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Cutting Into Relief

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Cutting Into Relief

Matthew L. Bass

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

Cutting into Relief

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The following is an examination of the ideas and decisions that went into an art exhibition held in gallery 303 of the Harris Fine Art Center February 1-13, 2013. The exhibition explores the relationships of the artwork, artist, viewer, and space. The catalyst for the above mentioned exploration is a process of making art using linoleum relief printing. The subject of the artwork is an in-depth examination of the material and printing process. It is my contention that such a close look at the art making process reveals the attitudes and decisions that we make with any human endeavor.

Gallery 303, Harris Fine Art Center, February 1-13, 2013, artwork, artist, viewer, space, relief printing, printing process, decisions

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Introduction

My first semester of graduate school, I was making multicolor prints of trees. I showed them to friends, fellow graduate students, and teachers, and received various responses. Those who had watched me work in my studio posed a very perplexing question; at least it was to my mind. They wanted to know why I made art the way that I did. Artists are often expected to explain their artwork and I had come up with justifications I thought were impressive and philosophically sound. However, the question was not about the finished images. It was about the way the images were made. The process was very time consuming and labor intensive. I was cutting materials with hand tools. Other tools existed that would remove the materials faster and with less effort. I had never been expected to justify my work methods before. An honest answer required serious introspection on my part. Why did I do things the way I did? Did I need to change the way I made things? What would happen if I did change the way I worked? Did I want to change and if so in what ways? It was an uncomfortable investigation for me. A journey of discovery within myself that radically altered the images I was making. I still use hand tools to make prints, but I understand why I am doing it that way. I can honestly answer the question. I believe art is more than an image hung on a wall or a sculpture sitting in a space. It can be a difficult idea to accept. It is understandable why. The finished artwork is tangible. We see it and interact with it in very sensory ways. However, other interactions are happening even if we do not recognize them at the time they are occurring. There are four main relationships interacting with each other whenever artwork is presented to the public. The object, the creator or artist, the space the work is shown in, and the viewer. Artists are actively thinking about and addressing these

aspects of art as they make and exhibit their artwork. With complete autonomy over a gallery space a thesis show provides, I will determine what the viewer sees, where they will see it, how it will be lit, etc.... For all that control, what the viewer will take from my reasoning, I am not certain nor can I predict. On the surface, the work is quite literal but the more time spent considering the ramifications that the work implies the deeper into the constructs upon which society functions are revealed. Constructs that connect everything to everything else in different ways and on different levels of understanding; it is interesting to me that these constructs are found within the art making process itself.

The Object

With my emphasis being printmaking, and an affinity for relief printing, the main body of work involves the process of reduction printing which has a sequence of cutting away a specific part of the linoleum with hand tools, inking the raised surface, transferring that ink to paper, cutting away more of the same piece of linoleum, printing another color on top of the previous one, and continuing those steps until the final color completes the work. Material is integral to works of art. Modern and postmodern art practices have made it commonplace to seek enhancement of a work by revealing the nature of the material. In my work, linoleum is treated as an art object in its own right. It acknowledges our need for a physical manifestation for art to exist. The choice to make the material itself important requires thinking about it in a different way. When I made the material the subject of the finished work, I had to observe the material in addition to the image being created. Relief printing is about the removal of the portion of material the artist does not want the viewer to see in the finished print. Artists' intent on the finished image will simply discard the removed material. My thesis began with the saving

and storage of the removed material in glass jars. My attempt to make the finished product inseparable from the process of making it; I have built my thesis around the materials being used and the processes used to create them. Every work in the exhibition will have a visual and conceptual relationship to these two things. There are four different visual forms the prints take, each with its own development and connotations.

The first group of images relates directly to the form of the jars and how the material interacts with the chosen vessel it is housed in (see fig1). I would like to point out that had I chosen a different container and method of storing the material this first group of images could not exist. I would also mention that if I was using a different material like wood, it would respond to the container differently than the linoleum my thesis is based in. These images are entirely dependent on the decisions that precede it. There is art to be found in the works progression, as well as the end result. And of course my particular problem, how to express this idea visually through printmaking. My solution, translate the conclusions into the next piece of artwork. This requires pauses while in the middle of the process to take stock of what is happening and to assess what is actually going on.

I did not always have a glass jar next to me while working so the removed material would be set to the side. Subsequently, there existed a time between the cutting and the discard being placed in the appropriate jar. I would stop and pay attention to what was happening visually. My observations led to silhouettes of loose material laying on a flat surface. The second body of work breaks away from the rectangle format of the first body of work. I also decided to work in a larger scale with this group of prints. To create visual associations I would create them in pairs (see fig2). This creates an abstract pattern

many have associated with visual language. This human need to make sense of something that is not readily apparent on the surface becomes incorporated into the body of work simply because people see it there. While all the prints are images of the material, the fact that people see things in it requires me to address it in the work.

The third body of work has elements of the first two. The material represented is on a flat surface and extends to the edges of the material. An edge is implied but has gaps in places where there is no material. Like the second body of work, I started with the silhouette of the material but quickly began to explore the intricacies of the interior of the material creating patterns within patterns, value designations, and form among other things (see fig3). Because each stage in the process is built on top of another stage, I began to print a few extra copies of each stage in order to examine how each stage was interacting with the previous ones. This decision informed the creation of the fourth body of work and another decisions to digitally catalog all the different layers of each print. After I was finished looking at the single layer prints, I had to decide what to do with them. I work on multiple prints at a time and began to print different stages from the other three bodies of work on top of the extra prints made for cataloging purposes. This means that the fourth body of work is comprised of primarily mono-prints.

The fourth body of work is a unique compilation of specific stages of prints related to a specific moment in time. The three previous bodies of work are planned out in stages. The fourth is created as it goes. I never know what layer is going to be used next or when it will be completed. The release of control over the process embraces spontaneity and intuition as a means of production. It also creates a different visual look to the work even though they come from the same pieces of linoleum (see fig4). This

ability to reuse a particular stage of production is limited by the process of reduction. There is a small window in which a particular stage can be used and the other bodies of work being done at the time become influenced by this. If the viewer is aware of this history, they can actually see the progression of each body of work in relation to each other. There are volumes of information that can be gleaned from this fourth body of work for someone willing to take the time. This way of working produces individual works intended to be experienced together. One body of work is informed by what has happened previously in that body of work but also what is occurring in the other three bodies of work. It also enables a shifting context from one exhibition to the next depending on the works chosen. The ability to emphasize one aspect of the overall process or complicate it with multiple visual paths allow for an ever-shifting view of the work.

Digitally scanning the work started out as a process of documenting the history of all the layers of each print, as they existed at different stages of the process. This permits an examination of the evolution of a specific print. It also demonstrates how a single piece of linoleum can generate dozens of different images. The nature of the processes used is such that they allow for the reuse of material that can be infinite. It also allows the introduction of other technologies. I began to compile images in Photoshop and import them into Aftereffects. This allowed me to begin to animate the static prints. Taking the oldest printing traditions and fusing them with the newest innovations allow for things the print cannot do itself. Digital spaces are spaces of possibility where paths not taken in physical space can exist. This permits a deeper level of consideration of the meaning of the body of work than exists on the physical walls of a given space. The vast amount of

information that is available at the fingertips has completely changed the way things in society are done.

The Artist

There are things that are gained from change and things that are lost. Routine and structure come naturally to me, and I work well within them. I love the unique quality that can only be achieved through a specific method of working. The day I stop enjoying that interaction will most likely be the day I change the way I work. The reductive process results in layers of ink building on top of each other that creates a rich surface. Computer prints cannot achieve this type of surface. The visual look of the print provides visual and contextual meaning to the body of work. Old processes made obsolete by technology have a charm of their own. There is something meditative that occurs while working on a print. I think it has something to do with the concentration and time necessary to hand make a multiple run print. I find it fills a longing within myself that few other endeavors satisfy. This translates into a commitment that is readily noticeable in the finished work. Many viewers looking at the work have recognized the amount of energy going into these images simply by looking at them.

When I look at a completed print, I see time, language, and movement. The question that prompted me to examine why I make art as I do was asked because more time saving options were available to me. This forced me to address the value placed on my time verses the value placed on the meditative experience of the process. Because I spend so much time working on these images, I associate so much of this work with ideas of time. How do we measure time? The materials in jars are stored according to month and year. Calendars are human constructs to measure the passage of time. How do we

value time? Anyone who has ever worked an hourly job knows the monetary value placed on his or her time and activity. Are there down sides to viewing time as society has taught us to? My answer is inherent in the way I choose to work.

Visual language requires a sign designated by society to function. It means what it means because we are taught what it means. I explore this idea in particular in the titles of the second group of prints. Each image is assigned a word and whenever I use that image in conjunction with another image the word associated with each of the images will appear in the title. The implication is that the images are a visual representation of the word assigned by me. Signs can be difficult to pin down in terms of meaning. I shared a studio space with someone from Hawaii. We had many interesting discussions about translating words and meaning from one culture to another. Certain cultures have words for ideas not expressed in other languages. “Luau” in Hawaiian refers to a traditional dish served at celebrations. It has been viewed by other cultures to simply mean having a Hawaiian themed party. Translating ideas across cultures and even between individuals can be problematic because we are so unique while being communal at the same time.

Because I use different stages of different prints in multiple ways, each print is unique but shares common threads. Consider these three prints from the exhibition (see fig.5). One is a planned out print from the third group, one is a layer of that particular print, and finally a print from the fourth body of work. The last layer of all three prints is the same image. Yet each of them is a distinct image in its own right. The orientation is unique to the prints as well as how they function individually when looked at. They have different titles, but when shown together, they have a visual connection with each other that changes as the viewer moves within the space. I view it as moving back and forth

between what is happening in the different bodies of work; movement between the jars and prints. I notice the different layers from the different groups when I observe the prints. I do not think I can separate the finished prints from the knowledge of the process because I am so involved in it. Neither can I separate the relationship between the prints being worked on as I am working. Animating the prints using computer software was a natural extension of the idea of movement I already could see occurring in the static prints. They are all informing each other which ends up informing the next group of prints. A decision building on the proceeding one until all the decisions are connected to each other. There are other associations I have with the work but these three are the most prevalent.

The Space

Many will experience my thesis and see nothing beyond the visual images being presented. I attempt to create connections in the viewers mind through the use of different kinds of work, the works presentation, and the organization of the space. There are three different kinds of work, the jars of material, digital animations, and the four groups of prints. The jars provide the viewer with the opportunity to recognize the source material for the prints. The jars function as a single piece through the presentation. They are placed on a plank in two rows and are staggered so they can all be seen at the same time. They are suspended from the ceiling to be at eye level with the viewer. The jars are placed in the center of the space to imply that all the work radiates from the material. Four walls frame the space the jars inhabit. The jars are so different from the rest of the work that I felt they needed their own space. On the outside of the four walls are four monitors with the digital projections playing.

The digital images are separated in such a way that they create three-dimensional space within the two-dimensional plane of the monitor screens. This creates a transitional environment between the three-dimensional jars and the prints. The animations face the prints on the outer walls of the room. It allows the viewer to consider the relationship between the hand made prints and new technologies. All the prints are suspended on a wire, which references my drying system in my studio. It also means that the tops of the prints are all the same height regardless of size. The prints are not framed or matted because I wanted to emphasize the hand printed quality. I have found placing them behind glass obscures the rich surfaces created by the layering of the inks. Observing the prints in a similar way as I have contemplated them while making them is important to the idea of the thesis.

Three pairs of prints are hung on each wall. The central pair are always the larger prints from the second group. The two pairs on the ends of the wire contain at least one of the other three groups and they are always combined with an image from a different group. Each pair began by selecting one print I wanted in the exhibition and then going through the rest of the prints and selecting those prints from other bodies of work that visually complement that work. Editing those images down until all the considered works were in pairs. When presenting a body of work to an audience, many of the decisions are made entirely based in visual concerns. On one level the work needs to be presented in a visually pleasing way as well as in a way that conveys the idea. The thesis is created in this way with the hope that the viewers will be able to observe the different works in relation to each other and each new relationship will inform the way the viewer interprets any one print or body of work.

The Viewer

My ambition to reveal a deeper sense of art that has developed within the art making community has guided my decisions in the development of my thesis exhibition. The act of making art is linked to other types of human endeavors in ways we do not seem to fully realize. By creating an intricate system of making that finds parallels within human development, allows the viewer to bring meaning to the work, and relies on interactions within a socially constructed space, my work hopes to reveal the intricate connections that bind everything together. The manner in which we develop as human beings is a process of its own. A newborn infant grows to maturity and becomes old. Society tells us that the child and the senior citizen are the same person and we understand. At the same time, the body has changed constantly over the life of the individual. Outlooks and ideas about the world grow and develop. In this way we could see ourselves as a progressive series of decisions that have culminated in the individual at that particular moment. The art making process is a reflection of this idea. A viewer prepared to consider the ramifications of the work has the possibility to discover that the work is nothing more than a reflection of themselves. They may begin to think about the decisions that make them who they are and that potential is exciting to me.

A difficulty faced is my inability to control how the viewer will make these connections in their own mind. Everyone coming to the exhibition will walk away with his or her own ideas. Their level of experience with printmaking will determine the extent to which they recognize many of the interactions being referred to by the work. The viewer is the variable over which I have limited control. Some will see abstract images. Others will see a relationship to t-shirt designs or wallpaper patterns. Many will see

graffiti and language. This makes the work like a Rorschach inkblot test. The work is a mirror that reflects the viewer perceptions. Ideally the viewer will dig deep and recognize they are connected to their decisions and some of their choices are connected to some of my choices. The ability to appreciate the way something is made has a value of its own this body of work tries to cultivate.

The show is housed in a space and I have previously discussed my decisions in the arrangement of that space. The viewer will come to the space and interact with it in their own way. At the opening reception, young children enjoyed running back and forth underneath the glass jars. They have not been socially conditioned to the extent that adults have. Those who are socially trained will travel in a circle. The jars and digital projections create a central space individuals rarely enter. The works in the middle and the prints on the outer wall create a path most people follow without question. This allows the viewer to interact with the works in a very controlled way. I have often wondered if at the end of the circle they might want to experience the first works and see something different for having experienced the last works. The way the images are made create a self-perpetuating cycle that continues to feed itself.

Conclusion

A collection of objects consisting of twenty-four prints, four digital animations, and one sculptural piece make up my thesis exhibition. These objects are only a fraction of the work created by following a process set in motion by a question posed to me at the beginning of graduate school. The works are a physical manifestation of the inner explorations of that question. I spent countless hours with my process and thoughts and have emerged with a different perspective on what art is and the role it plays in our lives.

The objects I make, the spaces the work is shown in, the viewers who see, and my relationship to all of them create a dialogue with each other. This body of work resists closure. It builds upon itself endlessly. It can be arranged in numerous ways and unforeseen spaces. Each new show will add new meaning and connections that will cause the work to develop in different directions. I hope those who have seen this exhibition will want to take this journey with me.

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Figures



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

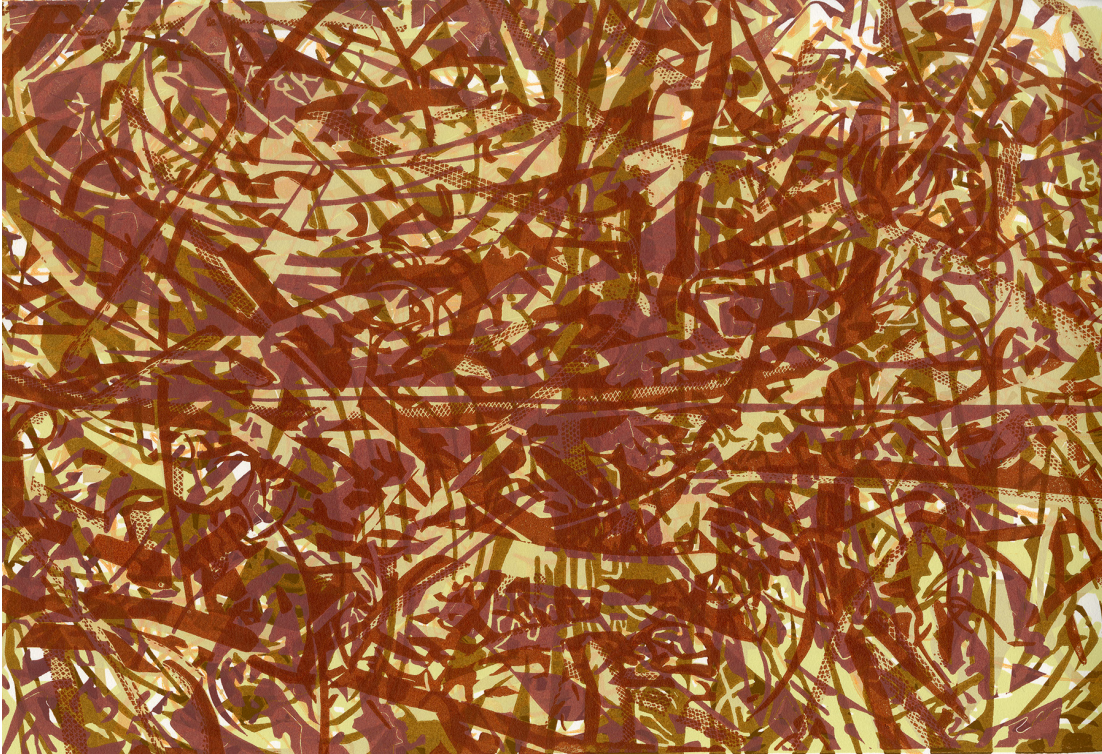


Figure 4



Figure 5

Instillation Views

