

SPECIALIZATION RESEARCH PROJECT

PRESSED FLOWERS

Submitted by
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PRESSED FLOWERS

My intention for this project was to explore the water media monoprint: watercolor pencil, watercolor crayon and brush applied tube watercolor. My motive for creating these works was curiosity. While working on a series of drawings in which I used watercolor pencils and crayons with brush washes, I realized that the paper, applied *wet* to an inked plate in the printmaking process, because of the moisture in the paper, would pick up watercolor pigment that had been applied to a plate. How well it would do this, I didn't know. How well an image could be applied to a plate, I didn't know. How the pressure of the printing process would affect the image, I didn't know.

PRESSED FLOWERS involved several formal issues; these included subject matter, paper, scale and medium. Except for the subject matter and, to a lesser degree the medium, the project allowed me to explore a different way of working from the one I employed in my thesis work.

I used the same organic imagery I've used in all my artwork for the past six years. The monoprints I created with watercolor

pencil involved the overall composition of leaves. With the pencil I laid in color, creating web works of stems and leaf veins, and *topographical maps* (descending series of lines which followed the outside contour of a shape). The monoprints I created with watercolor crayon were informed by the same cabbages that inspired my thesis paintings. The brilliant crayon colors made an exuberant translation of the subject matter. Finally, I chose flowers as the visual concept of the brush applied watercolor monoprints. These images involved a delicacy, intimacy and decorative quality that integrated well with my choices of paper and scale.

Except for Plate V, which was printed on *Twinrocker* Handmade Simon's Green cold pressed printmaking paper, I used *Twinrocker* Handmade White Feather Deckle printmaking papers exclusively, in three different sizes - 4" x 22", 9" x 12" and 13" x 28". I chose it for its texture and edge, which echoed the textures and edges of my imagery. These monoprints, especially the flowers, are approximately life size and restate the subject matter's intimacy; they can be held in my hands as flowers can be. The scale also allowed me to work in a completely different size than that of my thesis paintings.

I worked fast and loose. Considering how slowly, deliberately and detailed my work usually develops, this was another departure for me. The usual reversal of image which occurs in printmaking did

not really apply here. Since my plates were clear plexiglass, I could simply reverse them to get an idea of how my final images would appear. Like the subject matter, the water media offered a note of continuity while allowing me to pursue new directions for its expression.

From preparing the plate, paper and press, to applying and printing the image and cleaning the plate, a working knowledge of the printmaking process was necessary. Since retaining the edges of the paper was important to me, I allowed the size of paper to determine the size of the plexiglass. Once cut, I prepared the plate.

I beveled the edges on a grinding wheel (sharp edges will tear the paper under the pressure of the press). Then I roughed the surfaces of the plates, first by sandblasting, which created a fine texture, and later by rubbing with a *Scotch Brite* sponge, which gave a deeper tooth to grab the medium. Finally, I washed the plates in soap and water to remove the dust, then sprayed them with an even coat of alcohol to remove any hand oil that had built up, or when the plates had been sitting for a few days, to remove the air pollutants that the plexiglass had absorbed.

Once the surface had a texture and was clean I applied the image. I worked first with sharpened pencils. I tried to create color by layering pigment, a technique that is successful on paper, but which on plexiglass was disappointing. The second layer I applied

would often *dislodge* the first layer, *paling-out* an area I wanted to be very dark. It was more successful to build color by layering with the watercolor crayon, which was also the least resistant material to apply, adhering to the plates' surfaces even though they might have oil from my hands on them.

The last medium I explored was the brush applied tube watercolor. This was the most like painting, and the most versatile. I could as easily layer pigment on the plate to deepen value and mix color, as I could remove the pigment to create detail or erase areas that were not working. To erase, I would flood the area I didn't want with water from a *wet* round brush, then pick up the pigment charged water with a *dry* round brush. This procedure worked well with both deep and shallow layers of pigment. Finally, I used the *edge* of a wet, flat brush to create detail and the *tip* of a dry, round brush to remove the excess water and pigment.

The most recurrent problem with application of all mediums was adherence. So that oil from my hands would not build up on the plates, I was careful not to touch their surfaces while working on them. I didn't use the alcohol until well into the project, because I didn't realize at first that the soap and water was not removing all the oil. After I understood this and began coating them with alcohol, the next problem I faced was the plates' absorption of air pollutants. I would clean them after printing, applying a layer of alcohol and

removing it with clean paper towels, but if I didn't use the plates within a few days the watercolor would bead up on them as though they'd never been cleaned. I learned to clean them again just before working on them.

I also learned to re-texture the plates between each printing, since the press would *take down* their tooth when I printed. Using the *Scotch Brite* sponge was more immediate than sandblasting. I could see and feel what I was doing with the sponge, whereas the sandblasting would create a dust I couldn't see through and the glove box didn't allow me to feel the plates.

The advantages to monoprintmaking with watercolor on plexiglass include, as I've said, being able to reverse the image as I worked on it, being able to keep the finished plates (*inked*, so to speak) for weeks, which allowed me to complete more works before printing, and finally being able to print several finished plates at once.

Before I could begin printing I needed wet paper. I used two methods for this; both of these involved soaking the paper for at least an hour and then blotting it to remove the excess moisture. With the second method, after blotting, I stored the paper in a sealed plastic bag overnight. This promoted an a more uniform moisture throughout the paper. With this method I could prepare all the paper I needed the day before, allowing me to focus all my attention

entirely on the printing the next day.

To print, I would first reduce the pressure of the press to accommodate the difference in plate thickness from the usual 1/32" of an average aluminum plate to the 1/8" thickness of my plexiglass. Since I wanted to retain the deckled edge of the paper it was necessary to create a template for both paper and plate. I would draw a line around the edge of the paper on a sheet of newsprint, then position the plate within this shape and draw a line around *it*. When I was ready to print I would lay this template down on the press bed first, then place the plate face-up on top of it. Next I'd put the paper face-down on top of the plate, then put another sheet of newsprint over the top of the paper and finally, cover it all with a thin piece of felt. Then I'd print. After printing I'd allow the paper to dry overnight and clean the plates. When the paper was dry, I'd evaluate the work.

The watercolor pencil monoprints were the least successful of the three mediums. The delicacy of line did not translate well (Plates III, IV and V). Little color blending occurred; the images were pale and the process of printing did not *enhance* the imagery (Plates I and II), it simply transferred the information that was on the plate. The same was true for the monoprints created with the watercolor crayon (Plates VI and VII). Because of their brilliant color they are more compelling works, but they lack the fluidity of watercolor. The

moist paper only allowed me to retain the quality of the drawing in these prints. Except for the faint impression of the plate nothing was gained artistically by the printing process.

The brush applied watercolor monoprints however *were* enhanced by the pressure of printing. Nuances of the medium were well replicated. Where pigment was deep, shallow or removed, the paper captured it. Most significant was the evidence of the pressure. There was a subtle *widening* of linear detail and *spreading* of blocked color. This inspired the title for the project. It also encouraged me to abandon the drawing mediums and further pursue the fluid watercolor.

After printing a plate the imagery would remain faint but intact. I decided to reprint three of the plates (XIII, XV and XVII), hoping the faintness of the image would be interesting. Sadly, the results were not very successful. I decided to stop wasting my precious paper.

Part of my evaluation involved that paper. The White Feather Deckle did not pick up the light values of the watercolor pencil, so I decided to use a paper of darker value (Plate V). The *Twinrocker* Simon's Green exhibited disappointing results; not only did it not pick up light values, it also failed to pick up several mid-tones. Another failure involved the second crayon print (Plate VII), which pulled up chunks of the delicate paper. The reason was never clear to me. It

that the paper was not evenly moist, or that this particular plate had a high build-up of pigment.

The worst problem with the White Feather Deckle in both the 9" x 12" and the 13" x 28" sheets was the paper's heavy saturation of water. This caused the exit edge of the plate to seep pigment into the paper, past the plate's edge. The best example of this can be seen in Plate IV. It occurred to a more or lesser degree in all the prints of those paper sizes.

The most successful works were printed on the 4" x 22" White Feather Deckle. This paper did not remain saturated after blotting, but stayed evenly moist. There is little evidence of the exit edge. The colors also stayed crisp and clear.

I've scratched the surface of this process of monoprinting and have even more curiosity now than when I began. I would like to mix the watercolor materials and explore different papers and plates, although with the use of aluminum or copper plates I would lose the transparent versatility of the plexiglass. And I would like to expand both my imagery and my scale in future works. This project has whetted my artistic appetite.

PLATES

PLATE I: *Pencil, no. 1* (22" x 4")



PLATE II: *Pencil, no. 2* (22" x 4")



PLATE III: *Pencil, no. 3* (12" x 9")



PLATE IV: *Pencil, no. 4* (12" x 9")



PLATE V: *Pencil, no. 5 (25" x 19")*



PLATE VI: *Crayon, no. 1* (4" x 22")



PLATE VII: *Crayon, no. 2* (4" x 22")



PLATE VIII: *Orchid, no. 1* (9" x 12")



PLATE IX: *Orchid, no. 2* (9" x 12")



PLATE X: *Orchid, no. 3* (9" x 12")



PLATE XI: *Orchid, no. 4* (9" x 12")



PLATE XII: *Orchid, no. 5* (12" x 9")



PLATE XIII: *Orchid Echo, no. 1* (12" x 9")



PLATE XV: *Orchid Echo, no. 2* (12" x 9")



PLATE XIV: *Orchid, no. 6* (12" x 9")

PLATE XVI: *Morning Glory* (22" x 4")



PLATE XVII: *Morning Glory Echo* (22" x 4")



PLATE XVIII: *California Poppies* (4" x 22")



PLATE XIX: *Spring Blossoms* (4" x 22")



PLATE XX: *Yellow and Pink* (13" x 28")



PLATE XXI: *Cone Flowers* (13" x 28")