

Upending perceptions

A perceived shortcoming in the printmaking process can be a great strength, writes **Ben Rak**.

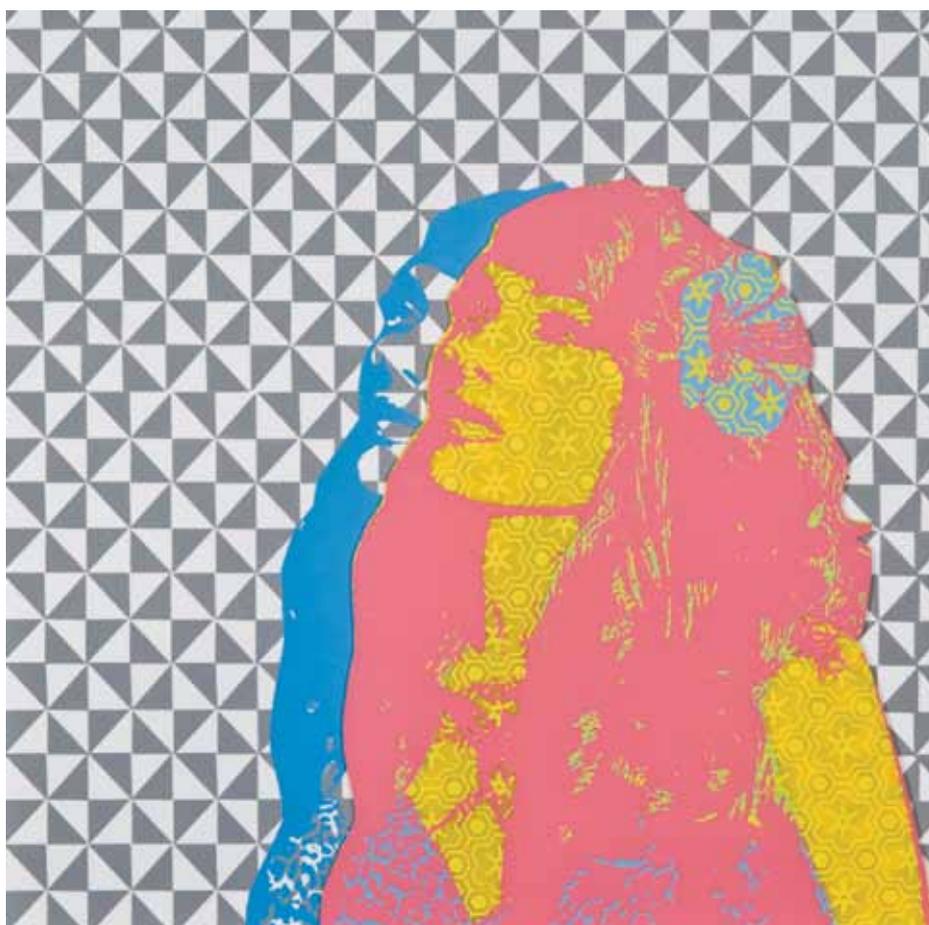
“Such an atmosphere relegated printmakers to second-class citizenship in the art world.”

Born out of a necessity to disseminate information, and subsequently art, to broad audiences, printmaking is at times considered a lower form of art production. This perception is due in part to the reproducibility of prints, the printmaking process’s mediation of the artist’s mark, and the degree of technical knowledge required to achieve a well-crafted outcome.

Walter Benjamin maintained, in a 1936 discussion of photography, that mechanically reproduced art lacks the ‘aura’ of original art,¹ and therefore, printed works cannot be compared to the direct marks and authority of media such as painting and sculpture. This assertion, early in the modernist period, established printmaking as somewhat irrelevant in an age that was determined to take the measure of the artist’s direct mark and the authentic artistic talent associated with that mark. Such an atmosphere relegated printmakers to second-class citizenship in the art world and has instilled in print practitioners a sense of anxiety regarding the status of their practice as a contemporary art form.²

When I was asked last year to curate an exhibition of contemporary printmaking, I decided to focus particularly on perceived shortcomings of printed artwork. My curatorial rationale brought together a group of artists whose use of reproduction in their practice is conceptually linked to the ideas underpinning their work and thus upends the perception of a so-called shortcoming, turning it into an integral part of the work’s strength.

Milan Milojevic, for example, has been researching his own identity, which is influenced by three cultures: that of



— Samuel Tupou, *Staring At The Sun*, 2010, screenprint on acrylic, 61 x 61 cm. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

his birthplace — Australia — and the cultures that his parents brought with them from Germany and Yugoslavia. His practice explores ‘contemporary cultural identity and the complexities of a cross-cultural position... The impulse to construct fictional narratives and spaces is a response to collected stories of a homeland Milojevic never witnessed and is based instead upon memory, myth, and fact’.³

Milojevic’s work is the product of a unique artistic process. He scans 18th century naturalist engravings that he finds in books and reproduces sections of the engravings. Using the digital forms of the traditionally printed marks, he creates imaginary flora and fauna inspired by the writings of magic realists, such as Jorge Luis Borges, and layers the digital prints with etchings, woodcuts, or other more traditional print-media. His invented



Milan Milojevic, *Night & Day (11 & 12)*, 2016, multi-layered digital prints with etching overlay, 30 x 88 cm. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

creatures display body parts of more than one animal; for example, a bird's body is topped with a deer's head. In every case, one body part is from a European animal and the other, an Australian animal.

Milojevic's reproduction of traditional printmaking marks and the transformation of these marks into digital formats allude to a cultural transplantation from the Old World (geographically and culturally speaking) to the antipodal 'new world' of Australia, where the culture from ancestors' native countries is reproduced from generation to generation, each time losing some traits but gaining others to become a hybrid of old and new. Similarly, analogue and digital technologies combine to produce a simultaneously traditional and contemporary object.

Like Milojevic, Samuel Tupou deals with his cultural background in his artwork: his

heritage is Tongan, he was born in New Zealand, and he lives in Australia today. Tupou creates images in which symbols of his Tongan identity, represented by patterns taken from tapa cloths,⁴ are blended with icons of Western culture.

Tupou's use of a commercial technique — screenprinting — to reproduce tapa cloth patterns suggests that mass production is invading a traditional culture. His playful dialogue between the cultures implies that he himself is trapped somewhere in the middle, between the mass-media/mass-produced Western culture and the traditional Polynesian culture of his ancestry.

Painter Anna Kristensen has been interested in the visual reproduction of surfaces since her 2008 exhibition *Vision Quest*, which featured meticulously painted images of rocks and crystals.

These works were followed by *Indian Chamber* (2011), a panorama painting of the Indian Chamber of New South Wales' Jenolan Caves. The work is in the style of the panoramic paintings of 19th century Europe, where a landscape or historical scene was reproduced as a room in which the viewer could observe a vista or event. It is noteworthy that the panoramic paintings of the 19th century were superseded by cinema as the preferred illusionary experience of different places, and that the mechanical reproduction of film is where Walter Benjamin believes the aura of the authentic artistic experience is lost.

Despite Kristensen's outstanding ability as a painter, she chose to pursue a mechanical reproductive technique (silkscreen printing) to produce her series *Render* (2014), which depicts the surfaces

—
 Anna Kristensen, *Crazy Wall*, 2014,
 silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas,
 233 x 189 cm.
 Reproduced with permission of
 The Commercial Gallery, Sydney
 Private collection, Sydney.
 Photo: Yanni Kronenberg



of brick walls and tiled pavements as hybrid print-paintings, in which the detail of the stones is screenprinted and the mortar holding them together is hand painted with luscious metallic silvers and bronzes. Kristensen's embrace of printmaking techniques in the production of this body of work seems to be a revelation for the work, which no longer speaks of reproduction between the lines but shouts out its reproductive qualities for all to hear. It is this acknowledged reproduction that creates a dialogue with Kristensen's photo-realistic paintings and raises the question of how a mechanically reproduced image really differs from a hand-painted reproduction.

Whereas traditionally the ability to edition an artwork and the perception of a print as a reproduction have been central to the marginalisation of print practice,

some artists do use the reproductive nature of the print as a metaphor or a conceptual leverage to emphasise the ideas they work with. It is exactly this artistic acceptance of printmaking's perceived shortcomings that confounds the naysayers' opinion of printmaking and makes it possible to consider printed artworks in the context of contemporary art practice and to celebrate our dedication to the medium.

Alison Alder, Gary Carsley, Tony Curran, Michael Kempson, Erica Seccombe, Judy Watson, and the artists discussed in this article will be featured in the exhibition *Aura: Repetition, Reproduction, and the Mark of the Artist* at Manly Art Gallery & Museum (14 July–3 September) and Wagga Wagga Art Gallery (9 December–4 March).

—
Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Penguin, Camberwell, Victoria, 2008, p. 7. (Original publication 1936)
2. Richard Harding, *Juxtapose: an Exploration of Gay Masculine Identity and Its Relationship to the Closet*, PhD project, RMIT, 2014.
3. Milan Milojevic, personal communication by email, 10 April, 2017
4. Tapa is a cloth that is fashioned from bark and printed or painted, often with geometric patterns. Tapa cloth is made in the Polynesian islands.