

Stressed Ink Monotypes by Paul Trachtman

How the process works

Stressed Ink monotypes begin as viscosity prints, in which an image is drawn into ink of a drippy, thin viscosity rolled out over a plate. A second layer of stiffer, thick inks is rolled across the plate, altering the initial image. At this stage, the interactions of thick and thin inks can yield luminous effects, which are caught on paper if the plate is printed.

A print made at this stage is called a viscosity monotype, and only one, unique print is usually obtained from the plate.

Making a Stressed Ink monotype requires sacrificing the viscosity print. Instead of printing the plate onto paper, it is set on a press and additional inks are pressed into the inked surface, with effects relating to the natural phenomena of turbulence and chaos. In some cases, this may destroy the image, and all is lost. When it works, the stressed interaction of inks leaves traces of wild eddies, whirls and fractal patterns that give the imagery a lifelike complexity. The stressed ink expresses the excited dynamics of nature.

A quote from James Gleick's book, *Chaos*, may help to explain this process. The passage refers to the philosopher Theodor Schwenk who coined the term "sensitive chaos" to describe the relation between force and form: "To Schwenk, vortices meant instability, and instability meant that a flow was fighting an inequality within itself, and the inequality was 'archtypical.' The rolling of eddies, the unfurling of ferns, the creasing of mountain ranges, the hollowing of animal organs all followed one path, as he saw it. It had nothing to do with any particular medium, or any particular kind of difference. The inequalities could be slow and fast, warm and cold, dense and tenuous, salt and fresh, viscous and fluid, acid and alkaline. At the boundaries, life blossoms."

In making Stressed Ink monotypes, I am setting up the chance for such instabilities to illuminate a unique print, and when it works, life blossoms.

Inventing these prints

For a painter, the monotype is a seductive way of making prints--spontaneous, unique, and a little out of control. In my early experiments with printmaking, I was struck by the exquisite sense of light in Degas' monotypes, and wanted to know about his techniques. Degas kept his own secrets, a curator told me, but pointed me towards an obscure doctoral monograph from the Fogg Museum in Boston. The monograph didn't reveal Degas' secrets. Then I got the chance to spend a few weeks staring at Degas' monotypes in a show at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, across the Mall from the Smithsonian Institution where I worked. It was the prints themselves that told me what I wanted to know, and each night I went to work in my studio like an apprentice, trying out what I'd learned that day from the master.

My next such master was a legendary printmaker of the earlier 20th Century, Stanley William Hayter, whose "Atelier 17" in Paris was home to Picasso, Braque and other artists who were discovering new ways of printing. Hayter invented a technique he called "Viscosity Printing," in which an etching plate is first rolled with a drippy ink that seeps into the cut or etched lines. After the surface of the plate is wiped, a roller with stiff inks of other colors is rolled across the plate. The drippy ink left in the etched lines rejects the thick ink, like oil and water, but the wiped off surface areas take on the new colors. A printmaker friend introduced me to this technique and suggested trying it with monotypes, for which no lines are cut in the plate. I rolled out a layer of drippy ink and made a drawing on the plate by removing some of the ink, using a chopstick to draw the lines and rags or brushes to wipe away areas. Then I rolled a layer of stiff inks, in different colors, across the plate and printed this plate onto dampened paper. When I lifted the paper off the plate, I was hooked. The inks were alive with their own nature, accepting and rejecting each other in unexpected ways, offering me new ways to approach my subject, which is always light, and the movement of light that moves us. New discoveries followed with every new print, and still do.

Degas and Hayter are hard masters, but nothing prepared me for my encounter with William Blake. I was in a back room at the National Gallery, talking to one of the print conservators, when I noticed a Blake lithograph on her desk, out of its frame. After hesitating, I asked if I might pick it up to examine it more closely. "Sure," she said, and put it into my hands. The flows of inks across

the sheet were so complex, subtle ,and changing, that I couldn't imagine how Blake had done it. So I asked. "No one knows," the conservator said. "Blake didn't leave any notes." As an afterthought she tossed off the words: "There's a theory that he printed two plates together."

What did that mean? I had no idea, but made a note of it. Years later, now living and working in the north of New Mexico, painting in the extraordinary light that flows across landscapes and through people's lives, I remembered that old note and decided to see what it might mean. In the years since, my investigations of what Blake might have done have led me to develop the process I call Stressed Ink monotypes. Whether Blake did anything similar or not, the process is revealing magical ways of working with the materials and energies of printmaking.

It's giving me new ways to express my love of a place that sustains my own life and spirit.