

Artist Ben Rak in Conversation with Abdullah M.I. Syed

The following conversations began in 2012 when artist Ben Rak produced a series of silk-screen works for my curatorial project *Semblance of Order* (2013-2015). The conversations continued in Rak's studio at the University of New South Wales Art & Design (formerly the UNSW College of Fine Arts, or CoFA), where he and I were fellow lecturers, and at Cicada Press, where Rak and I printed between 2009 and 2015. The final discussion included here took place in my Sydney studio in 2016 and focused on Rak's new body of work.

Abdullah M.I. Syed: What is the *Pictures of Scratches* exhibition all about?

Ben Rak: *Pictures of Scratches* is a tongue-in-cheek look at the media hierarchies of the art world and the fetishisation of the artist's mark, responding to a current trend in which contemporary artists intentionally make their work look crude.

AS: Keeping this 'crude' art trend in mind, please explain how you relate your marks to the notion of authenticity in printmaking, which was born out of a necessity to reproduce artwork for broader dissemination.

BR: The way in which foul-bitten scratches from etching plates are perceived fascinates me. These scratches are an unintentional by-product of the etching process but are often valorised by viewers as the truly authentic marks of the artist, primarily because of the scratches' organic nature. My use of the incidental mark as one of the primary focal points in the image is part of my attempt to unpack hypocrisies surrounding the romanticisation of the mark of the artist and to question the notions of authenticity and reproducibility in art.

AS: Your recent work makes a strong case for reconsidering post-minimalism while significantly arguing a non-pictorial artistic shift in your art practice. Tell us about this developing position and how the post-minimalist aesthetics inform your exhibition.

BR: The post-minimal nature of the work references the historical contexts in which minimal art and abstract expressionism came to bear. As I see it, there is a constant dialogue between abstract expressionism's pure, direct artist's mark and the antithetical approach in the attempt by minimalist and geometric art to conceal or even erase the artist's mark from the canvas. Similar to the New York minimalists of the 1960s (notably Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, and Donald Judd), who considered inexpressive and non-referential aesthetics a reaction to earlier abstract expressionism, I am using geometric abstraction as a response to the fetishisation of the artist's mark.

The aesthetic of my work has always been minimal, in that I tend to depict simple subject matter on stark backgrounds. The minimal aspect of the work is 'complicated' by the use of patterns, but the subject is usually isolated within the image plane. This project is better described as post-minimal, in that it directly references minimalist and geometric abstraction movements of the past to nudge the viewer towards reading the work in relation to a painterly style that ascribes value to the unmediated mark of the artist.

AS: So in a way, to borrow Frank Stella's expression, what we see is *not* what we see in your work?

BR: (*Laughing*) Pretty much!

AS: Using traditional printmaking techniques and adhering to conventional art production values, you show that both formal and material conditions play influential roles in your earlier exploration of subculture, sameness, otherness, and conformity. Now you are reviving and transforming discarded materials, such as scratched etching plates, to produce diverse marks encased in various abstract shapes. How does this process of sans-authorship mark-making inform your claim as to the authenticity of an artist's mark?

BR: In previous projects, I used cultural and subcultural iconography to search for what might be considered an authentic identity—one not polluted by commercial narratives and media stereotypes. In my current project, I decided to drop the cultural references and focus on authenticity in a much broader sense. My strategy of using traditional printmaking techniques for sans-authorship mark-making (sourcing unintentional scratches from etching plates) is my sardonic attempt to locate the perceived boundary between a unique art object that conveys an aura of authenticity and the aura-less, mechanically mediated marks that are traditionally considered the realm of printmaking.

AS: It seems that the visual economy of these discarded materials expresses diversity. If so, is that your interest?

BR: Yes—diversity, uniqueness, and sameness in an era dominated by homogeneous mass production and consumption. My work addresses such notions.

AS: You have been developing installation and sculptural interpretations of printed metal and Perspex plates, exploring print as an object that can occupy space, as in your exhibitions *Consumed* (2010) and *Performance Anxiety* (2013). Tell me more about your interest in structures, space, and spatiality.

BR: My sculptural works primarily explore definitions of the print medium and the boundaries of such definitions. I'm interested in creating artworks that slip between definitions, works that can be considered prints (because they were created using printmaking techniques) but also defy the traditional expectations from a print—that it exists in multiples, is mechanically mediated, is a framed work on paper, and so on. The works in *Pictures of Scratches* are meant to be prints, but not exactly. In an interesting twist, the paintings in this series challenge the viewer's understanding of what is original and what is reproduction. The etchings are the originals, and the paintings, in a way, are reproductions!

AS: So what are the works, actually?

BR: It depends on how you want to read them. They can be categorised as prints, sculptures, or even drawings. In cross-disciplinary art practice, art categories depend on the perspective of the viewer and on the agenda that the viewer wants to ascribe to the work.

AS: Working with Cicada Press and now having your own custom studio, Throwdown Press, which engages mostly with emerging artists, you have been a champion of the professional print studio. How does the creative and labour-intensive environment of a collective print studio inform your practice?

BR: I firmly believe that collaboration leads to innovation. By working alongside a wide range of artists, who have their own processes and aesthetic sensibilities, I've been lucky to have a firsthand look at a variety of techniques and to see how these artists solve both conceptual and technical problems.

With Throwdown Press, I've taken on the role of lead facilitator, which forces me to fulfil the artist's needs, regardless of how easy or difficult that task is. This sort of collaboration between artist and facilitator leads to fascinating outcomes while influencing the development of the artistic output of both the artist and the printer.

AS: You have developed and mastered your own technique of silk-screen printing on unorthodox materials, such as metal, Perspex, and now glass, making large wall-based as well as sculptural works. What are the difficulties that you encounter when making an artwork with such methods and materials and of such great proportions?

BR: The techniques I've developed are considered quite standard in the realm of commercial (screen) printing, so I wouldn't consider them an innovative use of the medium. Nonetheless, having to master these processes within the limitations of my studio and the materials I work with has proved to be both challenging and invigorating to my practice. I find that having to solve technical problems keeps me focused on and interested in my projects, drives their conceptual development, keeps me engaged with the process, and (hopefully) prevents me from becoming complacent with my practice.

AS: For the first time, you are exhibiting your painting, something you have not explored since the beginning of your career. How did you return to painting?

BR: I felt that historically, painting was at the top of the art-medium hierarchy and epitomised the direct mark of the artist. Painted marks (such as brushstrokes, impasto texture, and colour washes) have been traditionally romanticised (and fetishised) as the authentic (direct) mark of the artist. Painting best expresses the aura that is supposedly lost in the mechanical reproduction processes of printmaking and therefore is perfect for the ideas I was working with in this project.

AS: You are combining silk screen and painting to create 'painted' matrices, which have their roots in the artwork of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Jones, Andy Warhol, and even R. H. Quaytman. Are you creating hybrid matrices of silk screen and painting?

BR: Rather than hybridity, I aim to achieve a fluctuating perception of each piece. The pieces should elude categorisation: are they painted prints or printed paintings—or neither? This body of work reverses the expectation of what a print is: a reproduction. In this case, the scratched etching is the original, and the painting is actually the reproduction.

AS: But the printed scratches create an abstract expressionist, Pollock-style pattern.

BR: Yes! The scratches are uncontrolled, über-organic marks (similar to Pollock's action paintings' gestural splashes and drips) that an artist would not be able to contrive even with the greatest of care and effort.

AS: Your earlier print and photographic works consist of figures, whereas now the body is referenced through geometric structures and the performative act of mark-making (scratching) on a plate. How do the presence and absence of the body play a role in your quest for 'the authentic'?

BR: Interesting that you read the geometric structures as bodies and the scratches as a performative act. Your interpretation aptly explains the links between my current work and my past work and lends the current work additional cohesion and consistency. Earlier, I was mostly concerned with scrutinising cultural identity while investigating its authenticity. I used the body and body language to express the performative nature of self and how it relates to stereotypes and media narratives. Now I am stripping away the figurative elements and using the medium of print and its connotations in my ongoing search for the authentic. I wish to emphasise that my practice demonstrates continuity, though not immediately visible, between my figurative work and my abstract work.

AS: And are these images related to the urban space in which we live?

BR: They are, but in a roundabout way. I think urban spaces are quintessential to the age of globalism, which has been part of my work for several years. This project is a continuation of that research.

AS: When did you begin taking a special interest in printmaking? Did some specific aspect of this art or craft catch your attention?

BR: During my first year of art school! At that time, I became disillusioned with photography as it was taught and felt that I needed to integrate it with other techniques for the process to remain relevant to me. I found mentorship in the Printmaking Department at the University of New South Wales College of Fine Arts (now called UNSW Art & Design) and very quickly discovered and learned ways to combine my photographic work with printmaking methods. The highly technical aspect of the various print techniques (such as etching, lithography, and screen printing) fascinated and challenged me, keeping me interested in the process while my ideas matured.

AS: Do you see yourself primarily as an artist or a printmaker? And do you even conform to such labels?

BR: It depends on your definition of printmaker. I think we need to distinguish between a *master printer* (a craftsman or artisan), who facilitates artists' work, and a *printmaker*, who makes prints to realise a personal artistic vision—in other words, an artist. Wouldn't you consider Andy Warhol and Lucian Freud artists even though they made prints?

In my art practice, I make prints and I also combine printmaking with other disciplines, such as sculpture, painting, and video, to realise an artistic outcome.

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Dr. Abdullah M. I. Syed is an artist and scholar working in Sydney, Karachi, and New York. He has curated many exhibitions in Pakistan and internationally for which he has contributed catalogue essays—notably, a survey of prints by Australian artist Michael Kempson (2010), *Remarking | Remaking: The Australian Drawing Connections* (2012), and most recently, *Drawn to Form: The Matter in Hand* (2015). Syed has also contributed text to *Print Australia*. This interview is from Syed's *Artist in Conversation* series, which he began conducting and publishing in 2011.