

Cutting Edge Lasers and Creativity Symposium
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Digital Calligraphy

Practitioners Illustrated Presentation.

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"In a wobbly line we find the truth of pencil"

Roland Barthes ¹

This illustrated power point presentation outlines my current practice based research. I am an artist based in Edinburgh and currently also working here at Loughborough University as part of the Artist into Art College Scheme.

My practice investigates the relationship between time, memory and place with particular reference to drawing and framed within the parameters of Zen philosophy.

I draw using meditative, repetitive hand rendered processes. These are then developed in print using the digital medium of laser cut and etching. I am interested in the place that traditional fine art methods meet new digital technologies and currently work in the medium of drawing, print, artist books and video.

The quotation by Barthes *"in a wobbly line we find the truth of pencil"* was scribbled onto my studio wall for years after I read it in an essay he wrote about Cy Twombly's work ⁱ. (Fig 1). As a Painter, I find this foregrounds one of the central concerns of my practice. How do I find the wobbly, hand drawn (Fig 2) or painted line when using the precise digital medium of laser cutting? And what is the relationship between the concepts that inspire us as artists and the processes we use to investigate them?

In traditional drawing and painting, autographic marks, chance and accident play a key role in the creative process. I am interested in finding the digital equivalent of this: the interruptions that can occur within controlled processes; celebrated by the Japanese as wabi sabi.

I would define drawing as an act of touch, occurring when one material meets another, be it the sun touching a building and creating a shadow, a child running a stick along a railing creating a drawing with sound, or a laser cutter burning into paper, tracing a vector file of repeatedly hand dribbled circles of paint.

In the early years,² my calligraphy wasn't digital. (Fig 3). Inspired by the interiors of derelict buildings, I used layering, cutting and tearing processes to evoke the intrigue and detail of decaying interiors. The roughly hammered wooden barricades on the outside of windows were inspiration for the final bold, black, calligraphic layer of paint, which restricted the viewers access to the picture plane. American abstract artists Franz Kline (Fig 4) and Brice Marden (Fig 5) were formative influences; due to the way they integrated Eastern Influences into their practice.

In 2000 following a research visit to Japan³, (Fig 6) I began investigating processes that recreated the contemplative experience of sitting in Zen gardens. This included repeatedly drawing pencil lines through textured paint, in response to the experience of watching monks raking gravel.

At this point I also became interested in working in print because of the possibilities it offers to work into the paper, not just onto it. *Köln - Imprint I* (2004) (Fig 7) is a deeply embossed etching with roll over. *Leiden I and II* (2004) (Fig 8) are one of a series of drawings in which I hand cut the spaces between repeatedly dribbled paint, drawing with light, and creating work that changed in response to the time and space it was viewed in. The composition is taken from architectural spaces observed whilst on a Residency in Leiden⁴. I was looking at the work of Ellsworth Kelly at this time. (Fig 9)

A good painting always has an element of surprise. In Japanese Calligraphy (Fig 10) the element of surprise is always evident, yet the process that leads up to the final spontaneous mark making is prolonged and quite controlled. An interest in the relationship between freedom and control in Japanese aesthetics and the study of Zen philosophy has been constant in my practical research, as has an investigation into the role of chance and accident within the creative process

Between 2005 – 2007 I studied for a Masters in Multi Disciplinary Print at UWE in Bristol. Since that time the focus of my research has been the use of laser cutting as a drawing medium. (Fig 12)

If you watch a Zen Calligrapher at work they spend a prolonged amount of time mixing ink until it is just the right consistency, a period of time in meditation, and then, when the moment arises, very quickly execute the finished piece. I can see many parallels between these methods and my own practice.

My methodology is to investigate the place of chance and accident in the initial painting process, during the preparation of vector files using Illustrator software, and during the final cutting process when I actively change direction in response to results I may achieve unexpectedly whilst consciously trying to achieve some thing else. My aim is to engage with the cutting and file preparation process as a creative tool, often subverting the associations laser cutting has with speed, repetition and having a fixed anticipated outcome. I am also investigating the potential for very fine detailed cutting of accidental marks that would not be possible manually. (Fig 13)

The file preparation for laser cutting is very important, and in my experience has been quite time consuming. When I first replaced my scalpel for a laser cutter I began a steep technical learning curve, as I had no previous experience of using Illustrator, or any other CAD software and hadn't realised initially that using a laser cutter would require this.⁵

One of my first laser cut pieces *Zoom-resize* (2007) (fig 14) is a self-reflexive piece of work, in which the laser cutter functions as both subject and object. The writing is abstracted from my scribbled notes on how to use the machine, the title taken from the last button pressed before sending a file to cut on a Cad Cam laser cutter.

The file preparation for this piece of work was very slow. It involved scanning my notes, then dragging the words together on Illustrator and painstakingly cutting and re-joining vector files, to create a lattice that would hold together when cut, but don't read literally. When using writing in my work I always write something specific, but obscure it to maintain an element of mystery and engage the viewer in actively participating in trying to work out what it says. This also points back to calligraphy and that edge where writing and painting meet. In Japanese the word *kaku* means both *to write* and *to paint*.

Zoom-resize was my introduction to vector files and how to draw with them. I consider the time spent preparing these files to be an important part of the process, and my equivalent of the calligraphers mixing of ink. When giving gallery talks about my work, I am often asked the inevitable question "How long did that piece take to make?" with this piece I answer "It took 30 mins to laser cut, and 6 months to prepare the files". I often create artist books in response to wall based pieces. *Little Black Book* (2007) (Fig 15) was a development from *Zoom-resize*. The illegible black text pops out from a shiny black background and the file cut on the inside is etched on the books outer cover.

My recent solo exhibition, *Incise*,⁶ exhibited at Edinburgh Printmakers earlier this year (fig 16). Investigates the Zen concept of the interconnectedness of all things. In *Circles* (2009) (Fig 17) each hand-dribbled circle has it's own individual characteristics, but is also inherently linked to all the other circles. In the initial artwork it was the paint that created this matrix. As the work has developed through the process of laser cutting, paper substitutes paint and digital processes substitute hand painting. Cutting away the negative spaces brings the inherent balance between negative and positive to the foreground, uniting the apparent opposites of black and white and echoing a photographic negative. By precisely cutting out these thin paint splashes, (Fig 18) the laser cutting foregrounds the physicality of both the paint and the action of painting, reminding us this would be impossible to cut with such precision, manually. Through the cutting process, the work becomes a form of digital calligraphy, foregrounding the relationship between traditional hands rendered marks and new technologies.

With this body of work, the file preparation was much quicker as the matrix existed in the original drawing. This was scanned in Illustrator and further compositions arrived at through using the Pathfinder palette. *Circles VII* (2009) (fig 19) and *Circles VIII* (2009) (Fig 20) are examples of this

When using Illustrator software, I am interested in gaining just enough experience to enable me to prepare my own files, but retain enough innocence to exploit the accidents and chance mishaps that occur due to the fact I am a painter and not a graphic designer. For example, with the

artists' book, *Book of beads* (2009) my initial aim was to have a thin border around the edge of the book. (Fig 21) By pressing the "wrong" button in Pathfinder I managed to arrive at a file without a border. Initially I went back and corrected the file in order to cut the book as I had originally intended it.

When I began cutting, out of interest, I decided to cut both pieces. Comparing the two, it was evident the "mistake" was the stronger of the two, and this became the one I editioned. Despite now being able to read an image quite well on Illustrator, it is not until I physically see the piece cut, that I know whether it is working or not. If I handed a file to someone else to cut and was paying by the hour to use a laser cutter I would forfeit many of the important creative turning points in this process.

I now save any Pathfinder files that don't turn out exactly as I anticipated, often printing them out and sticking them into my sketchbook as an image store for future work. (Fig 22). Similarly I have often found inspiration for a new body of work can occur when an Illustrator file didn't open in Ethos quite the way I expected it to (Fig 23)

I see these file preparation "blips" as an opportunity to learn something new about Illustrator. With a basic understanding of the software, I find my own trial and error much more fruitful than the Help menu. Help menus can only ever be the initial springboard for artists, as what we demand from digital software is much more complex than the simple examples the manufacturers supply. I recognise that "accidents" within the digital process are becoming a central part of my methodologies and allow what could be considered quite a rigid part of the technical process to open up layers of further creative potential.

This also becomes very important when working on the actual laser cutter. In *Circles II* (2009) (fig 24) I accidentally sent a cut line as a kiss cut. Also, because I didn't have a huge margin on my printed paper, the paper moved slightly as the laser cutter began to cut. Keeping the initial kiss cut "accident" I re-positioned the paper and sent the file as a cut. This mis-registered etch line, (Fig 25) and thin slither of original beige paper visible under the printed black flat, have now become one of the signatures of my work, echoing the tentative first sketchy lines one makes when drawing, that may get smudged, rubbed out, and left as a ghost. If someone else had been cutting this file for me, they would have dis-regarded the initial result as a mistake and I would have missed an important point in the development of the work.

My laser etched pieces explore the subtle differentiations that occur when etching the surface of paper. In *Circles XIV* (2009) (Fig 26) a smudgy charcoal surface is created as the black screen printed ink is etched back to the original taupe paper. In *Circles VI* (2009) (Fig 27) the shiny printed black is juxtaposed by the matt black of the paper surface and the deep velvety black that emerges when the paper surface is solidly etched. In *Circles IX* (2009) (Fig 28), etching reveals the subtle differences between black and deep purple.

I don't have regular access to a laser cutter, which means I work on the machine in short concentrated bursts, and often in another city. Initially I saw this as a hindrance to my practice, but increasingly I see it as giving a focus to my working process. I am reminded again of the Zen calligrapher. I am often forced to make very immediate decisions about whether to go with something or re-do it when a result isn't exactly as I anticipated. I may not be sure if a piece is working when it initially cuts and often don't have time to evaluate the work as I cut it, because the cutting time is so precious.

When I get back to the studio (Fig 29) and have time to reflect, I increasingly welcome the spontaneity of the results that were least expected, and am constantly looking for ways of working with the laser cutter to exploit this.

Largely due to the amount of time I was spending in the laser department in Bristol, I began to see visual compositions on the laser bed, either details of the machine itself, or the arrangement of paper left behind on the cutting bed. *Detail* (2007) (Fig 30) is a photographic scatter book. In *Untitled* (2009) (Fig 31) the surrounding paper and left-over cut out pieces from *Book of beads* (2009), became a piece of work in itself.

Untitled – lines (2007) (Fig 22) is a two-minute video that abstracts the mechanical, repetitive process of cutting, recreating it as a sensual, meditative experience. My aim with this piece was to capture the qualities of a quick sketch or collage, but using video as my drawing medium and an abstracted laser cutter as subject matter.

I would like to play the video to end this presentation

Jenny Smith is a practicing artist who lives and works in Edinburgh. She initially gained a B.A. (hons) in English Literature (1986), before going on to obtain a 1st class degree in Drawing and Painting from Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee (1993). In 2007 she gained an MA in Multi Disciplinary Print at UWE Bristol.

Jenny has won a number of awards for her work including the Royal Scottish Academy Award for Painting and the Friends of the RSA Artists Bursary with which she undertook a research visit to Japan.

Jenny exhibits nationally and internationally and has work held in public and private collections around the world, including recent acquisitions by the Tate and National Galleries of Scotland. She is currently showing in the Jerwood Drawing Prize Exhibition in London and subsequent UK Tour.

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¹ Roland Barthes *The Wisdom of Art* (1972)

² 1993-1999

³ Thanks to the Friends of the Royal Scottish Academy Artists Bursary.
www.royalscottishacademy.

⁴ Guest Studio, Leiden, The Netherlands, Jan - March 2002

⁵ I received patient technical tuition from Claire Humphries (www.burgundydesign.co.uk) (Visited 14/10/09) and Jane Taylor at the Centre for Fine Print Research at UWE, including invaluable one to one training funded by the Scottish Education Authority.

⁶Incise, Solo exhibition at Edinburgh Printmakers. May 23-4 July 2009 www.edinburgh-printmakers.co.uk (visited 14/10/09)