

A Study of the Role of the Master Printmaker at Edinburgh Printmakers

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The Master Printmaker is at the heart of the print workshop maintaining traditional techniques as well as developing and experimenting with new approaches to print practice.¹ My research, focusing on Edinburgh Printmakers' Studio Director Alastair Clark, reveals the complexities of the traditional role of Master Printmaker, as well as the impact of the rapid development of digital technology. This paper explores the collaborative process of the Master Printmaker and reflects on his working partnership with a selection of artists. These artists include Callum Innes, Eric Great-Rex and Rachel Maclean. The selection represents established artists with an ongoing collaborative partnership with the Master Printmaker, experienced printmakers pushing the boundaries of their practice and artists new to print studio practice.

The title of Master Printmaker is generally given to a highly skilled printmaker who has studied and developed their craft over a number of years. Clark completed a postgraduate diploma in Drawing, Painting and Printmaking at Edinburgh College of Art in 1991 and in 1992 he began working at Edinburgh Printmakers - initially as the lithographic technician, before becoming the Assistant Director of the organisation in 2006. He also undertook specialist training at the Tamarind Institute of Lithography in New Mexico in 1995 to further advance his skill in this process.

The Master Printmaker is not only a highly skilled printer but also a collaborator who works closely with artists to facilitate and produce editions of artists' work. Edinburgh Printmakers, established in 1967 as an open-access printmaking studio, also offered artists the facility to work with an experienced printmaker, a Master in their craft. The potential for artists to work in partnership with a Master printmaker is replicated across other print studios in Scotland.

Clark's ongoing exhibition activity and engagement with research, which includes contributions to international print conferences, are not only linked to his own practice but to his role as printer and studio director.

Very few areas within fine art are required to adapt all the time, taking on board innovations in technology. Through education, collaboration and supporting and mentoring other makers, Clark and the studio staff, which comprises three permanent members of staff and interns, are open to developing new approaches as a wider range of digital technologies are being made available. These include: large format digital printing, laser cutting and 3D printing. They also are committed to enhancements of traditional techniques, for instance through technical innovations and improvements in chemicals and inks. The challenge then for any print organisation is to decide what to invest in when the opportunity for new equipment and the possibility to experiment with new processes arises. Clark remarks that as Edinburgh Printmakers is offering a service then we need to invest in equipment that is predictable, dependable week in week out.²

Looking closely at a selection of working partnerships with the Master Printmaker offers insight into the collaborative process and what it entails. The first example is a partnership with an established artist, Callum Innes, who has a strong and ongoing relationship with Edinburgh Printmakers. This started with their previous Master Printmaker, Alfons Bytautas who worked at Edinburgh Printmakers from 1979 until 2009. The longer an artist works with a Master, the more trust there is between them and this in turn adds to a successful print outcome. Working with Bytautas over a number of years, Innes produced a series of etchings in monochrome, which have been exhibited internationally. On Bytautas' departure, Clark began working with Innes and helped facilitate the introduction of colour to Innes' prints. Clark suggested lithography, with its potential for fluidity of mark-making, as a process perhaps more in tune with Innes' painting practice. (Fig.1)

Their working partnership affords a lot of time between stages, sometimes months. This ongoing relationship with the Master Printmaker offers the artist thinking time to consider colour, layers and the freedom to experiment with proofs. Clark and Innes have conversations about what is inherently in each layer exploring ways of getting a certain quality and density of mark that can then be applied by painting directly on the litho stones. Through such a long working relationship Clark gains insight into the working pace of the artists and their methodology. Ultimately Innes is the editor. He adds and subtracts marks from the stones and makes decisions on the options presented to him. Clark's skill is to understand what is important to the artist, which in the case of Innes are significant things like the edges of the work and the shades of colour applied.

The second example involves an experienced printmaker pushing the boundaries of his practice. The artist Eric Great-Rex has printed and editioned works for himself as well as other artists. Clark remarks that with this type of relationship there is less you have to explore with regards to technique, as you are both speaking the same language.³ This offers the artist a chance to experiment more, to take a few risks. Clark adds that it is important to stress that although they are both experienced in the language of print they have never made this particular print, so there is openness as to what can be achieved through the collaboration. (Fig.2) An experienced printmaker is less likely to be distracted by all the toys in the shop so to speak, and less seduced by process alone. Knowing Great-Rex has been in the Master Printmakers position in his own career, from 1984 to 1989 he editioned artists' work at Cone Editions Press in New York. I asked him what he considered to be the key skills for this role. He commented that as well as having to possess immense technical knowledge you have to be a great listener and quickly gain an understanding of how the artist approaches and develops their ideas.⁴ He recognised these attributes in Clark and this contributed to their successful working partnership. Great-Rex worked on a series of lithographic prints with Clark between 2016 and 2017, bringing a more graphic sensibility and aesthetic to the work that you would not necessarily associate with the lithographic process.

It is important to point out that Great-Rex was working with Clark on print editions to coincide with his solo exhibition, *My Cat Knows What I'm Thinking*, at Edinburgh Printmakers. The prints produced were an integral part of the exhibition and they had to work with everything else that the artist was presenting. Therefore the challenge in this instance was to retain the artist's own artistic signature throughout the body of work regardless of the process used. Historically Geat-Rex's practice has been rooted in print but he now works mainly with ceramics and it is clear to see how the application of image onto stone would be an attractive option. Working directly onto litho stones has certain similarities with applying images and painting glazes onto ceramics. The resulting works⁵ are not obviously lithographs; they are reminiscent of woodcuts and are very much in the style of the drawings applied to his ceramics. The final images have developed in such a way that they retain the artist's graphic sensibilities but at the same time carry the history of those initial conversations, workings and experiments with Clark.

Depending on what combination of artist and printer you put together, you are going to get different outcomes. The conversations about idea development and process will be unique to each pairing. This is just as important with digital processes despite the fact that digital prints can be printed by any number of commercial printers with very little difference between them. The Master Printmaker here can help the artist realise the digital outcome in discussing subtle differences in colour and surface quality. This leads me then to consider artists who develop work for digital print outputs.

The final example of Clark's working relationship is that of an artist working digitally and relatively new to print studio practice. In 2013 Rachel Maclean worked with Clark on a large series of archival pigmented digital prints for a solo exhibition at Edinburgh Printmakers, *I Heart Scotland*. With MacLean there is very little dialogue with Clark about the development of the work. In this case the artist is working in a purely digital way and wants to get her images, which are cleverly constructed but more or less complete, off the computer and into print. In terms of translating her ideas from the screen and into a physical larger

state there is no desire to transform the image beyond the photographic. (Fig.3) She is not looking to extend or change those subtleties that are going on in the visual construction of the image. The photographic aesthetic is retained, as this is key to any understanding of the works.

Unlike the previous examples, where traditional or hybrid forms call for an ongoing dialogue, the digital print requires far less conversation in the print studio. In this instance the creative and aesthetic decisions are about what size and type of paper, photo or cotton, the finish of the print, satin or glossy. It is therefore more of a bureau service choice. However the thing that makes Maclean's project so different is that Edinburgh Printmakers supported her by providing the opportunity to make a whole folio of digital prints and photo etchings, the facility to do so and the space to exhibit them. It is worth mentioning that Maclean is a successful example of a young artist who has been supported by Edinburgh Printmakers and has subsequently gone from strength to strength having recently been chosen to represent Scotland in the 2017 Venice Biennale.

At a time when artists are increasingly pursuing multidisciplinary approaches to making, one could argue that the adaptability and responsive nature of print practice exemplifies the current state of contemporary fine art practice. Print is ever expanding and can encompass many approaches to making and presenting work. Clark and I have discussed the range of artists that have worked with Edinburgh Printmakers over the last three years in order to discern any trends in print processes utilised in the production of works. There seems to be a healthy mix of, and demand for, both traditional and digital processes. It would naturally be less costly for galleries interested in contract printing to pursue a digital print outcome as it involves less contact with the Master Printmaker and studio. However it would appear that galleries with a bit more time and money to spare, if it is appropriate to the artists' way of working, value the unique quality and artistic dialogue that evolves through more hands-on print processes.

These examples of artists' collaborations offer some insight into the complexities of the Master Printmaker role. There is a certain amount of vulnerability for any artist working in a print studio, particularly if it is for the first time and if they know very little about the processes involved or the printer they are working with. The print studio is quite a public and open space, often populated by artists working on their own prints. It is understandable that artists embarking on a collaborative edition may feel uncomfortable about expressing their ideas under such conditions. The skill that Clark has in making the artist feel at ease in this environment and willing to share their thoughts is something he has developed over twenty four years working with a huge variety of artists.

This brings me to my final question: how can we support potential future Master Printmakers and what level of training will they require? Clark has noticed a significant decline in the printmaking skills of recent graduates who are accessing the print studio. This could be partly to do with so few named specialist fine art printmaking courses in higher education institutions. There is however a desire to further this skill set and the uptake of print education short courses at Edinburgh Printmakers is testament to this. Art schools may foster the initial interest in print but in order to ensure the future existence of Master Printmakers the print studios, which Scotland has a flourishing network of, will have to play a much larger part in nurturing and developing both the technical and collaborative skills required.

¹ Further reading on Master Printmaker's collaborations with artists:

C. Zammiello and E. Hodermarsky, *Conversations From The Print Studio: A Master Printer in Collaboration With Ten Artists*, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven 2012.

Peacock Visual Arts, *Artists in Print: 21 Years of Collaboration*, Peacock Visual Arts, Aberdeen 2013.

² Interview Logue with Clark at Edinburgh Printmakers 06/12/16

³ Interview Logue with Clark at Edinburgh Printmakers 06/12/16

⁴ Conversation between Logue and Great-Rex at Edinburgh Printmakers 07/02/17

⁵ The resulting lithographs comprised:

Incomplete Meanings, Stone lithograph 2017

If A Bird Lands On Your Head Does It Build A Nest? Stone lithograph 2017

Love Hot Cold Fresh Stale Betrayed Denied, Stone lithograph, 2017

Fig.1 Alastair Clark Preparing to Print Callum Innes' lithograph, 2014
Courtesy of Edinburgh Printmakers; photo Edinburgh Printmakers

Fig.2 Alastair Clark with Eric Great-Rex, 2016
Alastair Clark working in the studio with Eric Great-Rex
Courtesy of Edinburgh Printmakers; photo Edinburgh Printmakers

Fig.3 Digital Printing, 2013
Rachel Maclean work being printed at Edinburgh Printmakers
Courtesy of Edinburgh Printmakers; photo Edinburgh Printmakers