

“Why artists make prints”.

Liam O Broin copyright 2009

The process of communicating through art – the artist – the gallery - the viewer- is very much a three way process. One without the other is incomplete.

Graphic Studio Gallery is very unique – it has a director and a staff passionate and very knowledgeable about printmaking. That passion is very much reflected every time an exhibition happens here. And there it is - the wrong word - it doesn't happen. Rather it *takes place* as a result of application, presentation, attention to detail and knowledge of printmaking passed on to the public with enthusiasm. The Graphic Studio Gallery team, Catherine – Niamh - and Paula cannot be praised too much for their dedication on behalf of the many artists who pass this way and not least those of us here today.

As to why we artists make prints – well that's a question to which there are as many answers as there are artists - each of us has a personal view of it – a kind of story of sorts.

I am standing in the studio etching area cleaning up after a days proofing. The end of a day of questioning,- changing - mixing – remixing hues, discovering, rejecting colours. Finally the colour I want is mixed, the finite amount required for the next days work – the edition.

Holding a narrow necked jar I begin to ladle a slab of molten toffee like vermilion red into the opening from a palette knife, and realise instantly – tomorrow will bring its own problems *and* the one which I am about to create just now! Then I perceive a gentle tug at my elbow and am led towards the workbench with hardly a word. It is Siobhan who without any fuss produces a small plastic bag and cuts out a square – then lays the open sheet halfway over the edge of the worktop, the other half hangs down. The slab of ink is taken and wiped against the edge of the bench onto the plastic sheet. The process is repeated several times until my entire supply of mixed colour is deposited cleanly. She then gathers the edges upwards and makes a pouch finishing it off at the neck with several delft twists, seals the neck with masking tape and with a calm smile hands me everything I need for tomorrow advising that all I have to do is puncture a hole in the plastic and pipe out the colour as required.

Despite my so-called years of experience - I am in no way diminished by this. No not at all! Rather I am enriched. After all, there I was foundering in the shallows – about to end up on the morrow in a sticky mess of furtive efforts in extricating the ink from the bottom of the jar - impossible really. Instead I am rescued, quietly, unobtrusively and led to dry land. This is only one aspect, yet so valuable in the process of printmaking – the tooting and frowning of sometimes profound example, and other times simple advise

with profound results, which is the stuff of working with fellow artists in the communal print studio.

The print - the way I think of it - the process of its creation and realisation involves so many of the human senses – and attributes. Patience – stamina - passion – energy – imagination – tenacity, sheer doggedness, and the ability to turn disasters into useful events. And then that profound facility, the brain to ask and solve the endless questions– the third eye – the essential ingredient without which all is nothing - or perhaps nothing other than an exercise in self indulgence.

Along with that is the kaleidoscope of the a-z of acids, solvents, chemicals, materials, pigments, inks, papers, techniques with which the artist has to be familiar in order to exploit the medium of printmaking to its fullest. Many of these are very ordinary substances which everyone uses yet in printmaking they are vital- essential very often. Printmakers talk about papers with as much loving intimacy as one talks of ones children – how this one reacts – behaves, translates to one drawing or another. I have never known paper to be the subject of so much scrutiny – talk- as that when an artist is choosing the paper for an edition. A paper perfect for one drawing – another drawing requires something else.

The paper names themselves have romantic sounds - exotic, Japanese mulberry –Shinsho - Chinese Xuan - rice papers. Velin Arches - Moulin de Gue, Somerset, Hahnemuhle, Fabriano Rosapina. Who could not want to discover, to touch and see the fruits of ancient formulas passed on by craftsmen over centuries from so many different places.

Colours, pigments also take us outside the narrow borders of where we are – Ultramarine Blue. For centuries more expensive than gold. Lapis Lazuli- pebbles gathered in streams in Afganishan then taken by Arab traders to the Persian Gulf and on to Venice – the very name of the colour crystallizes its history in Latin – Ultramarine – beyond the sea. Gum Arabic an ingredient vital to the lithographic process – gathered by those same nomads from the acacia bush in the desert and brought by the same traders for European consumption – literally – gum Arabic is mostly used in making beer!

Then there is gold leaf beloved by many artists and printmakers not least by Irish artist Jean Bardon the exponent of Gold leaf par excellence. Every time I look at one of Jeans prints with its delicately, carefully laid on areas of gold, I am reminded of the two brothers who spent their working life seated opposite each other at a workbench in Parkgate street, shaping in turns, each with a small flat headed hammer- a measured cube of 24 carat gold laid on a leather cushion – beating in tandem - in silent synchronization, exactly where - how hard- to strike, how delicate this blow or another – until a tissue thin leaf sheet of pure gold exactly four inches by four inches was achieved. How then to lift this delicate leaf into the interleaved tissues of a leather pad? We would be at it for years, as each leaf crumples into nothingness in our clumsy fingers. Not so the two brothers – one simply takes a comb out of his pocket and

rubbing it across his sleeve passes the comb over the flat gold membrane, which comes to life, and clings to it like a shimmering butterfly - whereupon it is laid - perfectly flat, cocooned between two sheets of rice paper in its leather cover.

Shellac – so revered in China and Japan for lacquered wood- vital in the making of drawing pencils and crayons for artists – is actually thousands and thousands of tiny beetles dissolved in methylated spirits and just cannot be matched by synthetic substitutes. Resin equally so – the stuff of Rembrandt and Goya- and indeed the modern printmaker. Ground to a fine powder and rained very softly over a copper plate, then gently cooked until it melts into tiny globules. The plate then etched quickly -areas required to be lightest painted over with dark brown pungent asphaltum- dug from pitch lakes in south America – then the plate etched again- more areas painted out until a range of subtle tones are etched into the drawing- like watercolour. Hence its name- aquatint.

Then - there is the mysterious case of the visiting Japanese printmaker who was seen coming out of the etching room carrying a bottle of soy sauce! Not the done thing to be having a sushi lunch in the acid room! Ah! but the real problem in the etching room was the very objectionable yellow stain which would not rinse away after a plate was etched in Ferric Chloride. The yellow stain, a bane in the life of any printmaker- until the Japanese artist explained - the soy sauce it turns out, liberally applied to the etched plate, removes all vestige of the offending verdigris - permanently!

Next it is the sheer magic of the lithograph. A slab of Jurassic limestone, yes- formed at the time of the dinosaurs. Two slabs, in fact are laid face to face with graded sand and water and the surfaces ground evenly by circular motion. The surface can be either smooth or grained and the artist can with a lithographic crayon, or pen, draw directly onto the stone – this is then treated with gum Arabic and all is ready to make the first proofs.

To make an addition to a drawing on lithographic stone the process is very simple. A weak solution of acetic acid is poured over the stone to dissolve the gum Arabic and the new drawing added. That's all very well so long as you do not run out of acetic acid.

The solution to that problem is very familiar – we just pour on vinegar- it is acetic acid!

I've often wondered are all printmakers good cooks and would good cooks make good printmakers ? – After all it has so much to do with chemistry and taste. I remember as a young teenager going to see the film Moulin Rouge. The scene, which fascinated me, was where Toulouse Lautrec is making drawings on stone and they are being proofed in the printers atelier. I was being trained as a lithograph artist at the time- so this was very familiar. A young apprentice presents a mixture in a wooden bowl to the senior journeyman who proceeds to dip his finger in the mixture and then places a drop on his tongue. Having tasted it – he then nods approval and the entire mixture is brushed over the stone!

To explain, when a drawing is completed on lithographic stone the stone must be etched with a solution of gum Arabic, and a very finite amount, just drops, of pure nitric acid!

If the gum/ nitric solution is too strong- it would taste too acidic- too weak it would be too sweet! Although its perfectly safe, even pleasant - to lick gum Arabic - we do it every day - with stamps and envelopes - no printmaker would taste a mixture of gum and pure nitric acid nowadays - but it was not outside the norm in the nineteenth century. What we do these days is to add a drop of nitric into the gum Arabic and apply a small amount to the margin of the stone – then watch for a delicate show of evervessence - the nitric reacting with the limestone surface in the pool of gum. We still have to be subtle – and very, very delicate - one drop too much in the wrong place can totally ruin hours and days of an artists work. The skill required to prepare a stone in this way is still the stuff of the everyday printmaker.

We use more than our hands and eyes to make prints - other senses come into play – we even make prints with our ears!

Jennifer Lane who recently had an exhibition here in Graphic Studio Gallery with Louise Leonard, told me a lovely anecdote on the subject of- how much ink is too much ink on the slab! One day while working at Graphic Studio in Upper Mount street she was rolling out a slab of ink. She could hear it- the swish, of the roller passing over the layer of deep ink on the slab. The late John Kelly, was in the next room chatting to someone – then Jenny heard it -

“ Too much ink”!

And there is the mezzotint- the very word resonates with the sounds with which its similar namesake in music is associated. Deep rich velvet tones of colour drifting into subtle hints of the most delicate tones – we could be listening to music! Yet there it is before our very eyes – liquid visual sounds of tones almost unachievable in any other medium.

We can also appreciate an etching by feel, literally not looking at all – if you close your eyes and delicately run your finger across the surface of a deeply etched printed line – you will feel the lines raised in subtle relief on the velvet surface of the paper.

And the creative *raison d'être* as to why artists make prints?

It cannot be- just the alchemy, smells, tactile feel of materials and the interaction of paper to ink – there must be, there is - something much deeper.

It is for me, and a number of colleagues have echoed this - a clarity of image not achievable in any other medium. When I look at an etching, mezzotint, lithograph, silkscreen, wood or linocut – the way the image is set in the paper surface, I am reminded of an early morning when one gets out of bed and draws the curtains. A process where even before it begins you are aware that something is different - an

added mysterious quietness prevails. And then it's revealed – it has snowed and everything is picked out in a sharp clarity. It is as though what you see has been passed through the press on a pristine sheet of lightly damped Fabriano Rosapina Bianco, with the delicate deckle edges of the mould echoed in the frosted edges of the window pane.

And that quietness one was subconsciously aware of – muted early morning sounds, are set back behind the exposed scene to allow it, its proper place, its rightful order on the senses.

The fine art print is a multiplicity – a finite edition – of numbered impressions. What they are not is a repetition of copies- each exactly the same. Rather within the framework of a certain consistency each print has a subtle life, an individuality of its own. The fact is that despite each print being within those defined limits the - same – the artist printmaker can nevertheless recognize each print very easily afterwards – the nuances of its surface will be very familiar reminders of the making – the inking, wiping – the extra roll - the one held back – an almost nothingness of a turn on the pressure screw of the press.

Neither is there ever a similarity between the hand editioned print and that of the machined print run - churning out thousands by the hour. In the hand print there is a texture, a compatibility of image coupled to paper, chosen, agonised over for its suitability- the way it celebrates, surrounds and carries the image – the drawing.

A hand editioned print is an individual- an original- and even more so each print mirrors the printmakers odyssey- the journey of how the image evolved and then in an instance of decision- crystallised – That's the stage I want – That's it! Suddenly the image comes to life it pulsates with new life, perhaps just as a result of an extra delicate wipe with the back of the hand, to lighten a plate tone within the image. That extra pass of the roller eased in the pressure of the artists hand – giving birth to something with a life of its own. Now let me see if I can do that again – Have I bent this process of ink and hand to some kind of rule – just for a time?

And then there is the image itself- the marks one makes. The drawing. The continual doing then - looking – thinking and changing, days of proofing trial impressions, in my own case invariably many more trial proofs than the edition itself! Endless questioning.

No inspiration is possible without the creativity of question.

It is the conceiving of the question that is as much the creative part, as to how it is answered. The endless capacity for so many possibilities where the image can be changed, added to, reworked again and again, – that has to be the essence of its attraction to the creative artist.