Rubbish Printmaking

Stephen Fowler

Cereal packets, Tetra Pak cartons, cellophane, tinfoil and plastic milk bottles are some of the base materials from which I make my printing plates. Each has characteristics that can be exploited via intaglio, relief or lithographic means. During the last two years of my multidisciplinary MA course in printmaking at the University of the West of England, I explored their creative potential at the university's print studios and home during the Covid-19 lockdown. In this reflective practice paper, I aim to outline the inspiration and reasoning behind my 'Rubbish Printmaking' practice (Images 1 and 2)

On reflection, I believe the root of my practice was in part a response to the illustration and art history context in which I was formally introduced to print at college. Art and technology were aligned; print was a commercial means to reproduce imagery, to be bought and sold. 'Before the invention of photography, printmaking with blocks, plates and stones ...was the only means available of making exactly repeatable visual images on paper. This meant that prints were called upon to fulfil a wide range of educational, religious and propagandist functions' (Hogarth, 1967, p.12).

Slides of the technical accomplishments of master printmakers, such as Albrecht Dürer, were projected each week. Although inspiring, they were also intimidating. How could we teenage students ever mount to such heights? (Image 3). Traditionally, a print was the result of various stages and several craftspeople. Either it was not explained well or was lost on me at the time that each expert in their field contributed to the final result. Depending on the subject, the initial stage of the artistic creation of an illustration need not involve only a single person. It, too, could be a collaboration: 'several artists, each specialising in architecture.... or portraiture would work concurrently on the same illustration' (Hogarth, 1967, p.12). The print matrix, be it wood, limestone or copper, was then manipulated by another craftsperson to create a reverse image of the illustration that was finally printed by a printer. The philosophy of the Bauhaus-inspired books (written by Peter Green and published by Batsford) that I found at the local library was more appealing and the printmaking within was more attainable by comparison.

Printmaker Peter Green, OBE, member of the Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers and Head of Art Teacher Training at Hornsey College of Art in the 1960s, wrote many of his innovative printmaking books for the independent publisher Batsford. Green's books are an excellent example of the character, design and aims of the wider publishing sphere of Batsford's 'introduction to' art books and like-minded publishers from the 1960s (Image 4): 'ideal for schools.... (and) stimulating inspiration for students and teachers – both in Colleges of Education and Schools of Art – as well as amateur

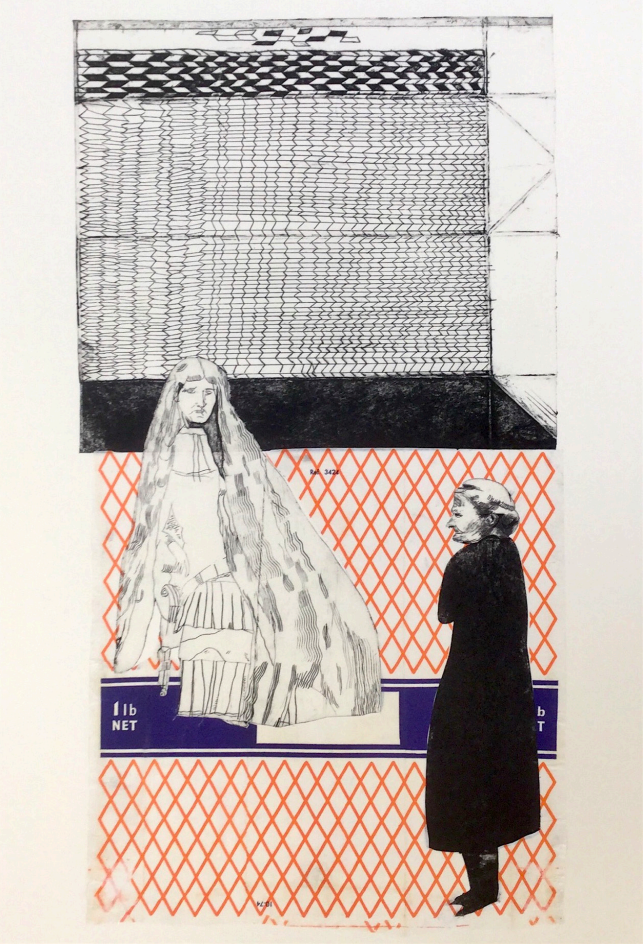


Image 1

Image 1: Stephen Fowler, Untitled (2021)
multiple Tetra Pak plates and chine collé butter packaging
44 x 23cm

and professional artists' (Green, 1964). They differ from many present-day publications, which are less introductions than how-to guides, filled with equipment lists and instructions, akin to recipes for specific outcomes and recognisable products. In her lively introduction to her book Print Workshop, Christine Schmidt says,

> *in this book I share the media and techniques... to create all kinds of prints...the prints (which) are unique works of art interesting enough to be mounted on a gallery wall but presented in a format that can be used in everyday life*

Schmidt, 2010, p.6

Image 2

The texts on Batsford's 'Creative Play Series' book jackets from the 1960s aim to take a more open approach, wishing to 'stimulate by example rather than to provide a series of do-it-yourself instructions to be mechanically copied. The texts are therefore brief and instructions and suggestions are made almost entirely by photographs.'

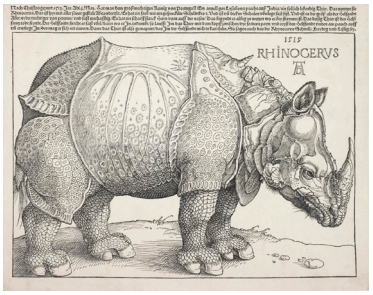


Image 3

Green's focus in particular is more philosophical and aligned with the art pedagogy of the day, seeing

> *art as an experience and not merely an object to be made', (encouraging) 'lively perception' (and not) 'concerned with printing as a means to producing so-called 'works of art' ...' (and an interest in) 'what can be learned through the materials and processes...and help us learn from our surroundings and to increase our knowledge of the language of visual form.*

Green, 1967, p.7

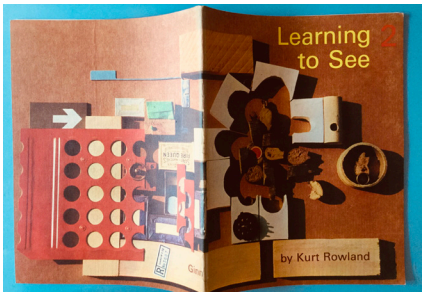


Image 4

Green's fellow writer and printmaker Norman Gorbaty shared these same priorities in his 1960 book, Print Making with a Spoon

> *works of art will emerge as a by-product ...through a willingness to explore materials creatively. Printmaking here is not an end in itself but is used to as a method through which the young person may develop his visual and tactical knowledge.*

Gorbaty, 1960, p.6

Reviewing both writers today, it is evident they enthusiastically share the influence of Josef Albers' teaching philosophy. Albers was a German-born artist and educator at the Bauhaus, Germany (1925-33) and the liberal arts college in Black Mountain College, North Carolina, USA (1933-1949).

Green's double-page spread in Creative Printmaking, showing the use of 'plasterboard, metal mesh asbestos, perforated hardboard, plastic grid, corrugated card' (Green, 1966, p.32-33), mirrors Albers' Black Mountain College students' work, with such non-traditional materials as corrugated paper, sand, and egg shells' and his (grid experiments with) 'inherent qualities of all kinds of materials ...used in combination (Albers, 1934), (Image 5)

Image 2: Stephen Fowler, *Orangutan* (2020), kitchen sink lithography, 42 x 59.4 cm
Image 3: Albrecht Dürer, *Dürer's Rhinoceros* (1515), woodcut, 23.5 × 29.8 cm CC British Museum
Image 4: Kurt Rowland, *Learning to See* (1968) 28 x 44cm CC Kurt Rowland

> *Albers encouraged the making and examination of such assemblages 'to analyze their matière, a word Albers derived from French to emphasize his combined visual and tactile approach to texture. He encouraged students to work with the appearances of materials as if painting with them in order to develop 'interesting relationships' (Troiano, 2019, p.104). Rather than being taught, Albers' 'students learnt via personal experiences (from such) inventions and discoveries' (Albers, 1934). He wanted his learners to 'produce work not with the intent to create art, but rather 'to share experience gained through tinkering'*
>
> Troiano, 2019, p.102

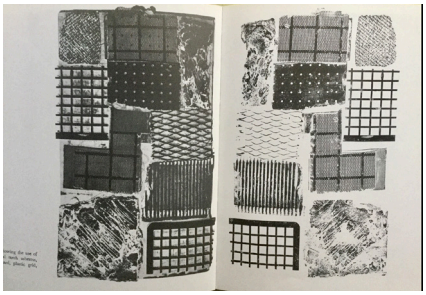


Image 5

Peter Green (1967), like Albers, encouraged the readers of his books to construct the same rich and visually contrasting structures to aid the 'capacity of constant lively perception'. Green took Albers' 'matière' exercise one step further, however, by printing directly from these tactile surfaces. Green saw print not as a 'complex skill or mysterious professional craft, (but) an accurate visual recording of a surface' and through the action of 'Taking of a Print' (Green, 1967, p.7) 'is one way of looking precisely at any particular surface, making the tactical visually evident' (Green, 1967, p.8). He saw such experiments as a revelatory process to aid 'visual literacy, to learn how to look and really use our eyes' (Green, 1967, p.7).

> *So many crafts have their special secret skills and are contained within separate compartments which so often prove barriers to learning and expression.*
>
> Green, 1967, p.7

This, I think, was probably the case for my peers and me when we were introduced to print. Today the practical, learning through doing, and the contextual are taught hand-in-hand, and students are shown both contemporary inclusive examples of printmaking and historical practitioners' work. At Harrow Art School in the early 1990s, contextual studies was taught on a Wednesday morning away from the print studios. The link between the development of illustration and print was outlined. I found the complex technical descriptions of print processes rather overwhelming and hard to understand. It was not until we first-year degree students had access to the large printing department every Friday that things started to change. Here I was introduced to and enjoyed the inventive nature and potential of printmaking. First, it was intaglio etching soft/hard grounds, aquatint and sugar lift, then relief print via rubber stamps. In experimenting with such simple base materials as erasers to make my rubber stamps, I was beginning to 'explore materials creatively' and 'develop (my own) visual and tactile knowledge' (Green, 1967, p.7).

I enjoyed the transformative influence of carved rubber stamps on my imagery. It was an accessible and relatable medium that offered attainable results and helped a personal visual language to emerge. 'The self-reliance of rubber stamping is liberating …you are now free to set off with just a few simple stamps on a journey that could take you anywhere. The joy of repetition is now at your fingertip' (Ryan, 2016,

Image 5: Peter Green, *Creative Print Making* (1966)
20.5 x 42cm CC Peter Green

p.6). Stamping, I found through experience and conversations with both experienced and beginner printmakers, is an accessible, immediate process that reflects Green's attitude to print:

> *Do not start thinking of printmaking as a complex skill or a mysterious professional craft. Fundamentally print making is the accurate visual recording of a surface.*
>
> Green, 1967, p.7

I wanted to study for an MA in Multidisciplinary Printmaking at the University of the West of England for several reasons: to develop my printmaking practice, extend my experience and confidence in traditional printmaking, and pass on my learning to the degree students in illustration at the University of Worcester. Each week during the first semester, we were introduced to the well-equipped print studios. Each process (etching, relief, letterpress, silkscreen, textile print and lithography) had a dedicated print room and excellent specialist technicians.

Despite the introductory semester and my original intentions, I started to explore more unorthodox forms of printmaking during the following Developing Practice module, notably kitchen sink lithography and collagraph printing plates, such as Tetra Pak, display boards and plastic milk bottles. At the time it felt a bit perverse, all those excellent print studios and processes at hand, and I was working with rubbish!

During my final year, I considered exploring lino print seriously. However, my curiosity always brought me back to exploring these techniques and materials with no established orthodoxy or long tradition, which I found open-ended and exploratory. My inquisitiveness and inventiveness thrived, and prints 'emerged as a by-product' (Gorbaty, 1960, p.6).

What I liked about working this way, working with these materials, was that there were no rules or manuals to refer to. As an artist, you explore and find your way, experimenting, playing and making, testing different combinations of intaglio and relief. The processes belong to you at the moment, and you are entering new ground as you reflect and respond. The practice community of like-minded printmakers found on Instagram, such as Anna Dyke, acted like the photographed examples in Batsford's 'Creative Play Series'. Dyke's work helped to inspire new paths of enquiry (Image 6). My so-called insecurities, such as steering away from traditional materials and processes, became strengths as I ploughed my furrow, finding out how/why/what inks, papers and presses affected the process and prints. I was learning through doing. In the case of collagraph printmaking, with the wide range of packaging materials available, my imagination could run wild. I wondered what qualities orange juice cartons have. Like all printing plates, conventional or unconventional, they each have tactile qualities. Tetra Pak is flexible and shiny. I like the feeling of scoring the foil with dry point tools, slicing through the foil and peeling it back to reveal the paper or card pulp beneath. Having no printing manuals for these processes and materials helped. There was no author to point out the right or wrong procedures

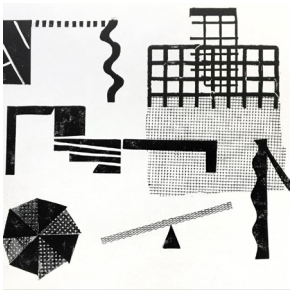


Image 6

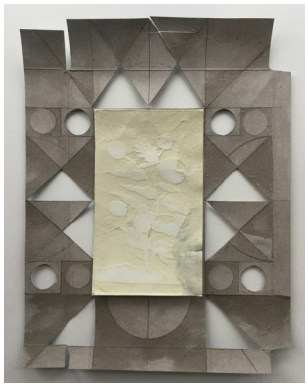


Image 7

Image 6: Anna Dyke, *Playground print* (2022), block print, 29.7 x 32 cm CC Anna Dyke
Image 7: Stephen Fowler (2021), cereal packet and orange carton collagraph plates

to follow. Sometimes prints got wrinkled in a pasta machine press. Not to worry, those are the characteristics and visual language of a pasta press.

During the first Covid lockdown, when the nation was confined to their homes, my perverse decision to explore lo-fi materials and processes was perhaps a prophetic one. I had the confidence and knowledge to work in my front room without a press, at least not a conventional one. My visual and tactical knowledge (Gorbaty) was starting to evolve. My inquisitiveness branched out, from mono printing and working with plastic bags to using plastic milk cartons and humus boxes as drypoint plates. Collagraph plates extended into the employment of coffee cups and multiple cereal packets (Image 7). This was in part motivated by the climate crisis and a question I received during a presentation I had given months before regarding the waste material of neoprene foam printing. My quota of weekly recycling was becoming minuscule, whereas my printing plate supplies were growing exponentially. A visit to the supermarket was like a visit to an art shop; every container had potential in my front room lo-fi print studio.

To create more satisfying and extended results, I looked back to the initial workshops of the first semester for hints on how to vary the drypoint marks. I started to use a range of drypoint needles and sandpaper for textured tone. I looked back to classes with master printmakers such as the collagraph printer Charles Shearer for ideas and suggestions. He used stone chisels with small teeth as tracing wheels to make marks on display board.

The rigour and successes in the printmaking canon, community and traditions informed my work. I switched from cheap coloured tissue paper to high-quality acid-free and fade-resistant tissue paper. Researching chine collé gave me the confidence and inspiration to experiment with different types of paper, packaging, paper bags, heavy handmade paper and monoprinted paper. The results started to develop and take on a mature voice. A reciprocal, circular learning pattern was in action between traditional and unorthodox printmaking. Traditional print was informing my work, but unorthodox print was also helping me to understand or embed the traditional training I had received.

I realised that like rubber stamps, Tetra Pak plates can be employed in a modular fashion, creating environments and relationships between folk, animals and objects. My previous experience informed my work and provided me with confidence from the start. I was able to start not knowing where the work was going to take me or what creative journey I was going on (Image 8). Whilst my practice was covering new ground, I made instruction sheets for the processes I was exploring (Image 9). Originally intended as prompts for my students on the course in illustration at the University of Worcester whilst in lockdown, they also helped to document and embed my learning as I drew the instructions, reflecting and giving me new options to consider. Printmaking folk from around the world on Instagram requested the sheets, as so many of them could not access print studios either. I am aware that my practice

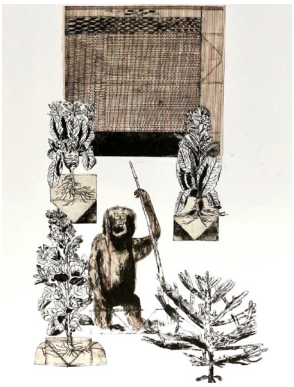


Image 8

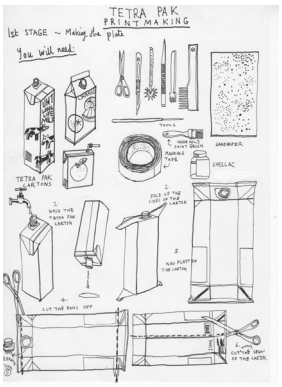


Image 9a

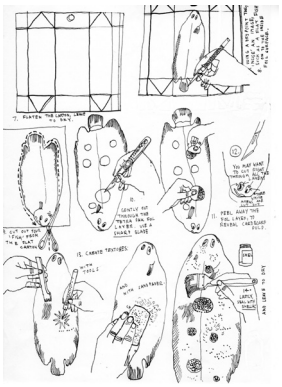


Image 9b

Image 8: Stephen Fowler (2021) Tetra Pak intaglio collagraph and chine collé, 76 x 56cm
Image 9a & b: Stephen Fowler, Tetra Pak printmaking instructions (2021), pen & ink drawings, 29.7x 42 cm

at first was a personal journey into printmaking. Now, through these sheets and the workshops I facilitate, it has the possibility of becoming a new print orthodoxy.

AUTHOR

Stephen Fowler

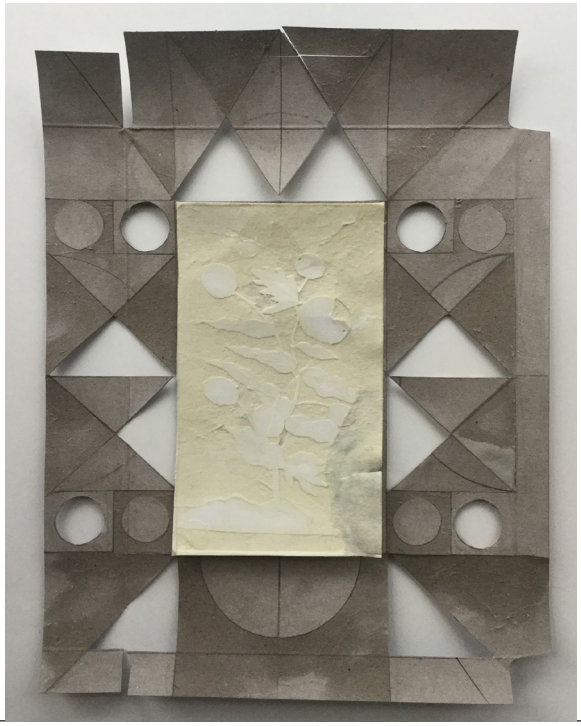
s.fowler@worc.ac.uk

School of Arts – University of Worcester, UK

Presented at IMPACT 12 Conference, Bristol, The Printmakers' Voice,

21-25 September 2022 UK September 2022

IMAGE GALLERY



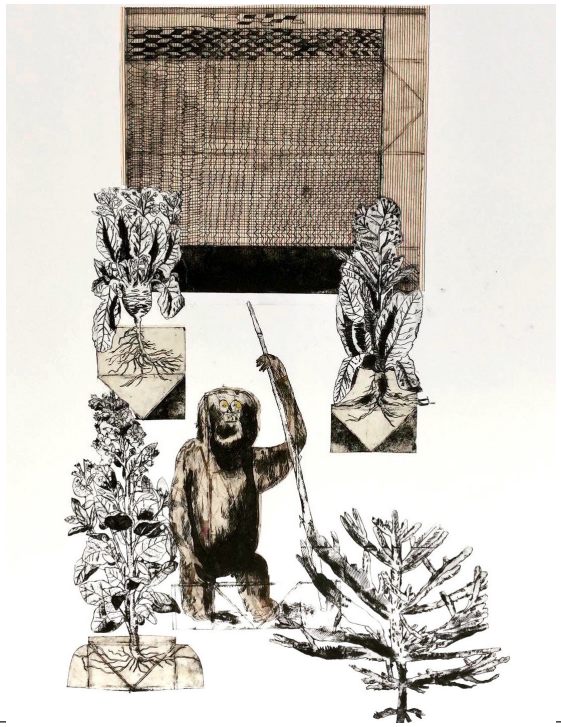
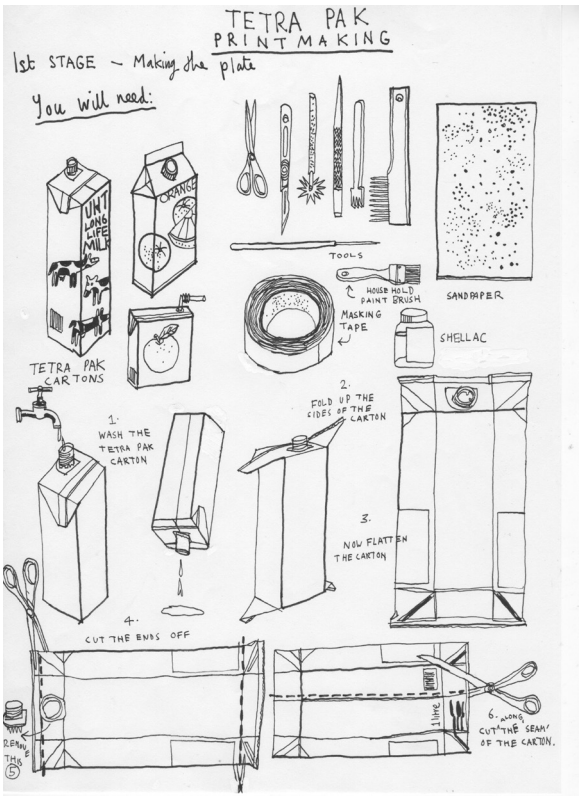


Image 1: Stephen Fowler, Untitled (2021), multiple Tetra Pak plates and chine collé butter packaging, 44 x 23cm
Image 2: Stephen Fowler, *Orangutan* (2020), kitchen sink lithography, 42 x 59.4 cm
Image 7: Stephen Fowler (2021), cereal packet and orange carton collagraph plates
Image 8: Stephen Fowler (2021), Tetra Pak intaglio collagraph and chine collé, 76 x 56cm



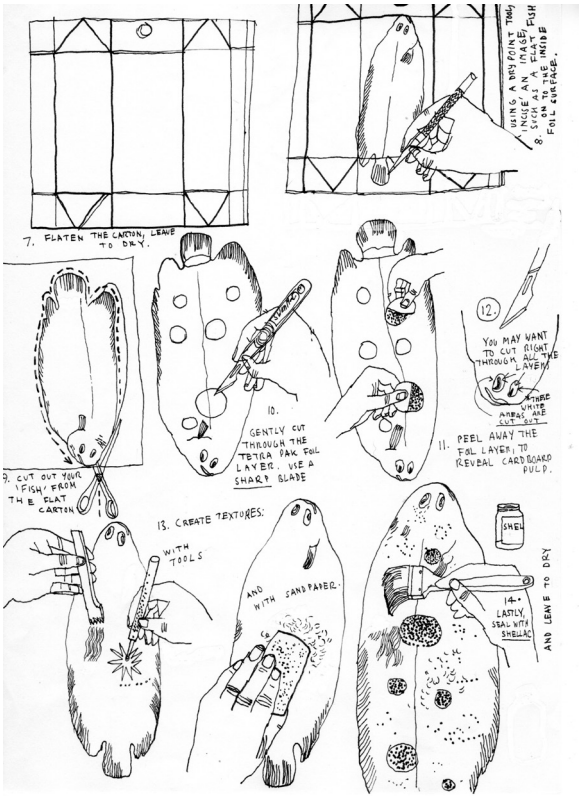


Image 9a and b: Stephen Fowler, Tetra Pak printmaking instructions (2021), pen & ink drawings, 29.7 x 42 cm