Direct silkscreen printing: a new direction

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The University of Montana

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DIRECT SILKSCREEN PRINTING: A NEW DIRECTION

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. THE DIRECT TECHNIQUE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THEORY</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. MATERIALS NEEDED FOR SILKSCREENING</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSPARENT BASE</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. PREPARATION AND MIXTURE OF SCREEN PROCESS INKS FOR DIRECT SILKSCREEN PRINTING</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. THE SPECTRUM OF COLORS NECESSARY TO DEVELOP RICH PRINTS USING THE DIRECT TECHNIQUE</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. PRELIMINARIES OF THE DIRECT TECHNIQUE</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. DEVELOPMENT OF LANDSCAPE AND FIGURE COMPOSITIONS UTILIZING THE DIRECT SILKSCREEN TECHNIQUE</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLOSSARY</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Tools and Materials for Direct Silk-screening</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Palette of Colors with Plastic Covers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Palette of Colors and Transparent Base</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>General Stencil and Silkscreen</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Development of Mountain Images</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Creation of Bird Images</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Pulling Squeegee on Landscape</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Squeegeed Print</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Landscape Composition</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Application of Inks and Transparent Base in Order to Create a Figure Composition</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Squeegeed Figure Composition Utilizing Transparent Base as a Block-out</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Completed Figure Composition</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Application of Inks to Create a Figure Composition</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Completed Figure Composition</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Utilization of Texture in a Landscape Composition</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Utilization of Texture in a Figure Composition</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Composition Utilizing Cloud Effects</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Composition</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Composition</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I. THE DIRECT TECHNIQUE

INTRODUCTION

With all of the options and alternatives to create a work of art, I find printmaking to my liking. In printmaking, I find that screen process printing or serigraphy offers the greatest challenge, potential, and the widest range of creative possibilities. It is the one printmaking process that I enjoy working with the most.

It is necessary that the potential serigraphist (the creative screen process printer) shed all conventional attitudes about printmaking, especially silkscreening, before attempting the Direct technique. This is not to say one must or should forget all about the basic fundamentals of the conventional way to create a print. These conventional techniques are the basis for all that will be done in the unorthodox, Direct silkscreen printing medium.

Direct silkscreen printing consists of the conscious application of inks, of various colors, directly to the screen in order to create an harmonious composition. It evolved out of the need to become freer and more effective in the utilization of the screen as a creative medium. It
also evolved out of the need to eliminate too many unimpor-
tant in-between stages of development in a print. Time
and energy are now spared primarily for the production of
a print. The search for directness was a main factor in
the discovery and development of the Direct technique.

Another factor in the development was trying to
break away from the total confinement of, and dependency
on, the limited conventional stencil.

A couple of techniques in Direct screen printing
were discovered by accident. One incident was not mixing
inks and transparent base thoroughly. Through this acci-
dent, I discovered that inks and base did not mix on the
screen. Further experiments revealed that various ratios
of inks to base reacted differently. Foliage and textural
effects were discovered by accidentally dropping ink on a
print, drying to resemble skeletal foliage forms. This
was due to the shrinkage of the thick color. These and
other techniques were discovered by accident, experimen-
tation, and hard work.

In order to understand the Direct technique more
thoroughly and to gain a working knowledge of it, it will
be necessary to deal with specific ways to create various
images, and, at the same time, gain some insight in compo-
sitional development.
II. THEORY

The theory underlying the Direct technique is that silkscreen process inks of various colors and viscosities (mixed with transparent base in different percentages) do not readily mix together on the silkscreen.

Approaching the silkscreen medium on this premise, it is possible to place large amounts of different colored inks on the screen at the same time and not be concerned about them mixing immediately, forming one muddy color. Experimentation has proven that the screen process inks in their various mixtures flow and glide over other areas of color that are already on the screen. They also flow around each other (while being pulled with the squeegee) acting as part of a stencil for each other, confining the other to a particular area on the screen and the print.

With this concept in mind, the serigraphist is allowed to control inks without the means of conventional stencils such as paper stencils, blockout, film, etc. The artist utilizes this new concept to enable him to make color flow and print in a predetermined way.

The name of the game in screen process printing is control. Ink is forced to remain in a predetermined
area to create an image. This can be done through the utilization of conventional stencils, or as in the Direct technique, by placing colors next to each other directly on the surface screen, in the desired area.

This knowledge lends to the manipulation of colors, squeegee, and screen in order to create an image with direct screen printing.

On the assumption that one will not attempt the Direct silkscreen method until he or she has the basic knowledge and techniques of serigraphy, I find it unnecessary to go into all definitions and descriptions of the basic tools and techniques.

A few definitions and the re-defining of terms are included in the glossary of this text.
III. MATERIALS NEEDED FOR SILKSCREENING

The materials that are needed for the Direct silk-screen printing technique are the same as those used for conventional techniques. They are the silkscreen and screen process inks (5500 series by Naz-Dar are recommended highly). There are several brands of silkscreen inks on the market today, of which I feel Naz-Dar is the best. Even though the 5500 series of inks by Naz-Dar are recommended, there are many different types and brands that are available for the many tasks confronting the screen process printer and serigraphist (creative silkscreen printer). These inks will perform the task that would be similar to the 5500 series, but the transparent base by Naz-Dar seems to work best in direct screening.

The other materials and equipment include squeegee, general stencil, solvents, clean rags, newspapers, printing papers, masking tape, tin cans, spatulas, and plastic gloves. **Cleanliness in printmaking is a must.** Baggies and rubber bands should be included as covers for the colored inks that have been placed in working containers. The artist may choose to use squeeze-type plastic bottles for applying colors, if the budget allows. (Figs. 1 and 2.)
IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSPARENT BASE

Transparent base is one of the most important ingredients in direct silkscreen printing (Fig. 3). It is the means to create white and open areas in a print. It is very important also because it allows colors to flow freely across the silkscreen simultaneously together without fusing and mixing. The transparent base works as a blockout when applied directly to the screen (Fig. 11). It allows no color to penetrate in that specific area. Finally, transparent base enables the artist to create depth in the silkscreened composition.
V. PREPARATION AND MIXTURE OF SCREEN PROCESS INKS FOR DIRECT SILKSCREEN PRINTING

The preparation and mixture of silkscreen inks should be completed the day before printing, because it is essential that the inks settle and blend together thoroughly with the transparent base. Another reason is that it is an energy- and time-consuming effort.

A mixture of colors and percentages of transparent base is a must for a direct method such as this. The amount of transparent base used in inks is determined by the artist and the effects desired in a particular composition. The range of colored ink and base that I employ are two (2) parts transparent base to one (1) part ink for the least amount of base used, and twelve (12) to one (1) for the most base used. Continuous experimentation by the serigraphist will reveal other suitable ratios of transparent base to ink.
VI. THE SPECTRUM OF COLORS NECESSARY TO DEVELOP RICH PRINTS USING THE DIRECT TECHNIQUE

The spectrum of colors that are used in my direct prints are fire red, primrose yellow, ultramarine blue, colbalt blue, brown, white, and black. All secondary and intermediate colors are obtained from these, enabling the artist to have a wide range of colors on his palette. In utilizing the Direct technique, I find it necessary to have four or more values of colors varying in transparency (Fig. 3). My palette consists of four values of black; four of blue; four of brown, orange, yellow, whites, and ochre; and four values of green.

Again, I repeat that transparent base and its utilization with colored inks is essential in the Direct method of silkscreening.
VII. PRELIMINARIES OF THE DIRECT
TECHNIQUE

In Direct silkscreen printing the manipulation of space, color, form, line, and texture are dealt with. The serigraphist must be conscious of and utilize the elements and principles of art, because they are basic to art and the printmaking processes. Therefore, in order to develop a silkscreen print, whether it be by means of a conventional technique or the Direct, the artist must have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the basic tools and the techniques of the medium, and the facility to use them.

Before starting a print, silkscreen or otherwise, one must make the necessary preparation that will guarantee a continuous and smooth-flowing printing session. The tools and materials needed should be in the printmaker's immediate reach (Fig. 1). Due to the fact that ninety-nine percent of the time the creative screen printer works alone, he must develop a system of working that makes it easy and convenient to handle the many tasks and problems of silkscreen printing.
VIII. DEVELOPMENT OF LANDSCAPE AND FIGURE COMPOSITIONS UTILIZING THE DIRECT SILKSCREEN TECHNIQUE

In the development of a landscape composition, the artist must arbitrarily consider the colors that he intends to utilize. He should think in terms of the amount of space that will be designated as sky; areas in which bird forms will be placed; the amount of space for water, foliage, mountains, and figure impressions. As a matter of fact, all images and their arrangements in the composition must be considered (Fig. 9 and Fig. 18).

To begin with, the serigraphist should have a general working area on the screen. This area may be circular, rectangular, square, or any shape the artist chooses to work within, as long as it allows enough room for printing. This general stencil or working area will predetermine the overall dimensions of the print only. It has nothing to do with the control of images or color combinations (Fig. 4).

It will take approximately fifteen minutes to create a small landscape that is seven inches in diameter. Seven minutes is needed for the application of inks and printing. Eight minutes goes into the thorough cleaning
of the silkscreen and squeegee after each print.

Development of the Images

**Bird images.** To produce bird images, dip spatula into the ink, let most of the ink drip off, letting the remainder that is on the spatula come to a drip. Once the small amount of ink hanging from the spatula is attained, touch the screen with it, moving downward (toward body) and then upward (away from body) as if you are making a check (√) mark (Fig. 6).

**Mountains and hills.** They are produced by placing pure screen process ink down the edge of screen (right or left side [Fig. 5]), then a mixture of transparent base and colored inks (5 to 1) is placed next to this, slightly behind the pure ink, overlapping it about an inch (Fig. 5). Mountains and hills are brought about because the ink has a tendency to repeat in the composition after about approximately three inches of pulling across the surface of the screen (Figs. 7-9).

**Clouds effects, whites and blank areas.** In order to produce cloud effects, white or blank areas in a composition, first place transparent base directly on the screen, in the area desired. The next step would be to squeegee other inks (sky area etc.) over the transparent base. The other colors or colors will flow around, and
glide over the area where transparent base is placed. White open areas or cloud effects are produced (Figs. 9 and 18).

Another technique used that will produce a similar effect of cloud impressions would be to splash water in the desired area of the composition and then squeegee. The image is created because of the principle of oil and water not mixing.

Foliage, tree, and island impressions. To accomplish various foliage, trees, islands, and textural effects, apply ink directly on the screen after colors of sky and land effects have been achieved. Let the ink set for a couple of seconds, press into the mass of ink with squeegee, and then lift screen slowly. The print will probably stick to screen. It should be pulled off of the screen bottom end first. When the screen is raised in vertical position, this would actually be the top of the composition.

The mixture of color for these textural impressions should consist of three parts (3) transparent base to one (1) part ink. The shrinkage of this mixture will create the impressions of skeletal tree, foliage, and island forms. All textural effects are developed in the same manner (Fig. 15).
Impression of human figures. To accomplish a composition of human figure impressions, first apply dabs of colored inks directly on the silkscreen (Figs. 10 and 13). These colors should vary in warmth and coolness, in value, intensity, size, etc. Apply transparent base on top and in between the various colors already on the screen. The next step is to apply color along the top of the screen (Figs. 10 and 13), usually without transparent base, then pull squeegee across the screen, causing the opaque color to flow around and over the many colors that were applied previously (Fig. 11).

The serigraphist can achieve a greater sense of depth in a figure composition by merely placing some subdued or grayed color in the top portion of the print, and warm and intense colors in the lower portion. Textures added in the lower portion of the composition, and a small amount added in the middle section, always enhance the creative print (Fig. 17).

In all prints, colors may be added after previous colors are thoroughly dry. This technique can add greater dimension to a print, or it can be used to eradicate any unwanted colors (Figs. 12 and 14).
Figure 13

Figure 14
IX. CONCLUSION

In concluding this text, I feel that it is only fitting to acknowledge the disadvantages and cite some advantages of the Direct technique. As in all of the printing processes, there are advantages and disadvantages, and the Direct method of silkscreen printing is no different.

One of the few disadvantages is that a limited number of identical prints are produced. It has been proven through experimentation that only three prints can be produced consecutively, of which the first is worthy to be labeled as a decent print. Another disadvantage is that inks and base are discarded after each individual print. This can become expensive. Thirdly, the screen must be cleaned after each direct print, but this consumes less time than the preparation of many stencils.

To cite the brighter side of the technique, the advantages seem to outweigh the disadvantages. One of the advantages is an infinite number of colors may be printed at the same time, eliminating the ordeal of producing a multitude of stencils, at the exclusion of building up layers of ink. Through this technique, images can be created directly on the screen, making it a rapid means
of producing a composition. At the same time, these images can be changed immediately without any great tasks.

The greatest advantage of all is that the screen can now be used as a more creative tool to bring about certain compositional effects. The creative possibilities of this technique outweigh all of the disadvantages associated with it, making it my favorite creative device in my reservoir of printmaking processes.

Finally, I must state that the development of the Direct silkscreen technique evolved from many sources, books, and experiences digested over the years, enabling the artist to experiment with knowledge, with an age-old process in a new and creative way.
GLOSSARY

Direct silkscreen printing. The conscious application of inks of various colors and viscosities (mixed with percentages of transparent base) directly to the screen, and the control of these inks without the means of a stencil, in order to create an harmonious screened composition.

Extender base. Should not be confused with transparent base. To give added mileage without affecting, materially, the viscosity of the ink to which it is added.

General stencil. An open area on the silkscreen through which the serigraphist prints, when using the Direct silkscreen technique.

Ink. Special processed colors, with the characteristics of paint, that are used to print images in screen process printing.

Screen process printing. The printing of images by means of stencils. It involves the principle of printing through a plate.

Serigraphist. The creative screen process printer.

Serigraphy. The art of creative screen process printing.
**Transparent base.** An oil base substance that is used for transparencies and to extend the inks. It enables inks to flow around and glide over other inks, without mixing, in the Direct screen technique.
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