

Subtractive Techniques in Intaglio Printmaking, An Italian Experience

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The purpose of our trip to Italy was to further our understanding of the techniques of printmaking, especially printmaking methods involving multiple plates and multiple colors, also known as multiple plate color etching. We went to Italy to study with a master printmaker who could show us new methods of etching (the main technique in intaglio printmaking) that we have not experienced at UW-L through our long study of printmaking. This program is lead by Polish born Printmaker Swietlan Kraczyna in his studio in Barga, Italy. Swietlan is also a professor of Intaglio at the International School of Printmakers in Florence. The work shop was three weeks of intimate and intense study of new methods of Intaglio printing.

Our group focused on the precision and detailed work of the subtractive methods in Intaglio. Intaglio is a type of printmaking where the template is a metal plate or sheet, in this case it was zinc, but copper is also used. By focusing on the “subtractive” or the removal of the etched area, also called ‘scraping, “burning”, or mezzo tinting”, we were able to control the release of specific color combinations using the three primary colors (red, yellow, blue of ink applied to three templates of etched zinc.

This was an advanced workshop in printmaking that was constructed from the background we have received from the printmaking program at UW-La Crosse, lead by Professor Joel Elgin. It was based on a series of exercises that taught us the detailed and essential process of multiple plate color etching using three plates. The first two weeks of the workshop focused on perfecting aquatinting; a method of etching using rosin dust and acid baths. What we achieved through the aquatint was essential to the next process, of subtraction of the etched surface in some areas. This enabled us to achieve varying degrees of texture and thus enable us to have a vast number of hues to choose from when printing. The objective of the workshop was to help verify that the artist has the ability to produce any color at will, using only three plates, and three primary colors of ink.

The third week of the workshop was learning the “subtractive” method of this process. This method involved all three plates etched to full value, meaning that the acid worked into the applied rosin creating tiny canyons for the ink to be held in. Since we had to do this with three plates, one for each primary color, the end result, after printing all the plates, one right after the other, the end would result in pure black (since the three primary fully etched plates combined created the black on the paper). To achieve this black, each zinc plate had to be etched for one hour in an acid bath containing a ratio of 20 parts water and one part nitric acid. Once each plate had been etched to full value, the individual plates were inked with one primary color and printed one at a time on the same least 50% rag material, to absorb the ink). In this case, the value of black can be obtained mezzo tinting way; the artist would subtract or scrape the etched surface to a level of pure plate again. By subtracting on one plate in certain area, combining the plates again in printing, one of several colors are “released” from the black. The images created will be composed of a wide range of hues that could not have been achieved through any other method. We produced plates of such a nature as shown in figures I, II, and III. These are the final prints using the subtractive method. We will also take these plates and techniques back to La Crosse to further our study of Intaglio printing. We gained valuable insight through a unique understanding. Our new understanding brought us to another level of printing and techniques in the area of etching, aquatint, and mutilate. All of these are essential parts of printmaking and will accompany us on our life long journey of printmaking.



Figure I



Figure II

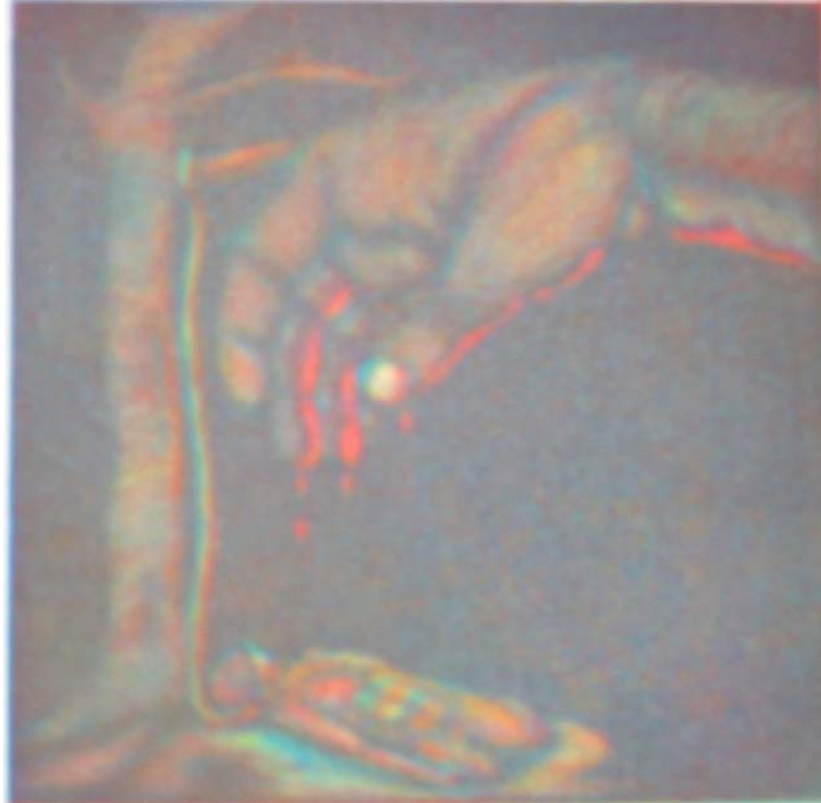


Figure III

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This experience could not have happened without the help and dedication of Joel Elgin. His constant passion for teaching and printmaking inspired us. We want to also thank the Undergraduate Research Grant Committee for giving us this extraordinary opportunity. The grant made it possible to travel to Italy and immerse ourselves in learning printmaking that will stay with us.