Aura: Repetition, Reproduction, and the Mark of the Artist
By Ben Rak

Within the broad sphere of the art-making world, the medium of printmaking is viewed in various ways. Some people fetishise the processes and technical prowess involved in the making of print artworks, while others consider prints to be 'merely' reproductions and struggle to view them as one would a painting or sculpture.

In his 1935 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin attempts to unpack what it is about the mechanically reproduced image that displaces its artistic authority and relegates it to second-class citizenship in the art world. Benjamin explains that 'the genuineness of a thing is the quintessence of everything about it since its creation',[1] an idea that he translates into the term *aura.* He goes on to argue that in an era when artworks can be reproduced by technological means, the aura of the artwork tends to diminish.

Walter Benjamin frames the diminishing aura as possibly a positive attribute of certain artworks. However, I argue that in most cases, the reduced aura affects the observer on the conscious and subconscious levels and lessens the viewer's appreciation of the artwork, particularly in the twentieth century, when digital reproductions are made easily and inexpensively.

In putting together the ten artists in this exhibition, my intention is to express how different artists use the perceived shortcomings of printmaking—repetition, reproduction, and the mediation of the artist's mark—to confound the viewer's expectations of the medium and impart an aura to mechanically reproduced artwork.

Judy Watson's series of etchings *the holes in the land* (2015) is the outcome of a fellowship she undertook at the British Museum in 2013. The works depict reproductions of the architectural plans of the museum, layered with drawings and textures of Aboriginal Australian objects that were collected by the museum in the

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[1] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 7. First published in German in 1935.

nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[2] The reproduction of the museum plans suggests a cultural transfer from native possession to colonial power structures, as reinforced by the title's allusion to the gaps left behind when the objects were carried away to England. By placing the drawings of the objects over the blueprints, Watson emphasises that the museum's physical possession of the objects is subservient to their cultural ownership by the Aboriginal people from whom they were taken.

Similar to Watson, both Milan Milojevic and Samuel Tupou use the reproductive qualities of printmaking to deal with ideas relating to their cultural heritage and place within contemporary Australian culture.

Milan Milojevic's work centres on the relationship between his Australian culture and his parents' Old World European cultures. He begins his process by scanning eighteenth-century naturalist engravings, which he reconfigures and prints digitally to create imaginary flora and fauna, hybrids of native European and Australian plants and animals. Milojevic then employs traditional print techniques, such as etching and relief printing, to print on the digital images, thus making the form of the work hybrid, similar to the content. His use of both old and new technologies becomes a metaphor for his attempt at negotiating the pull of two cultures—his parents' and his own.

Samuel Tupou's background is Tongan, but he lives in Australia. His images contain reproductions of Tongan tapa cloth[3] patterns combined with icons of Western popular culture. Could Tupou's use of a commercial technique—screenprinting—be suggesting that Western mass production is taking over his traditional Tongan culture, with him trapped between the two?

Anna Kristensen is captivated by surfaces, primarily rocks, gems, and stone facades, which she exquisitely paints in a photorealistic fashion. In her 2014 series *Render,* Kristensen departed from her usual painting technique and created a set of hybrid

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[2] Examples of such objects are pituri tobacco bags, a mangrove paddle for a raft, and an apron of the Mara tribe.
[3] Tapa is a cloth that is fashioned from bark and printed or painted, often with geometric patterns. The cloth is made in the Polynesian islands.

print-paintings, depicting brick walls and stone pavers. In these works, the detail of the stones is screen-printed while the mortar holding them together is hand-painted with glossy metallic paints. By using printmaking techniques in the production of these works, she acknowledges the reproductive qualities of painting and raises the question of whether viewers see a difference between hand-painted reproductions and mechanically made ones.

Michael Kempson's meticulously drawn etchings of stuffed animals in his monumental work *Child's Play* embrace both reproduction and the mechanical mediation inherent in printmaking as conceptual devices. Though possessing the skill to develop complex colourful etchings, he chooses to limit himself to a minimal, monochromatic, technically pared-back style of work typical of pre-twentieth-century engravings. This method is perhaps a stylistic allusion to one of the influences on his art—William Hogarth, who, like Kempson, was engaged in social commentary through satiric imagery. In depicting visual reproductions of toys that are mass-produced reproductions of animals, Kempson positions his social critique not only in the domain of geopolitics but also within the sphere of consumerism and globalization.

Alison Alder's long-standing interest in social issues and Australian politics finds perfect use of the visual vernacular associated with the commercial printing of newspapers and magazines—the halftone dot pattern—in her series *Australian Political Disasters of the 21st Century.* By reproducing newspaper images of politicians and increasing the scale, Alder degrades the halftone patterns to suggest an anti-authoritarian punk aesthetic. This aesthetic perhaps connotes that our politicians are not living up to the standards that we expect of them, or, as Hito Steyerl explains in her essay 'In Defense of the Poor Image', that a poor image is a 'bastard of an original image…It often defies patrimony, national culture, or indeed copyright'.[4]

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[4] Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', *e-flux* Journal #10 (November 2009); accessed May 21, 2017.

Gary Carsley's use of reproduction twice over (he blows up a photograph of a landscape and re-reproduces it as photocopied wallpaper) applies the characteristics of printmaking and photocopying to the field of queer theory. Carsley describes his work by adopting terms (such as *transimage* and *draguerreotype*) from the language of the queer subculture, thus criticising traditional binary definitions both within the subculture and without. Furthermore, his view of the digital process as an extension of the handmade adds to his defiance of binary definitions and leads him to create work that is at once an original and a reproduction.

Tony Curran's combination of video and painting defy the traditional notion of what a print is and how prints are made. Curran uses a computer program to randomly select shapes from a database of marks that have come out of observational drawing on an iPad. Maintaining each shape's original colour and position from the digital files, he then proceeds to meticulously colour match in oil paints and "print" (paint) on to his canvas. By reproducing the image from the screen to the canvas, Curran positions the artist as a machine or technician in the process of art-making – similar to a printing press or inkjet printer. Furthermore, this manual reproduction of marks that have been subverted by a digital mediation process call in to question the authority of the artist's hand as the authentic site of artistic creation in a similar fashion to Kristensen's and Carsley's work.

In her work *Ocularangagluphos*, Erica Seccombe uses medical visual imaging technology to scan and replicate a miniature plastic toy octopus. In this way, Seccombe is reproducing a mass-produced reproduction in a similar fashion to Kempson but with different conceptual repercussions. Her use of a new technology to both scan and print the work leads us to contemplate our relationship to technology and nature and the connections between them. By increasing the scale of the objects, Seccombe turns what was originally spectacularly natural into merely a spectacle of entertainment.

The artists represented in the exhibition *Aura: Repetition, Reproduction, and the Mark of the Artist* all manage to employ an element of the printing process as a conceptual device to defy nay-sayers' assumptions about the medium and perhaps expose hypocrisies surrounding those assumptions. The artists demonstrate that

through an awareness of the history, tradition, and limitations of the printmaking medium, they can use the visual vernacular associated with it to turn weakness into strength and keep the aura of print alive.

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