

Spaghetti Intaglio

Shefali Wardell

ABSTRACT

Shefali Wardell writes about a project called Spaghetti Intaglio: a week-long exhibition of domestic and DIY fine-art prints made without professional studio equipment, shown in December 2019. The UK-wide call-out resulted in submissions ranging from pasta machine photopolymer to hand-pressed prints made from mud, and abstract images formed with imprinted fly excrement.

BACKGROUND

Four years ago, I started teaching printmaking in a community college having spent my print schooling mainly in studios and universities. After this, going to work somewhere that had only adequate equipment and slightly outdated practice was a valuable learning curve, as I found myself compelled to find ways to create the same high-quality results and education I had been used to but with reduced means.

My memory was that when I went to university to study drawing as my postgraduate degree, I had luckily stumbled upon a wonderful print department with excellent facilities and fabulous knowledgeable and nourishing technicians. By the time I came out I knew just about enough to secure a traineeship at the London Print Studio. Once again, I felt that this was a thoroughly amazing place where the generosity of print education knows no bounds. By the time I found myself teaching community drypoint using plastic scavenged from recycled school folders, I was starting to realise what a privileged print education I had. Yet I wanted to find a way to provide an education that was just as memorable and helpful.

It was from this place that the desire to showcase work made with creativity and innovation from everyday materials grew. Here I met people teaching themselves how to print fairly well from YouTube tutorials involving kitchen supplies, adapting pasta machines in to miniature intaglio

presses and cola into a lithographic etching solution. Having already had my own happy foray in to using hairspray as a type of aquatint, I was immediately drawn to the experimentation, and this energy is what I hoped to showcase in an exhibition.

EXHIBITION REQUIREMENTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

The exhibition callout was simply for UK printmakers who work outside of professional



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. Expanding Blue 2 by Cheryl Brunel. Acrylic ink and oakmoss marbling

Figure 2. Doppelganger Rose by Michaela Wheeler. Watercolour, screen print and stitching

studios and/or with domestic and self-made equipment. The exhibition was presented more as a showcase than a guaranteed sales-oriented show, and with an explanation that I wanted to investigate the domestic printer community.

Economic necessity seems to be a large part of what currently drives the evolving practice of domestic printmaking, although health and environmental concerns are also becoming equally influential. When I first joined the print department in 2016, climate emergency was not discussed in the print room, but by the time I released the 2019 call out for Spaghetti Intaglio many printers were looking to work with less toxic processes.

Working in community education, the drive towards safer environments for older students and those with health conditions is a large part of what we do now and not always met with enthusiasm by those who are used to 20th century materials. There sometimes seems to be a largely unfounded anxiety that the quality of output will fall without petroleum-based inks, strong acids or heady solvents.

The requirements of entering the show did not specify non-toxic or environmentally sustainable working, but it seems that this is often linked to domestic environments and working outside the professional studio. From the submissions, it is apparent that home working does not mean a separate home studio. For example, Cheryl Brunel, uses repurposed kitchen equipment in the living room to marble paper using an Oak Moss solution. The results of this marbling are an extremely high quality and they proved to be popular sellers at the show. It seems unlikely that anyone would look at them and associate them with the glass oven dish they are made in.

Printing like this in the middle of a home environment is bound to put pressure on domestic health and safety where pets and children might be around. Without the equipment of a studio, such as acid rooms and extraction, working at home might require the printer to start looking around for less unhealthy materials if only for their own health. There is also the pressure not to ruin home furnishings with oil-based inks or corrosive materials.

Kate Simkins, who exhibited some intricately carved swede prints, with a plate that later got pickled for posterity, discussed this with me before the show as she had spent some time being maligned in studio circles for using safe-wash inks that did not require cleaning with solvents. With the sudden impact of Climate Emergency protests, she at last found herself in fashionable company but the change in her working methods had originally come from legitimate concerns about health. She makes often bright coloured relief prints and etchings based on her own illustrations and does not report any loss of control or quality while working with these newer styles of ink.

The amount of recycled materials in the show were both a tribute to finding things for free instead of having to buy paper, which is often



Figure 3



Figure 4

the most expensive part of printing, but also to the increased urgency with which many artists are eliminating waste and extravagance from their studio practices. Lucy Oates' work was a wall-mounted, hanging, shimmering object that consisted of screen prints made on recycled cans. It brought together sculpture and printing on a non-paper support that was still predominantly about the printing surface.

ECONOMIC IMPACT AND BARRIERS TO LOW INCOME COMMUNITIES

For many printmakers there are huge economic barriers to exhibiting regularly enough to get known or to sell work. On top of the usual financial burdens of any art show, such as delivery, collection, insurance, our often fragile paper-based practice leaves us with the extra cost of framing. From the botched jobs I had attempted after studying, I know that good framers are worth every penny but appreciation doesn't actually make framing for exhibitions economically accessible. Even buying decent looking frames from a high street shop often costs more that it takes to make a small edition of prints. Even for those who have good luck renovating charity shop items there is still the terrifying matter of mounts. Printers who are also skilled bookbinders would seem to have the advantage in this area but many of us from other backgrounds regularly turn down exhibition opportunities as a result.

While making Spaghetti Intaglio economically accessible I was keen to address the further impact of a decade of austerity on our ability to make work in the studio or exhibit. Who gets to print in a climate where spare cash is scarce? For me, one of the reasons for showcasing domestic printmaking particularly was the chance to see work from different voices, and I think that the ability to innovate within a technical subject is one of the strengths of the printmaking community within the arts.

A UK-wide call out resulted in prints coming from England and Wales, and the majority of the participants who were not from the local Richmond print community came from outside of London. Having advertised exhibiting opportunities in London before, this is a slightly unusual balance and I would normally expect more London applicants. The practicalities of a print show may have been one reason, as the cost of posting a few unframed paper prints is much cheaper than shipping a canvas or sculpture to the other side of the country. Most entrants who might not have considered it worth their while to buy a train ticket to come down to a small show before Christmas were happy to supply a stamped return envelope. Maybe there are even fewer accessible print studios outside of the major cities, meaning that printers out of these spaces have to use their own surroundings to print.

However, despite posing some questions a show of this size was not really large enough to answer anything about the economics of current printmaking life in the UK. It may be difficult for artists to discuss



Figure 5



Figure 6

publicly the economic imperatives behind what we make but this lack of space for open discussion is an impediment to improving things. In her application for the show, Birmingham based Hannah Parkes described her home-made studio setup that had been built into a spare bedroom as well as the garden. She made a screen bed as well as exposure unit from scratch and used a brick wall and hose pipe outside as a wash-out booth.

The striking thing for me about this was that for an artist producing work that is evidently of professional quality, there was the admission that rather than feeling confident about showcasing these technical skills, in her words she often “battles with herself about whether this way of producing prints is acceptable enough for the art world.”

Looking around the show, I realised that somehow we have to find a way to have this conversation as a community in order to keep making a variety of work but I would never blame individual freelancers for not wanting to talk about this in public. In 2020, those of us who have the truly enjoyable creative bread and butter jobs such as technician work or teaching may still find ourselves with inadequate living wages, or variable hours contracts. Yet we are by far the luckiest ones. For others, the ability to look outwardly successful is often tied up with gaining opportunities from curators, galleries or potential customers. So publicly discussing economic strife and how it drives technical innovation in a print practice may feel risky, and it is unlikely to get you a contract with an art consultancy who will sell your work to Dubai board rooms. This situation itself could be seen as preventing us from engaging with an interesting dialogue about making.

In a country that has thus far survived strangulating economics for a decade, while the social contract seems to melt away before our eyes, it is hard to open up about the truth behind everyday decisions around making in case honesty makes things even worse. Is the dream of the lucky, maverick creative making work for passion alone, but yet able to land lucrative contracts, more important to the veneer of art than the truth? How does this story sit with a discipline like printmaking where a level of technical facility is necessary to produce anything at all?

In part Spaghetti Intaglio was about showcasing high quality work made in this reality and a to start a dialogue about what printmakers are doing in the country right now aside from the other challenges of life, and without the need to project any type of economic narrative to legitimise what and how they are making. While this is hard for individual artists to do, it is much easier for curators to create and hold a space that facilitates this dialogue, and it is something that we should be doing.

One of the themes of the submissions should not have come as a surprise to me, because it has been part of my own printing story. This is the question about what you do to print after formal education. University fees buy you decent facilities that get you hooked on the vacuum screen bed and cast-iron press. What on earth do you do once



Figure 7

you have graduated and all that comfort is left behind?

Robert Verill, who showed 6 pieces of intriguing and popular work in the show had a farsighted approach to this in that he never got hooked in the first place. Reading his submission, I realised that we studied at the same college, but rather than going straight to the print room he lingered outside the building, finding discarded objects. These were soaked in mud or clay slip then printed from using a system of boards instead of a heritage print press. The resulting oversized ghostly prints were both ethereal and organic looking in nature, filled with the memories of a cast-off bodily existence. His work developed from a performance background, which explains the echoes of action and sense of embodied presence in it. I had been used to seeing print practices that developed from drawing and photography, so one that was so entwined with performance and the body was exciting and perfectly situated outside of a print studio.

As expected, domesticity associated with the kitchen was in evidence, but not just in the form of pasta machines or screen-printed fabric. A particularly interesting take on this was Amy Sterly's carved rolling pins and clean, polished prints made from similarly adapted cooking utensils. This turned everyday wooden kitchen implements into relief plates that could be hand-pressed on to lightweight paper. She arranged them over large pieces of paper with several utensils forming shapes to make a whole image, throwing the emphasis on to pattern and a sense of movement more than domesticity.

It was important for the business model of the show to reflect the overall economic subject matter: Entry was free, with a modest hanging fee charged to every chosen artist. The hanging fee allowed for paying a technician to install work safely, and that in turn meant that in exchange for a small optional risk, artists did not have to frame shown work. The imperative for an evening private view was also reworked into a print show day where printmaker and educator Diane McLellan ran a Saturday workshop on pasta machine lithography. Ultimately, this was because with a micro budget I decided it was better to spend money on something related to community education about the subject matter of the show than wine.

The provision of the gallery space, donated by Richmond and Hillcroft Adult Community College (RHACC,) also meant that it was affordable to take no commission on sales. Overall, the model allowed for a project that could sustain itself and pay the staff who worked on it without bringing economic doom to the organiser, nor economically crippling the participants. The ability to do this was an important step in looking forward to accessible exhibiting models and is one I hope we can all consider building on in the future.

As a small show in a South West London suburb in December I do not think it was reasonable to expect it to sell out and it the call out did not focus on the promise of sales. Yet there were some sales, and the artists who sold admitted that they were pleasantly surprised. For

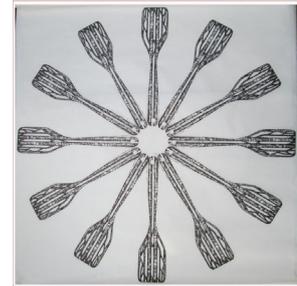


Figure 8



Figure 9

Figure 8. Carved Spoon by Amy Sterly

Figure 9. Untitled by David Natas. Photopolymer printed on pasta machine

Manvit Bal who made a series of colourful hand-painted and pulled linocut monoprints based on her own drawings and photographs of Osterley Park, it was the first time she had ever sold a print in a show.

Many people enter small shows as a good way to experiment with presenting work. Without a famous institution or central London location behind a show, there is no way to guarantee sales, and that is another reason economic accessibility in exhibiting is important. Otherwise entering work in to shows can just prove to be the disappointment of an expensive lottery ticket, and completely unavailable for those who do not have spare gambling funds.

Providing an exhibition catalogue as documentation that has potential for dissemination has also been met with a positive response from the participants, and although this is another curatorial expense to factor in, I wonder if it is actually more important than I realised at first. In an age where documentation often ends up being a drop of marketing-oriented photographs on social media, does providing something more contained and focused have longer term impact for artists who have invested time and money in showing work?

IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN AND THE FUTURE

As I write this our current situation of international lock-downs has once again forced me to hand-pressing a print at my dining table, while waiting anxiously for the next few months to see whether my paying contracts still exist.

The arts industry did not start off in any fit state to weather this unexpected economic break down, but the show I curated just months ago has shown me that even in the midst of this there is still so much creativity and energy in the print community to keep making. While much of my research recently has focused on creating economically viable and sustainable art projects, it is an uncomfortable fact that adversity quite often actually seems to nourish creativity. No discipline is more able to cope with this than the technical yet continually adaptive printmaking.

Whether as an independent or working for a prestigious outlet, it is hard to make any part of a living as curator, and yet those of us who create shows need to be mindful of their agency in driving change. Otherwise artists can end up feeling that they are creating into a black hole, where exhibiting is too expensive for work to ever be seen and studios are out of the reach.

While Spaghetti Intaglio showed some wonderful work made outside the print studio, the feasibility of this model also gave me hope that it might be possible to rebalance the economic burden placed on individual artists and make it a little easier to show work. Being able to fund it independently through reasonable hanging fees instead of scarce grant applications or free labour also offers some hope for the independent curators who find themselves locked out of mainstream



Figure 10



Figure 11

success as much as lower income artists do. The print community is one of warmest and most generous creative sectors I have ever worked in, which is why even in the midst of all this uncertainty, it is still thriving.

At the moment it is very important for those of us who have even just one nostril and an eyelash above the flood of the economic depression of the last 10 years to look for ways to bolster economically sustainable opportunities that showcase makers, because it is only as a community that we will get through this, together.

APPENDIX OF PRINTMAKING TECHNIQUES AND SETUPS SHOWN:

Hand-pressed and wooden spoon-burnished linocuts and rubber stamps, made with non-toxic and safe wash ink.

Watercolour painting on to screen mesh to produce a variable edition of prints.

Hand and machine sewing over prints.

Home-made equipment such as screen-beds and presses, constructed from discarded and waste materials.

Relief plates made from carved wooden kitchen utensils, hand-pressed on to fine paper.

Pasta machines used to print photocopied plastic lithography plates, photopolymer plates and plastic drypoint plates.

Lithographic plates made from aluminium foil, processed in cola. Carved vegetable relief prints.

Fly excrement stains collected using a range of foodstuffs and transferred to paper.

Hand-pressed plastic collagraph.

Embroidery hoop screen prints, made from discarded screen mesh and old tights fixed in an embroidery hoop.

UV stencils for screens exposed outside using daylight.

Printing on to found and recycled surfaces including waste paper and tin cans.

Images made from hand-pressing discarded print workshop materials, such as rags and dirty ink plates.

Photopolymer relief plates processed in a UV nail lamp for setting gel nail polish.

Marbling done with Irish Moss and kitchen equipment.

Paper stencil screen printing.

Waste clay slip used in place of ink.

Printing directly from found objects.

Japanese woodcut hand painting and pressing techniques used with lino and washi.

Spaghetti Intaglio was held at RHACC, Parkshot, Richmond upon Thames from 11th – 17th December 2019. It featured 20 artists from around the UK and an exhibition catalogue will be available in August 2020.

AUTHOR

Shefali Wardell is an MA Illustration research supervisor at Falmouth University, and teaches printmaking at Richmond Art School. Her website is <http://www.overeggingthepudding.com>

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IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1: Expanding Blue 2 by Cheryl Brunel. Acrylic ink and oakmoss marbling



Figure 2. Doppelgänger Rose by Michaela Wheeler. Watercolour, screen print and stitching



Figure 3. Crabtree House by Hannah Parkes. Screenprint



Figure 4. Barn Owl in Moonlight by Nicola MacNab. Hand-pulled rubber cut



Figure 5. Old Man with Pigeon by Jacob Louis Beaney. Hand done rubber stamp print

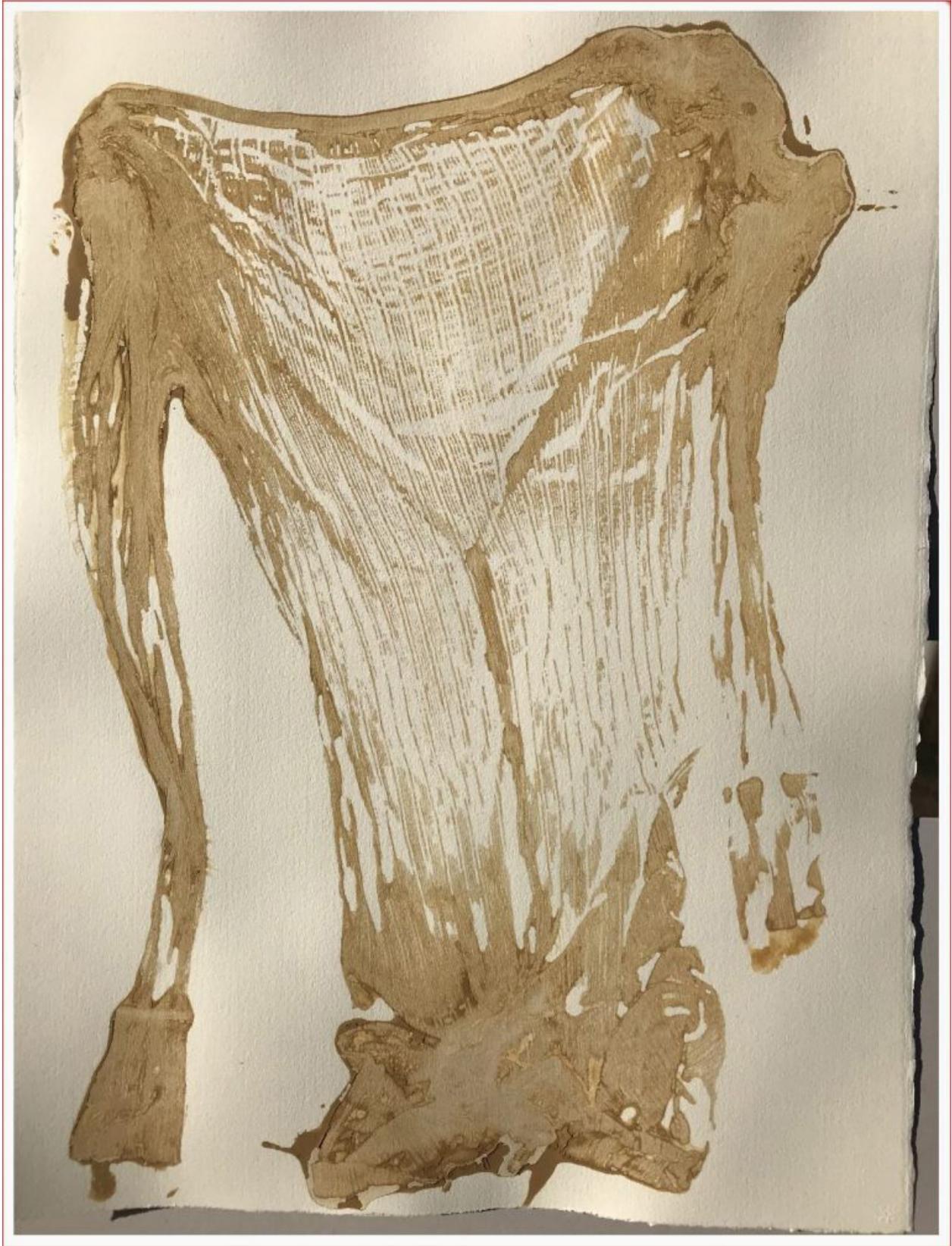


Figure 7. Print no 4 by Robert Verill

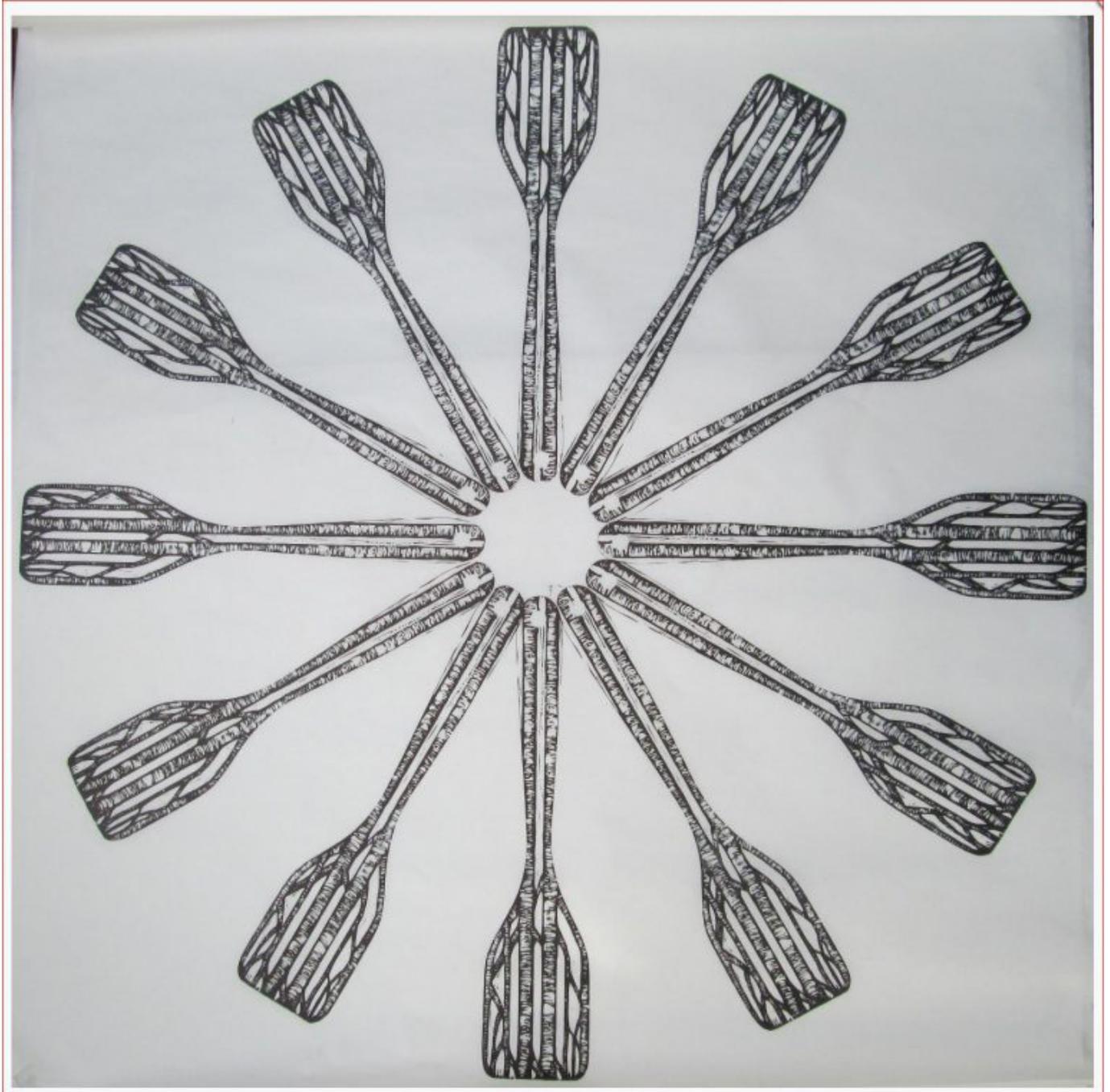


Figure 8. Carved Spoon by Amy Sterly

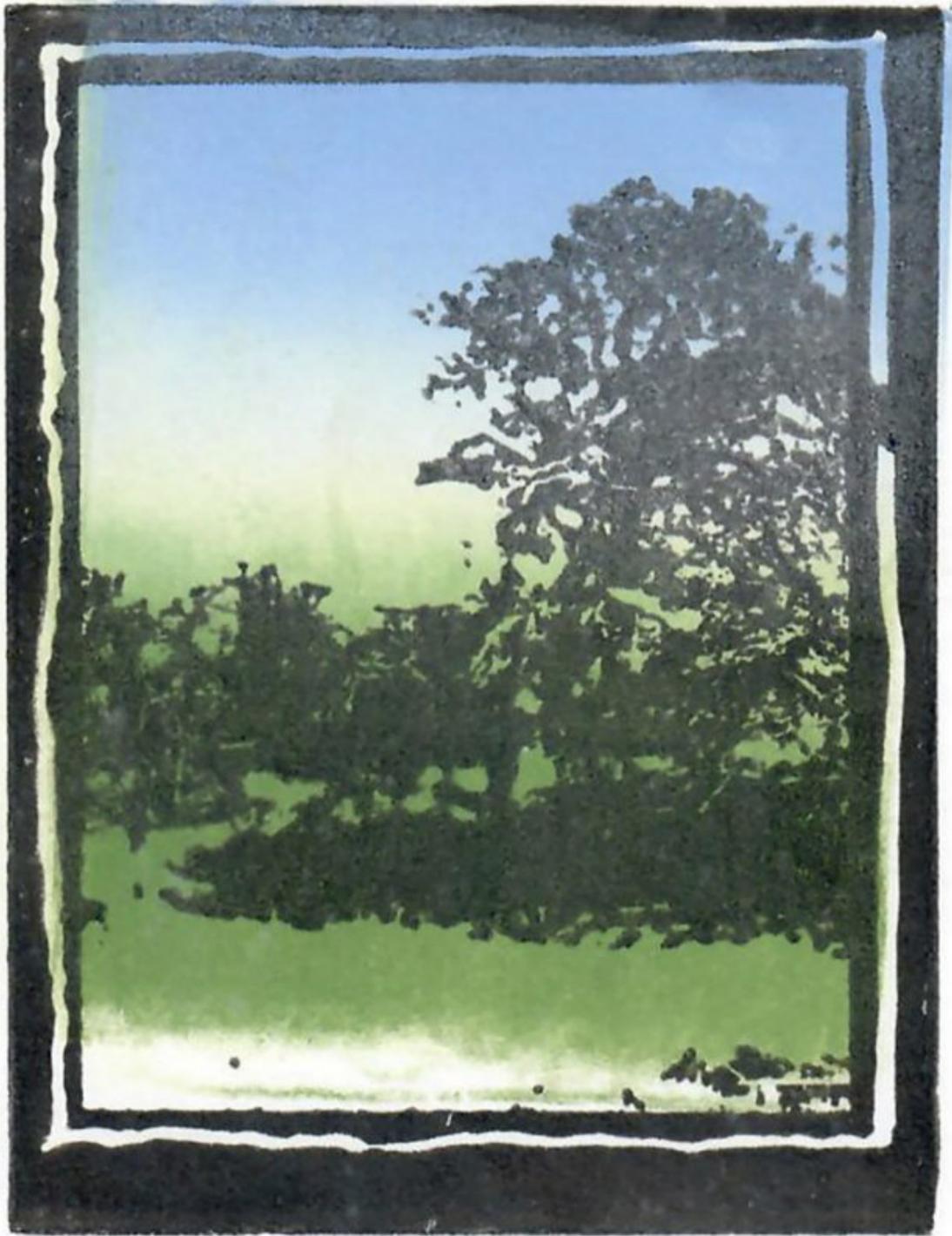


Figure 9. Untitled by David Natas. Photopolymer printed on pasta machine



Figure 10. Green Glass by Debbie Churchill. Paper stencil screen

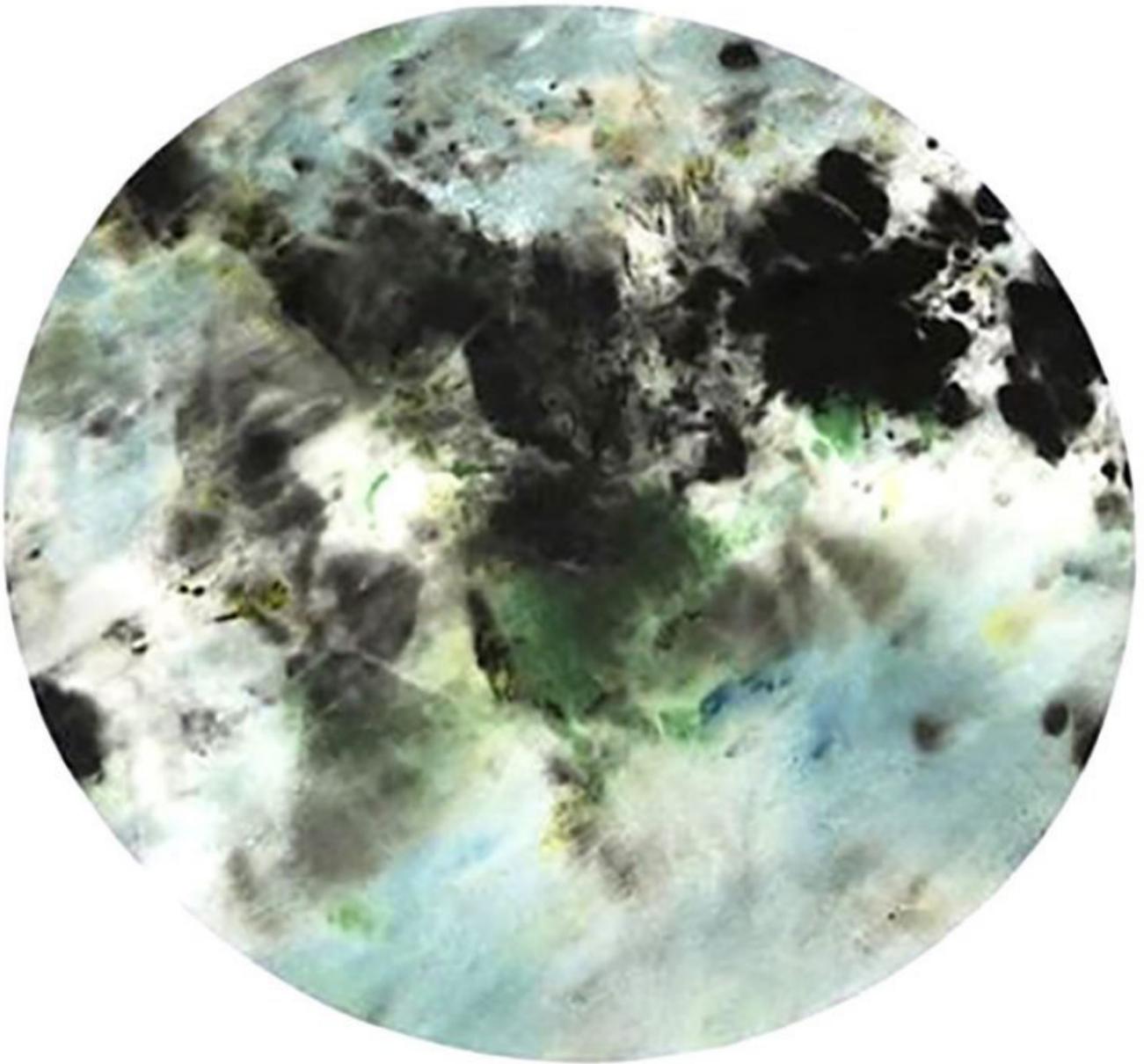


Figure 11. Untitled by Billy Jackson. Waste rag print