

PRINTS IN RHYTHM

Giulia Leonelli

This paper will introduce my research in the field of printmaking by observing my body of work realised over recent years. Utilising the theoretical approach developed in my doctoral thesis *Entendre le pictural*¹ (published in 2017), I will defend the rhythmic qualities of printmaking, focusing on the creative process, as well as considering the hanging and installation of a series of prints.

First, let's consider the meaning of this title *Entendre le pictorial*. The title sheds light on both my reflection on art and my printmaking practice. *Entendre* in French carries a double meaning: it is the verb form of the word that means to hear and listen; at the same time, it means to understand and consider. This *double entendre*, when applied to visual arts, suggests a kind of experience that unfolds in space and time, a physical dimension where art is heard and considered, then understood and felt in its scale.

The word *Pictural* in the title refers to the painterly qualities pursued in my work, having been first trained as a painter. Approaching printmaking, this pictorial quest certainly echoes the use of colour and chromatic research as a fundamental part of the creative work. But the main reason I define my printmaking practice as *pictorial* lies with the abstract patterns and shapes that spring into being as rhythm rather than structure, always seeking to suggest movement and inconsistency. In this sense, the pictorial echoes the *painterliness* concept defended by art historian Heinrich Wölfflin² as a peculiar characteristic of Baroque art in its quest for open and irregular shapes.

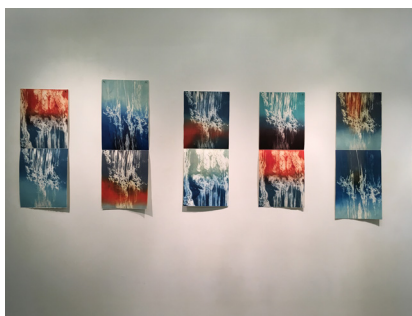


Figure 1

My purpose is to apprehend the rhythm in visual arts as something different than a mere question of composition balance. Beyond the arrangement of forms, rhythm springs in defiance of inaction and quietude, aiming to suggest a perpetual becoming and a constant renewal.

My concern for a dynamic momentum comes to fruition in the nature of the process itself, through the chemical reactions involved in etching. I'm often looking for accidental occurrences, intended to embrace randomness. For instance, I frequently use the aquatint technique in conjunction with soap ground, an alternative hard ground made of linseed oil, soap, white pigment, and water. I do this because of its imperfect resistance to the mordant, allowing some protected areas to be partially bitten.

While chemical reactions determine the aspect of patterns and shapes, my role is primarily that of directing the element of chance through minimal interventions. Then, when a rhythmic configuration has been attained, I proceed with more specific and meticulous interventions that will guide the random shape to its final flourishing.

Following this vision, the theme of the *flowing* has become a recurrent feature in my prints because of its ambivalent significance. *Flowing*, suspended between a material and a temporal dimension, is a visual mark evoking the constant unfolding of time that impregnates artistic forms in their emergence and their becoming.

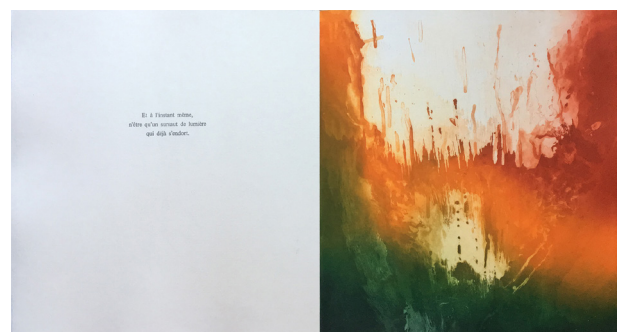


Figure 2

¹Leonelli Giulia, *Entendre le pictural*, (2017), Paris: Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. <http://www.theses.fr/2017PA01H304>

² Wölfflin Heinrich, (1988), *Renaissance et Baroque*, Paris: Gérard Monfort.

Figure titles and information:

Figure 1: Madrigals Series 1

Figure 2: Mandolin Days 5

The production of my artist book *Mandolin Days* at Atelier Bo Halbirk in Paris occurred between 2015 and 2016. The book consisted of a set of seven 39 x 36 cm prints and an original poem in French, composed in lead letterpress. The making of this work led me to work with polychrome inking using the technique known as *à la poupée*, which consists of a local intervention of different colours on the same plate, in a single passage under the press.

Because of all the creative possibilities offered by this process, printing has assumed a leading role in my work.

All the elements that intervene in the printing process seem to operate according to a tactile memory that is carried within layers and successive moments. For example, the engraved furrows retain traces of the inks spread over the plate, then wiped away. The resulting colour comes from dynamic and active mixing, a tactile and highly gestural process. The act of choosing a combination of hues that eventually resolve in a visual intonation corresponds to seizing a specific occurrence among a maze of diverse and variable possibilities.

This chromatic contribution to *painterliness* and rhythm is consistently used to produce a regular edition, where all the prints look alike. As for *Mandolin Days*, it has been produced in a limited edition of ten almost identical copies. However, I have since matured an interest in revisiting a print ensemble through a series of actions based on selective inking and overprinting, so that the same configuration seems to evolve and remodel from one print to the next in the same edition.

Several experiments around the variation of a single matrix have been executed. *Gravitation* is a 70 x 50 cm plate mostly worked by the aquatint technique, with some drypoint interventions. The matrix has been printed in variable editions and listed in two series of prints (Fig. 1).

In the first series, the inking is selective: a large, dark spot emerges and draws an ellipse with tangent extremities, surrounded by floating borders whose evanescence, in the upper margin, attenuates the sharpness of contours and fades to the blank of the paper (Fig. 2).

A second series is then produced from an overprint of the same matrix, on a paper already carrying the imprint of the first version made beforehand in shades of black, blue, grey and white. This time, the plate is inked in purple, magenta and red tones, according to a selective process. The ink doesn't extend to the edges of the pattern to attenuate its reiteration within the surface of the paper. On the press bed, the plate is oriented at an angle of 180° compared to the previous print, which allows a reverse overprinting (Fig. 5).

Inescapable as Today is an ensemble of prints made in 2019 during an artist residency at the Centre for Contemporary Printmaking in Norwalk, Connecticut. The plate, measuring 76 x 56 cm, has been etched with aquatint, combined with the application of a soap ground layer.

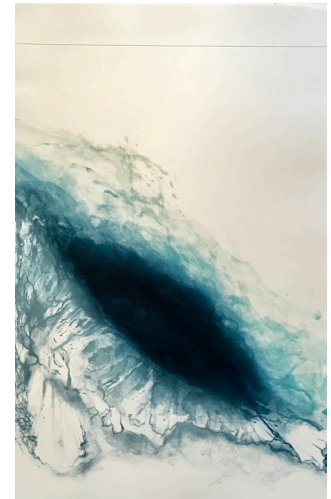


Figure 3



Figure 4

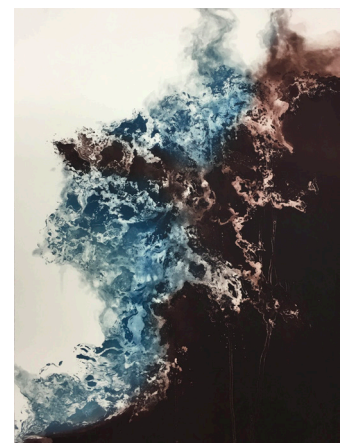


Figure 5

Figure 3: Gravitation 1
Figure 4: Gravitation 2
Figure 5: Inescapable as Today 1

The first series of prints comes from an “à la poupée” inking. The composition is partially framed on two sides by a deep and solid hue, obtained thanks to a palette of brown, red, grey, black and silver inks. Shades of blue intervene where the shape flourishes in effervescent patterns, progressively fading into the blank of the paper. However, in this first version, the choices taken during the printing process seem to encourage a certain heaviness and gravity, contrasting with the lightness that the etched substance itself exhales in its foamy semblance (Fig. 6).

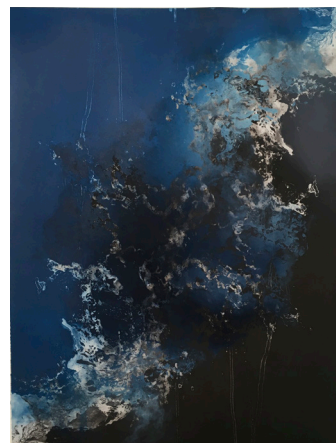


Figure 6

The second version consists of an overprint of the same plate, as in the *Gravitations* ensemble. Some prints from the first *Inescapable as Today* series, inked in blue tones, have been selected and used as the basis for a new impression. This time, the plate was inked in a range of grey tones. Nocturnal, effervescent: the pattern is renewed following another cadence. The whole surface is now permeated with inks, as if the colour had started before the paper did, to rejoin the support in a punctual occurrence (Fig. 7).



Figure 7

A third printed version of this plate was made using various blue shades to produce a gradient “à la poupée” inking. The deeper blue gradually fades and lightens, and finally merges into the white of the paper. The three successive interpretations of this plate, organised in three editions of eight prints each, achieve a sequence from which the form is observed in its development (Fig. 8-9).

Following a similar intent, the series *Un Appel de signes* (2021) was executed to ponder the variation of only one plate within a single edition of prints. This series can be considered to be a monoprint suite, issued from the variable and selective inking of the same matrix, worked with aquatint and burin.



Figure 8

While the mixture of inks remains the same for all of the 10 prints of the edition (a dominant violet hue coupled with turquoise insertions) the rendering of the matrix differs noticeably from one piece to the next because of the use of solvents as an expedient to alter and reshape the pattern. These adjustments are intended to produce a visual dissolution in successive steps.

I am interested in the production of works in series, displaying patterns in an evolving sequence that change from surface to surface. This interest finds its beginnings in a collaboration with musician and composer Joe Fee. In 2012, while I was still dedicating myself more extensively to painting, we worked together on the performance of his original score *A Rebours*, a poetical rendering inspired by the French novel by Joris Karl Huysmans³, at LeFrak Hall in Queens College, New York. The staging of this piece, dedicated to awakening the plurality of perception, provided a spatialization of painting in its relationship to the musical experience as if the painting itself was flowing and pursuing from surface to surface, beyond its limits.

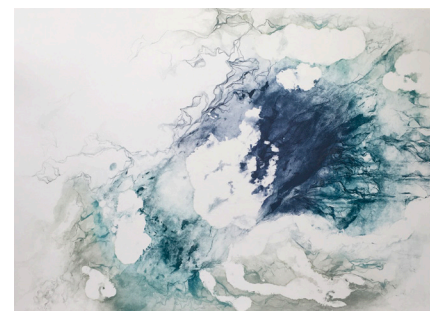


Figure 9

Considering a series of works as if each surface stands as a temporary

Figure 6: *Inescapable as Today* 2
 Figure 7: *Inescapable as Today* 3
 Figure 8: *Un Appel de signes* 1
 Figure 9: *Un Appel de signes* 2

³ Huysmans Joris Karl, *A Rebours*, (2012), Paris: Gallimard.

circumstance within a broader dynamic is the more exhaustive version of the lesson learned during the concert at LeFrak Hall. Today, by producing a print in variable editions, my intention is that of suspending the solidity of a form by successive metamorphoses. In this sense, the musical model offers a particularly fruitful example of a way of producing patterns that unravel and dissolve, following a dynamism as transient as time itself.

All of these reflections have generated an interest in displaying prints by creating a rhythmic environment intended to challenge the peculiar fragility of fine art prints (Fig. 10).

The *Madrigals* series was produced on the occasion of my doctoral thesis defence in June 2017 at Galerie Michel Journiac in Paris. The title refers to the short poetic compositions of popular origin that were in favour during the Renaissance. First known as poems, the madrigals were successively put to music and became choral songs arranged in counterpoints, involving the alternate singing of several voices around the same stanzas. The *Madrigals* ensemble is comprised of the multiple and varied entanglements of three voices of the same choir. Similarly, three matrices respond to each other by chromatic inflexions and vertical progression.

At the time of their production, I thought of the prints as comprising many units, converging into a suite and presented in variable and modular sequences according to the exhibition space. Once hung in a sequence, each piece stands as a fragment and responds to the others by alternating configurations. The insistence and repetition of visual elements produce a tension between impermanence and renewal. In 2019, the *Madrigals* were shown at Manhattan Graphics Centre in New York, along with several pieces from the *Gravitation* series and the *Inescapable as Today* ensemble. Between variation and recurrence, the patterns respond to each other in close succession, as they are moving from surface to surface.

In my work, the rhythmic quality of a print relates first to the partly accidental arising of forms on the matrix. These originated as a timely occurrence among the innumerable and diverse possibilities, through chemical reactions as much as through direct interventions.

Second, printing takes place at the precise moment at which the form finds its way through the material. The idea of intonation, borrowed from a musical context, assumes a visual dimension thanks to all the choices inherent in the printing process: mixing the inks, looking for the right timbres and tonalities, as well as testing the extreme tactility of the wiping technique.

CONCLUSION

My quest for rhythm acts as a relinquishment of composition and structure. The form happens as the fruit of a sudden blossoming rather than the product of a construction determined in advance. Through the printing process, the wandering of a shape is assigned to the paper and



Figure 10

Figure 10: Madrigals series 2

continues to unravel from surface to surface, each time with a different impulse. The paper acts as a “minute of surface”, able to capture the provisional unfolding of a rhythm. Thus, the paper is the medium of the etched form, its moment of advent. The recurrence of a matrix, in its variations, exacerbates the becoming inherent to any art form and multiplies its possibilities in abundance. Between impermanence and renewal, the carved matrix happens on the paper: an engraved shape that has bloomed with patience, while the paper bears its very instant of existence.

REFERENCES

Huysmans Joris Karl, *A Rebours*, (2012), Paris: Gallimard.

Leonelli Giulia, *Entendre le pictural*, (2017), Paris: Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. <http://www.theses.fr/2017PA01H304>

Wölfflin Heinrich, (1988), *Renaissance et Baroque*, Paris: Gérard Monfort.

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Giulia Leonelli is a French/Italian artist who holds a doctorate degree in Visual Arts from University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, where she teaches as a printmaking instructor.

After a BFA in Fine Arts at Rome University of Fine Arts, she enrolled at Sorbonne University in Paris in 2009. In 2012, she was chosen as a recipient for the French/American “Young Talents” award, for which she was selected to attend the MFA Studio Art Program at New York University. Her work is oriented toward a pictorial approach of printmaking, led by a musical aspiration and a poetic intent. Her doctoral thesis *Entendre le pictural* discusses the temporal understanding of an artwork by experiencing its unfolding as space and time, and the implications of rhythm and sensation as philosophical attributes of art. Her work has been shown in several exhibitions in Italy, France, Spain, Denmark and the United States. *Tempo rubato : let's steal time* was the title of her solo exhibition at Manhattan Graphics Centre, New York, in 2019.

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Presented at IMPACT 12 Conference, Bristol, The Printmakers' Voice, 21-25 September 2022 UK

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IMAGE GALLERY

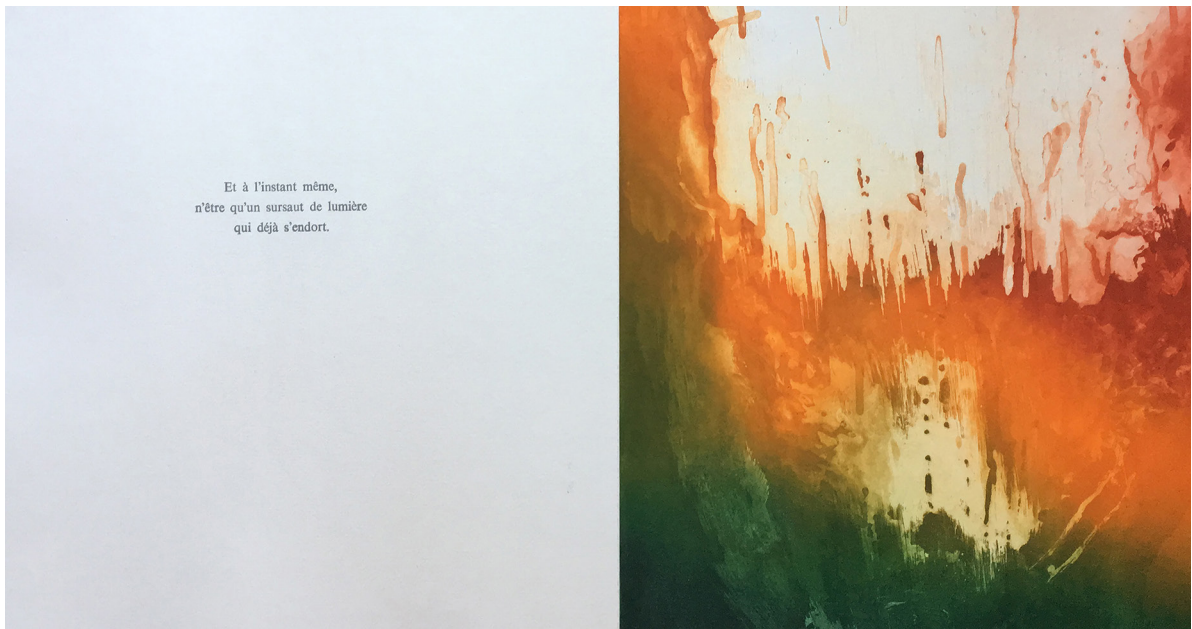


Figure titles and information

Figure 1: Madrigals Series 1

Figure 2: Mandolin Days 5

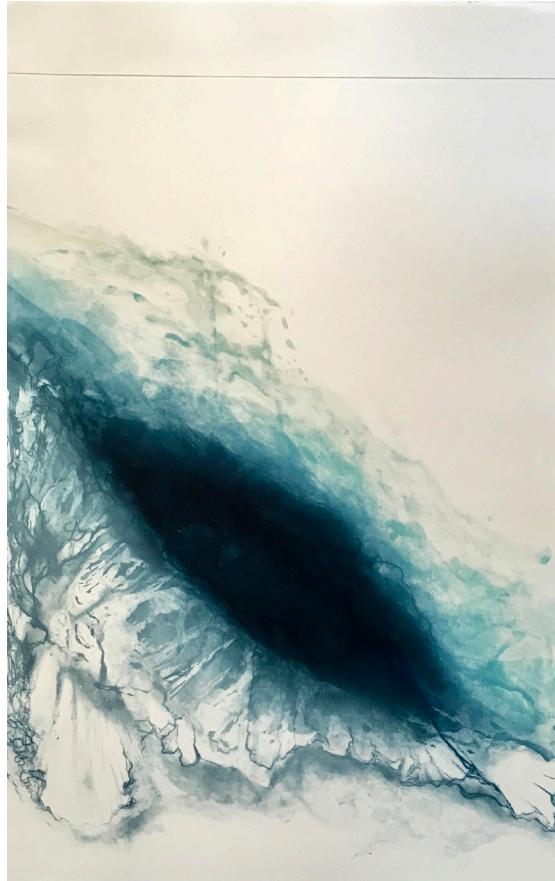


Figure 3: Gravitation 1

Figure 4: Gravitation 2



Figure 5: Inescapable as Today 1

Figure 6: Inescapable as Today 2



Figure 7: Inescapable as Today 3

Figure 8: Un Appel de signes 1

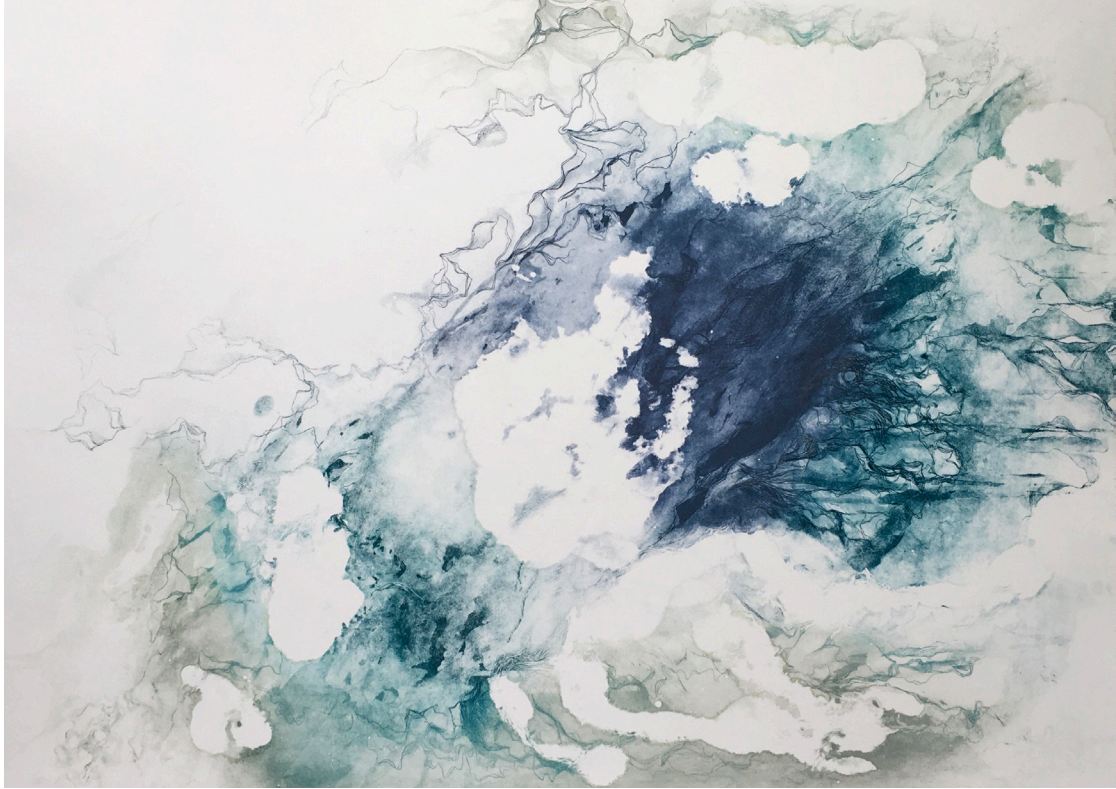


Figure 9: Un Appel de signes 2

Figure 10: Madrigals series 2