

Gestural drawing for serigraphy

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine and respond to the challenge of retaining the vivacity of gestural drawing when translating into the language and techniques of silkscreen printmaking. The interdependent relationships and transitions between the selected media, methodology and the underlying philosophical, phenomenological and lived experience of the practice are discussed. The techniques and materials employed to achieve responsive gestural drawn marks to be retained through the silkscreen exposure and print process are presented. The print appearing to the printmaker at the end of the process demarcates the making of an image for print to that of the completed printed image in its own artistic terms. A single serigraphic portrait is the vehicle for the exploration which began at a lecture at Birmingham School of Art in November 2019, given by Ian Sergeant on: 'Visual Representations of Black British Masculinity.'

LANGUAGE OF SILKSCREEN

This article aims to explore the challenges of retaining the vivacity of gestural drawing when translating these drawings into the language of silkscreen printmaking. William Kentridge offers a valuable context to this investigation by describing the appearance of the print at the end of the process as a separation from the process of making an image:

There's a separation from the gestural mark of your hand to what you get on a sheet of paper... There's something in the drawings going through the process of invisibility under the press and coming out, in your peeling the sheet of paper off the etching plate or lithographic stone or taking it off the silkscreen bed, which is a difference. It is a moment of separation between making and seeing the image, which is important.

Hecker (2010:14)

The successful moment of transformation from drawn image to final print on paper is a moment of satisfaction for printmakers who have pursued the ambitions and intricacies of image making within the specific constraints of the medium. This research investigates the detailed steps of such a process. The example that follows is in the field of portraiture, outlining the process of the depiction of an individual in the act of expressing themselves and their ideas.

Ian Sergeant is a black researcher who presented



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1: Ian Sergeant presentation: Visual Representations of Black British Masculinity. Smart phone digital image printed out as a photocopy. Photo taken by E. J. Turpie, 2019
 Figure 2. Graphite stick. 2019. Photo by E. J. Turpie

his current thinking on the representation of Black British Masculinity in November 2019 at the Birmingham School of Art. In the audience, I used a smart phone camera to document Sergeant's expressive presentation as he passed in and out of the projector beam. With Sergeant's agreement, one dynamic profile image was selected as a basis for a silkscreen printed portrait which I would make.

This article details a methodology of printed portraiture: working from a small digital photographic image translated through gestural drawing to a large-scale silkscreen print. The purpose of the drawn gestural interpretation is to capture and reflect the expressive nature of the subject's commitment to his thesis. The portrait is a celebration of the subject's vigorous presentation of the central role of Black representation and continuous contribution to contemporary art and culture.

FROM DIGITAL TO GESTURAL

My process of translating a digital photograph to a drawing started by enlarging the image and printing it out in sections of plain paper to be used as a guide for tracing on to drafting film. This printout is the first moment that the photographic image becomes a material object. Up to this point the image is still virtual, 'seen and worked on in the digital screen, and stored within the computer as data' (Love 2015:218) As Paul Thirkell suggests, the transformation from data to an analogue fine-art print 'is a highly subjective exercise and requires a craft-like knowledge and mastery of the process to achieve a desired result' (Thirkell, 2005:5) Research into the ability of digital and computer technology to reproduce hand-drawn marks has indicated that although technically accurate, it may not meet artist's subjective sensibility for tangible material and tactile qualities of marks on paper (Parraman:2003)

Similarly the screenprint may not fully accurately reproduce the subtlety of the hand-drawn mark on paper. However, printed marks using drafting film can produce unique serigraphic qualities. Since the introduction of drafting film for silkscreen stencils, the application of drawn marks, with at times other techniques, have been used by artist printmakers. This chimes with Richard Hamilton's observations that silkscreen printmaking 'demands the participation of the artist both during the printing process and the making of stencils.' (Hamilton, 2001:283)

My personal toolkit for drawing for serigraphy involves a careful selection of drawing implements and surfaces. In this case, a soft 9b graphite stick was used to make the drawing on transparent mark resist film, which has a textured surface capable of holding drawn graphite marks. (Fig.2 Graphite stick 2019). It could be argued that having control of committed actions (Smith, 2003) based on ongoing critical assessments of the progress of representation, is tacit knowledge. Quietly, consciously and subconsciously, an internal dialogue is formed between the act of mark-making and the visual

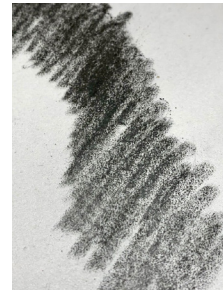


Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 3. Graphite mark deposits. 2019. Drawing and photo by E. J. Turpie

Figure 4. Graphite whole unanchored portrait by E. J. Turpie. Graphite drawing 2019. 59 x 84cm

output, as Tim Ingold explains:

We have things to know only because they have arisen. They have somehow come into existence with the forms they momentarily have, and these forms are held in place thanks to the continual flux of materials across their emergent surfaces.

Ingold (2019:60)

The materiality of graphite has the potential to create marks which are more abstract than literal, which can be used to embody the subject's energy and commitment. Using an ongoing responsive approach to the surface and the drawn marks, I used a sharpened graphite stick to make delicate marks which were used to delineate the forehead, eyes, cheeks, nose and mouth. In contrast, tonal planes and abstract expanses hinted at deep shadows and figurative references. The facial profile was drawn to reflect the light that Sargeant looks towards. Gestural marks for his head and body were drawn with the rounded butt of the stick pushed hard into the film, leaving deep graphite deposits. If these marks appeared insufficient to prevent the exposure light reaching the silkscreen emulsion[1], the marks would be intensified to ensure a density sufficient to occlude the light transmission to the screen. (Fig.3 Graphite mark deposits. 2019)

To express movement, the subject's hands were drawn with differing pressures and tonal values, taking the right side of the image into deep shadow and the left highlighted in the projector beam. I made marks with purpose, even though they might give the appearance of being free, effortless or even thoughtless. My drawing is not a static portrait of a subject posing for an artist, but of a subject in action. Rather than staring out at the artist or the viewer, inviting engagement, Sargeant is depicted in profile. His individual performativity as a committed presenter is reflected through his body position, upwards gaze and positioning of hands. The viewer is invited to appreciate this passionate presentation.

The broadly drawn gestures of the lower body are left to taper off and enable the figure to float on the background, unrestrained by a frame edge, unlike the photographic image that inspired it (Fig 4. Graphite whole unanchored portrait). At the printing stage, an alternative composition was created by a cutting off the lower body by the base line of the frame, in order to see whether it might provide stability and an anchor for the portrait. (Fig 5. Printed anchored portrait). The compositional and framing options were discussed with the subject when he viewed the prints in the Birmingham School of Art, (11th December 2019). Sargeant thought the depiction of his floating body suggested a sense of liminality, which he felt appropriate to his research methodology. Sculptor Alison Wilding attests to this quality of drawing to float and depart from confines: 'The thing I like about drawings is that they can float. You don't think about gravity. They do something really different. That is the freedom and pleasure of drawing for me' (Heong Gallery, 2020).



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 5. Ian Sargeant Anchored Print (2020) by E. J. Turpie. Two colour Serigraphic Print. 68 x 101 cm

Figure 6. Drawn hands on mark resist film. Photo by E. J. Turpie

In pursuing the portrait, I made gestural marks to encourage the viewer's identification with the subject. Throughout the mark-making process, each mark posed the question as to whether it was correct for the image, in part and on the whole, before the next mark was made. This experience was one of embodiment, where the interaction with the drawing was a phenomenon in of itself (Montarou, 2014). The drawing shows the results of an improvisation between the original photographic and anticipated serigraphic image, and between the known persona of the subject and the memory of his physical reality. David Edgar describes his drawing research into voids and landscapes:

Phenomenologically speaking, each suggestive mark that I make projects my embodied knowledge and memory of the observed world. Each mark has its own personality, mood and rhythm. A drawing evolves as the marks continue against and over each other over time. A mark made activates against another mark made.

Edgar (2019:10)

A drawing may stand on its own terms as a unique single artwork. However, the serigraphic printmaker must pay attention to parameters of the medium with restrictions such as screen exposure time, thickness of emulsion, concentration of inks, value of screen mesh, pressure of squeegee pulls, and paper texture and qualities. Marion Arnold explains the complex creative drawing translation for print process:

Printmaking requires commitment to a prolonged process of image realisation and time-consuming, labour intensive analytical and technically complex procedures. Responsive to the evocative and signifying capacity of the lines, tones, and shapes intrinsic to drawings, artist printmakers face the challenge of translating a drawing (the source language) into a final graphic state with aesthetic resonance and evocative meaning, delivered by ink imprinted on paper.

Arnold (2019:2)

RETAINING DRAWN GESTURE

A wide range of mark-making for silkscreen was made possible through the development of True Grain film by Kip Gresham in the 1990's. He recalls: 'My aim was to make a transparent drafting material that paralleled the surface of a litho stone... [where] chalk / crayon / graphite marks have an attack and decay; that is, the mark has a beginning, middle and an end. It has tonal variation.' (Gresham, 2020). Mark Resist drafting film (Cadisch Screen Printing Supplies) has similar, if not as subtle, continuous tone capabilities as True Grain however, it can 'take many different marks... that can hold back the light' (Fortune, 2020).

By adopting this drawing practice to create figurative imagery, material values can be made with different levels of impressions of graphite on



Figure 7

film. (Fig 6. Hands drawn on mark resist) The marks may be initially less gestural and lacking direct connection with that of pencil, crayon or charcoal on paper, however, learning the material latitudes of graphite on mark resist establishes a means to understanding how to make more responsive printed gestural marks. (Fig 7. Gestural drawn hands)

PROOFING

Although prints can be made on a huge variety of substrates, this research prioritizes paper and I elected to use smooth, bright white 'Bread and Butter' paper from John Purcell Paper supplies. From my previous research into printing portraits of people of African and Afro Caribbean heritage, the ink was created from a pre-mix of Mars Black with small amounts of Crimson. In this case an additional portion of yellow ink was added to give additional warmth. The ink was swatched to assess if the hue had warmth radiating from the blacks.

Akin to the embodied experience of the processes of making the drawn image, each element of preparation and printing is dependent on the application of precise learned printmaking knowledge, complemented and carried out in conjunction with responses to visual and tactile signals on the day of making the print itself.

THE SERIGRAPHIC PRINT

The proofed print shows a composition which places the body to the lower-left of the image, creating a dynamic relationship with the expanse of space above and to the right. Although the head is in profile and tilted away from the viewer, the likeness of the subject is apparent. The dramatic gesticulation of his hands is rendered with dynamic marks that suggest movement, in contrast with the clarity of the head, implying steadiness. In contrast with the bright white paper, the range of the marks, colour and gravity of ink contributes to an illusion of the substantial presence of the image. The balance of the body in shadow and the highlighted profile and hands encourages an affirmative representation of the subject's expressive persona. (Fig 8. Monotone portrait printed on white bread and butter paper)

THE ADDITION OF A FLAT COLOUR BACKGROUND

In order to extend the print beyond a monotone image, I explored printing a flat colour background. Although the perceived colour in the original projection setting was white, the colour as displayed on the phone screen appeared a light green. Cultural, emotional and psychological interpretations of colour alongside the memory of the lived experience of the subject inform the choosing of a colour. My subjective decision is intended to provide a flat ground to overprint the dark gestural drawing to bring together the visual polarities. I decided on a light turquoise blue, and mixed blue and yellow with white pigment to ensure a depth of opacity.

Silkscreen printing flat saturated unblemished colour demands



Figure 8



Figure 9

Figure 8. Monotone Portrait of Ian Sergeant (2020) by E. J. Turpie. Screenprint on white bread and butter paper. 68 x 101 cm

Figure 9. Flat colour backgrounds printed in preparation for Ian Sergeant, PhD Passion by E J Turpie. Screenprint on paper, 68 x 101 cm

uniformity, and leaves no evidence of the human hand in the final print. (Fig 9. 6 Flat blue, prints) I hoped that the consistent flat printed colour would contrast with the gestural drawn marks. Any perceived imperfection could detract from this. Serigraphy brings together the fine art printmaking of the gestural marks with the flat blue of industrial print processes (Saff, D. and Sacilotto, D.1978:291). (Fig 10. Monotone portrait printed on blue and white)

The final stage was to invite Sergeant to the studio to view the final work and to receive his approval. He enthusiastically accepted the print, which was duly dated, signed and numbered: No 1.

POSTSCRIPT

Since this paper was written in January 2020, the world has changed. Coronavirus has altered the way human beings relate to each other physically and mentally. The death of George Floyd and the concurrent rise of the Black Lives Matter movement has brought awareness of the level of racism pervading societies to the fore. The making of the portrait described in this paper was an acknowledgement of Ian Sergeant's passion for his subject and his commitment to wider representation of Black cultural contribution. My portrait will be included in future physical exhibitions as a large-scale print introducing a series of weekly lockdown drawn portraits of subjects from the Black community. Currently, these have been made public through my research blog and Instagram platform. This will be an early artistic contribution to the long and overdue changes that BLM has brought forward. This paper, my prints and associated research will keep reflecting on the context of current issues, striving for a post COVID, anti-racist future.

AUTHOR

Turpie, having established a successful creative industries career returned to education in 2017 as a Doctoral Research Student at Birmingham School of Art. His career included establishing an independent production company producing innovative television and digital content. During his journey towards PhD completion he has achieved a PG Certificate in Research Practice, his first formal qualification since achieving an MA Printmaking from the RCA in 1979. His PhD Research subject is The drawn serigraph: An investigation through portraiture, in which he explores the subtle digital and analogue techniques of image making and the complex relationships between the Artist and Subject.

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Figure 10

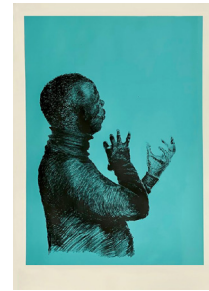


Figure 11

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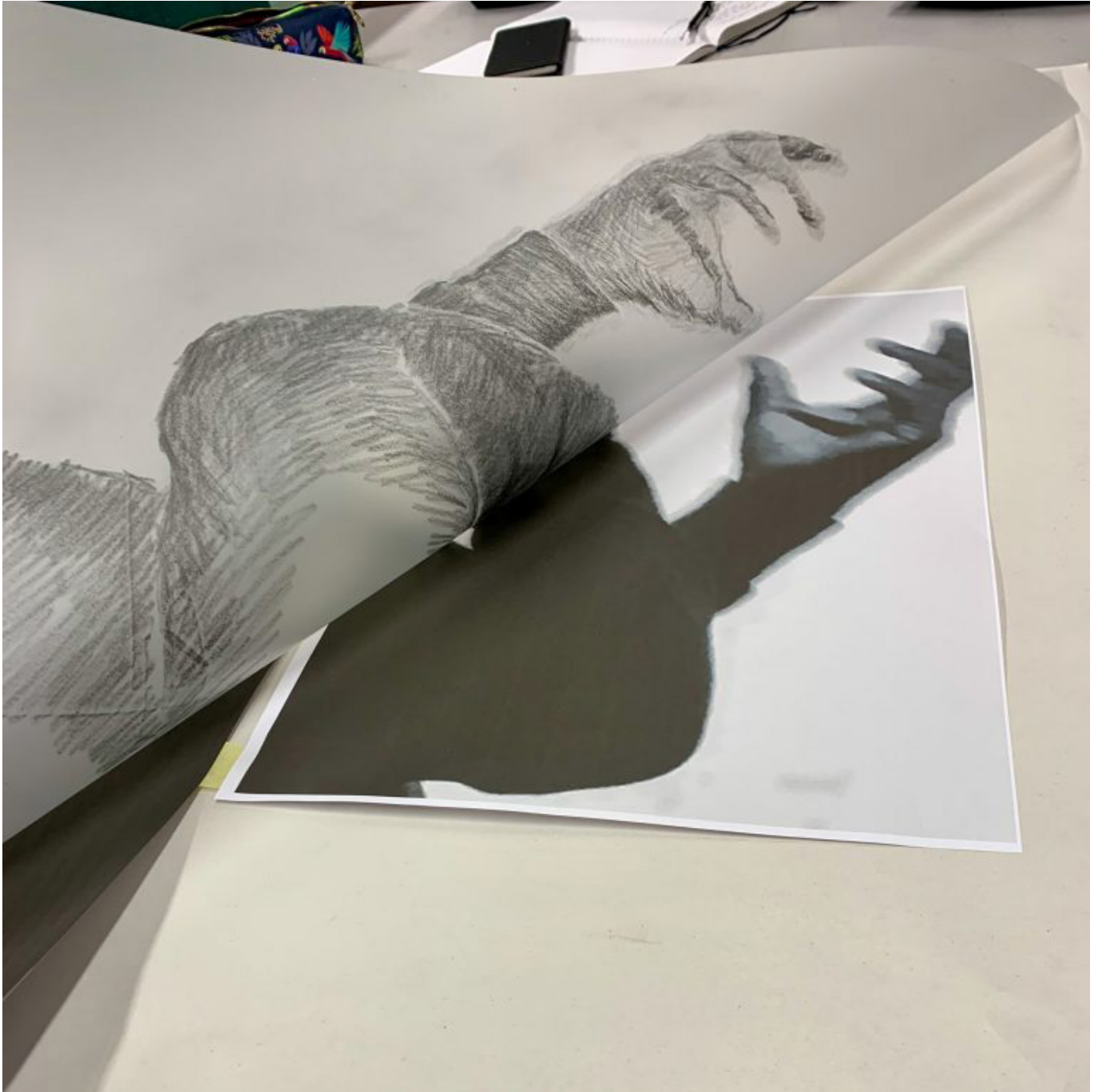


Figure 6. Drawn hands on mark resist film. Photo by E. J. Turpie



Figure 7. Gestural drawn hands. Detail of Serigraphic Print



Figure 8. Monochrome Portrait of Ian Sergeant (2020) by E. J. Turpie. Screenprint on white bread and butter paper. 68 x 101 cm

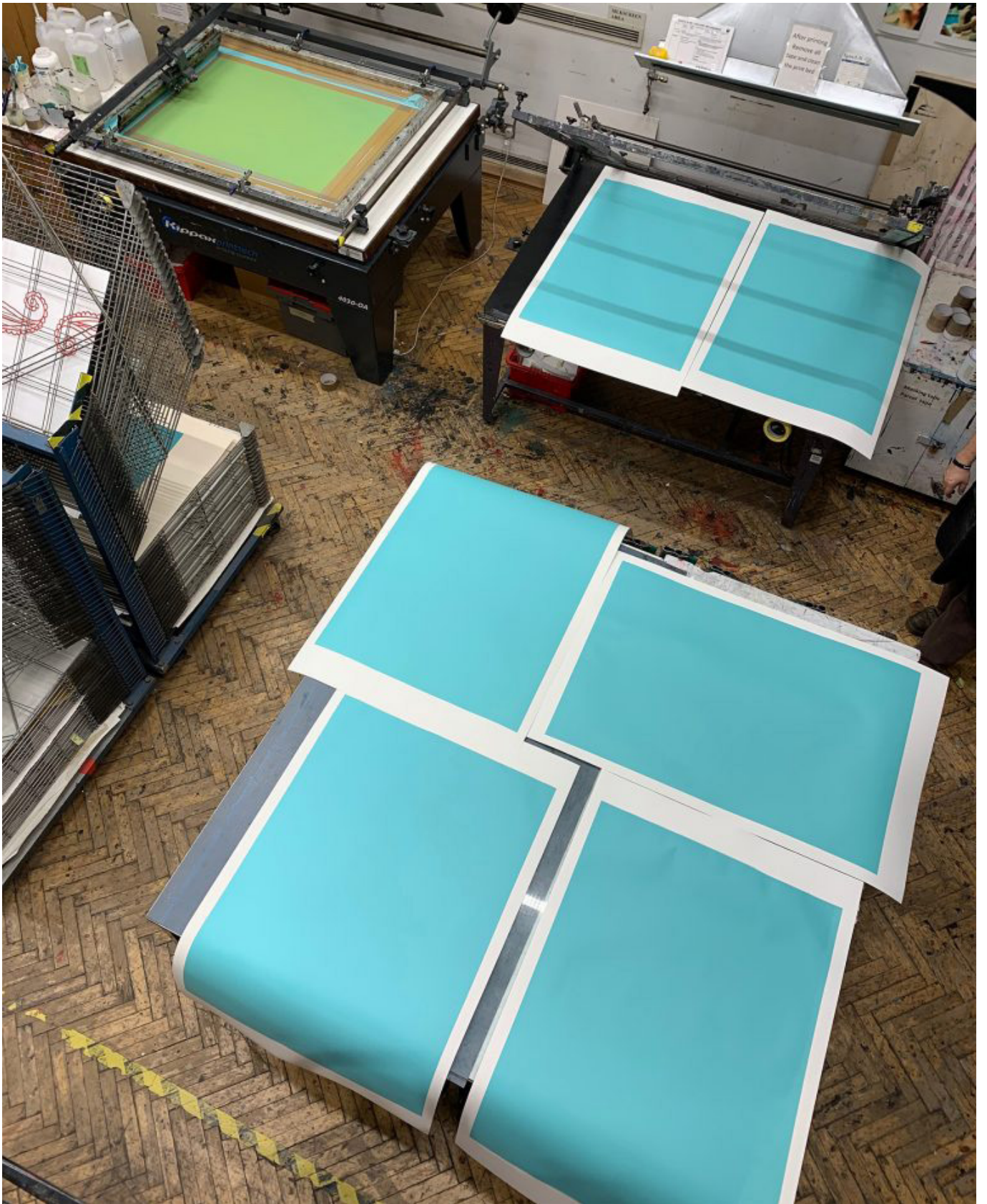


Figure 9. Flat colour backgrounds printed in preparation for Ian Sergeant, PhD Passion by EJ Turpie. Screenprint on paper, 68 x 101 cm



Figure 10. Ian Sergeant, PhD Passion (2019) by E J Turpie. Two colour Serigraphic Print placed next to single colour serigraphic print. 68 x 101 cm



Figure 11. Ian Sergeant. PhD Passion. 2019. Two colour Serigraphic Print. 68 x 101 cm