a child, I already was fascinated by the linear. Unravelling a ball full of knots with patience to arrive at a continuous thread was pure pleasure. In my artistic work I conceptualise these childhood sensations. I am also curious as to how much I consider my work that of a female artist. While I am wary of this label, I cannot deny the influence of my female nature on my work. Weaving and lace are combined with the rigour of a graphic language. This allows me to go beyond the artisanal, to seek sublimation. Neglecting the model in itself, but maintaining the general idea seems to me the best solution for combining mathematical precision and expert craftsmanship while keeping the emotional content. With the first lace print that I made, I arrived at a point where I had to find a solution for working on larger formats while keeping the fineness of the line. I decided on a simplified language with crocheting lines called air mesh, which keeps the lightness of the line by giving it at the same time enough volume. I create the drawing on a grid of squares. The symmetry of the ornamental forms, the proportions and the repetition of the basic fragments opens up a thousand possibilities. Simplification and reduction always play an important role. It leads to an increasingly bare appearance with strict and static horizontal / vertical compositions. Little by little I adopted the KISS graphic principle (keep it simple, stupid) to allow the eye a first reading without drift and then take it to the depth of the image. As by the way in your drawings of *White Pages*, where the reduction shows a tension, a purity that we both would like to deepen again and again.

Anne: Yes, the white of the paper also has an active role of illumination, which adds to the tension. I wonder whether there is a meditative motivation in this linear, slow and repetitive work. In 'Louise Bourgeois: *Insomnia Drawings*', Marie-Laure Bernadac quotes Ms. Bourgeois saying that 'her abstract drawings of spirals, mazes, loops, dots, waves, coils and concentric designs come from a deep need to achieve peace, rest and sleep.' (Bernadac, 2000). This is certainly also the case for your stitched drawings, and the multitudes of engraved points on the paper.

Sylvie: I also find in repetitive work a sense of well-being, an energetic and vital force: 'permutation, assembly and repetition, like life itself' as your father said. (Heyvaert, 1975) Also I title my series in repetitive



Figure 7

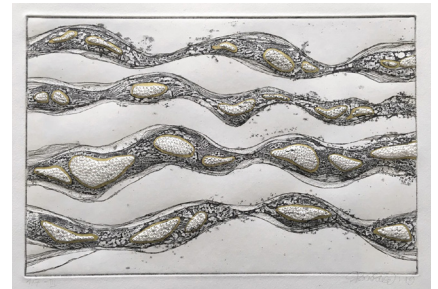


Figure 8

Fig 7. O'gold IV format (2019). Monotype stitching, 380 x 280 mm (paper), 180 x 130 mm (plate)

Fig 8. Odense c et t Flow III (2019). Etching, sugar lift on copper, gel pen, stitching, 480 x 380 mm (paper), 200 x 300 mm (plate)

ways, such as: Time Creating Surface – Fragmentation I-V, Tracing Circles – Tracing the Horizontal – Tracing Time of 2012, then the series of 2013 Evolutionary Edition – Tracing the Surface with four different plates reworked in four states.

Anne: In the series Tactile Perception, it is the paper itself that you engrave directly. Michel Melot speaks of the 'primary and primordial gesture' of engraving (Melot, 2002). Richard Noyce would say that it is at the edges 'that we can find the melting point of imagination and technique', and this is how the art of printmaking has gone beyond its limits, venturing into the unknown. You say you came to stitching by chance, while searching for a graphic solution for a composition with circles. With this technique, engraving is the origin, but in the process the line has become a point.

Sylvie: While looking for one way of doing something, somehow, I stumbled over the edge and came up with another one. First of all, I saw possibilities in the linear, before following the lines that finally form the shape. The stitching actually follows a line drawn in pencil, it follows it as if walking, with the automatism of putting one foot in front of the other. One could say that I went from lace to stitching, with the repeated gesture which replaces the advancing gesture, sliding on the support. Working the paper, barely marked, keeps its purity, and makes it vibrate without distraction. The volume that rises is sensual. I explored this technique in a series of circles, strict in their composition, and also in sinuous, more organic forms (fig.4).

Anne: Your stitched points form volumes and surfaces which catch the light, and show themselves. It reminds me of the pleasure of discovering the patterns on engraved plates which are not yet inked, seen from a certain light, or even better, felt with the eyes closed.

You've told me that you often use stitching compositions that you worked on previously in printed images, like the Umkehrbilder (Reversible Images) of 2016. Made with aquatint, these are flat black surfaces with drawn shapes that oppose the white of the paper (fig.5). This tension between figure and background is still a characteristic of the printed image, in its dependence on the imprint of the matrix. (Moro, 1998)

Sylvie: The black areas are in fact still the result of playing with lines and edges. You can see the gesture of the fine brush which preserves the white areas with varnish on the final print. The work with the soft brush shows a certain vivacity, even a movement which underlines the movement of the sinuous forms in the voids.

Once again, the time it takes to contemplate the print is part of the work. The spectator can choose to focus the gaze on the white area, which is the negative of the black form. The gaze between the two planes of the same image is confused. I like to play with perception and optical illusion.

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Anne: I like the effect on O'Aquatint Black I and II (fig.6) with its big white dots which gain luminosity on the deep velvety black background of aquatint on copper.

The black of classic engraving, absolute and fundamental black, is the perfect opposite of white (paper). "Black is the colour most lacking in resonance" (catalogue "Black is a Color" 2006), but, in contrast, white resonates all the more.

Sylvie: For books, newspapers, even when writing on the computer, black is commonly used on a white background. The question that seems crucial to me is: is there any other colour that is more explicit, more logical? Black is both attractive and remains at the same time mysterious: a beginning and an end. So yes, black is a choice and the deep black from an aquatinted plate is my optimal preference. Black and white are both values of silence, of restraint.

Anne: And when you don't choose to print in black, it's gold with its lively timbre.

Sylvie: I'm looking for contrasts. Gold attracts by its brilliance and its value; one thinks of the icons, gold framed paintings, jewellery, the golden age... As a colour, the golden oil based intaglio ink has an inconsistent texture, which allows for brilliant and vibrant areas.

Anne: I also think of the sacred value of prints linked to religious beliefs from the origin of printmaking itself, 2000 years ago, and of the transcendence of images present in engravings by Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, and even more contemporary prints by Anish Kapoor. Juan Moro explains the maintenance of the aura of intaglio prints despite their multiplication, in his essay on printmaking, chapter 'on the sublime', by this tradition of the sacred and the search for the sublime. (1998, p.48-51)

In the monotypes exhibited, your golden spots are obtained by crushing the ink under the press. The power of pressure is transmitted in these forms, and brings a strong mysterious presence, reinforced by the shine of gold on the pitted white background. It is also a beautiful contrast between the dot-holes and the spots, traces, drips: engraving and printing. Do you frequently use the monotype technique?

Sylvie: Making monotypes tempts me to move away from a preconceived idea, although in general I prefer to use a stencil to delineate the form, as in the series Samples of Circles, of which I present two works in the exhibition. With the Odense Gold monotypes (fig.7) made in 2019, I played more on the randomness of the spots, by printing in quick succession, which frees the gesture as the number of prints increases. The concentrated and meditative work of stitching done in the quietness of my own studio (atelier-c-noir'85) goes well with the sublime of white and gold.

Anne: The series 'O' c. et t. Flow I - IV' (fig.8) goes even further in this

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combination of processes: there are lines formed by etching, sugar lift, gel pen and different stitching densities. These more organic forms remind me of blood vessels: is there a symbolic derivation?

Sylvie: Indeed, this series refers to Cells and Tissues of the World I – XVII of 2011. There are all kinds of cells in the human body and its tissues, such as the very muscular tissue of the heart. One of the subjects is inner beauty, here in the literal sense. Odense c. et t. Flow I – IV is one of the suites.

Anne: I come back to fabrics, nets and ornaments, and beyond. 'I'll be back', you said. In your selection for this exhibition in Odense, I can clearly see these conversations.

I see this continuity is reinforced by your modular approach which appears to be influenced by printmaking. (Heyvaert, 2011). The repetition-variation of the forms in the series, accompanied by a reiteration of technical processes, produces this conceptual intensification that I observe in your work. Many conceptual and minimalist artists such as Sol Lewitt, Agnes Martin, François Morellet, among others were attracted by the qualities of concentration and minimalism in intaglio whilst also being interested in the sensitive textures and randomness of the medium. Juan Martínez Moro explains the attraction of printmaking for these artists with the compromise between technical process and aesthetic thought. (Moro, 1998) As an artist-printmaker I defend printmaking based on a system of its own values such as technique and process, which still offer today many possibilities for innovation and transgression.

A predominant choice for intaglio seems to have forged your artistic identity in this way. Your experiments with simple paper engraving and printing actions are a prime example of the intertwined relation of concept/image and technique. From a minimalist approach to the art of printmaking, by exploiting the possibilities of the simplest processes of etching and aquatint (lines and solids), you have worked and questioned the surface as well of the matrix as that of the printing paper. And through your play of contrasts between blanks and filled paper, between presence and absence, between the flat and the relief, between black and white and gold, between line and point, you are expanding the boundaries of printmaking with your crushed monotypes and stitching. Your persistent questioning of time by linking in different series of works together adds a continuity to your research. Finally, your work is also the result of a balance between determination and chance, rigour and emotion, which punctuates the coherent evolution of your work from its beginnings over 30 years ago. This exhibition at Fyns Grafiske Værksted, from Odense in Denmark shows a good selection.

Your numerous stays in collective workshops around the world have certainly influenced certain processes, by encouraging you to adapt to different work methodologies and materials. I see that several works were born from specific circumstances. And let's not forget the human

relationships that encourage and provoke reflection. I hope that we both will soon find ourselves in one of these fruitful spaces so unique to the world of print, in Luxembourg, Betanzos or Paris, perhaps in Bristol, or even in Odense!

I know that you will return there soon and that you will continue to question your work revolving around lines, dots and beyond.

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AUTHORS

Anne Heyvaert, artist and research professor, Faculty of Fine Arts of Pontevedra, Digital & graphic art research, Universidade de Vigo, Spain. Member of grupo dx5 digital & graphic art research. Studied at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts, Paris. Training and working stays in collective engraving workshops in Spain, France, Luxembourg, Canada, Argentina. Co-Director (from 1998 to 2002), then lecturer, at CIEC, Centro Internacional de la Estampa Contemporánea, Betanzos. Curator (2010-2012) and several times jury member of the Premio Internacional de Gráfica Máximo Ramos, Ferrol. As an artist, numerous exhibitions and selections in international awards for contemporary art and printmaking.

anneheyvaert@hotmail.com / www.anneheyvaert.es

Sylvie Karier (1955) Lives and works in Luxembourg. Art studies at the Arts and Crafts School Luxembourg. Solo shows since 1998 in Luxembourg, Spain, Germany and Denmark. Group exhibitions – selected biennials in Luxembourg, Japan, Macédonia, Germany, Bulgaria, France, Denmark, China, Italy, Roumania, Sweden, Belgium. Member of artists and printmakers associations: Atelier Bo Halbirk (Paris), Fyns Grafiske Værksted (DK), Atelier Empreinte Luxembourg, Cercle artistique de Luxembourg. Artists residences (selection): Durban (South Africa), Trois Rivières (Canada), Cité Internationale des Arts Paris, Atelier Bo Halbirk, (Paris), Liège (Belgium), Fundación CIEC (Spain), Fyns Grafiske Værksted (DK). Public collections: Luxembourg, Sweden, Spain.

skarier@yahoo.de / www.sylviekarier.com

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IMAGE GALLERY



Fig 1. Fyns Grafiske Værksted gallery, view of the front with works from the exhibition 'I'll be back' by Sylvie Karier (7.2.-3.3.2020)



Fig 2. Behind the Golden Fence- Fairyland I, detail (2019). Etching on copper, gel pen, 690 x 490 mm (paper) 600 X 500 mm (plate)



Fig 3. Fyns Grafiske Værksted gallery, Dentelle Tendue IV,II,I (2002). Etching, 760 x 560 mm (paper), 450 x 360 mm (plate). O'Filet I,II (2019). Etching, gel pen; Nine Rows of Lines (2019). Etching, stitching. 380 x 280 mm (paper), 180 x 130 mm (plate)

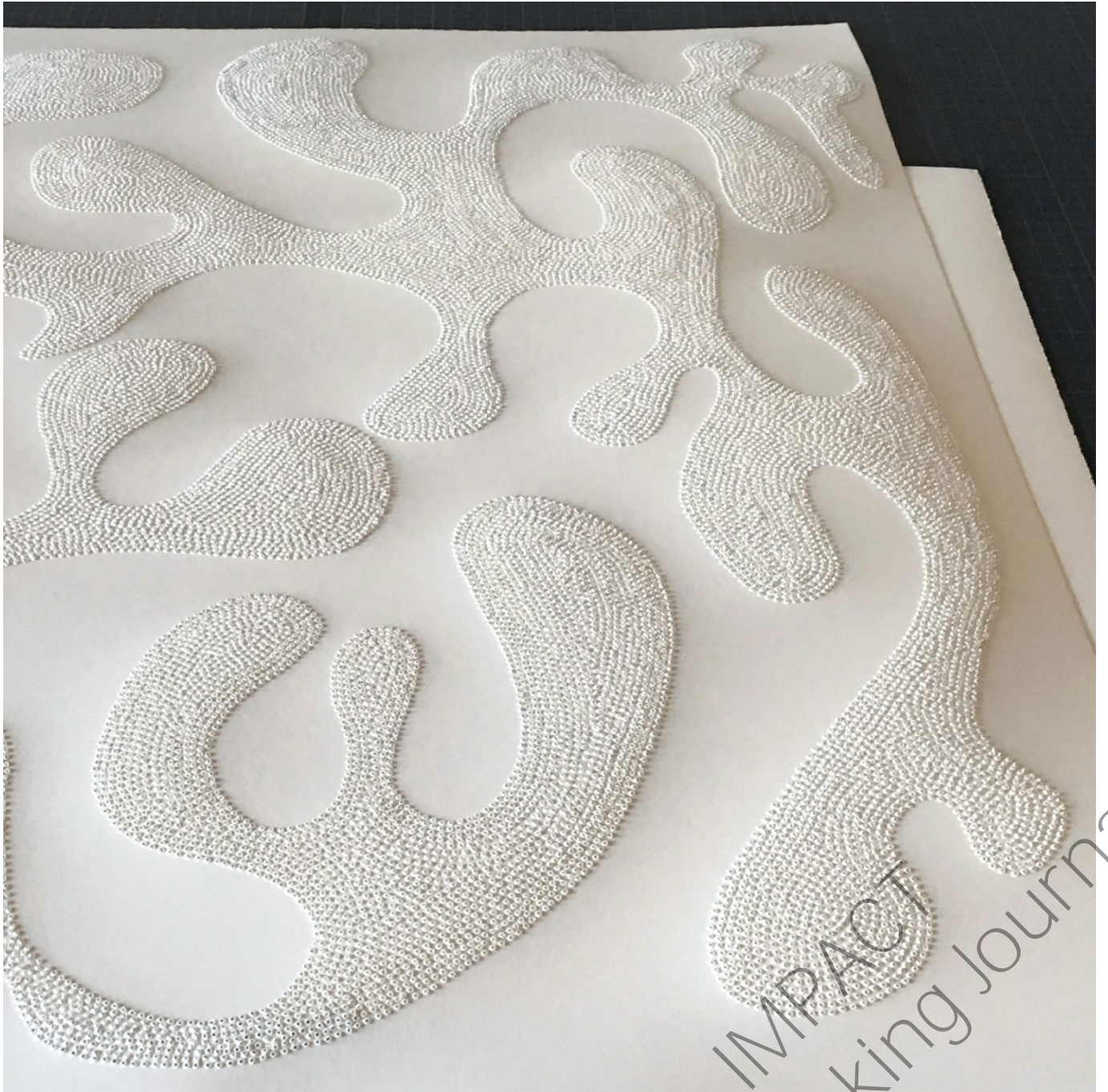


Fig 4. Perception tactile # 33, detail (2018). Stitching on paper, 600 x 500 mm



Fig 5. n-s-b Close up 13/18 (2015). Etching and aquatint on copper, 380 x 280 mm (paper), 180 x 130 mm (plate)



Fig 6. O'Aquatint Black I (2019). Etching, aquatint on copper, stitching, 380 x 280 mm (paper), 180 x 130 mm (plate)



Fig 7. O'gold IV format (2019). Monotype stitching, 380 x 280 mm (paper), 180 x 130 mm (plate)

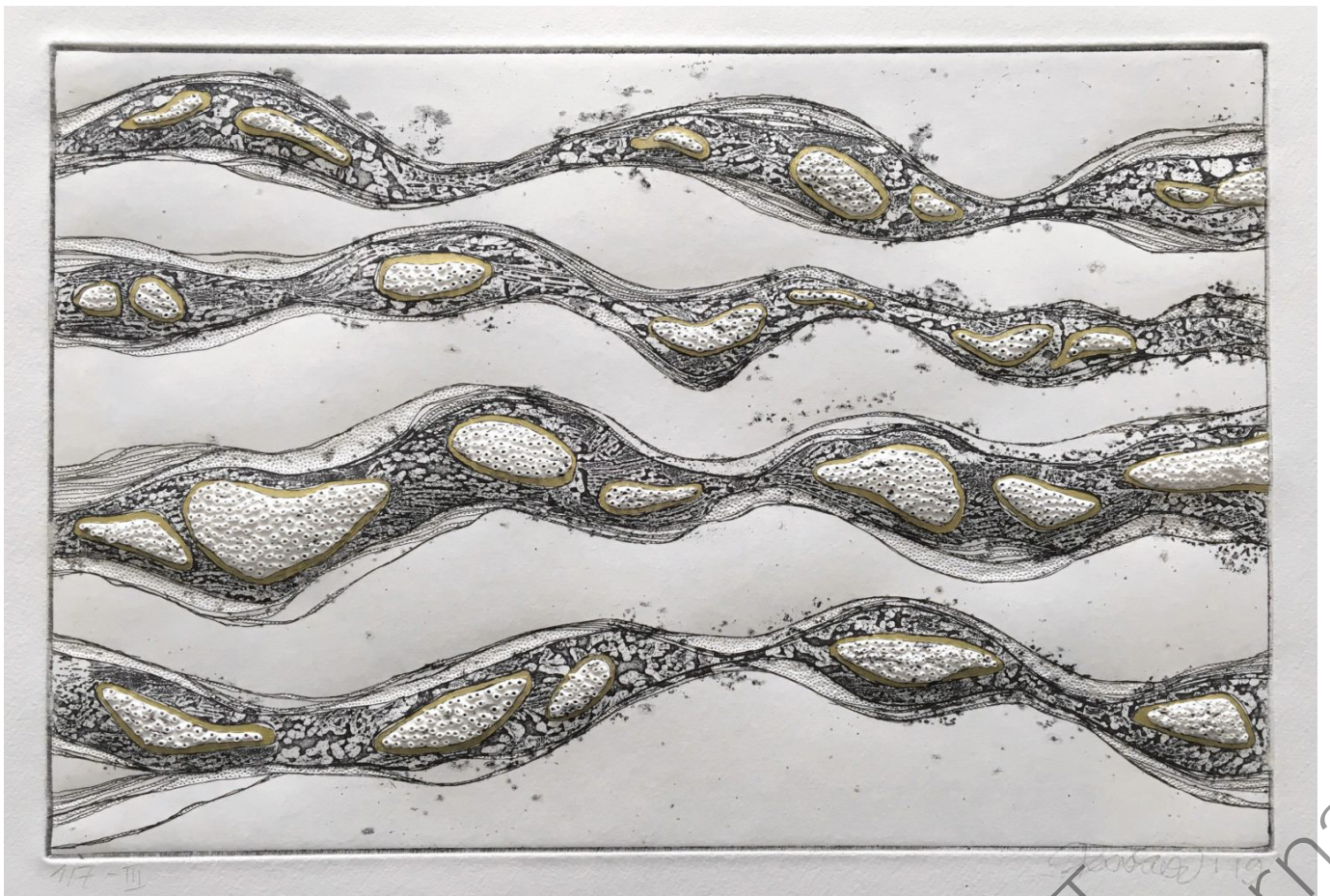


Fig 8. Odense c et t Flow III (2019). Etching, sugar lift on copper, gel pen, stitching, 480 x 380 mm (paper), 200 x 300 mm (plate)