

Mixing Numbers

Tim Maguire in conversation with Jonathan Watkins

JW

What is it that appeals to you, as someone who has been identified so much with painting as an artistic medium, about digital technology?

TM

For a long time now, painting and printmaking have played off each other in my work. Frustrations in one area are often solved through investigations in the other ...

Printmaking - drawing from experience of the processes involved in printmaking - for example, often helps me think again about how I might make a painting, and vice versa. The process has always been attractive to me because there is a wonderful unpredictability about the result. One works in a precise way but the results are often surprising. Imagery is created outside one's expectations.

For some time I'd been making lithographs and monotypes with Franck Bordas, [a master printer] in Paris. After some initial successes, I had begun to feel frustrated by these traditional forms of printmaking, wanting more control, more precision. The range of tones and the subtleties of colour that arose out of the colour separation process I'd adopted in my painting were often lost when I tried to adapt them to lithography. There was too much slippage through the transference of the drawn image to a plate and then onto paper.

One solution was to take that "drawn image" (actually painted-on film) and transfer it onto a virtual "plate" – within a computer – by digital scanning. The image can then be printed digitally. Such reproduction is much more exact than that of an image transferred onto an actual plate, then inked up. Well, that was the initial impulse. When I first started working with Franck, his studio was almost entirely set up for lithography. I'd only recently moved to Paris, and the whole set-up was very attractive, massive old presses, rows of litho stones, a glass-roofed 18th century atelier surrounded by cabinet makers and the like... Franck had only just purchased a digital printer with the hope of using this new technology in his collaborations with artists. I was in one corner of the room, ink all over my hands, feeling frustrated, Franck in another with ink all over his hands, looking for a way beyond lithography ...

JW

It was a nice synchronicity, with Franck in the process of incorporating digital technology into his business, and you looking for different, new ways to manifest an artistic proposition.

TM

Franck works with a lot with artists, often painters, and had done for many years. But at that stage there were few collaborations that involved digital technology. The digital printer was mainly used by photographers dropping in to print this or that file, perhaps retouching the corner of a photo and so on. Obviously this new technology was ideal for creating very truthful facsimiles – the challenge was to find a way to break into this

seemingly perfectly sealed system, to use the technology to create images from within, that could not have existed in any other media.

JW

How was it, making that switch from analogue to digital?

TM

When we started with digital printing I quickly realised that we could generate pure colours that we could never get through other means. My principle of colour separation, which I use in both my painting and printmaking, comes from commercial printmaking, where illusions of colours are created by little dots of pure colour being printed side by side, and that's something I played around with in early lithographs. To simulate that marriage of colour in lithography, as with painting, I was forced to put layers of transparent colour one on top of the other, but you don't get the same result. The pigments have their own idiosyncrasies and the colours can cancel each other out. However, with digital technology essentially you're mixing numbers, and the image is printed out with millions of juxtaposed dots of colour ... the marriage of colours happens in the computer. So there's no top or bottom, first or last, as there is with paint or (lithographic) ink, where the last layer always dominates while the first is suppressed.

The colours we can now achieve are almost fluorescent, much closer to the intensity of digital photography and to what I see on screen and that is very attractive to me.

The random aspect which appealed is still there, because each print is made up of three separately painted films, each with a different primary colour, and I don't really know how these colours will combine until they've all been painted, scanned and transferred to a computer. By which point any errors are built in and have to be accommodated somehow.

JW

Previously in your paintings and prints you'd resorted to a technique which involved the flicking of solvent onto layers of wet paint, removing paint to reveal dots of colour which were then optically resolved in a kind of pointillism. In fact, we see it here in *Poppies*.

TM

Because of the purity of colour obtainable digitally, that pointillism is so much more effective in the digital prints. *Poppies* is one of the last works whereby secondary colours are generated by one of the three layered colours being taken out by the solvent.

JW

On the other hand, there's something in the medium, the technique that involves the removal of colour by solvent, which is part of the message. It tends to degrade the image that you'd conjured up, as if you'd eaten into it. And then you had pushed and pulled it around through the wet paint that you needed in order to remove the dots of colour. There were ideas of corruption and decay that were very consistent with your preoccupation with still life. With the use of digital technology that part of your message recedes into the background. And, of course, we don't so much see traces of you moving around the image, with physical, manual gestures ...

TM

Well, the gestures are still present, but are more discreet – lines from the dragging of the brush, that can almost be misread as enlarged scratches in a negative; thumbprints...But you raise an interesting point, in the light of another major difference that digital printing makes. It's a question not just of enhanced colour, but also of the scale of the image. You're no longer tied to a ratio of 1:1. A drawing that goes onto a lithographic plate has to be printed out the same size – it's a very direct transference of gesture to final product. A painting always remains on the scale that you made it! But with digital printing, depending of the degree of resolution in the scan, you can blow it up to any size you like. Though I restrict myself - my basic rule of thumb is 1:4, twice as high, twice as wide.

JW

Why not more magnification?

TM

I've resisted because I felt that I would lose the plausibility of the gesture. At 1:4, the gestural aspects are present, in fact enhanced; though there is a certain disembodiment of gesture through their reproduction, still I feel there is a direct link to my hand, my arm. To magnify more I feel would be too contrived.

JW

This applies obviously to the drawings or paintings that you're working from, and not the subject matter. The poppies in *Poppies* are wonderfully big. And these flowers are immediately recognisable motifs, with close correspondence to your still life paintings. There's an interesting narrative in this exhibition as we move from *Poppies* to the prints depicting snow and water.

TM

I started making images of snow because I wanted to apply my technique of colour separation to a subject that was essentially black-and-white

JW

I remember when I saw your paintings of snow for the first time, they reminded me of a Monet exhibition I'd just seen which included a lot of winter scenes. How exciting it was, and what nice perversity. Here was an impressionist, so concerned with colour theory, going out and painting white landscapes.

TM

Ostensibly white landscapes – but actually full of colour. His sketchbooks from Norway are full of colour notes and references, of snowy mountains in pinks and greens. I liked the idea that colour was going to be introduced into my digital prints of snow inevitably because of my inexactitude. They would be interesting because of the way I put colour down. The theory is that equal quantities of yellow, magenta and cyan give you black at 100% intensity. At lesser intensity you get grey. The colours cancel each other out. It's easy to get 100% of each colour, and equally, it's easy to get 100% of no colour at all, which is white ... but anything in between becomes a question of fairly subjective judgement. For example, what is 40% of any particular colour?

JW

The snow prints, at first glance, are incredibly abstract. With a bit of time and/or encouragement it begins to dawn on us that we are looking at snow flakes falling through a night sky.

TM

Yes. The sky is black, the pale snowflakes float across that darkness like a screen. The image is very frontal and the space invoked is a very Modernist one.

With the colour separation paintings, I'd introduced randomness through the flicking of solvent, through the unexpected way in which the drops of solvent might land. With the snow prints it's inherent in the images. Snow flakes fall in patterns that are so [wonderfully] undesigned, and so I could be quite precise, and representational in the way I drew them up and painted them.

JW

That whole question of verisimilitude goes out the window because of the starkness of the snow images - and it's not as if there's anyone wanting to check! Are they based on photographs that you took?

TM

All the snow prints in this exhibition are composites of images I've found on the web, all found images, very low res. And I've overlaid a number of different shots taken in different places to get more snowflakes, the density and size of snowflakes that I wanted.

JW

Why not just invent them?

TM

If I didn't start from photographs I think I would be too self-conscious. In the end the process of working from these photos was quite methodical, even mechanical. The snowflakes are white and grey against the dark sky. It's simply a matter of painting sheets of film black, one for each primary colour and then wiping out areas to create the whites or greys of the snowflakes.

JW

As with your earlier still lifes, you're working with readymade images ...

TM

... so that I don't have to invest too much aesthetic consideration into the composition.

JW

Interestingly, you're still applying paint, if only to remove it later.

TM

Yes, it is a question of paint being deducted, rather than added.

JW

How does the colour get in?

TM

It's the mismatch of percentages really, and the inaccuracies of registration. Remember that for each print I'm working on three separate films, one for each primary colour. These colours if evenly matched cancel each other out to create blacks, or in lesser but equal quantities, greys. So, a mechanical "colour separation" of these essentially monochrome photos reveals lots of saturated colour. But try as I might, I'm not so precise. The edges of any individual snowflake won't align exactly from one film to the next, so each white flake will have a little halo, a rainbow of colour surrounding it.

Then, for those snowflakes which are dimmer, greyer, if I'm not achieving equal quantities of cyan, yellow and magenta, instead of grey I'm going to get some sort of mixed colour. Depending on the percentages – say 60% cyan, 30% yellow, 40% magenta - I'll get a snowflake that's quite green, another that's blue. Also, on different films the snowflake shapes might turn out to be a little bigger or smaller and this is something that is imperceptible until you've made all the scans and put them together. Each sheet of film gets treated slightly differently, and that's how the colour arrives in the final print. These inaccuracies are like a prism, revealing the inherent colour.

JW

Despite the abstraction of the snow prints, they touch on a theme of ephemerality that pervades your work overall. Snow is a very fragile thing. Likewise, a poppy is one of the most fragile flowers. And then there's the ephemerality of the image, caught on the virtual plate of a computer. The fact that the colour that you're mixing isn't substantial, but just a bunch of numbers ... again it's not surprising that this digital medium appeals to you.

TM

There's another connection between the poppies and the falling snow. Poppies are fantastically translucent, vehicles for light. That's why I was so interested ... the way the light fell on them and shone through them. The petals are skins of light. Snowflakes are similar, the way they catch the light and glint.

Translucency belies the physicality of the subject. It's not like some cogent three-dimensional form that has light, dark, shadow and mass. A translucent object is flattened when the light shines through it, so that it becomes more abstract. The colour glows in the photos of the poppies and you get very little sense of perspective. Likewise, the images of falling snowflakes tend to be quite flat.

JW

Water, the subject we confront on entering this exhibition, is so translucent it's transparent. And, like the falling snow, it's completely unfixated, moving all the time.

TM

The prints of water here arise out of my experiments with the snow imagery. As you point out, my treatment of falling snow was not so "painterly" – it had less of me in it. The act of making these images was not as important to me as the actual phenomena of colour. I then began thinking about photographs and videos of falling snow, with the idea that colour is generated by mismatches of little points of brightness. It occurred to

me that the colour could also be unlocked if you had three sections of footage of snow falling, each one a different pure colour, digitally superimposed. You would then get all sorts of colours randomly generated - yellow, for example, where a red snowflake and a green snowflake crossed over ...

If there was a lot of snow this would happen quite a lot, but it wouldn't last very long. You'd only get a little flash of colour every now and then. I was thinking about making a video, but it was summer in the northern hemisphere, and it wasn't easy for me to get to wherever it was snowing. I was thinking, well, what else would move in a random way that has tonal contrast between whites and black that would generate that range and intensity of colour? Rippling water was the answer, especially if the water was quite dark, so that patterns of light would be reflected and broken up, and they could then be overlaid to get the effect I wanted. Patterns of light in water are more subtle than in snow. Snowflakes are very binary, either black or white ... There are greys but overall the events are more concrete, either black or a defined tone, whereas with water you get passages from light to dark. With scans of each primary colour, overlaid you get a much greater potential range of colour and tone.

Initially I took some photos and combined them, digitally, as if they were stills from a video, to get an idea of the effect. I figured if this resulted in an interesting still image it would work as a video. Using a fixed camera with a motor drive I took a series of photographs, just reflections on water ... They capture moments half a second apart but even in such a short time the reflections shift significantly within the frame. But the event fundamentally stays the same. That is to say, there are formal qualities which are preserved from a particular location in certain conditions that distinguish it completely from the results of an identical procedure undertaken five minutes later or in another place close by. In different circumstances water moves in different ways, resulting in very particular types of reflection. There is randomness, but within set parameters.

JW

Due to water obeying all kinds of natural laws ...

TM

Speaking of which, the series of water prints here, based on combinations of photographic stills, is entitled *Refractions*, because of the way light shines through water, with an irresistible prismatic effect.

JW

Sometimes it looks psychedelic, like a kind of Paisley marbling ...

TM

... or it can be a soft opalescent mother-of-pearl.

JW

Are the images completely untouched by you? Is there any kind of manipulation, digital or otherwise?

TM

I try to keep any manipulation to the barest minimum. Essentially I just put the three colours together. The process of getting the final print is fairly simple, converting each

of three photos – related but not the same - into a different colour, then combining them in order to reveal an extraordinary range of colour through the computer. I might just play with the levels of intensity in Photoshop, to balance the tonal ranges between the different colours ... That's all. Otherwise it's a very hands-off process. Aesthetically speaking, it either works or it doesn't.

JW

If it doesn't work, it's not as if you've wasted a canvas ...

TM

Very economical! And I've always preferred a fast result over something laborious.

JW

With *Poppies*, there's a flatness courtesy of the subject matter, and there's the apparent abstraction of the snow, and then webs of pure colour in the *Refractions* series ... There is a tension here between representation and abstraction which is very characteristic of your work overall, from the beginning. Obviously, it reminds me of *Canal*, your series of five large paintings that we exhibited together at Chisenhale (London 1991). Your representation of water in those paintings then was key to an understanding of your artistic position *vis-à-vis* modernism

TM

It was a very deliberate reference to the essential flatness, the abstraction of modernism, but at the same time rendering it in a very illusionistic, three-dimensional way.

JW

This new work depicting water, arguably, is more easy-going. *Canal* was more overtly meaningful, invoking major modernist figures such as Barnett Newman and Josef Albers.

TM

Yes, the *Canal* paintings were very much about painting. The *Refractions* series doesn't have that kind of self-reference. It's very unfixated as a work of art. We know the prints are made from photos, but they don't look particularly photographic. They look quite painterly, possibly the result of brushstrokes, but they come straight out of the camera. I like their ambiguity, their quickness and the fact that their imagery is impossible to preconceive. I like the way that they are so apart from me.