

Glass and Print

The Physicality of Printmaking

Steve Brown

Between 1984 and 1999 I worked as a screen printer for the textile industry involved in all aspects of the process from artwork through sampling to production.

Some of the work involved printing onto different materials with specialist inks and the adaptation of machinery or processes in order to complete the job. It is this open-minded approach and specialist experiential knowledge, combined with a love of printing onto, and with, new and varied materials, which I have taken with me through my two degrees, as a practitioner and recently into research.

Two years ago I had the opportunity to participate in a glass forum for teachers in higher education at the Northlands Glass Centre in Scotland organised by the Bullseye Glass Company. Although I had studied for my MA in the ceramics and glass department of the Royal College of Art I had concentrated on ceramics there and so this was my first real experience of working in glass.

Working alongside a number of other participants, with a mixture of backgrounds including print and glass we were shown some techniques for simple masking to create basic imagery through 'dusting' very fine glass powder. As we explored this process further it became obvious to those of us with print experience, Helen Maurer, Kevin Petrie and myself that there was an affinity between this process and printmaking and some of us produced a number of tests that explored this direction.

Following on from this successful and stimulating workshop I was invited to build on this exploration with a group of printmakers working towards a group exhibition of glass titled 'Printmakers Fired' at the Bullseye Connections Gallery in Portland USA in 2005. With two weeks to make the work based within Bullseye's artist studios and with the full technical support, facilities and resources of this major glass company the work continued to develop.

There were two challenges foremost in my mind at this point, how to create a more advanced stencilling system for the powder work and how I could fit and transport my studio into a bag, which I could take to the East Coast of America. The solution to both problems was to use a stencil, which I could roll up, for this I utilised a specialist piece of equipment called a Plotter/Cutter to cut computer designed stencils from sticky backed vinyl sheets, these could on arrival be attached to a very coarse mesh, which could also be rolled up, and this would support the stencil rather like a conventional silk screen would. The very coarse mesh allowed me to dust the powder through it and accurate sophisticated stencils blocked out areas to create the imagery.

This process allowed me to prepare for the work and take stencils with me enabling me to produce the work for the exhibition in a short space of time. However, although the process had pushed ahead significantly something was still not working for me, and it was a discussion of the work with Ted Sawyer Director of Research and Education at Bullseye that led me to a better understanding of the problem. I was making pictures! That is to say representational pictures conventionally produced onto a ground; a glass sheet, and in a rectangular format. I don't normally do this in my practise; I normally concern myself with the relationship between image and form, which have a physical presence.

So with this knowledge I returned to the UK where a few months later the original participants of the Northlands workshop were invited to continue their work at The University of Sunderland's facilities, again supported by Bullseye, and here the work finally came together. I removed the glass sheet as the medium onto which I was working and started dusting directly onto the kiln shelf, building up layers of glass powder. This material needed supporting once it reached a certain thickness and so I created reverse stencils and dusted a powdered mould material through the mesh, which allowed me to build up much thicker quantities of glass. It also allowed me to then add new imagery over an existing layer, building up ever more complex physical layers of imagery and support structure much like Stereo lithography works in the field of Rapid Prototyping. Once the glass has been fired at a fusing temperature the support material can be carefully brushed away and the complex structure of the multilayered imagery can be seen; a physical manifestation of the print.

Further developments have been to add oxides into the mould material to effect colour changes where the support touches the glass, students that I have taught the process to are also currently exploring it further in relation to blown glass, whilst I continue the pursuit of new techniques of producing imagery in relation to form in applied arts materials with my joint PhD research project at the Royal College of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum.







