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Introduction

This proposal will explore the three key words; *Linocut*, *Connection* and *Handmade*. I will be exploring the use of linocut in art, its survival in the modern world and its value as a tactile practice. I will be looking at key pioneers of the practice to examine their way of working to reference it within my own. I will then explore how the demand for these older printing methods has changed from the time of their origin, finally concluding with exploring the desire for work showing the hand of its maker.

Linocut

Linocut is a distinctive form of printmaking that is defined by its bold aesthetic and tactile process. It has been and continues to be used as an illustrative method in publishing, children's books and advertising. Its diverse applications make it adaptable to many styles of illustration.

Linocut is used to stunning effect by artists, illustrators and designers because of its strong graphic qualities, accessibility and versatility.

Nick Morley (2016)

The process of linocut involves carving a desired image or pattern into a linoleum block, typically with specialist linoleum cutting tools. Different tools can be used to achieve a variety of marks. Ink is then rolled onto the remaining raised surface, and the block is then pressed onto the desired medium, for example paper or fabric. This results in a bold image that has a hand-made quality. "The constraints of linocut push illustrators to work with confidence and clarity" (Morley, 2016, p.35). Morley really emphasises the fact that there is such a deliberate nature to printmaking, especially linocutting, as it is a time consuming and focused process, where mistakes cannot be erased, only incorporated.

A key difference between linocut and other illustrative techniques is that it encourages simplification. An illustrator must reduce the image that they are creating down to its most basic components, as there are limited ways to express gradient and light difference with linoleum. Rainbird comments on John Newman "While the forms depicted in the prints relate closely to the structures ... they do not illustrate them. Rather they suggest provisional shapes in the process of evolution, on the cusp of coherence." (2004, p.74). The simplification of imagery with the practice also allows for aspects such as texture from the ink or paper to stand out, showing traces of the process within the work, adding more character and depth.

Linocut was popularised in the time between world war one and world war two by a number of british printmakers and particularly further developed by the Grosvenor School of Arts linocut artists. Britain's first major modernist linocut work was created by French-born printmaker and artist Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, and was posthumously printed by his friend Horace Brodsky. Titled *Wrestlers*. (Coppel, 2008)



Fig. 1: Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Wrestlers*, c. 1914, *Linocut*

According to Coppel (2008, p. 23), linocut is a modern block printing technique with a brief and discontinuous history. Artist Claude Flight liked how novel the material was, and although he acknowledged the Japanese woodblock print was the ancestor of his linocuts, he “rejoiced in the fact that the linocut was not hampered by the weight of artistic tradition.” (Coppel, 2008, p27). Flight appreciated that linoleum was an industrial material that had been repurposed by artists such as himself, and had no illustrative heritage attached directly to it, meaning that the medium could be moulded in new and exciting ways, unburdened by tradition and grounded in material process.

Linocut has historically been an accessible material for artists, including those who cannot afford more high end artistic materials. “Manufactured in 1860 ... linoleum is a universally used floor covering ... [due to] it's extremely low cost ... [it became] a medium for making prints” (Karshan, 2010, p.10). The affordability of linocut opened the door for artists outside of the elite institutions to practice printmaking. However it was also viewed as quite a childlike way of making art, due

to its simplicity and affordability. Karshan (2010, p.10) stated that “The linocut technique continues to be used in arts and crafts classes and by children ... The linocut was considered too limited, too unsophisticated a method to be used by mature artists”

This notion was challenged by a few artists within the prestigious art community. These being Henri Matisse and Joan Miro.



Fig, 2: Henri Matisse, *Teeny (Head of a Woman)*, 1938, Linocut

However Matisse and Miro still produced linocuts nearly solely of just one colour, a nod to the childlike simplicity that had always been associated with the medium. Artist Pablo Picasso was the one to further push the medium past its childlike stereotype.

The number of works that linocut can produce can be limited, despite being a repeatable print process, especially in a process called ‘multistage lino’, a reductive linocut technique. This approach was famously developed by Picasso (Sacilotto, 1978, p.66). Multistage linocut

involves repeatedly cutting and inking the same piece of lino until an image involving multiple layers of different colours is achieved. This process is irreversible, each step permanently alters the lino, and when the artist moves onto the next stage, that previous version or colour of the print can no longer be reproduced. As a result, multistage lino edition sizes are often small. This limitation adds a sense of rarity and preciousness to the prints, which is often sought after by collectors.

Handmade

Linocut reflects the hand of the artist, its a method that is rooted in physical craftsmanship, and values imperfection. It has a very 'handmade' quality. Handmade within the context of illustration refers to the creation of a visual artwork using traditional and physical tools and materials, without the primary use of digital technology. It emphasises the direct involvement of the illustrator's hand within the creative process.

Historically, Illustration has been used practically, for communication and advertising, but artistic movements such as Art Nouveau and Art Deco brought on a fascination for aesthetics over function. "The mark of the hand is a very important element in the twentieth-century crafts" (Dormer, 199, p.148). This was primarily within art-craft objects, "as soon as people were willing to buy handmade pots because they liked the way they looked rather than because they were cheap and useful, a trend began" (Dormer, 1991, p.147), however this can also be seen with illustrative works. People now have a fascination for keeping art and illustration as decoration in their home, often to boast or enjoy its emotional and monetary value.

In a digital era, many illustrative practitioners partially or fully rely on digital technology to produce their illustrations due to their ease of use, and ability for large scale production and sharing. Programs such as Adobe Illustrator and Procreate have made illustration more accessible in terms of replicating techniques and materials digitally. However these digital

imitations lack the soulful quality of a handmade illustration. "Printmaking offers a middle ground between the handmade and the mass-produced." (Urban , 2012, p.65). Printmaking allows for this sought after 'trouble free' and quick way of working that so many artists are competing against the industry to achieve in the modern world.

Digital illustration risks becoming too in line with trade. Take NFTs for example, they have a monetary value and are an item of economic trade. They have lost their role as an aesthetic piece of work with sentimental value, and their monotonous and usually easily reproducible design takes away from any sort of purpose they hold as an illustration, and they are reduced down to a currency rather than a piece of art. "Contemporary craft is necessarily peripheral to all mainstream economic activity. If it comes too close to trade, then both the nature of the craft person's work and the nature of the artefact is compromised by the need to be price competitive with trade." (Dormer, 1991, p.154). Linocut is a perfect example of a handmade craft that can combat this devaluation of art. Its physicality makes it difficult to easily distribute at its original quality, safeguarding it from economical exploitation.

Reclaiming authenticity and individuality in illustration is more important now than ever, particularly with the rise of monotonously overproduced AI images. Many companies are resorting to the use of AI for promotion of their product, as it is cheaper and quicker than hiring a skilled illustrator. It takes the value away from art produced by artists, whilst simultaneously destroying the planet. "AI models are water guzzlers. They consume water in two ways: onsite server cooling and offsite electricity generation. The global AI demand may require 4.2 - 6.6 billion cubic meters of water withdrawal in 2027" (Ren, 2023) Linocut is an example of an illustration technique that can never truly be reproduced by a computer. The 'handmadeness' of the technique cannot be replicated by AI as its true quality that it holds with its physical form is almost impossible to recreate digitally, as you will never be able to experience having an AI piece of 'artwork' in your hands in its original form.

Connection

The imperfection with a handmade piece of work, particularly linocut, can really resonate with a consumer of illustration as it reflects the presence of a human hand, something that feels increasingly rare in a digital culture. These imperfections, rather than indicating a loss in quality, can offer a sense of authenticity for the consumer. This results in a feeling of connection between the creator and the viewer. Its physical existence adds extra sensory inputs to consuming the work, the embossing effect that lino creates adds a tactile element for example. This increases the connection that lino can form with a person due to its interaction with other senses. An example of tactile art and its importance of connection can be seen with the production of tactile or 'touch and feel' children's books. "By interacting with books, children's visual, auditory, tactile, and other cognitive abilities are enhanced. Interaction increases children's interest and creativity in reading." (Zhang, 2020)



Fig. 3: Farshid Mesghali, *Seagull from The little black fish*, 1968, Linocut

Linocut helps evoke emotions due to its handmade appearance. This can be incredibly valuable in the creation of picture books, as it is typically vital for the illustrations within a picture book to connect with their readers, especially if they are directed towards a younger audience, who often rely on the pictures to understand the story. In fig.3, Megsghali's use of a multistage lino allows for the different colours to evoke emotion with their reader. The contrasting red beak to symbolise danger and to draw attention to the fish in its grasp. Additionally, the linocut portrays movement with the handmade look of the cut waves, almost evoking a sense of chaos and urgency for the reader.



Fig, 4: Kara Walker, *African/American*, 1998, Linocut.

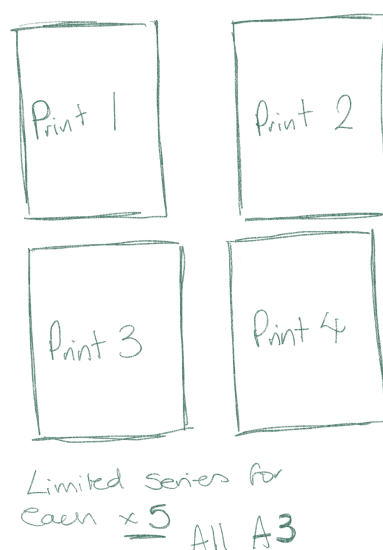
Linocut is also effective in communicating political and social issues. As can be seen in fig.3, Walker has used the medium of linocut to address the cultural issues facing African Americans in the Civil War South. Walker describes the figure in *African/American* as “your essentialist-token slave maiden in midair.” (Moma, 2006). The stark contrast that the minimal colour palette and harsh imagery creates exposes the viewer directly to what the illustration is portraying. The visibility of the artist's process also allows for the viewer to form a connection to the artist, causing them to consider the effort and emotion that went into creating the print. Walker is a key example of using printmaking to communicate a sentiment to others that they may also share. “This interaction becomes even more potent when printmaking techniques are used to create posters or other forms that are used in protest, or as a polemical statement, or to encourage social debate.” (Noyce, 2006, p.43) a printmaker can further connect with consumers by catering their topic of work to a topic that may be political or of social debate.

An artist's goal should be to connect with as many people as possible, and more precisely an illustrator's goal is to be able to communicate effectively across a wide and diverse audience. Illustration straddles the boundary between fine art and visual communication, they have to not only create a design that is compelling, but is also legible. In this regard, printmakers have a huge advantage. “Print artists have the advantage over makers of unique objects in that they can conceive, develop and produce a work in the clear knowledge that it can be aimed at a wide variety of purchasers, thereby being assured that their work has the potential to interact with the lives of a greater number of people.” (Noyce, 2006, p.45) printmakers have an advantage of scope due to the ability to produce multiple physical copies of an original piece of work, which can exist simultaneously in multiple places. The existence of multiple original works means that it can foster the same deep engagement but to a wider audience than an original painting, which can only exist in one place at a time in its original state, for example.

Conclusion

Researching the keywords, Linocut, Handmade and Connection has assisted me with the decision for what topic my extended essay and practice next year will be. Looking at the connections between the three words has opened up potential paths for my practice to take. Through my research in this proposal, I have found that Linocut is still a very novel printing technique, and is often looked down on by certain more prestigious members of the art community. I have also found that it is an incredibly effective printing method for connecting with people, its personable nature making it a more effective form of visual communication. As a result of this I will be producing a series of linocuts as professional illustrations, their purpose to be displayed proudly in homes or in a gallery as a way to connect with their viewers, and to challenge the likes of renowned fine artists. I want to prove that handmade illustration, particularly linocut as a form of printmaking, is still very valuable in a modern world.

My proposed title is; The hand of the maker - What is the importance and relevance of hand made art? I will further this research by exploring the sub topics; Why is handmade illustration so important in a digital era? And Why do illustrators belong in fine art spaces?



Fig, 5



Fig, 6

My proposed practice base project will consist of a limited series of multistage lino prints (fig.5), with bold lines and evidence of the linocut they are produced from, as can be seen in an example of my past work (fig 6.)

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