

Tracy Hill,  
*Harmonic Constituents*,  
2016, intaglio on  
Somerset, 96 x 59 cm.  
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# Bringing the world to its senses

*How to grapple with the future of print?*

Words by **Monika Lukowska** and **Sarah Robinson**.

On the map of printmaking events, 2018 was a significant year, with the International Print Triennial in Krakow, Poland, and the IMPACT10 conference in Santander, Spain, both showcasing current trends in the printmaking field. Within the abundance of prints from all over the world there was an evident use of new technologies in conjunction with traditional techniques; sonic interventions intertwined with prints, laser engraved plates, 3D prints, and even video projections falling under the definition of printmaking. Reflecting on the winning pieces in Krakow by Karol Pomykala and Tracy Hill that interweaved the labour intense, traditional processes such as linocut and intaglio with virtual reality and Lidar scanning became an incentive to explore what this technological tendency might mean for printmaking.

Professor Barbara Balfour points out that print is the most porous medium and claims 'that print's capacity to incorporate other media in combination

with its shape-shifting nature remains both a strength and a liability'.<sup>1</sup> The fact that printmaking so easily adopts new technologies results in pushing the boundaries of the medium and stretching the definition of what print can be. Are those technologies, that ubiquitously emerge within the traditional printmaking field, expanding the print medium and enhancing the experience of the artwork or do they act as an eye-catcher, a technological addition that makes a print attractive? Is, then, printmaking's development hindered or benefitted by incorporating digital matrices?

By examining artworks by Sioban Piercy (Ireland), Karol Pomykala (Poland) and Tracy Hill (UK), along with critical texts on printmaking, we aimed to investigate the current state of the print medium. We argue that there is a need to develop a more critical lens which would allow a rigorous examination of the way newer technologies are being interwoven into traditional mediums.

## Current state of the print medium

Reflecting on the seemingly exciting changes within the printmaking medium prompts a question of why, with all this advancement and progress, printmaking does not provoke much of a critical discourse?<sup>2</sup> One possible answer lies in the preoccupation with techniques rather than the meaning of the prints. Curator Marjorie Anne Kirker points out that much of the debate around printmaking has been dominated by 'general histories and technical issues'.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, writings and conference presentations demonstrate a visible concern with techniques and new technologies; they lack critical discussion which would position printmaking in the larger context of contemporary art.<sup>4</sup>

Discussing the current state of print medium, art theoretician Marta Raczek points out that in printmaking 'technique often becomes a sort of prison' where artists 'voluntarily' focus on endlessly repeating the same concept, and thus

neglecting the meaning, in order to achieve technological perfection.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, curator José Roca argues that by defining 'the realm of printmaking' only from the technical standpoint 'printmakers have indeed printed themselves into the proverbial corner'.<sup>6</sup> These arguments underline the often-strong emphasis on technique instead of meaning. We argue that there is a need for a more reflective use of technologies in printmaking that would encourage the viewers and art critics to maintain curiosity about the *why* and *what* instead of *how*.

### Interweaving traditional and digital technologies

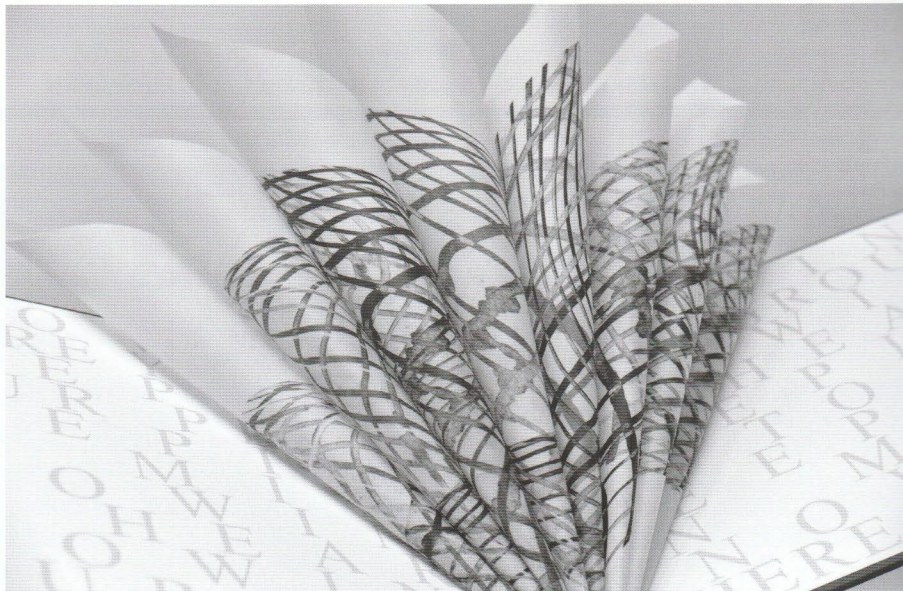
It is not our intention to criticise or favour one side over another or to point to the benefits of either traditional or digital printmaking; rather we aim to examine more closely the dynamic changes within the print medium and examine their impact on the way we perceive prints.

Digital printmaking offers a new way of describing the world where technology became inseparable from our lives. In relation to manipulating the pixel matrix, artist and mathematician Frieder Nake points out that 'the removal of the shaping hand from the printing plate to be engraved enhances the mental, conceptual level. A concept is described rather than work being performed'.<sup>7</sup> This approach might encourage artists to delve deeper into ideas while benefiting from the technological advancement on screen that has for a long-time freed printmaking from the constraints of the traditional, physical studio. Yet there is a noticeable danger in the overuse/automatic use of the abundance of digital tools offered for contemporary printmakers, such as 3D software and laser engravers, among others. Digital accessibility allows anyone to be a printmaker and thus everything could be considered a 'print'. In the current era of mobility and digitisation, it is worth keeping in mind that 'the program is not a magic spirit that replaces artist's creativity', despite the innovative solutions and intriguing features it might offer.<sup>8</sup>

One could ask if, within the modern digitised world, traditional printmaking is becoming a sidelined technology? Artist and scholar Ruth Pelzer-Montada points out that '...there is a simultaneous focus by some artists on printmaking as an "outdated" mode of technology'.<sup>9</sup> A view that is still active today according to artist Sioban Piercy, in her academic paper presented at IMPACTIO stating 'it made clear that to be a skilled maker of things, that is to be a printmaker, was to run counter current to the dominant art discourses'. She reassuringly argues to support 'thought and concept' alongside 'sensuality and materiality' in printmaking practice.<sup>10</sup> Piercy's practice



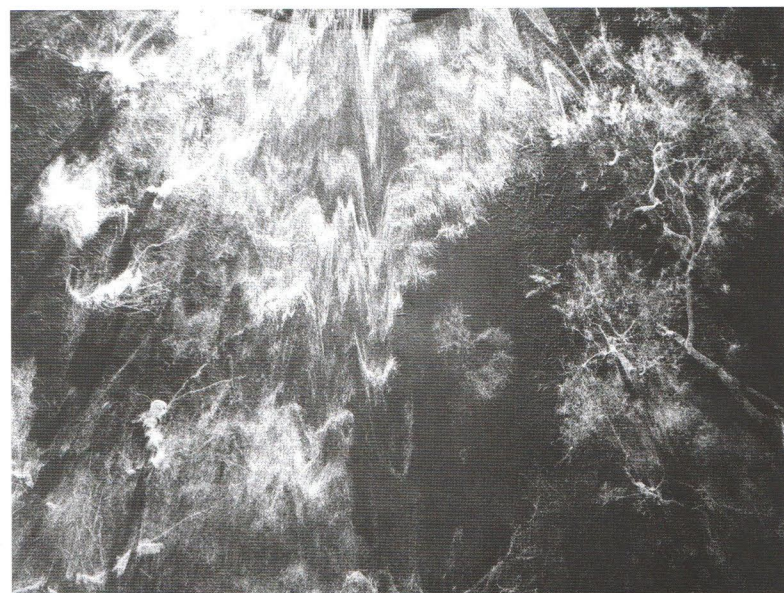
Sioban Piercy, *Object Lesson Book Three (Detail)*, 2018, ink jet print on waxed Japanese Kozo paper bound in hard cover, with beech wood frame, 170 x 75 x 48 cm, edition of 10. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.





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**above**  
 Sioban Piercy, *Object Lessons - Books One to Six*, 2018, installation view at IMPACT10, Santander, Spain, 2018. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

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**below**  
 Tracy Hill, *Genius Loci*, 2017, intaglio on Somerset, 96 x 59 cm. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.



moves comfortably within the intersection of digital and traditional technologies. Carrying the tactility of traditional print, Piercy's *Object Lessons* (2018), manifest as digitally executed prints, meticulously bound together into sculptural artist books supported by exquisite scaffolds. The skilled use of both digital and traditional visual aesthetics is crucial in understanding Piercy's argument for a return in acknowledging equality between concept-based and skill-based printmaking.

Without a doubt if printmaking wishes to distinguish itself from other art forms it needs to preserve and at the same time develop its technological aspects. The techniques are indispensable but they should be 'considered as the means and not as a goal in and of itself'.<sup>11</sup> At IMPACT10, Piercy's presentation and work held a resonance that touched many. It spoke of a need to revisit connections between conceptual and traditional materiality. This printmaking embodied with skill is one we propose to be the base for a new critical lens for contemporary printmaking.

Perhaps the first step is asking how might we (as viewers, artists, printmakers, curators and art critics) look through a new critical lens while examining printmaking in the ever-expanding field? Perhaps we could start with a question of why new technologies are used in the artwork. Is it in order to enhance the viewer's experience of the artwork, to convey a message that couldn't be conveyed in another way? Likewise, we could ask how well technique responds to the meaning of a work.

**Technique-as-content/content through technique**

Roca proposes: 'Printmaking is a tool, and a powerful one at that. But only by acknowledging that its intrinsic qualities make it ideal for saying something that cannot be said equally well in other media can print be reclaimed from technique-as-content and be understood as content *through* technique.'<sup>12</sup> With this premise in mind, we examine contemporary, award-winning prints in terms of the use of innovative technologies in supporting artists' concepts.

In the latest International Print Triennial in Krakow, *Immersed in Images* (2018), the winning artwork by Karol Pomykala, presented an intriguing intersection of traditional printmaking and new technologies which demonstrates a successful merge of both the concept and the technique. The work *One Direction* (2018) comprises a large-scale black-and-white linocut and virtual reality (VR) goggles with a 360-degree looped animation. The precisely executed linocut depicts a crowd of androgynous people. With the VR glasses on, the viewer is positioned in the middle of

this crowd, becoming embodied as a part of the installation.<sup>13</sup> This work responds to the premise of the Triennial but also reflects on aspects of everyday life where, through oversaturation of images and information, it is difficult to achieve uniqueness. Moving from the 2D to 3D, animated space enhances the feeling of being lost and isolated, which is so often experienced in the modern world. In this example, the VR is an extension of the traditional print that augments the experience (and thus the meaning) of the artwork, exploring not only the potential of the technology but also current social problems.

As with Karol Pomykala's immersive print, connections between digital technologies and traditional printmaking have been exploited in the work of Tracy Hill, who won a major prize in Krakow and exhibited her prints at IMPACTIO. In her practice, Hill aims to reveal unseen liminal wetland spaces in the UK and Australian wetlands by incorporating Lidar laser-scanning technology and intaglio processes. In a moment of making the invisible visible in her work *Harmonic Constituents* (2016), computer data is interweaved conceptually with embodied, tacit process and becomes a skilled performance at 'the intersection between our digital and aesthetic worlds'.<sup>14</sup> Hill's work is an example of how post-hybrid use of a digital matrix *on* or *with* a traditional process can promote different ways of seeing the world that has been digitised.

In both Pomykala's and Hill's work, Lidar scanning and virtual reality are a purposeful expansion of the print medium, which support us as the viewers in seeing the content *through* technique. Both artists use technology to explore and raise our attention to the broader social and environmental issues rather than employing it as an eye-catcher.

### Moving forward

In answering our original question: if the ubiquitous digital technologies benefit or hinder the print medium, it can be said that the inclusion of new media in the contemporary printmaking is essential in moving dialogues forward in the field. The new digital technologies inevitably infiltrate the medium, which then enables printmakers to respond to the fast changes in the modern world.

The challenge for contemporary printmakers lies in using these digital tools with a purpose, as supported by Roca's and Piercy's call for attention to printmaking skill being a support for executing ideas that cannot be expressed through other means. The techniques and digital tools are there for artists to use—but they have to be used with care and reflective practice. By simultaneously developing the technical side and conceptual basis, and asking the questions of *why* and *what* (rather than *how*), there is potential to firmly locate printmaking within the wider context of contemporary art.



Karol Pomykala



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Karol Pomykala, *One Direction*, 2018, linocut, VR, 124 x 380 cm. Cooperation: Bartosz Morawski (VR), Marek Domański (sound). Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

### Notes

- Barbara Balfour, 'The What and the Why of Print (2016)' in *Perspectives on Contemporary Printmaking: Critical Writing Since 1986*, eds. Ruth Pelzer-Montada (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 119.
- Ruth Pelzer-Montada, 'The Attraction of Print: Notes on the Surface of the (Art) Print', *Art Journal*, Volume 67, 2008, 74-91.
- Marjorie Anne Kirker, 'Printmaking as an Expanding Field in Contemporary Art Practice: A Case Study of Japan, Australia and Thailand.' PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2009, 19.
- Ruth Pelzer-Montada, 'The Attraction of Print: Notes on the Surface of the (Art) Print', *Art Journal*, Volume 67, 2008, 74-91.
- Marta Raczek, 'Diagnosed: Schizophrenia' in *Gra/fo/mania. Texts About Contemporary Graphic Arts* (Wroclaw: BWA, 2012), 47.
- José Roca, 'The Graphic Unconscious or the How and Why of a Print Triennial' (2011), in *Perspectives on Contemporary Printmaking: Critical Writing Since 1986*, eds. Ruth Pelzer-Montada (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 98.
- Frieder Nake, 'Printing Plates and Pixel Matrix: the Mechanisation of Memory (2010)' in *Perspectives on Contemporary Printmaking: Critical Writing Since 1986*, eds. Ruth Pelzer-Montada (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 180.
- Marta Raczek, 'Diagnosed: Schizophrenia' in *Gra/fo/mania. Texts about Contemporary Graphic Arts* (Wroclaw: BWA, 2012), 50.
- Ruth Pelzer-Montada, 'Introduction', in *Perspectives on Contemporary Printmaking: Critical Writing Since 1986*, eds. Ruth Pelzer-Montada (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 14.
- Sioban Piercy, 'The Inscere Object: A Critical Evaluation of the Skillfully Made Work Within Contemporary Fine Art Printmaking Practice', Conference Paper at IMPACTIO, 2018.
- José Roca, 'The Graphic Unconscious or the How and Why of a Print Triennial' (2011), in *Perspectives on Contemporary Printmaking: Critical writing since 1986*, eds. Ruth Pelzer-Montada (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 99.
- Ibid., 98.
- <https://topprintmaking.com/printmaking-today-karol-pomykala>
- <http://tracyhill.co.uk/>