Swim

Art 620: Senior Comprehensive Project

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Artist's Statement

"We see in order to move, we move in order to see." --William Gibson

Movement is an essential element of life and yet so few pay attention to the motion created by people and other living things. My work explores the varied movements of sea creatures, and the way their forms interact with the water around them, through a traditionally static medium, printmaking. The steps in the process of relief printing mimic how the movement of the animal comes into being.

Movement is all around us. Every living thing is constantly in motion all of the time and yet we do not often notice the movement all around us. My work explores the varied movements of seas creatures specifically and the way they interact with the water around them. I present this idea in a traditionally static medium, relief printing. The steps on the process of creating the prints mimic how the movement of the animal comes into being.

My initial goal was to show that the steps involved in making a relief print mimic movement through the use of stop motion animation. The action of cutting away at the block, one mark at a time, allows the cuts and lines to move across the paper, like the movement of an animal. This type of motion is often ignored in much the same way that few people pay close attention to the majestic movement of the jellyfish or the powerful stroke of the sea turtle. People are constantly in motion in one form or another but rarely even think about it. In fact, all living creatures are moving constantly; life and motion become more or less one and the same. Each animal moves in its own unique manner and each movement, each motion, is specific, has a certain reason for its occurrence, and is mesmerizing in its own way.

The art of stop motion animation involves the repetitive act of creating a small amount of work—for me, a few cuts of the block—then taking a photograph, creating a little bit more, taking another photograph, and so on. The photos are then put in succession to create the illusion of motion. A well-known artist in this form of filmmaking is South African artist William Kentridge. Working mostly with charcoal and pencil, he constantly draws and erases so that his drawings move and transform (Art:21). His works often tell narratives as political or social commentary (Figure 1). Kentridge described his own work by saying he had and "interest in seeing [his] drawings in progress...what is interesting about doing the animated films is that it's a

way of holding on to all the moments and possibilities of the drawing" (Kentridge 12). My prints actually show the different moments in the process and what came from them.

The most striking difference between Kentridge's work and my own is the medium and how it can be used. An integral part of drawing is erasure. In an interview, Kentridge says, "The process of redrawing and erasure means that each drawing is poised in a state of uncertainty. Each stage of the drawing carries with it the visual memory of its recent past" (Cameron 19). The ability to erase is a luxury that does not exist in relief printmaking. A cut is permanent; it can have a cut made over it, but it cannot be undone. At the same time, both of these processes have the ability to show movement.

It seemed natural to me then that stop motion and printmaking could be combined to portray the movement of animals. A stop motion animation allows the artist to give apparent motion to a still form. Likewise, the actual physical action of creating a print is understood to be an integral part of the final product. The combination of the process of filming a stop motion animation and the process of creating a relief print are both individually evocative of movement. The two art forms together then amplify each other.

Relief printing involves the cutting away of the flat surface of a linoleum block. Then the block is inked with a roller so that, when printed, the areas that have not been cut show up in the color of the ink, and the cut away areas stay the color of the paper. When creating a print, proofs of the block are generally printed before the final image is completed, in order to assess the progress of the image. Proof images are not usually displayed as final work though. I included these proofs, as well as the blocks, as part of the final body of work to highlight this process-driven nature of printmaking. The proofs themselves show the history of the block and the image. Though cuts have been made to transform the block, and in essence cover up its history,

the block remains an artifact of that history. The blocks have an energy that tells the story of the artist's motion and how the images were created and the blocks have a unique beauty because of that.

Having no experience in the area of stop motion and having very little experience with computer art, I soon realized that the project I had initially envisioned would be impossible to complete in one semester. Hours and hours of work go into making just a few seconds of stop motion films, a fact that I discovered after the semester started. I felt confident in my printmaking skills and so I translated my work from stop motion film to printmaking itself, preferring to work with a single process and explore how it could be used to meet my goals for the project.

My concept was still to show the motion of the animals through the process I was using. I thus chose to display the linoleum block and four separate prints of the block, in different stages of completion, from a plain uncut block to the final image, all in series. Additionally, two studies are displayed to the left of the grid of prints (Figure 2, 3). I created the 5" by 7" prints of the anemone and jellyfish originally as studies for the five larger blocks. In these studies I experimented with smaller, shallow cuts, given the nature of the animals depicted. The delicateness of the individual cuts indicates the subtle and elegant nature of the creatures themselves. The jellyfish, though its sting can be deadly, is a fragile creature. Likewise, the anemone, though a predator, has the appearance of an innocent underwater flower. In the five larger blocks a variety of marks were used. Each aspect of the image is different and as such, dictates that a mark specific to the representation of that element be used to create it. The image of the whale for instance, shows large, solid areas within the body of the whale, relating to the immense mass and power of the animal (Figure 4). The water spraying up around it though,

show a very different type of cutting: small and quick, random in a way, like the water drops themselves flying through the air.

With between 700,000 and one million species living in the ocean and as much as two thirds of all marine species still unknown to us, I wanted to focus specifically on this group of animals (Discovery News). I was a competitive swimmer for many years and always had a fascination with water; the way things move on and in it and how it can change something. So I chose to study animals that live in water and their motion through it. I researched each animal I chose to portray in order to learn more about them, and then watched videos of animals swimming. I then tried to suggest this motion with the marks I cut into the block. Read from left to right, the image begins as simply a series of marks, not any recognizable form, but comes more and more into being, like the motion of the creatures swimming.

Each of these animals swims and moves in a very different way. The jellyfish rhythmically pulsates, tendrils flowing behind it in a lazy, yet purposeful pattern. The stingray glides along the ocean's bottom, meandering gently and stealthily. The humpback whale pushes through the water gracefully, yet powerfully, its large mass moving with unexpected agility. The seahorse bobs and bounces smoothly through water plants, like a child's toy dipping in the surface of a bath basin. And the sea turtle's strong fins propel is through the waves with ease as it makes ventures to and from shore to lay its eggs. While each animal lives in a similar environment, it is the differences in their motion that are the distinction from one another.

My imagery for the project was inspired by many different artists. Because my artwork depicts different animals and how things change with time in a world constantly in motion, I was most influenced by other artist's whose work depicted motion in some way.

A significant influence in my work is the art of Blu. I found this artist's work when I planned to work with stop motion, but his imagery influenced my prints as well. An Italian artist who conceals his real name, Blu began working with graffiti and has worked across Europe, in the Middle East, and in Central and South America throughout his career (Blu). His work consists of large graffiti murals and exquisite stop-motion animation videos of his paintings (Figure 5). In the videos, consisting of numerous frames per second, the paintings themselves "travel" along sidewalks, across buildings, and around architecture. The shapes and figures shift and become abstracted to just a series of marks, and then form new shapes that move across the surface, transforming the stationary art of painting into an active experiment.

A recurring theme in Blu's work is dealing with the hidden human potential to achieve that lies within us all and how things may be more than they first appear, and then change with time (Blu). This seemed to fit well with my goal of showing motion in my work and how things change. In Blu's film *Muto*, for example, shapes begin to appear, shift, multiply, and eventually take a different form. A simple little cube will rapidly change from a diamond to a prism to sphere and back and then explode or people will grow out of unrecognizable creatures crawling along the sidewalk. Whole new people grow out of an individual's head, like an idea springing forth from one's thoughts. In addition to the actual artwork, Blu's films, which are made mostly within cities, do not try to hide when part of the environment changes, but instead embrace it. If someone leans a bike against the wall he is working on or if people walk in front of the wall, Blu just leaves it to be shown in the film (Blu). The ephemeral nature of his work emphasizes the constant motion of day-to-day life in both these ways.

Another artist whose art depicts motion is Giacomo Balla. Born in 1871 in Turin, Italy, Balla began work in a commercial lithography shop at age seven to help support his mother after

his father's death (Robinson 1). The artist was enrolled in an art program for three years, a part of his life that was later said to influence his art both in terms of subjects matter, and the amount of preparatory studies he used for his compositions. He often painted portraits and caricatures. Under the teaching of Boccioni and Severini, Balla gained knowledge of Divisionist techniques but later became part of the Futurist movement. His work often showed a painterly style, as influenced by the Impressionists, which still defined spatial depth and had an element of realism in it (Robinson 3).

In 1912, Balla painted *Dynamism of Dog on a Leash*, depicting superimposed images of a small black dog walking next to a figure (Figure 6) (Robinson 88). He attempted to show movement by showing the same form repeated in different positions across the whole range of motion. The dog's legs and tail, the person's feet, and the leash become almost a blur, showing traces of where the object was like ghost images. The artist quoted *Pittura futurista. Manifesto tecnico* (Robinson 89):

> "A form is never motionless before us, but it constantly appears and disappears. On account of the persistency of an image upon the retina, moving objects multiply themselves, become deformed, follow each other in succession, like vibrations in the space through which they travel."

The repeatedly drawn layers created depth and show an abstraction towards deeper realism. Another painting, titled *The Hand of the Violinist*, also painted in 1912, shows similar ideas (Figure 7). The indistinct motion of superimposed images of a hand along the neck of a violin is done mostly in browns, yellows, and black, and shows every position at which the hand was while playing the instrument (Robinson 89).

It is the representation of intangible ideas that interests me most in Balla's work. To be able to show how light travels, or how an object or animal moves, is not easily done in a still art form. However, by creating an image that is the product of layering several images atop one another, shows the progression, not only of the object depicted, but also of the artist's action in creating the work. An element I chose to emphasize, Balla was able to depict motion by revealing the movement of the artistic process.

Though her work does not necessarily deal with motion as directly, I have been interested in the relief prints of Karen Kunc for a while now, and especially in her use of bright colors and organic forms (Figure 8). A repeated theme within her work is life's constant struggle with endurance and vulnerability and growth. Her prints represent the forces of nature and how they can change the natural landscape over time and how, in turn, that shapes our own worlds, both literally and figuratively (Kunc). Kunc is influenced by her environment, living in a rural area in Nebraska (Cunningham 69). She acknowledges both the idea of showing space and creating movement in her work (Kunc). Kunc explains her work as that which "involves the use of ambiguous spatial illusions rather than a logical view of objects in real space" and specifically describes her mark-making process as being "...like handwriting: personal, spontaneous, and in motion" (Cunningham 69-70).

Another artist, James McNeill Whistler, worked primarily with intaglio printing. Born in Massachusetts, Whistler attended West Point military school, but spent much of his time pursuing his art, hoping to same day be an artist (Lochnan 1). The artist spent much of his life working in Great Britain and was said to follow an "art for the sake of art" philosophy that art should not be made for any utilitarian purpose, but simply for the sake of creating something and it aesthetic value thereafter. He worked with lithography, etchings, and dry points, as well as

painting landscapes and portraits. He was said to take great care in the choice of materials for the printing of his etchings, overseeing, much if not all, of the process (Heilbrunn). His work often focused on lines rather than color and was very dark or very light in value. He worked both with precision of the line and with techniques such as mezzo-tinting and intentional plate-tone (Figure 9). This variety in the type of printmaking is part of what makes his images so exciting. The artist is said to have listed traditional Japanese woodcuts and photography among his influences (Lochnan 87). Unlike many other artists, including Giacomo Balla, Whistler did not work consistently on a piece. He would begin the work, change it significantly, completely abandon it at times, and then come back and work diligently for a while, until the work was done (Heilbrunn).

There was an exhibition of Whistler's work, specifically his prints, at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh last August through November. The gallery showed the progression of his imagery and techniques over the course of his artistic career. Whistler's work shows mastery of the art of printmaking as well as a conscious sense of composition to create compelling images (Heilbrunn). His work shows both detail and texture in artistic form. My work, too, attempts to push the process of printmaking to new limits in terms of showing texture and showing movement by mark making and attention to detail.

Robert Cumming, another Massachusetts born artist, works in photography, sculpture, painting, and printmaking (Robert Cumming). His relief prints look strongly at line and how variation in line work can create different forms and shapes on the surface of the block and then in the print. He often works in black and white and his images include organic forms. Few areas of the block are completely carved away; instead lighter areas of the images are created with the

repeated use of similar lines. Many of the works deal with structural subject matter and include a wide range of colors and geometries.

It was the quality of line that originally drew me to Cumming. In a relief print it is often easier to create a contrast in light and dark by carving away large areas of the block. But in order to get more different values within a piece, care must be taken to create unique cuts that give the impression of lights and darks in various tones. His images have a sense of tension in them that makes them compelling and the amount of detail involved makes the viewer want to explore the piece more closely.

My work presents a series of animals in apparent motion through the depiction of the steps in the printmaking process. Life is constantly in motion, living things surround us, and everything is always moving. Inspired by other printmakers and artists who depict movement in their work, my work draws attention to this in a way that shows both the image and the actions necessary to create the image. In William Gibson's words "we see in order to move, we move in order to see." My work has been a journey to learn about different animals, discover new ways of using printmaking and how to view these things differently. My prints show how I see movement, and, in turn, my prints have moved me to see differently.

Illustrations



Figure 1
William Kentridge
Drawing from “Stereoscope”
1998-99
Charcoal, pastel, and colored pencil on paper
47 1/4’’ x 63’’
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art, with special contributions from Anonymous, Scott J. Lorinsky, Yasufumi Nakamura, and The Wider Foundation



Figure 2
"Study of an Anemone"



Figure 3
"Study of a Jellyfish"



Figure 4
"Humpback whale"



Figure 5
Blu
"Untitled Wall"
2011
Paint on cement wall
Dimensions unknown



Figure 6
Giacomo Balla
"Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash"
1912
Oil on canvas
35 3/8" x 43 1/4"
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York



Figure 7
Giacomo Balla
"The Hand of the Violinist"
1912
Oil on canvas
22" x 30 3/4"
Estorick Collection



Figure 8
Karen Kunc
"Welling Rain"
2003
woodcut print
46 3/4" x 24 3/4"
Museum of Nebraska Art, Kearny, NE



Figure 9
James McNeill Whistler
"Little Venice"
1880
Etching
7 1/4" x 10 3/8"
Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

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