

# Paul Coldwell : Prints as simultaneous experience

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It has always been understood that works on paper reveal, in general, the process of their creation, the temporality of their making, at least at careful and close examination. Works on paper, such as prints and drawings, go in this respect beyond any painting: they unveil the various steps necessary to achieve certain results. This concerns the way that particular lines are posed and their succession, the process of etching or engraving and the way of printing which yet remains visible. In painting this process is often not clear, hidden under the surface even if it is possible to make this information available through technical examination. One important and interesting question, probably the most central discussion about an artwork, concerns the creative process of establishing an image, the creation and the succession of the various steps necessary to find the final solution. At no other point does one come closer to the act of creation of an artwork than with this particular issue.

However, with the introduction of new media, in particular any kind of contemporary imaging techniques and digital processing, the way of determining the stages of creation becomes more complicated, both on a technical and an intellectual level.<sup>1</sup> While with older drawing and printmaking techniques, one layer after another is established and therefore the process remains visible, with the new digital techniques these traces can be merged and the process is often not so clearly visible any more. Overall this is not a matter of quality, as digital techniques offer other opportunities and possibilities. These techniques ask especially for a different way of perceiving the works and their characteristics. An interesting case of such discussion is the printed work by Paul Coldwell. The latter offers a stimulating point of reflection, not just on a technical level, but through his various writings, thoughts and ideas and therefore also on an intellectual level.<sup>2</sup> As Coldwell predominantly produces digital prints, he becomes a challenging case for any change in the perception of prints and the development of a new understanding of the relation of

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1 See the informative article by Ben Thomas in this catalogue.

2 See for example his book *Printmaking. A contemporary perspective*, London: Black dog publishing, 2010, esp. the chapter on new technology, pp. 158-181.

various criteria used in the past to determine the quality and importance of a printed image

So far, print scholarship and any historical discussion of the criteria used for prints were oriented towards a well defined process making clear distinctions between the invention of the subject or the initial image, its execution on the surface of the printing «matrice», the actual printing and the distribution. At least until the mid twentieth century - ie. the use of screenprints or the more industrial ways of printing - the preparation of the surface of a printing block or plate was merely a manual task. With technologies developed in the second half of the twentieth century this situation changed. It became easier to use other images as a base for the production of new artworks or, as in the case of any kind of digital imagery, to reduce the manual component. Thus, three main issues arise, although they are linked to each other keeping nevertheless a certain form of independence.<sup>3</sup> A first question, probably linked most closely to any older understanding of printmaking or drawing, consists of the process of creation, the sequence of steps necessary to produce the initial image, even as an electronic file. From there, the next issue concerns the physical production of the artwork itself, its printing and the discrepancy between digital transformation and analogue printing, and the consequences for the appearance of the work provided by new printing techniques. Finally, the third field of questions relates to the depth of the image, both visually and intellectually, and its impact on the perception of the art work.

## The process of creation

One of the most important differences between the creation of a print in an “old” technique and as a digital project, is the process of creation of the image. Coldwell himself pointed this out on various occasions and the changes involved are important to understand his approach as a printmaker. A traditional drawing always reveals the process of creation, the way in which the work was produced, where it was begun, how it was continued, which corrections have been made, which hesitations were involved. Lines overlap, the pressure of the drawing medium on the paper leaves always some traces and the speed of drawing remains visible embracing some eventual hesitations or even the hand used (if done with the right or the left hand).

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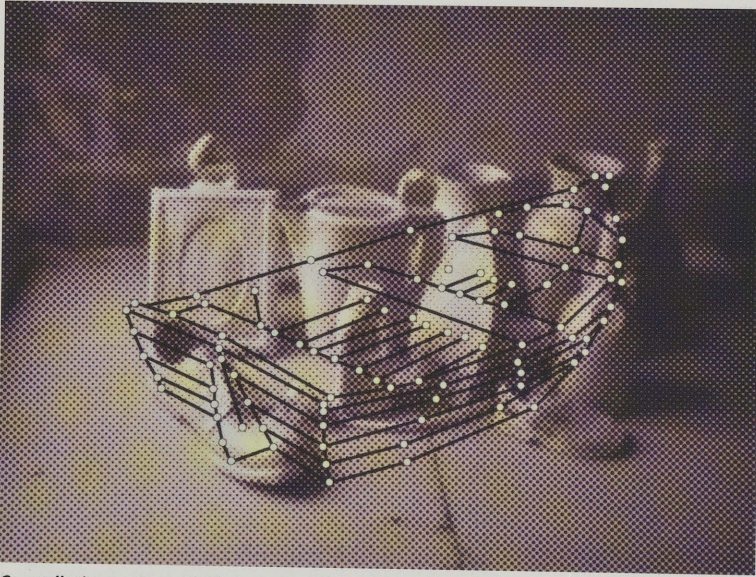
<sup>3</sup> One restriction needs to be made: I will concentrate in this essay on linear subjects, not dealing with more abstract subjects or works using mainly bold surfaces.

All these elements contribute to the unique character of traditional drawings, they are distinctive differences not only between different artists but also within the work of the same draughtsman. Roughly the same applies to any kind of more traditional prints, although some important differences are noticeable. Not all the lines can be assigned to a particular stage within the process of engraving, etching or cutting. In some cases, the temporal character remains invisible, is hidden behind something else. However, the differences between a drawing board or a printing plate and a screen or keyboard is fundamental. It goes much beyond any kind of physical or philosophical description, it deeply affects the perception and the way in which the works are created. For a traditional drawing (or a print), a wide range of decisions need to be made even before starting the work itself: the kind of paper to be used and its size, the drawing medium (or a combination of various media), an initial idea, the subject of the composition, where to start the work and in which direction the drawing should develop (from top left to bottom right for example, or from the centre to the borders of the sheet or vice versa). These decisions can be revised at every stage of the actual drawing: a direction can be changed, a line can be reinforced or even erased (at least in some media), but they continue to be visible, they bear witness to the production process. The whole lapse of time of the creation becomes evident, not just as a final result, but as a practice in itself.



*My Father's Coat I* 1994 Etching

Working in a digital medium is not simply a different approach but opens up entirely new possibilities. Coldwell describes his process on many occasions. In the first instance, he had to learn how to make digital drawings, how to use several tools and to get used to a different process of working. A few basic decisions need to be taken, but a few fundamental distinctions change the way in which digital works are produced. For the print *My Father's Coat*, Coldwell had to learn how to deal with some elements, although he admits not feeling comfortable and making the process



*Constellations - Boat* 2002 Inkjet

too complicated. He had to familiarise himself with the creation of layers, «how to determine the character of a line; draw and remove»<sup>4</sup>, but only after an artist-in-residence period in Madrid, away from the computer, was he able to process this new knowledge. He then came back to London and started working on this series.<sup>5</sup> However, one of the major differences between such digital drawings and more

traditional techniques is however that any step can be reversed without leaving a sign. Decisions can be made at later stages, changed back, combined, modified, if necessary erased, and all without the process of creation becoming visible. There is a constant progress of the image on the screen, but through the work in layers and steps, it will not become as evident as in a more traditional work on paper. The act of drawing, taking off any temporary connotation, defines a slow progress, and can become increasingly impersonalised. As the line is basically not even a mechanical line, but digital information, everything, which reveals movement, such as speed, hesitation or emotion, is missing. This exclusion of any personal approach has led in some cases to a use of dot patterns, which seem at a first glance rather arbitrary, but which are placed in a way corresponding somehow to the hatching or the setting of lines in a traditional drawing. The dots, or more generally any kind of line (in some cases also the grids and nets), constitute a kind of objective information, bare of any gesture or of individual characteristics. However, they include the potential feature of being repeated, of creating a distinct pattern, of enhancing the visual

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4 *Finding spaces between Shadows - Surface Layering Memory*. Inaugural lecture Camberwell College of Arts and Chelsea College of Art & Design, The University of the Arts London by Paul Coldwell, 7 or 8 March 2005. - I would like to thank Paul Coldwell for having made this text available to me.

5 *Finding spaces between Shadows*, op.cit.

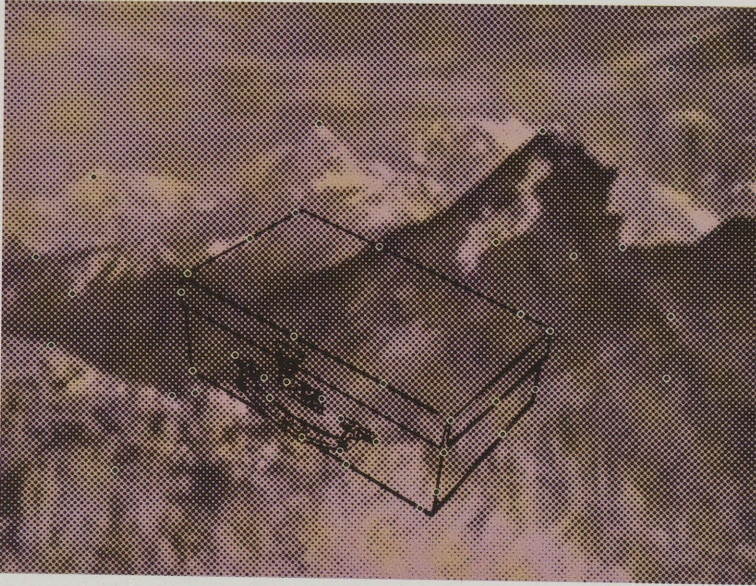
information given in the basic image and they can therefore strengthen the image. Coldwell often uses photographs as a basis for his prints. Over these photos he lays grids or patterns, not in a mechanical way, but taking particular care to balance and enhance the primary image and to create a new view, which is less oriented towards a single understanding, but which offers a multiple and parallel reading of the image. A particularly interesting example of this process is provided by the prints from the 2002 *Constellation* series. Coldwell combines here a photograph, a line drawing and two dot-patterns, one for the overlaying structure (the photographic half tone) and a second as a basis for the more linear approach of stellar constellations.

## The physical production of the image (printing and appearance)

While during the creation of the image, the process of drawing or assembling is predominant, at a later stage the transfer from file to paper or to any support becomes an issue. Hence, the question arises, how to print a file after having created it. In principle two ways exist to print any kind of electronic imagery, either with computer printing devices, such as plotter printers, inkjet printers, laser-jet printers or any other direct digital output, or turning the image into a more traditional form, using printing plates or even printing blocks. When Coldwell started to produce digital prints, the technology was not yet well advanced and the results were rather disappointing. In particular the inks were dye based and fugitive and the range of available papers limited. As a result, in many cases he transferred the image onto photosensitised plates, he etched them in a traditional way and then he printed them as conventional intaglio prints. At first glance, using digital technologies to produce an image, but sticking to more traditional printing forms seems to be a contradiction. However, beside the technical limitations of a few years ago, there is an important difference in the appearance and in the possibilities of the two approaches.<sup>6</sup> The main distinction resides in the end treatment and appearance of the surface, of the result Coldwell wants to achieve, as he pointed out on various occasions. This has direct consequences for the perception of the artwork itself that he wants to stimulate. Although each physical emanation uses a digital file as a starting point, the surface and appearance of digital printing is very different from more traditional techniques. This is partly due to different inks, their fluidity and opacity, and partly

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<sup>6</sup> See also the discussion by Ben Thomas in this volume.



*Sites of Memory - Suitcase* 2006 Screenprint

to the different papers needed for the two approaches. Therefore, the main issue is not only how to physically produce the object, with various economical, aesthetic or intellectual advantages for a certain project, but also what implications the choice of one or other type of printing has.

One of the main properties of any digital image is that it is flattened. The space within the image is purely

optical, it never includes any kind of physical space and it never includes any notion of time. While drawings or lines on printing plates often overlap and therefore create real three-dimensional effects, the various parts of a digital image basically always lie in the same spatial level. In this respect, the creative timelessness of a digital file finds a parallel in its spatial definition. The only exception is represented by a slight difference in the ink accumulation, when structures or parts of the image overlap, but any combination of two or more parts of the composition are taken into the same physical level. There is no overprinting, no continuous creation of the various parts. Not even the time needed to print the image itself remains visible and the different colours, if needed, are printed at the same time. This becomes very explicit when comparing a digitally produced image to a traditional one. Even if the visual base is digital, the printing itself constitutes already a kind of spatial effect, important for the perception of the artwork. This whole process is furthermore complicated by the fact that the overlapping parts of the images in Coldwell's prints do not constitute a continuous space. If any exists, this is defined by the photographic base, by the software used to establish the file and not by a printing process distinguishing layers or colours and keeping visible the time needed to create the elements of the final result. While any kind of direct electronic printing embodies this particularity - ie. the flatness of the image and the merging of various parts into one surface - the distinction of appearance is only due to the paper surface itself. With more

traditional techniques however, this relation between surface and image is different. His screen-prints, such as *Sites of memory*, or even any kind of combination of digital processes and relief-printing, such as the latest *Still Lives*, create a different surfaces, enhancing certain parts of the image, while others remain untouched. The major difference consists here of the two appearances of the surfaces, the visual distinction between various parts of the



*Still Life with hair grip and paper clip* 2012 Inkjet + Lino cut

image, something which is only achievable in any kind of combination of printing techniques or the more traditional approaches. Such distinction can produce puzzling effects and often brings forward particular parts, intensifying certain intellectual elements, but without neglecting others. However, digital printing or combinations of digital output with relief printing and intaglio prints, not only shows different surfaces, but also displays proper three-dimensional effects of inking and flattening paper. With the transfer of digital images onto more traditional printing plates, the depth of the image increases, the surface is different from digital printing and the discrepancy between the image and its appearance creates a particular tension having important consequences for the perception of the works.

## The visual and intellectual depth of digital prints

The reuse of photographic images is neither a new phenomenon arising from the development of digital images,<sup>7</sup> nor are overdrawn images or overlaid grids

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Andreas Schalhorn (ed), *Neue Realitäten. FotoGrafik von Warhol bis Havekost*, exh.cat. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (10 june - 9 october 2011) and Galerie Stihl Waiblingen (18 february - 27 march 2012), Cologne: Wienand, 2011 and Martin Engler (ed.), *Malerei in Fotografie. Strategien der Aneignung*, exh.cat. Städel-Museum, Frankfurt am Main (27 june - 23 september 2012), Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2012.



*Chairs - Recollections* 1993 Etching/aquatint

something which occurred only a few years ago.<sup>8</sup> However, these phenomena become increasingly visible and much easier to use. The basic question is therefore not what this implies on a technical level or how it could be linked into a more general history of grids, patterns or use of digital images, but what somebody like Coldwell can achieve and which particularities arise. It is evident that these various questions are heavily interlinked and that they partly depend on each other: any distinction would here be artificial, but may help to understand the process of creation and the intention of the production.

Very often, the choice of a particular subject shows the deeply personal concerns of an artist, his interests, ideas and thoughts. It may be an unconscious approach, something which may not be remembered at a later stage, but

that is nevertheless important within the creation of an artwork. Three main subjects come to mind from an overview of Coldwell's prints, drawings and sculpture: space, time and individuality (the latter either as its presence or its absence). Within the sculptural works and drawings it is rather difficult to have two or even three subjects united into one work of art. However, through the combination of images, the artist had exactly this possibility. But before merging the subjects, he needed to separate them. He stated once, that his prints are not cheap versions of his sculptures or drawings or just a manner of distribution: they have their importance in their own right as complete artworks resolved within their own language. Looking at the inherent complexity and at the properties of each type of objects, they keep indeed their independence, although there are certain affiliations and similarities. The three main subjects are interlinked, they are rarely put forward in an isolated way. At the beginning, when he was not yet overlaying drawings onto digital photographs, Coldwell created multiple layers of space through the arrangement

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<sup>8</sup> Ulrike Gross (ed.), *Rasterfahndung: das Raster in der Kunst nach 1945*, exh.cat. Kunstmuseum Stuttgart (5 may - 7 october 2012), Cologne: Wienand, 2012.



of objects. *My Fathers Coat* or the *Chairs* are typical examples of this approach. Coldwell draws objects overlapping each other, and then combines them with linear structures. These elements create a notion of space although no particular room is depicted. It is not a question of perspective, or of the objects' scale, but of visual combination. Despite their separation, these elements are perceived as being interlinked. The artist takes up existing ideas, especially the organisation of volume during cubism or orphism, or he refers to Giorgio Morandi's work, but without breaking entirely with the notion of picturesque space. This organisation might be seen as a conflict between figuration and a more abstract structure of space, but it is finally an attempt to push boundaries of perception further. The objects themselves do not appear as visually altered; however, their unusual combination breaks with all the rules and experience of western perception. Whilst the space is understandable, it is neither depicted nor broken up and frames a clearly readable allusion. When Coldwell started to combine drawings and photographs, he went a step further. In many cases he used photographs as a basic layer and superimposed an object. The photograph therefore defines a space, independent from the object, but nevertheless giving it a precise context, combining two spaces into one image. It becomes a simultaneous space, often combining an image relatively far away and a close-up one, something which would in reality not be possible. This merging of areas enables Coldwell to create a simultaneity of perception, with various images constituting neither a spatial concept nor a narrative or a linear one. They share a parallel structure, refer to different aspects without excluding elements from the images. At the same time, this allows Coldwell to extend his field of subject, to use multiple images and therefore to enhance the intellectual depth of his works. Suddenly, the layers of the image question the perception itself as well as the relationship between elements, layers and their relation. In some cases, it might seem a relatively obvious combination at first glance, for example within the series *Sites of Memories* or *Still lives*; but in all cases, these combinations open up new ideas, new insights and question a more conventional understanding.

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