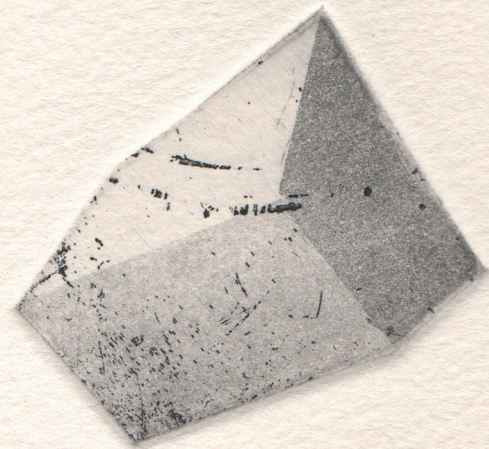


**Ben Rak**  
Pictures of Scratches





BEN RAK: Pictures of Scratches

Manly Art Gallery & Museum  
28 October – 4 December 2016

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All photos courtesy of the artist and Document Photography

Cover image: *Scratches* (detail)



NORTHERN BEACHES  
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# Ben Rak Pictures of Scratches

28 October - 4 December 2016



Manly Art Gallery & Museum  
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Opening Times :  
Tuesday to Sunday  
10am - 5pm

# Foreword

Manly Art Gallery & Museum is pleased to present this solo exhibition of new work by the established artist Ben Rak, as part of the 2016 Year of Print national celebrations. Artist, educator, and independent curator, Ben Rak was born in 1978 in California in the United States and grew up in Israel. He currently lectures at UNSW Art & Design and at the ANU School of Art.

In 2015, Ben Rak participated in *Out of Quarantine* at Manly Art Gallery & Museum, an exhibition held in partnership with Q Station Sydney Harbour National Park Manly, which explored ideas of migration and place, enabling him to build on his interest in cultural identity and socio-political issues.

This new body of work draws together processes and ideas from his cross-disciplinary art practice to reveal a considered search for ‘authenticity’ in Rak’s work. While seemingly minimalist, the work has gravitas, made possible through a deep conceptual engagement with technique and the refinement and articulation of his core creative interests.

Through the artwork, Rak plays with the notion of a hierarchy and chronology of painting over printmaking; in this case, which comes first, the painting or the print? He also plays with the idea

that the artist’s ‘mark-making’ is intellectually based instead of incidental or accidental. Rak directly challenges the audience to consider the intention of the artist and to examine what is contained in, and conveyed through, the work.

Thanks to Ben Rak for his dedication to the project, to Dr Adbullah M.I. Syed and Dr Tony Curran for their contributions to the catalogue, and to Michael Kempson for opening the exhibition. We trust you enjoy the exhibition and this accompanying catalogue.

Katherine Roberts  
Senior Curator, Manly Art Gallery & Museum

# Scratching at Gesture

By Dr Tony Curran

In the mid-twentieth century, the handmade mark of the artist rose to the greatest height of artistic authority that it had ever achieved. Artists of all media looked inward to their own agency, psyche, and emotional rawness in pursuit of artistic and human truth. They used personalized approaches to both traditional and new materials, restlessly seeking new forms through experimentation.<sup>1</sup> The generation of artists in the 1960s, however, unseated the authority of the gesture by using innovative hands-off manufacturing procedures and replicating machines. Now, more than half a century later, the gesture continues to be of recurring formal interest to the artist Ben Rak in his exhibition *Pictures of Scratches*, which places the gesture on a minimalist steel slab, ready for dissection.

The cult of the gesture is a hypocritical one. On the one hand, gestural fetishism comes out of an earnest pursuit to connect a viewer to an authentically human artist. On the other, the cult of the gesture is a product of the world of high art, which has known for more than half a century that the gesture is not the site of an authentic creator but is a potent *symbol* for artistic genius, even though gesture does not and cannot harbour such genius. The fetish of the gesture can be dated back to the sixteenth

1. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Source-book of Artist's Writings*, 2nd ed. (California: University of California Press, 2012), p. 13.

century, with the introduction of the term *sprezzatura*. Translated by art theorist Deanna Petherbridge as “lively nonchalance,” sprezzatura refers to an artist’s capacity to execute one’s work without the appearance of effort, concealing one’s skill and labour.<sup>2</sup> Taking this to its logical conclusion, Petherbridge reminds us that “if apparently effortless art signifies greatness, then by association the genuinely reductive sketch is a symbol of genius.”<sup>3</sup>

Since the sixteenth century, when the artist’s hand was in the service of religious art, the gesture has followed a steady semiotic trajectory despite substantial shifts in intellectual and artistic circles and resultant changes in attitudes toward the role of the human author in art and society. Gestural mark-making pervaded as a sign of genius throughout the humanist developments during the Enlightenment and in modernist projects.<sup>4</sup> However, in post-modernism, artists and philosophers

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2. Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 36.

3. Ibid

4. Achim Hochdörfer, “How the World Came In,” in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age*, ed. Achim Hochdörfer, David Joselit, and Manuela Ammer (Munich: Museum Brandhorst, 2016), p. 15.

have shown that dreams of connecting to an authentic self or author were a bourgeois fantasy. Nevertheless, the gesture has survived as a relic from a time when human ingenuity was invaluable.

Roy Lichtenstein's attack on the cult of the gesture was loud and clear. In 1964, in the wake of abstract expressionism, Lichtenstein painted *Yellow and Green Brushstrokes*, a representation of two abstract expressionist brush marks rendered in a comic book vernacular and using stencilled half-tone dots and bold black outlines to emphasise the artificiality of the gesture depicted<sup>1</sup>. Commenting on Lichtenstein's method of painting, celebrated critic and art historian Robert Hughes stressed the manufactured connotations of Lichtenstein's process: "The enlarged printer's dots, which were the basis of Lichtenstein's style, were a way of distancing the image, making it seem both big and remote, like an industrial artefact."<sup>2</sup>

The 1960s saw a shift from hot expressionism to cool pop, minimalism, and conceptualism, which rejected any pretensions to the authority of the gestural mark.<sup>3</sup> Philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes wrote influential essays denouncing the value of the author as an authentic voice.<sup>4</sup>

1. Tony Godfrey, *Painting Today* (London: Phaidon, 2009), p. 13.

2. Robert Hughes, *Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1980), p. 353.

3. Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence Kind Publishing, 2011), p. 17.

4. See Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Critical Theory since Plato*, eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Boston MA: Cengage Learning, 2004); and Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in the same work.

According to art historian Terry Smith, no style of art has succeeded pop, minimalism, or conceptualism.<sup>5</sup> Instead we only build on the ideas presented in these movements.

In contemporary practice since the '60s, painterly gesture has come to act as a *signifier* equivalent to authenticity. *Pictures of Scratches* attacks the legitimacy of conflating gesture with authenticity. Each of Ben Rak's series—*Pictures of Scratches*, *Paintings of Scratches*, and *Scratches*—systematically undermines any pretence to authenticity by procedurally and mechanically reproducing gestural marks, reversioning the tropes of the pop, minimalist, and conceptual artists.

*Scratches* is a series of prints made from recycled and cut etching plates. After trimming the pieces into shards of zinc, Rak coated the micro plates with hard ground and used several randomizing procedures to scratch the plates, camouflaging artistic intention. Next, Rak aquatinted the plates, providing tonal modelling to render illusions of ambiguous three-dimensional forms. They appear as quasi-Platonic solids that reference the rationalism of Renaissance geometry and the proto-digital geometries produced by minimalists and conceptualists; for example, Sol Le Witt's *Pyramid* gouache paintings from 1989 could well have found their way into Rak's ammunition. The installation of Rak's work in a grid further alludes to the minimalist movement.

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5. Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 245.

*Pictures of Scratches* and *Paintings of Scratches* continue to spin the categories of reproduction and original by bringing the artist's touch back into the foreground of production. While *Pictures of Scratches* uses the vocabulary of mechanical offset printing (so loved by Lichtenstein), the process is a product of fierce gesture—the artist must drag a squeegee boldly down the screen to push thick acrylic paint through the pores of the silk and onto the paper. *Paintings of Scratches*, on the other hand, returns us to the painterly gesture, with the scratches deceptively announcing themselves as the final step in gestural sophistication, as high art.

What Rak has done in *Pictures of Scratches* is critically revisit the capacity of the gesture to serve as a site of individual agency and as an authentic representation of the self. Following on from Rak's master's research into perceived identity, the scratch is a new development for the artist as he continues to mine important issues of self and identity in art today.<sup>1</sup> What better way is there to describe a gesture than as an act of performing one's identity, on a flat surface, for aesthetic contemplation?

*Pictures of Scratches* demonstrates that the abstract expressionists' obsession with gesture and the pop, minimalist, and conceptualist artists' subsequent rejection of it were both needlessly reductive. This exhibition argues that gesture has a potent and complex capacity to symbolize artistic intention

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1. See Ben Rak, "Performance Anxiety" (master's of fine arts thesis, University of New South Wales, 2013). [http://www.unsworks.unsw.edu.au/primo\\_library/libweb/action/dlDisplay.do?vid=UNSWORKS&docId=unsworks\\_11498](http://www.unsworks.unsw.edu.au/primo_library/libweb/action/dlDisplay.do?vid=UNSWORKS&docId=unsworks_11498) accessed 12 September, 2016.

without conflating it with human agency. Gesture can be contradictory, illusory, just like everything else in art. Combining organic forms of gestural abstraction with the hard rigid aesthetics of minimalism and conceptualism creates a paradox between two contradictory structures of human expression. The rigid and the wobbly are best served on the same plate.

*Dr Tony Curran is currently a Vice-Chancellor's College Visiting Artist Fellow at the Australian National University in Canberra. He holds a PhD in Fine Art from Charles Sturt University and is a sessional academic in the Painting and Foundation Studies Workshops at the ANU School of Art*

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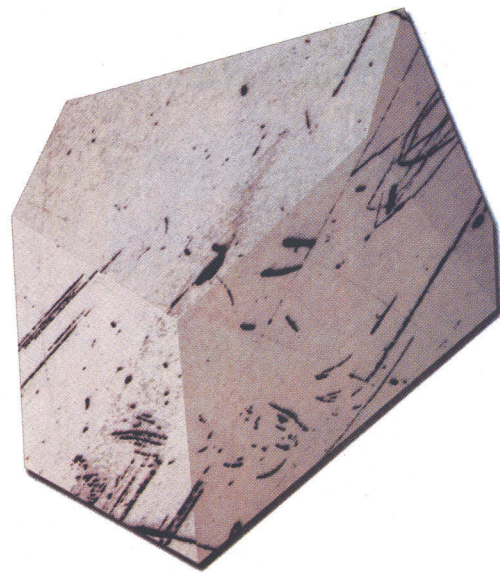
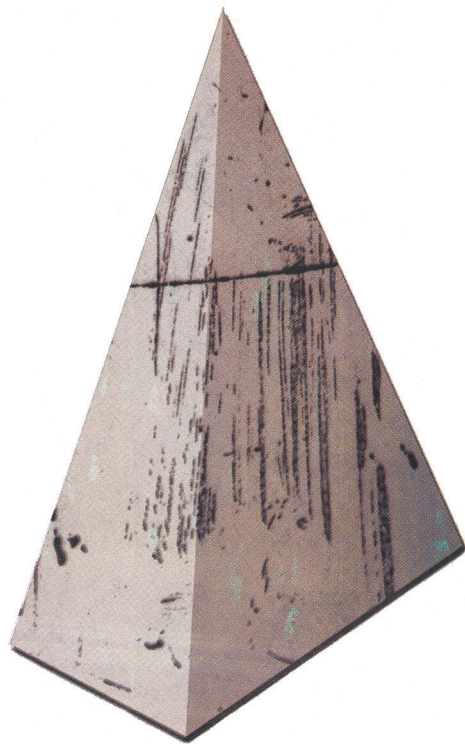
*Paintings of Scratches (#1)*, 2016. Acrylic painting & silkscreen on canvas, 80 x 80 cm

*Paintings of Scratches (#2)*, 2016. Acrylic painting & silkscreen on canvas, 40 x 40 cm

*Paintings of Scratches (#3)*, 2016. Acrylic painting & silkscreen on canvas, 40 x 40 cm



*Pictures of Scratches* (#2, #5), 2016. Silkscreen on paper. Each panel is 56 x 76 cm

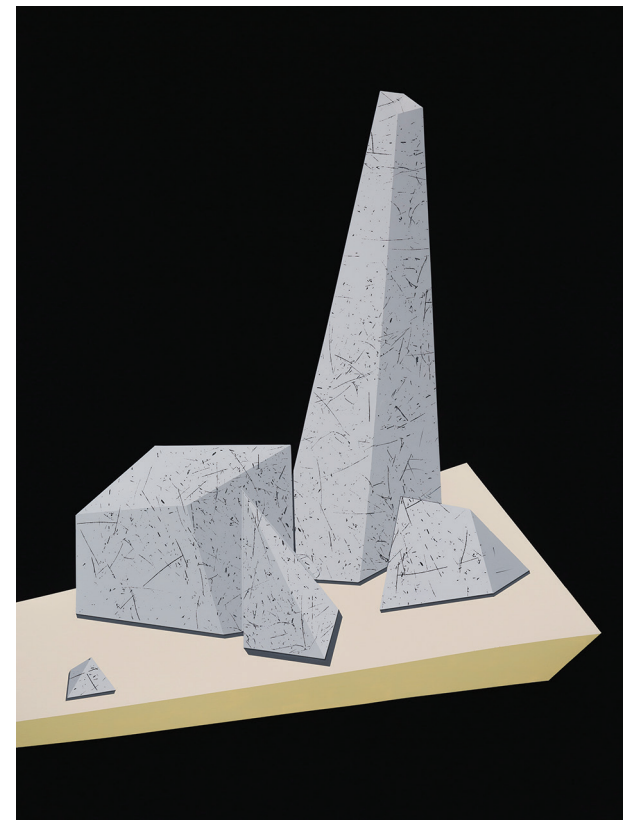




*Pictures of Scratches* (#7, #8), 2016. Silkscreen on paper. Each panel is 56 x 76 cm



*Untitled I (Painting of Scratches)*, 2016. Acrylic painting and silkscreen on canvas, 130 x 170 cm

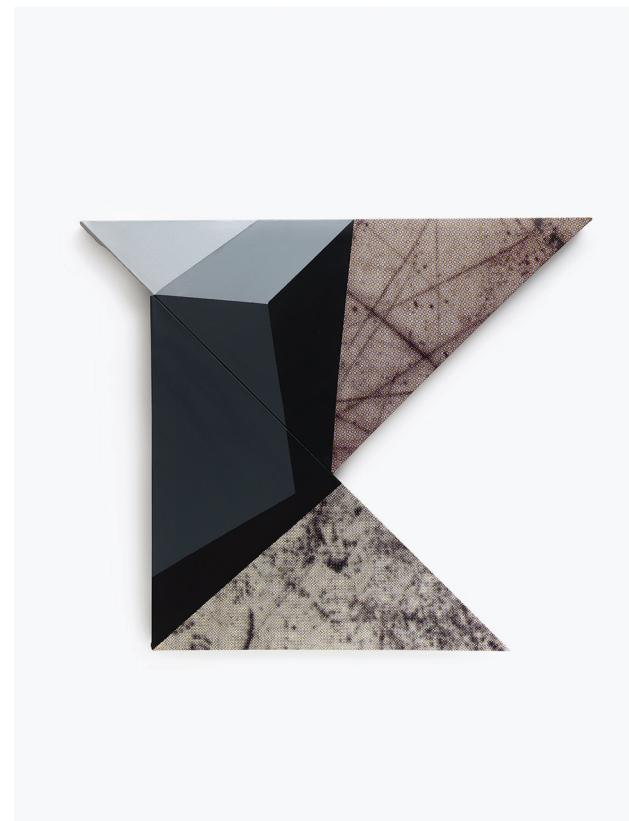


*Untitled II (Painting of Scratches)*, 2016. Acrylic painting and silkscreen on canvas, 130 x 170 cm





*Untitled III (Painting of Scratches)*, 2016. Acrylic painting and silkscreen on canvas, 80 x 80 cm



*Scratches* (detail), 2016. Etching installation of 160 panels, 350 x 220 cm. Area shown, 100 x 120 cm.



*Scratches* (detail), 2016. Etching installation of 160 panels. Single panel shown, 20 x 20 cm





# 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 Syed's 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 Syed were fellow lecturers, and at Cicada Press, where Rak and Syed printed between 2009 and 2015. The final discussion included here took place in Syed's 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: 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: 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.

*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.*

## About The Artist



binya666



<http://www.benrak.com.au>

An artist, educator, and independent curator, Ben Rak was born in California, in the United States (1978), and grew up in Israel. He is presently working and living in Sydney, Australia, where he lectures at the University of New South Wales Art & Design and the Australian National University School of Art in Canberra. He is the co-founder and director of Throwdown Press, a residency-based print facility which, in an attempt to create discourse on the role of printmaking in contemporary practice, invites artists with no prior print experience to produce etchings and silkscreens.

Rak holds a BFA in printmaking (2008) with first-class honours (2009) and an MFA (2013), both from the University of New South Wales. Rak has also fostered international dialogue by curating exchange exhibitions between Sydney-based artists and multiple international institutions.

Rak's recent practice explores ideas of authenticity. Using the print, Rak examines the connections between reproduction, repetition, authorship, and ownership. In this age of mass production, Rak asks, how can the artist use print as a metaphor in the study of authenticity?