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## Crossing Over Mediums: Experimentation with Watercolor and Printmaking

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**CROSSING OVER MEDIUMS: EXPERIMENTATION  
WITH WATERCOLOR AND PRINTMAKING**

by

**Alyssa Spjut**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**HONORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES  
WITH DEPARTMENTAL HONORS**

in

**Painting/Drawing and Printmaking  
in the Department of Art**

**Approved:**

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**UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, UT**

**Summer 2013**

## **ABSTRACT**

My interest lies in creating strong compositions that incorporate color, abstract lines, and shapes. Color is my main focus and I am interested in how the colors in my watercolor sketches translate into my printmaking work and vice versa. The comparison of the more spontaneous and organic way of working with watercolor, in contrast to the printmaking process, which involves strategy and planning, could end in some unusual and unexpected results.

My thesis is based on my exploration of merging or translating my watercolor paintings with my printmaking work. By using and combining formal elements such as line, shape, texture, space and color I can work towards abstraction. This process of working with different media will allow me to use techniques I have learned from my classes and bring together aspects from each medium to create an interaction of multiple media. My goal was to experiment with watercolor drawings, various printmaking media, and combine them in a variety of ways, both directly and indirectly.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Kathy Puzey for her efforts in advising me through out this creative project. She has been encouraging and supportive in helping me understand printmaking as well as my own direction of art making. Her extensive experience with printmaking and experimenting helped me to see the possibilities of art. I would like to thank Dr. Rachel Middleman for her insight in the writing portion of this project. Our discussions and her knowledge in art history have greatly enhanced my understanding of abstract art and art in general. I would also like to recognize and thank Jane Catlin for her supportive and helpful critiques throughout this creative process. I have been fortunate to have been taught and mentored by the impressive faculty in the Art & Design Department of the Caine College of the Arts. I would also like to thank my parents, Gary and Karla Spjut, for supporting me and encouraging me to never give up.

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## **Part One**

### **Introduction**

In a classroom setting, specific skills are taught concerning a certain medium, such as a particular way to create a texture with a watercolor brush or define value with specific mark making. I would like to take a different approach by crossing the mediums and the skills used to create mixed media art. The questions I will focus on include: How can these two different mediums be used together? When using both mediums, how can the two be joined in one piece without being noticeably separate? What role do formal elements play into making an abstract piece of art?

I addressed these issues by researching the processes of printmaking techniques and basic design elements and by observing other artists' work. I then began using this visual and academic information when creating my own artwork, experimenting with the different techniques, materials and ideas that I had discovered through research. In the diverse and creative artwork studied, I observed the products of risk taking.

I believe it is possible to combine these two different mediums to create a united work of art. With the right balance of formal design elements, there can be flow and cohesion among the difference of materials.

### **Abstraction**

During a spring semester of school, I enrolled in an Advanced Painting and Drawing, a class where we created our own assignments. I was in a low point in art making and having a hard time deciding what to create and questioning if my art should be based on what another sees as reality. I asked myself, "What is your subject matter? Why are you painting what you are painting? What is holding you back from not making anything?" There was too much thinking

and perhaps too much fear. So I started experimenting with watercolors. I turned off my brain in a sense. I settled on small-scale watercolor paintings and sketches with no tangible reference. I would just pick up the brush, dap a color and apply it to the paper, responding to each mark. Then continuing this process each time with a different color until I felt like I could move onto another piece. These experimental paintings evolved into abstract images. This was my first experience with creating art in this manner.

Abstract art is a broad idea with many competing definitions. The famous painter Pablo Picasso believed there is no such thing as 'abstract' art, but felt "that all art is seen in terms of its abstract qualities whether it is in the figurative idiom or not."<sup>1</sup> Others believe that abstract art may be "too all-inclusive."<sup>2</sup> This definition covers a wide range of artworks that are unrelated except for the fact that there is no use of figural objects. One generally agreed upon and current understanding of abstraction is as a type of art that does not allow the viewer to interpret or conceive his or her own idea with relation to a referenced object or form.<sup>3</sup>

Abstract art uses the basic design elements just like other specific forms of art, although this is what abstract relies on. Abstract art is made up solely of formal elements. The importance in the use of formal elements leads to the overall impression of the piece. How these elements are interweaved and balanced between each other is essential.

What some may see as a curse and others a benefit, characteristics of abstract art are the "freedoms of accidental effects."<sup>4</sup> Since the images are not truly representational of a found object or portrait of a figure, there is room for unexpected accidents. While creating the art, something may go wrong such as the watercolor is too opaque or the copper plate was etched

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<sup>1</sup> Brooks, Leonard. *Painting and Understanding Abstract Art: an approach to contemporary methods*. 1st ed. New

<sup>2</sup> Fer, Briony. *On abstract art*. 1st ed. Yale University Press, 1997. Print. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Fer, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Brooks, 6.



longer than expected in the acid. These events allow for the artist to step back and react to the current situation. Rather than trying to fix the problem to fit the perceived idea, the artist accepts what has happened and continues to incorporate the “mistake” into the piece.

Within in my own artwork, I tried to embrace the unexpected changes in the original plan and to respond creatively to each step. This required me to look at what I was currently doing and not get too caught up in the thought of the product but rather immerse myself in the process. I decided to tackle this question of abstraction and explore it for myself through watercolor and printmaking.

### **Method and Materials**

Did I have a sketchbook filled with ideas to reference? No. Magazine clippings gathered for inspiration? No. I did, however, use a large piece of paper and pen for impulsive drawing. When I started to brainstorm for an idea, it was not extensively thought out or executed. I simply found a larger sized piece of paper and started drawing, not forcing myself between borders of a square. I drew lines, mostly straight and geometric, that cross over another creating interesting negative space, which is the area found between the forms and lines.<sup>5</sup> I then looked to where I wanted to vary the line width. After I decided on the basic forms and space used, I created a frame with the size of the desired piece. I moved this frame around the sketch deciding on the final composition, being the overall arrangement of the elements.<sup>6</sup> With the final composition decided, I transferred the image to the birch plywood for a relief print or to a copper plate for an intaglio print.

My first exploration of mixing the medias began by combining watercolor and relief prints. Woodcut involves having an image transferred to wood, either birch plywood or MDF.

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<sup>5</sup> David A. Lauer and Stephen Pentak. *Design Basics*. 7th ed. (Boston: Thomas Wadsworth, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

and carving out the negative spaces. The raised lines and forms left on the block are then inked; a piece of paper is placed over the top of the block and rolled through the press or rubbed by hand. The paper is removed and the imaged is reversely transferred, and this is what makes up a printed image. Using carving tools with a variety of sizes and carving marks, I am able to define the image. Repetition of smaller marks may be used to allow the space to reduce the value but still give an impression of an area rather than a solid shape. After carving the image, the block is rolled with ink using a brayer - a rolling tool allowing for an even distribution of ink to cover the entire surface. After rolling the brayer in multiple directions, the block is ready to be printed. It is placed on a press with the paper placed directly on top. Another protector board is placed on top of both, so that an even distribution of pressure weight is allowed on the block. After being rolled on a press bed through a press the image is then translated to the paper.<sup>7</sup>

There are multiple techniques for creating woodcut relief prints. One in particular is the reductive technique, which “requires the entire edition to be printed at once because the surface is cut away for each hue.” The first color printed is usually a light and transparent color as well as the one that covers the “greatest surface area of the block.”<sup>8</sup> With each added layer, the opacity and saturation of the hue is increased. One block is used for the entire process, with more wood being carved away between each printing. The layering of the colors is what makes the image become a clear, single image. This process allows for multiple colors to be printed on one piece and the benefit of carving multiple layers for one image.

With the relief process, I would incorporate watercolor by having the medium act as a base rather than the flat nature of the natural tone of paper. The layers allow for spontaneous and organic elements to occur underneath the more planned forms of printmaking. Another way to

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<sup>7</sup> Ayres, Julia. *Printmaking Techniques*. 1st ed. New York City: Watson-Guption Publications, 1993. Print. 87.

<sup>8</sup> Ayres. 56.

mix the two mediums is to apply watercolor after the image is printed. This would allow me to use the shapes and forms created by negative space to dictate the placement of colors. Each way created a unique effect. The watercolor base set the tone for an overall mood of the piece. Using watercolor as added elements of color, incorporated the two mediums with a balanced effect. The two mediums, whether watercolor was used before or after the printing process, influenced each other.

Unlike the process of relief printing using wood blocks, intaglio uses plates of metal and plastic. I prefer the use of copper plates because the material creates a more permanent impression than the plastic. The process begins by prepping the plates with beveled edges to allow for a smooth transition in the printing as well as prevention of cutting the paper.<sup>9</sup> The specific process I use is etching. This involves coating the copper plate with an acid-resist ground, a material to protect copper areas from being touched by acid, and an image is drawn into the ground using a "pointed metal tool called an etching needle, exposing the metal.<sup>10</sup> Once all of the line work is scratched away, it is immersed in acid allowing the metal to be etched where the copper is exposed. After the copper has been cleaned of acid and of ground, the plate may be printed.

The ink is applied with a plastic applicator evenly covering the entire plate. It then goes through a process of removing excess ink, including tarlatan, a plastic mesh-like material, to make sure the ink is pressed simultaneously deeper into the etched areas.<sup>11</sup> The excess ink is wiped away from the surface with a smaller tarlatan, newsprint and finally hand wiping, using the palm of the hand to remove that last of the excess ink.

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<sup>9</sup> Ayres, 60.

<sup>10</sup> Ayres, 68.

<sup>11</sup> Ayres, 90.

Once prepared, the plate is put through the press. The etched lines hold the ink and transfer it onto the water soaked paper.<sup>12</sup> After the lines have been etched, other techniques, such as soft ground and rosin aquatints, are used to add texture and value to the plate to help develop the image. Between each process, state-proofs are printed to gauge the progress of the print.

## **Elements**

### **Line**

Line is the most familiar element of art. Though it is usually interpreted as one dimensional and varying in length, within the terms of art it varies in width as well, with unlimited variations.<sup>13</sup> Lines can be used to convey an emotion as well as define a particular shape, whether implied or not. The quality of line helps to create the emphasis or define the volume. Line is found all through the art world. Some art is created simply with lines directly while other art uses line indirectly to represent a form.

When I first started painting abstractly, line was prominent in my work. With the brush I would paint a variety of lines over the entire piece interweaving within each other. Some lines created organic forms while others defined geometric ones. I started by putting watercolor on a water block the size of 4" x 10". This was a unique size, providing me a way to approach line in a composition differently than I had done before. I had to consider the length of the line. I incorporated both long and short lines, considering the direction I was painting.

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<sup>12</sup> Ayres. 68.

<sup>13</sup> Lauer. Pentak. 129.

With one of my earlier watercolor pieces, *Coast*, (Figure 1), I relied on variety of line to create unity within the piece. By using larger flat forms like squares and rectangles as well as organic forms and a limited color palette – muted cool greens and violet, with the warming of yellow - the emphasis on line was greater. Using organic shapes as a framework, I used repetition of line in different areas of the composition, varying in length and width. This repetition is found within the circular forms and following the form of the larger organic shapes. There is also the sense of unpredictable forms that allows for continuity yet variety.

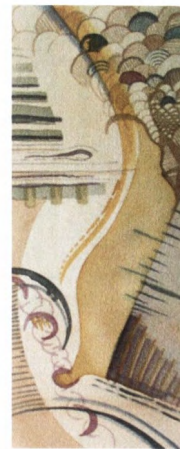


Figure 1

After learning more about lines with my experimentation of watercolor, I was able to use the experience to help enhance my composition in relief printing. Deciding to make a monochromatic piece (Figure 2), I used line as an important element of this piece. My previous images had been fairly organic. I took my next block and started drawing directly on the MDF wood. The drawing was more linear and architectural, with shapes and lines weaving within one another. Negative space played a major role in the presence of the piece. This image gave me an



Figure 2

opportunity to try different types of mark making as well as pushing to limits of line variation. When printed with the royal violet ink, it provided richness in hue allowing for a balanced contrast with the ghost print.

The overlapping created an even greater depth of space and composition between the two layers. I was originally going to watercolor after the image was printed to better incorporate the use of the medium; however, I preferred the simplicity of the solid light background that highlighted the presence of line.

## Shape

The definition of shape, or form, is “a visually perceived area created either by an enclosing line or by a color or value changes defining the outer edge.”<sup>14</sup> Pictures can be found with the lack of color or line, but rarely are they found without shape. It plays an integral role in creating a composition whether the shape is exaggerated or precise. Shapes may be layered on top of one another to create depth or to create a larger form. Abstraction and shape have an important relationship because abstraction comes from the manipulation of a shape, using positive and negative shapes.

While in my relief woodcut printmaking class, I was struggling with brainstorming ideas on what to create. I decided to take one of the 4” x 10” watercolor paintings as a starting point and increase the size so that I could more easily experiment with mark making. Seeing the

variety of shapes, I decided to use the multiple block reductive technique, and I began with four blocks of thin birch plywood measuring 20” x 11”.



Figure 3

For this multiple reductive block (Figure 3), I divided the image into four sections based on color - yellow, green, red/violet, and blue - and printed in that order. Shape contributes greatly to the overall image in this piece.

The organic form of the golden yellow shape helps the eye flow through the entire composition. The negative space created with the forms allows for layering, giving a sense of depth to the piece. Smaller shapes placed next to one another create larger forms, as seen with the larger violet shape fitting like a puzzle piece next to the golden form.

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<sup>14</sup> Lauer, Pentak. 152.

With the next piece (Figure 4) I decided to take a completely different approach. I had a total of nine sheets of cream tone lightweight BFK paper. I divided them into three groups of

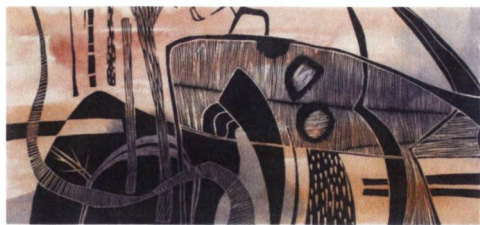


Figure 4

three. Each was to have its own color scheme. Once again I painted the background with watercolor, though this time with more texture and predetermined placement of color.

My goal was to have medium play a more active role in the piece rather than just color the background. For the actual image, I used MDF wood and drew with pencil directly on the board without any preconceived plan except for the idea of a single layer relief print. With the three different groups, the backgrounds were different colors, as well as the ink color. In this image I tried to unify the piece with both larger, more solid shapes.

### Texture

In painting and printmaking, artists can create actual texture or the impression of it. Texture can be created with the way paint is applied to the surface, creating smooth transitions of a face or the rough depictions of a rocky road. In printmaking, texture can be implied by the way the marks are made into the surface. There can be smooth transitions of value or scratches randomly found across a shape.

To continue and explore the idea of adding watercolors to the image, I decided to add them after the image was printed. I tore multiple papers of 10" x 6" size. I chose random colors from the leftover ink box and starting inking the block. I randomly placed the paper on the block and printed (Figure 5). I did this for each paper resulting in multiple variations, all of which were different. I then chose another color and another block

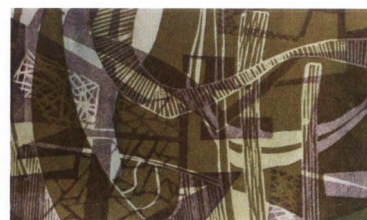


Figure 5

and repeated the same idea. Some overlapping created a balance composition while others did



not. This allowed for unplanned and unpredictable images allowing me to free form the step-by-step process. By printing in this manner, patterns were created with the different blocks. One pattern printed on top of another creates an entirely new texture.

After printing the images and allowing them to dry, I painted with watercolor overtop. I let the printed image direct me where to place the colors within the spaces, enhancing the previous texture. This also allowed me to paint with the similar colors and think of unexpected pops of color to add.

### Space

By using the idea of space, the artist can “convey a feeling of space or depth.”<sup>15</sup> The artist can explore the illusion of space. This can be determined through size, exaggerated size, overlapping, and perspective. Using a variety of areas, space helps to enhance the entirety of the piece in creating a unique mood or feeling.

After experimenting with relief printing, I decided to see what I could do with the intaglio process. I tried the subtractive/additive method, where multiple layers are printed from one



copper plate. The first layer is created with line etching and a rosin aquatint to produce a solid area for the color to print. After the whole edition is printed from the first layer, the image is sanded off and another layer of rosin is applied within the lines of where the next desire color will be. This process continues until the artist has completed all the layers.

Figure 6

My image (Figure 6) started out with a monochromatic, referring to one color, feeling to the piece. I printed a light transparent blue within the space I had applied rosin. The next layer was a darker and transparent blue as was the next layer, though a little darker. The piece was

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<sup>15</sup> Lauer, Pentak. 194.



becoming predictable so I decided to texture lime green color to the next layer. To finish the artwork I took a drawing from another piece and printed it onto this image. It took away the “coloring book” sense of filling in the lines. The navy blue image on top of the other layers gives an organic feel and balances the space between the many layers.

## Color

Color, or the lack of, has a wide role in the field of art. There are primary and secondary colors and the color theory that surrounds them. There is the perception of how light affects a color and how it is perceived as well as the influence colors have on each other. Color dominance and the emphasis it gives to an image play a vital role in my work as well as understanding the special qualities of certain colors.

Color played a major role in my experimentation with watercolor. The first layers would be transparent leading into richer, more opaque colors. I learned about how colors interact with one another and how layering them creates different effects depending on what colors were used.

I decided to try to create another print using the subtractive/additive method; however, this time letting the shape become the form rather than an outside line defining it (Figure 7). I started with an organic form printed in a transparent soft pink. Uncertain with what direction to take this in, I did a rosin aquatint and etched the random rectangular shapes across the piece. I printed each one a different color. The colors did not expectantly correlate but were cohesive and allowed for a pop in the piece. I continued to do this with each layer, adding more rectangular shapes of color. Though I am not using watercolor directly on this piece, what I learned from experimenting with opacity and transparent qualities of color helped with the resolution of color choices in the piece.

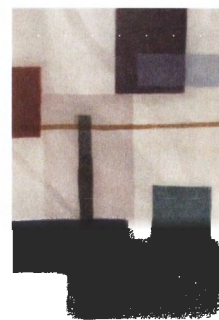


Figure 7

## **Conclusion**

With experimentation and art making, I discovered that the mediums of watercolor and printmaking could coexist in one piece of art. When mixing the different mediums together there is a successful added depth and illumination that enhance the entire piece. With the use of the formal elements in addition to the aspects of each medium, a successful and intriguing piece is created for the viewer. After countless amounts of art making, I have been able to see how the two mediums used together can create a successful body of work, which can be seen in my examples to follow. The experimentation that took place allowed me to learn more about the basic formal elements – line, shape, texture, space and color – within in my own artwork and will continue to do so in future art making.

## Part Two

Below includes a sampling and reference of the body of work created for this project. The images are placed in chronological order to show the progression of the work as I developed techniques and experimented with different mediums.



*From Below*, 4" x 10",  
watercolor, 2011



*From Above*, 4" x 10",  
watercolor, 2011



*Pieces*, 4" x 10",  
watercolor, 2011



*From the Side*, 4" x 10", watercolor, 2011



*All Together*, 4" x 10", watercolor, 2011



*Silence*, 4" x 10", watercolor, 2011





*Miramar*, 3 - 4" x 10", watercolor, 2011



*In Time*, 3 - 4" x 10", watercolor, 2011



*Translation*, 25" x 36", reductive multiple block woodcut print, 2012



*Manhattan Beach*, 19" x 10", reductive multiple block woodcut print, 2012





*Transitions*, 15" x 15", reductive multiple block woodcut print, 2012



*Intertwined*, 20" x 10", watercolor and woodcut relief print, 2012



*Cards, 3" x 5", watercolor and relief print, 2012*





*Study #1, 4 of 10, 5" x 5", watercolor and wood cut relief print, 2012*



MDF wood block of "Looking Up" print



Carving Tools and MDF wood block



*Looking Up*, 19" x 10", woodcut print, 2012



*Color Study*, 11" x 24", watercolor and woodcut print, 2012





*Study #2, 4 of 12, 5" x 7", watercolor and woodcut relief print, 2012*

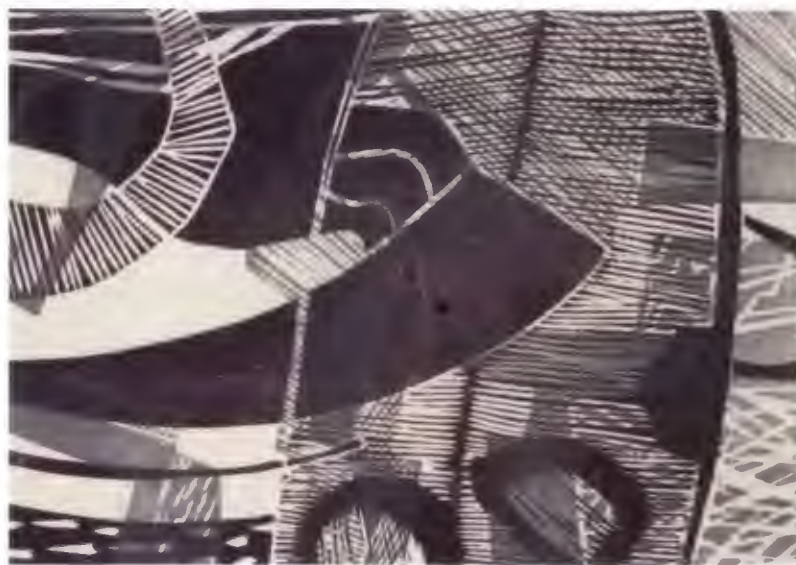


Birch plywood block of "Climbing Over" print



*Climbing Over*, 21" x 10", reductive woodcut print, 2012





*Study #4, 2 of 6, 7" x 10", multiple block woodcut print, 2012*



*Hit Me*, 10" x 12", watercolor and woodcut relief print, 2012



*Falling Through*, 3.5" x 5", intaglio, 2012



*Differences Matter*, 4" x 5.5", intaglio, 2012

## Resources

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## **Author's Biography**

Alyssa Spjut was born in Littleton, Colorado and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah. She attended Skyline High School until she graduated in May of 2008. While in high school she was her school's Sterling Scholar for visual arts. She participated on the swim team and water polo sport where she served as the team captain for both. Alyssa also was the Senior Class secretary and planned and organized various school activities and events. After graduating from high school, Alyssa moved to Logan, Utah to attend school at Utah State University.

While attending Utah State University, Alyssa went on study a abroad trip to Germany with the Art department and has been involved with multiple service organizations. She has had the opportunity to serve in various positions including Undergraduate Teaching Fellow and Caine College of the Arts Ambassador. After attending college for five years, she will be graduating from Utah State University with a Bachelors of Fine Arts with a double emphasis in painting drawing and printmaking as well as a minor in psychology with Honors in July 2013.

Following graduation, Alyssa will pursue a Masters of Science in Art Therapy and Counseling at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk, Virginia. She plans to gain the knowledge and experiences to allow her to specialize in the field of Art Therapy working with children. She hopes to continue experimenting with art through prints and painting as her love for art will continue to enhance her life.