

PRINTMAKING AS PAINTING: THE ART OF THE HELIOGRAPH

STORY IDRIS MURPHY



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AS WITH ALL TRULY CREATIVE ART practices, artists continually question the process, those workings by which the work is brought together into its final form. In printmaking and screen-printing, these influences are brought to them by other artists, art practices and advances in technology.

This questioning of processes produces various innovations, some of which become part of the mainstream, and some are lost in translation “in the flood of new technology or thinking”, to coin a phrase.

I use the term ‘heliograph’ to describe my prints, however ‘cliché verre’, ‘heliographique’ and ‘autographie heliographique’ are other terms used to describe this process. This, along with its pre-Impressionist beginnings, may have helped this process to be lost, as it did not seem to fit in with either the earlier definitions of printmaking or the newly emerged photography. This is the case of

the heliograph: the emergence of the daguerreotype, followed quickly by photography, transformed and questioned the notion of the artist’s practice.

In her book, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag said, “Photography has powers that no other image-system has ever enjoyed, because unlike the earlier ones, it is not dependent on an image-maker (the artist). However carefully the photographer intervenes in setting up and guiding the image-making process, the process itself remains an optical-chemical or electronic one.”

It may be that this ‘new heliograph’, for want of a better term, may help instigate a reconciliation of the artist’s approach to current technology.

As an artist, printmaking has always been a wonderful but frustrating process for me. I have always felt somewhat inhibited by the

constant ‘pre’ thinking regarding technical processes and its limitations compared with the freedom of the immediate process of painting, where constant reworking is always possible.

Therefore I am always searching for a printing process which could correspond with my notion of painting. Printmaking had, however, one advantage that one could work very productively in cooperation with technicians or master printmakers, who could also have an impact on the final result.

My approach to landscape painting has continued to have elements which meant dealing directly with nature. I wanted to have a complementary printing process, a directness somewhat like that of a ‘mono print’ but with the ability for an image to be reproduced within the tradition of the limited-edition print.



- 01 Dry Desert Bed, 2016, from suite of nine Heliograph, Arches Velin Museum Rag paper, 315gsm, 33 x 49cm, Makar Press
- 02 Ant Hills Savanna, 2015, from suite of nine Heliograph, Arches Velin Museum Rag paper, 315gsm, 33 x 49cm, Makar Press
- 03 Mutawintji Trees (State 2.), 2015, Heliograph, hand coloured, Arches Velin Museum Rag paper, 315gsm, 33 x 49cm, Makar Press



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My first approach was to emulate Corot's experiments, but instead of using his small glass plates covered in a dark emulsion which is then scratched into, I used large sheets of glass 45 x 45cm and painted directly onto the glass using oil paint and printing ink, painting as I would with a conventional painting process. This had the unexpected element of viewing the landscape through the glass plate itself, seeing both landscape and the emerging image at the same time. Other unique properties presented themselves in this process, such as the ability to work on both sides of the plate to produce a unique image.

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I extended this process, using smaller perspex or plexus glass 'plates'. Painting these with acrylic paint has given me a freedom that I had not believed possible, both in the flexibility of working in the landscape and the printing process which provides an image that is somewhere between the quality and spontaneity of painting and drawing. Toting perspex plates around the bush with little regard for the minute changes to the painted surface also gave a sense of engraved movement to some of the images.

I need not add further explanation to this part of the process but show the images that were produced through the unique coming together of an amalgamation of old processes played with but not fully explored (no camera, no lens or similar device was used in the making of the image on the plates themselves).

However these images would not have been possible without new technology to facilitate the printing of these images. Transferring the image by exposing the plate to sunlight was taken up by exposing it to the artificial light of a scanner. This reproduced, in



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Painting these perspex glass 'plates' with acrylic paint has given me a freedom that I had not believed possible, both in the flexibility of working in the landscape and the printing process.

the exact size, the original plates with a definition which you would normally have no chance of reproducing from the plates which formed the image in the first place. This process reinstates dependence on the image-maker but embraces the use of technology, without a camera. ■

Idris Murphy is represented by King Street Gallery on William, Sydney.
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- 04 Hillside Formation, 2016, from suite of nine Heliograph, Arches Velin Museum Rag paper, 315gsm, 33 x 49cm, Makar Press
- 05 View of Island, 2016, from suite of nine Heliograph, Arches Velin Museum Rag paper, 315gsm, 33 x 49cm, Makar Press
- 06 Track & Cloud, 2016, from suite of nine Heliograph, Arches Velin Museum Rag paper, 315gsm, 33 x 49cm, Makar Press

Courtesy the artist and King Street Gallery on William, Sydney