

They Drifted Slowly to Eternity

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INTRODUCTION

To drift implies slow movement, an engagement with time.

To drift suggests the undertaking of an action, a gradual discovery.

To drift presents the possibility of a lack of control, a dis-connection from one place and connection with another.

To drift offers the possibility of crossing borders and traversing barriers.

This body of work takes the subject of people who are physically and metaphorically between states, drifting and encountering the unknown. It seeks to give new currency to appropriated photographic images used within the media that may be seen as momentary, then left to float in the boundless parameters of the internet.

The title of this body of work *They Drifted Slowly to Eternity* is taken from a New York Herald account describing the human tragedy that unfolded after the 1873 sinking of the SS Atlantic that was carrying 800 migrants from Liverpool to New York ('Passage to the World' The Emigrant Experience 1807 – 1940. K. Brown, 2013) 560 passengers were lost in that tragedy and although now it is an arguably forgotten memory it is sadly echoed through the continuing loss of lives from current migration.

BORDERS

In 2012 the UK's Home Secretary, Theresa May was interviewed by the British newspaper The Telegraph. Within this interview May, who was later to become the UK's Prime Minister, introduced the UK public to the term 'Hostile Environment' whilst describing the government's policy on illegal immigration. In my view, this term is

negative and divisive but also reminds me that our world is defined by borders and barriers, both metaphorically and physically. The current myriad of images of people traversing these borders that now fill the internet come to embody hope, fear and tragedy. This series of woodcuts is my response to these stark press images of migrants on boats, part way through a journey for a better life.

The production of a print encourages moments of reflection for the maker, a space to re-engage



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. *They Drifted Slowly to Eternity, Yellow* (2019) by Oran O'Reilly. Woodcut and Carborundum powder on Hypalon. (detail)
 Figure 2. *They Drifted Slowly to Eternity, Red* (2019) by Oran O'Reilly. Woodcut and Aluminium Powder on Hypalon (detail)

with image and subject through time-based processes and meditative repetitive action. Within this body of prints I have initially re-worked contemporary and historical images of migrants, transforming them through a number of processes including digital manipulation, projection, ink drawing and tracing, with the ultimate outcome being woodcut printing. Each process leaves a trace and mimics a journey, a slow drift within the images' new direction, acknowledging the cyclical nature of migration. These physical interactions seek to metaphorically instill time within the work and allow it to act as an antithesis to the speed at which imagery is digested within contemporary media. It is time that keeps moving forward even when politically we may seem to move in reverse. It is time that we, in the west, can afford ourselves when others make desperate attempts to be in control of their own. The cutting of an image slowly into wood seems to be of little consequence, but the effects of war and oppression within the work of Kathe Kolwitz, Jose Guadalupe Posada, and Fernando Castro Pacheco still evoke a strong sense of loss and empathy. If my work is in any way adding to this lineage, it cannot help but reflect on print's ability to remind us of events we should not forget.

Repetition is inherent within print. Repetition of movement, of process, of printing.

HYPALON AND DUST

Paper also goes hand in hand with the printed image: it is a reference to the page, the traditional vehicle for knowledge. My move away from paper for this body of work was a slow breaking of ties in the search for a contextually relevant and more physical substrate. The woodcuts are printed by hand onto off-cut pieces of Hypalon, a material used in dinghy and boat building. The shapes reminded me of broken pieces of pottery I had found on the foreshore of the Thames, with traces of past histories and human presence. I think that this material brings a fragmented and discarded element to the work, evoking a reference to the subject but also subverting any inherent allusion of the sublime and romance of seascape.

Some of my previous works had experimented with adding a dusting of graphite and marble dust to the surface of works whilst the ink is wet in an attempt to bring both context and a varied surface to the images. I had enjoyed that these materials brought both a physical and fragile presence to the prints. These initial tests encouraged me to employ various powder pigments and metal powders to introduce colour to the printed surface. It was intriguing to see that some of the metal powders transformed, both in their coloration and their consistency, once they had been used with varying thicknesses of ink.

Following this unintentional development, experiments were carried out using different colours and viscosity of ink as well as light spraying of acidic liquids (vinegar, lemon juice), bleach and water to observe changes to the dusted surfaces. The metal powders have varying



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 5

Figure 3. They Drifted Slowly to Eternity, White (2019) by Oran O'Reilly. Woodcut and Copper Powder on Hypalon.
 Figure 4. They Drifted Slowly to Eternity, Orange (2019) by Oran O'Reilly. Woodcut and Iron Powder on Hypalon.
 Figure 5. They Drifted Slowly to Eternity, Red (2019) by Oran O'Reilly. Woodcut and Aluminium Powder on Hypalon.
 Figure 6. They Drifted Slowly to Eternity, Yellow (2019) by Oran O'Reilly. Woodcut and Aluminium Powder on Hypalon.

qualities and reaction times: Copper powder oxidizes at room temperature triggering a colour change from its initial bright orange to a brown. Sprays of water with vinegar or lemon juice on the copper powder began to turn the surface much darker and adding a small amount of salt to this creates areas of green. Adding a small amount of water to the caligo inks begins to rust iron powder, whereas aluminium is extremely resistant, prone to slight darkening but not rust. These experiments were more playful than scientific and seemed to vary depending on the room temperature and time of year, but the irregular results were intriguing and began to instil each print with a unique element of transition.

The transformations of the metal powders are slow and not necessarily evident to the viewer during the time that they have access to a work, but the use of these fragile surfaces engages with a slow process of transmutation. Through this, the work enters the world of the ephemeral and time-based media, rather than remaining a static vessel. It offers the possibility of movement and deterioration as well as investigating the connection between the transient nature of materials and the subject of migration that drifts in and out of our collective conscience.

EXHIBITION

This body of work was shown in a solo exhibition at ASC Galley, London entitled 'Hostile Environment' in July 2019. The exhibition included drawings, an animation and six of the woodcuts on Hypalon. There were common themes within all the works of removal, displacement and the use of and reflection on vocabulary used within historical and contemporary commentary on migration, such as borders, barriers and threats. The constructions that the woodcut prints lie on echo the fractured forms of boat structures and become a fragile vessel for the imagery. The prints were placed as if they had drifted and had come to rest within the gallery space. Viewers are able to walk around the prints that become more object than image with the intention of evoking ideas of loss, disorientation and to confront our inability to fully understand the migrant experience.

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IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1. They Drifted Slowly to Eternity, Yellow (2019) by Oran O'Reilly. Woodcut and Carborundum powder on Hypalon. (detail)



Figure 2. They Drifted Slowly to Eternity, Red (2019) by Oran O'Reilly. Woodcut and Aluminium Powder on Hypalon (detail)



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