

Some Notes on the Aura of Print

By Glenn Barkley

Some of my best times working in art have been spent looking at prints.

I was lucky enough as a curator at the University of Wollongong Art Collection to work with a collection that was dominated by prints in many different forms. Working with artists, printmakers and collectors, we built a collection that grew into something quite unique and important. It had a particular emphasis on Indigenous prints but it was more than that.

When I started at the collection in 1995 the director was Guy Warren, an Australian artist who had been making prints since the 1940s in Sydney and later in London. He had a refreshing disregard for some hierarchies and the importance of print was a manifestation of this. One of my favourite memories is of Guy coming back from Northern Editions with a stack of prints for the collection - there was something to be treasured about these bundles.

Later gifts and acquisitions from artists such as Noel McKenna, Franck Gohier, Belinda Fox and GW Bot (amongst others) broadened the collection outwards. It really started to bulge however when the collector and philanthropist Dr Douglas Kagi gifted a large group of prints by UK based artists such as RB Kitaj, Richard Hamilton, Joe Tilson and Peter Blake.

I mention this because I think that the thing working with this collection did for me was to introduce me to printmaking's often forgotten tactile and physical properties; from touch, to weight and even to smell, it's aura no less.

Aura (the exhibition) works both with and against the cliché of the 'aura'. Printmaking is an artform where the general public is aware yet confused. Often when you say to someone that you make, work with, or collect prints, the answer could be, more often than not, 'like posters?'. You then need to go into an explanation of what printmaking is, and isn't.

And confusingly now, when someone says, 'like posters?' the multifarious, changing nature of printmaking today means the answer might be 'well maybe...it could be ... it is sometimes... but not all the time...you know what artists are like...prints today...'

In printmaking now, if such a 'thing' exists, the *idea* is the thing with the most currency regardless of means of execution.

The idea of the idea being paramount in an artwork tends to be something that the baby-boomers think they invented, like site-specific sculpture. Of course these ideas, and ideas in general, have been around for a lot longer. The exhibition of ideas however is a bit of a new one. Often the major vehicle for this is prints. From the 1960s onward conceptualism decimated and sometimes exploded most of the art forms in which it came in contact with. From ceramics to etching nothing was sacred and all was available. The bistro of signs created an all you can eat smorgasbord of object and post-object shrapnel that is still being put back together like the shell of a bombed plane. Print was a way to disseminate some of conceptualism's ideas in the world of the 'everyday' where they could be consumed and subsumed.

Sadly however, printmaking mostly fell back onto the tropes of the art world as a means of distribution and much of the work made in the 1960s has slipped from view. Internationally, the thinking person's generation of artists moved over to the fine art end of production where they proceeded to dismantle that as well. But importantly printmaking began to generate its own self-fulfilling market place.

Interestingly, while conceptualism was seeking to pull everything apart, the high profile studios of the master printmaker - such as Geminin GEL in Los Angeles and Kelpra Studio in London – sought to place the artist back in the centre of production surrounded by rule breaking technicians who were happy to work with every artist's whim.

The printmaking studios of the 1960's, coupled with conceptualism's anything-goes aesthetic and iconoclasm provide the foreground for considering today's printmaking. Refusing to be restricted by the print studio alone artists seek assistance in every corner from plastic moulding to 3D printing to IKEA to Officeworks.

It is now in the gallery (the post-studio studio), that the print and the object can come together and coalesce for the first and perhaps only time. Printmaking as represented in the exhibition *Aura* gives us a sense of what printmaking has become in this world. There is still a sense of the anything-goes ethos of previous generations but now it is coupled with a deeper understanding of technology. The sense of prints in the world and how they operate is also endlessly interrogated.

Take editioning itself, something that once used to be a way to define what a print was. Editioning has become an act that can be incorporated into a work's meaning. It can be hundreds or even thousands of prints. Sometimes the act of printing itself is passed over to the viewer – downloadable files becoming a digital matrix by which an endless stream of images can be produced ad infinitum.

Alternatively the print can be a one-off, the runs of prints can be drastically reduced as if in recognition of the shrinking audience (or market) for traditional printmaking. Furthermore, a work can be made up of multiple parts, all printed, but brought together to make something unique. Through the advancement of 3D printing technology, printing is starting to dissolve into sculpture in a much more fluid way, changing a 'print' from something which we have come to understand as being mostly flat, to having the potential of being three dimensional. The end of editioning is in essence an end to printmaking as we may have known it, or optimistically a beginning to what it might be.

But what does this mean for the print and its 'aura'? From my experiences – especially those working with collections – the print's power comes from its analogue charms, and its handmade qualities. I am attracted to the object in the room. I know this might be an old fashioned idea but it is one that still captivates – just witness the resurgence in craft and the plethora of handmade and artisanal mass-produced goods now flooding our lives.

But if the exhibition *Aura* tells us anything it's that these ideas of the object's status and fetish-like qualities are constantly up for grabs. The artist still works in the world of *things* but now the very nature of *things* is changing. Will the aura be resilient enough to shift guise from one form to another?

Glenn Barkley is a curator, writer, artist and gardener based in Sydney and Berry NSW. He is Co-Director of The Curators Department.