

Digital Into Intaglio by Mel Strawn

The final solar print does not look like a typical digital print. It is, by virtue of its limitations, simpler and more abstract than perhaps most digital prints. I see this is an alternative to the exotic optical effects of full color digital imaging, a seeking for something more austere, perhaps a bit of understatement with reserves.

After a quarter of a century exploring digital image-making with a conventional archival print from a digital inkjet printer as the intended end product, I recently turned (actually returned) to an older process, etching. Well, etching as end process but actually a digitally-based preparation sequence. Why this combination of new and very old processes to, first, create/compose a work and, second, to execute, publish, print it? Simply, each brings distinct advantages and, ultimately, distinct visual qualities to the enterprise and each immerses one in a different and subjectively rewarding/challenging involvement; this is the in-process handling of tools and materials and how the creative imagination is engaged because of choices of media, tools and materials. Eye-mind-hand control of the computer keyboard or stylus or mouse and the ongoing feedback of the monitor within the parameters of a program is at least partially different in feeling, procedure and mental involvement from any of the so-called traditional art-making traditions. Digital Print

RoninThe digital toolbox and work space allows, even invites, efficient experimental handling of visual source materials – images from any original form, pure light color directly from the electronic palette available on the computer interface and a quite extensive set of tools to facilitate the creative process. While these can be, and often are, used in ways patterned on traditional practice, yielding somewhat equivalent-looking works, they also can interact to reveal very unexpected, often spectacularly complex visual qualities and configurations that can, with the artist's creative control, result in unexpected and rewarding compositions or images. Additionally, the realization of whatever comes from digital composition in today's digital printing can be of very high quality and equivalent to traditional archival technology. Digital printing has a visual quality that is distinct; in general it can be very clean, precise and highly controllable. It has an optical quality similar to photography and hand-done sharp-focus painting that gives an illusion of optic-based reality (even if that reality is fantasy or an imagined one). It has the feeling of perfection. The various traditional art printmaking processes typically proceed in quite different ways. Hand labor-intensive art prints got their start in the West, about 1430, as prints on paper to provide reproductions of paintings. The artist-printmakers adapted the engraving or etching processes metal workers had, among other things, used to embellish armor since the middle ages. They involve the simple act of seeing or imagining and then drawing to develop the image. A subtle, linked optical, mental and physical event results in a work that is indelibly marked in a way unique to each artist. Drawing, including broadly, painting and all similar hand-craft procedures, unfolds relatively slowly in time and space and entails what is a uniquely human, biological as well as psychological genesis. This resulting distinct character is further qualified by the tools and materials used and these are different from, perhaps more tactile than, the quality typical of digital processes. Each, the digital and traditional, has value. It is interesting that optics as a determining instrumentality in post Renaissance painting (Vermeer, famously, but others, too) has been recently championed by David Hockney in his elegant book, *Secret Knowledge, Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the old Masters*. Hockney, primarily a painter, also uses a computer in various ways. His discussion and thesis deals exactly with how the artist's work is critically affected by the tools used; how optics developed and, with the invention in 1837 of chemically fixed images (photography), came to yield a look that has largely trumped images sourced sans optics, sans photographic models. He said, after a summary of how the optical search for reality ending in film and video, “The power of still images will endure. The well-made will be loved and therefore preserved. If I mention 'Henry VIII' an immediate picture comes to mind – a picture made by a great artist Holbein. The handmade image is a human vision. There is a great big beautiful world out there, with us in it. A new vision of it is now possible, with the computer helping to destroy the tyranny of the lens. Some have already observed that the new digital cinema is a sub-genre of painting. Exciting times are ahead.” (I was today struck by a similar record – in a history of Modern Japan the Meiji Emperor was depicted: first by a photograph of the young emperor in native imperial dress, then in another dressed as a modern, Western ruler in military dress and lastly in a painting in typical 19th Century style by an Italian artist. The painting was the one that became ubiquitous in Japan.) I recommend the Hockney book to anyone interested in the nature of vision and how artists and 'tools' help shape it. Solar Print

Desert HeartAnother bit of historical info on the making of prints: the glass print used in the 19th Century in which a sensitized paper is exposed beneath a sheet of glass on which the image is fixed by the artist, the transparent parts resulting in a (dark) line – a bit of optical chemistry not too unlike solar etching or basic photography and photogravure. My own recent venture back to hand printmaking is one form of hybrid possibility. I enjoy the various ways I can use the digital workspace, including scanners, cameras, computer-based programs (mostly Photoshop®) and digital printers to initiate a work that is finally realized on an etching press, one hand-wiped print at a time. Technically the solar etching process is similar to acid/copper etching and the preparation of the image is based in part on photogravure. A black and white and/or grey scale image is printed, digitally, on a transparency sheet that then gives a positive (darks will print as darks) transparency to expose in contact with the polymer plate. The exposure is to sunlight or other UV source that chemically hardens the parts not blocked by dark ink. The resolution is very fine; details hold up well. The entire range of inputs, photographs, scanned objects or materials are available as well as directly working on the plate a la monoprint or direct drawing as in conventional etching. They can be developed into the master image on the computer in all the ways we use in “pure” digital composition. The final solar print does not look like a typical digital print. It is, as I use it, not very close to the optical look of photography. So far, it is largely limited to grey scale tones (and pure whites are hard to come by). It is, by virtue of its limitations, simpler and more abstract (lacking color, et al.) than perhaps most digital prints. I see this is an alternative to the exotic optical effects of full color digital imaging, a seeking for something more austere, perhaps a bit of understatement with reserves. Solar Print with Chine Collé to provide color (L) / Solar Print (R)

A Train Jazz CC

Reap Variat BW Perhaps the best statement for me about this seeking is the notion of equivalence as expressed by photographer Minor White. For him (and me) a successful work is not primarily or only about something else, even if it depicts something. It is successful if it elicits a response, a simple quality of being that is, in itself, a richness, a kind of inner resonance – or as the Zen masters say, a suchness. This involves either a blinding perception of the optical qualities of the image (amplified detail and resolution, scale, et al.) or other modification, a degree of abstraction from or making of – well, an equivalent for a thing with a name. To strive for a work that touches a can't-be-named core experience sounds pretentious, but is really basic to what art, as differing from reportage or social issues or narrative, is about. A term, less ambiguous perhaps than equivalence is suchness. It is. It, the artwork experienced by me, by you, IS. And, of course, our total experience of the artwork encompasses the nominal image-identity, if it is representational at all, with all its associated issues along with the unique formal realization of each. The artist and critic say “it works” or “it doesn't work.” Digital Print (Upper) / Could be printed in either Digital or Solar Etching mode/process (Lower)
Seat Cage

Pythagorus

Miro News

To get back to the initial point, the choice of going back to a process which yields an end product simpler than the full color, complex digital print: The choice is to simplify, to try to find a suchness of experience by shedding color (though not forbid it) and the super complex detail made seductively possible by the photo-painterly-collage digital process. It is a choice to, some of the time, work in and explore a tangible and psychic space with less stuff in it. Digital Print (L) / Solar Print (R)

FAO

Nothing Inside

_____ While I don't invite an invidious comparison of these digital and _____ may be interesting to see what I've been working with. There are 8 images. Four are digital-pure, four are solar etchings (or files to make a solar etching). The digital print FAO relates to the A Train JazzCC solar print, here with chine collé providing color in the solar print. Ronin is already a several years old digital print and is an example of (my) typical digital imaging. Seat Cage, digital, is from the same set of photographs that produced Reaper Variations, one of the solar prints; very different feelings from visual subject matter of a very similar sort. Nothing Inside, a solar etching, has nothing to do with photographic sourcing. The character, MU, literally means nothing(ness). This was written, digitized and combined with a scanned pattern of inkspots, combined in Photoshop®, output as a gray scale image onto transparency film with my HP B9180 Photosmart printer. The positive transparency was then used to expose the polycarbonate plate for exposure to the sun and washing out with water to get the intaglio printing plate. Pythagoras Miro News has not been printed yet but could be output as either a solar or digital print; each would (will) have a distinct tactile and optical quality as determined by the printing process used. They will also have a different scale-larger for the digital version, more intimate for the solar etching version. Desert Heart is a digital composite of three photographs realized in the solar etching process indicated above. Finally, for those interested, a basic reference for solar etching is the book by Dan Welden and Paline Muir, Printmaking in the Sun, Watson Guptill Publications, 2001. It has a section on using digital imaging and solar etching. Mel Strawn January, 2010