Undercurrent

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UNDERCURRENT

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Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
Printmaking

The University of Montana – The School of Art
Missoula, MT

May 2011

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My thesis work references dynamic river processes as a metaphor for relationships and the processes by which these relationships form us as individuals. The images stem from my experience as a professional and recreational whitewater river guide (memories that were powerful in shaping my life) and observations of others candidly interacting.

I use river-like references (such as holes, deep pools, eddies, currents) with figurative images to explore the idea of surface and subsurface: the apparent and the obscure. Rivers, like people, have such a depth of current and dynamic change that gives them shape and form. Even with the most stable and seemingly unchanging river systems there are still small changes in flow, current, erosion and sediment transport that shape and carve the banks and boulders.

In order to navigate obstacles and dangers in a river one must learn to “read the water” or the surface of the water. What can be seen on the surface is such a small indication of what is happening in the undercurrent. When on the river, being able to see the various signs on the surface of the river can provide opportunities to protect yourself and others. These small tells not only allow you to avoid danger, but also allow you to enjoy the various features of the river to a fuller extent. Through experience one can learn to read and attempt to understand the surface tells to understand what is happening below the surface.

As with rivers, we as individuals are constantly being shaped through our relationships as well as participating in the shaping of those we interact with. These relationships, whether intimate or casual, are a significant human experience. My hope is that my work will draw attention to the process by which we as individuals are shaped by our relationships, and our importance to each other.
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**Undercurrent**

**Introduction**

At the height of the spring 2010 run off I was on a pedestrian bridge overlooking the swift turbid surface of the Blackfoot River in Western Montana. Even though not a cloud was in sight, I heard what sounded like heavy rain pounding on a windowsill. My husband (a fluvial geomorphologist) explained that the sounds came from the hundreds of rocks the size of bowling balls bouncing and slamming into one another as the river drove them downstream. I thought of those rocks as figures being constantly shaped by their jostling with one another. Even though I could hear this dynamic process happening, it was completely obscured from my vision. The only way to understand what was occurring below was to take clues from other subtleties the river surface revealed.

It was a powerful experience. Even though the river rocks had probably originated from a variety of upstream bedrock outcrops, they were there being moved together at the same time. As the rocks were moved by the external forces of the river’s current, their interaction with each other shaped them and the river itself into unique shapes. I saw a connection between the dynamic processes of the river and the dynamic processes that we experience in relationships. No matter where we come from, our interactions with others help to shape us as individuals. I became interested in how much influence others have on our development as individuals, and how much might we influence others. What importance and/or responsibility do we have in the shaping of one another?

The dynamic features of rivers are a perfect metaphor for human relationships and the processes by which these relationships form us as individuals. Rivers, like people, have such a depth of current and dynamic change constantly happening, shaping and forming them everyday. Temporally this change happens at different rates, however, even when everything appears calm there is still something being acted upon by the currents. What can be seen on the surface is such a small indication of what is happening in the undercurrent.
The main forces that drive the very happenings of the surface water and shape the geology are the currents that are generally unseen, or the subsurface (anything below the surface of the water). I began to explore the idea of surface and subsurface, or the apparent and the obscure. These forces at work are mostly unclear and very powerful and can be a metaphor for the subconscious as well as what is consciously hidden or obscured from others.

When one learns to read the river, to read the manifestations or “tells,” it can give insight as to what is happening beneath, warn of hidden dangers and give indications as to where the current will take you.

Part of the inspiration for my thesis work comes from spending many summers on various rivers in Utah, Colorado, Alaska, Montana and Idaho as a whitewater river guide. During these trips the safety and enjoyment of those who were with me—whether they were family members or clients whom I had very recently met—was my responsibility. I found it interesting that these clients were so quick to completely trust with their lives, in some very unpredictable and high-risk situations, someone that they had met less than an hour before. This instant and unearned trust was such a contrast to the caution with which I personally approach many of my relationships, testing and gauging the waters until I feel safe enough to enter in a little further. Being able to read the river comes with experience and time, much like being able to “read” another person. I believe that it is important to read these small tells to connect more fully with one another, respond to another’s needs, and also to see impending danger to protect yourself and others.

In *Others in Mind* Phillippe Rochat (professor of psychology at Emory University, Atlanta) argues the sense of self, or self-consciousness, is co-constructed in relation to others.” “It is impossible to conceive of a self outside of social experience (George Herbert Mead).” Self-consciousness, the representation of who we are, our identity, all
is co-constructed, arising from reciprocal exchanges with others.\footnote{1}{Philippe Rochat, \textit{Others in Mind: Social Origins of Self-Consciousness.} pg. 211 (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009)} He further discusses the importance that people have to each other:

From the outset, to be alive implies being with others. I start from the simple fact that without others, we \textit{would not be}. As infants we would not have survived. As adults, we would not have any explicit sense of who we are; we would have no ability, nor inclination to be self-conscious.\footnote{2}{Philippe Rochat, \textit{Others in Mind: Social Origins of Self-Consciousness.} pg. 2 (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009)}

He also talks of how the sense of self is a confluence of two perspectives: the embodied self (or first-person perspective) and what is actually publicly shared as the self (or third-person perspective).

What I hold in my mind as “me” is always a combination of both perspectives, never the sole representational product of one or the other. In a sense, what we end up representing about ourselves is the result of an elusive and always changing convergence between these two views, the view from within-the embodied, private view of the self- and the view from without-the allocentric view on the self through the evaluative eyes of others. The way we represent what we are is not to be found in one or the other perspective, \textit{but at their junction}, like the latitude and longitude lines crossing on a navigational map that tells sailors the objective position of their vessel on the ocean.\footnote{3}{Philippe Rochat, \textit{Others in Mind: Social Origins of Self-Consciousness.} pg. 27 (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009)}

How people see themselves is not only based on what \textit{they think} of themselves but also \textit{how others} see them (it is at their junction). People project what they \textit{want} others to see about themselves to get the results that they desire. This is done for a variety of reasons: to be accepted, for approval of others, recognition, to protect oneself emotionally or professionally, to show others their great value, etc.
Understanding that a good part of how you perceive yourself is based on how you think others perceive you, and how others treat you, is a powerful realization. That means that the way that you choose to interact with another human being will help either define them in a healthy, positive way, or diminish their perspective of their own self worth. One small hit, here and there, will probably not cause an instant dramatic effect on a person, causing them to have a permanent low self-perception of themselves. However like the river rocks it is still an influence on their shape and identity, and it is these continuous interactions with others that will eventually influence the development of a person’s perspective of themselves. Every interaction does count. Whether or not we are conscious of it, others do have a significant influence on our development as individuals.
Description of Process and Influences

My print process begins with an emotional response to an idea (either a memory or process from the river that to me illustrates a significant aspect of a relationship or I find an unique river process within the layering of the etched plates that sparks my memory of a candid interaction). These candid interactions are typically gained by observing my family members, friends or people connecting to each other.

I then take this memory or idea and translate it into line through the etching process. The original sketch is very simple, but the plate ends up becoming much more complex.

To make an etched copper intaglio plate is a lengthy process, particularly my approach which is very involved. The basic idea of etching is to use ferric chloride acid to etch, or “bite,” lines and texture into the copper, creating grooves and depressions which later will be filled with ink and then printed.

I prepare the copper plate (a thin sheet of roofing copper) by wet-sanding and cleaning it to remove all the grime and impurities. This allows the resist, or in my case the asphaltum hardground, to adhere to the now-prepared surface of the copper. The resist can be a number of materials, and can give several different effects. I gravitate towards simple line-work in my plates rather than combining line and texture. To me, line work is incredibly expressive and personal, like an individual’s handwriting. Later in the process my work becomes much more complex through layering of the print. I feel the need to balance the complexity of the multiple layers with the straightforwardness of line-work. I choose to work with the asphaltum based-hard ground, even though it is one of the most toxic choices, because I love the way it feels and responds. The hardground is applied with a brush in liquid form to the prepped surface of the copper plate and allowed to dry/set. It has a beautiful, deep amber color and a stiff, somewhat tacky texture with brush marks that are still visible. I then heat it up on a hot plate, causing the hardground to warm and partially melt to level the hardground until no brush marks are visible. Once cooled, the hard ground has become opaque, matte dark brown in color and much harder to the touch.
Many artists stop at this point and begin to draw and etch into the hardground as it will sufficiently resist the acid and hold lines. When drawing into the ground at this state, it still has a bit of a gummy, rubbery feel for which I do not care for. I take it another step further and “smoke” the plate. The copper plate is hung horizontally, hard-ground facing the floor. The flame of an old-school kerosene oil lamp is held up to the ground, the flame licking the hardground until it transforms from the dark matte to a dark mirror, reflecting the flame that has changed it. It is a beautiful process, but very slow. It takes time for the hardground to transform, so I move the lamp inch by inch, pausing frequently, across the copper. It is also an uncomfortable and taxing position physically, as the hot copper is directly overhead, so my neck is constantly craning skyward and my arms are overhead, being drained of all blood for an hour or more. But, to me, it is worth it!
Once cooled, the ground becomes very hard, and is an absolute pleasure to draw into. It feels like glass, and because the smoking effect strengthens it, it can resist the acid for longer before breaking down (or foul-biting) and can hold detailed line-work closer together. Using the etching needle (drawing tool) through this ground has a very fluid, delicious feeling. Similar to finding the perfect edge when snowboarding, it has a sense of unencumbered movement that can be captured into line on the plate.

To draw a line, or create a texture, designated areas of the copper must be exposed for the acid to “bite” (or eat away/dissolve), creating recessions in the copper which will be filled with ink and printed later. The longer the copper is exposed to the acid, the deeper and wider the mark will become. Once the desired lines and textures are drawn into the hardground, the plate is ready to be put into the acid bath and etched.

A common approach to etching is the “stop-out” method. The entire drawing, all wanted marks and texture, are drawn into the hardground and the plate is placed into a ferric chloride acid bath to eat away, or “bite,” the full image for a specific amount of time. The plate is then removed, rinsed of acid, dried, and a “stop-out” (a mixture that resists the acid and will dry quick and strong) is applied to areas that have been etched sufficiently. The plate is returned to the acid for another specific amount of time, and
the process is repeated until the artist is satisfied with the amount of etching in the plate. This etching method is commonly used because it is efficient and the outcome tends to be more predictable. The entire drawing on the plate is completed before the plate comes in contact with the acid, and areas where the stop-out will go have been pre-determined. While there are some adjustments that might be made to the image during the etching process the decision making about drawing the image for the most part has be finished and now simply needs to be etched into the copper.

I take a different and much less efficient approach to etching. Instead of drawing out the entire image onto copper and then stopping it out, I build it up, reacting to each round of “biting,” and build the image up more intuitively. I begin with an original concept for the finished image by sketching on paper, and then carefully choose selected lines to draw into the copper. These are the “bones” to the entire image, and I etch them for a very long time so that they are deep large rich lines when printed. Collectively these first few lines will have been etched for 4 hours or more. Once these initial lines have been etched, I rinse and dry the plate, and then draw the next layer of the drawing into the copper, or in my mind the “meat” or “muscle” of the image. I repeat this process until all the layers have been built up upon themselves to create a mature image of the original concept sketch.

As I am drawing the lines into the hard ground, I am responding to previously etched lines and thinking about the original concept of the work. It is a time consuming but therapeutic process for me. This approach to the etching allows for a more intuitive reaction to each step of the process. It allows opportunities for those “happy accidents,” made possible by working with this unique process, which would be lost or otherwise unseen.

Having always been drawn to line-work, in my work and the work of others, I developed a deep love for it after working with printmaker Koichi Yamamoto. Moving and decisive, the line-work in his prints is a powerful means of pure expression. His work, and his approach to printmaking, has greatly influenced my work and perspective. Koichi deals with the theory of the sublime. It was interesting to see how he constantly saw connections between the natural world and his art, even if was just making “good
strong lines” with our snowboards in the backcountry. To him it was similar to engraving a piece of copper and needed to be done whole-heartedly. Koichi introduced me to printmaking, and I was fortunate to have him as a mentor and a friend. It was because of his contagious passion for the printmaking processes and their limitless possibilities that I fell in love with printmaking. He revels in the physicality of the process, and the community that is built in a print studio. This contagious approach passed onto me. I learned much just working in the same studio with him. Full of never-ending, focused energy, he is an extremely prolific artist and adventurous in life. He was always looking to share his knowledge, experiment, and to challenge himself and those around him.

Figure 6: Koichi Yamamoto’s engraving “Crude Aspiration IV,” 2004.

Once while printing a lithography stone with Koichi, he likened the printing process to that of dance. That idea stayed with me, and I saw how it applies to other areas of printing, like my intaglio prints.
Once the plate has been etched (simplified version) the hard ground is removed and the plate cleaned to start printing. The plate is then carefully inked and wiped. Dampered paper is laid on the inked plate, covered with special blankets, and the whole setup is sent through the press. The immense pressure of the printing press forces the blanket and paper down into the depressed (etched areas of the plate) pushing the ink into the fibers of the paper.

A print can consists of a single layer or be comprised of multiple layers, depending on the desired end result. I approach the printing similarly to how I approach etching. I have a specific idea, or concept in mind, but I take it step by step, allowing the print process to add its unique properties. I look at the plates I have made, then ink up specific areas of the plates. Sometimes I use the entire plate and image, and sometimes, just portions of the image. I begin to print these selections, one at a time, layer upon layer, and develop the print until I feel that it is successful. The bits and pieces that are printed overlap, they engage or connect to build up a whole image from the pieces of other ones. Often during the process, I find a result that I was not completely expecting. This forces me to adapt, to build on a new outcome. It is a time-consuming, as well as an emotional and mentally consuming, process for me. For with each new layer, the work requires me to re-evaluate my previous decisions, and the effectiveness of those

*Figure 7: Selected stages of “Confluence”*
decisions. The line-work might result in a different feel or look than I had anticipated, or the layers of colors reacted unexpectedly. And because of the nature of the process and the unexpected surprises that happen, the print sometimes leads me to an outcome that I did not foresee.

Creating multiples is one of the basic principles that set printmaking apart from other practices in the art world such as painting and drawing. I find it hard to be satisfied creating multiples of the same images, even though I greatly admire the skill required for the needed consistency and how the multiplication of an image can be very powerful to one’s concept. Each print is a unique experience. Like a relationship that is close to my heart. Not only that, the experience that is undergone while creating the prints is as important to me as the finished piece. It is like a dance, and it feels impersonal and a bit phony to me to try and recreate the same experience again. While it is a tradition to use the print process and it’s natural personality to print multiples, I find the urge to move on to the next challenge rather than attempt to recreate old ones.

Another person that approaches printmaking in this manner is John Armstrong. It was a great opportunity to be able to spend time in the studio with him when he was a visiting artist. His process and prints greatly influenced my process and work. I loved the dance of give and take with the print process and the possibilities that his techniques offered. I admire the complexity through layering, and use of stencils he uses. He takes such a genuine joy in the process of making his plates and prints, like me, he reacts to each print layer by layer. Even though his prints originated from the same plate, by the time he was done with his involved and spontaneous process each print had it’s own personality. I saw a metaphor to this approach: similar to how so many personalities can come from the same family, each child becoming a unique individual even though originating from the same parents.
I love the print process, from creating the plate to the final printed image, because of the influence of the process itself has on the images. There is a partial relinquishment of control when using these processes, and it can have beautiful consequences. I am keen on being surprised as I work, even if all the surprises are not happy ones! There are some surprises that are worth all the frustration of the unwanted ones. Accepting the process, and loving it for what it is, is a metaphor for human relationships. There has to be some relinquishment of control or openness to finding something great. This is why I print. The process forces me to give up some control, to see my work differently in every step of the journey and to find an understanding and connection with the changes. It challenges me, and allows me to take my work to places that I would not consciously go on my own. The process itself is a metaphor for meaningful relationships.

As I began to work on Undercurrent I became more aware of my own choices, of what I was choosing to present to others and what I chose to keep private. I wanted to be open in my work with experiences and memories; to share with others what had been so meaningful to me. Through the abstraction processes in my work, both in
etching the copper plates and during the printing process, I became more open and vulnerable with the content of the images.

In my work for Undercurrent I continued to pair the metaphors of river features to my observations about relationship aspects with others. I explored and utilized levels of abstraction, layering and color usage to create unique, individual prints all originating from a limited number of plates.

I began to etch plates with drawings of candid observations of others. It was my relationships to them and the observance of these interactions that were meaningful to me. Some were family members such as grandparents, siblings, parents and nieces. Others were of people that I had grown close to through various experiences—many while working on rivers. I was interested in a variety of relationship scenarios, for instance, the connection between parent and child. It was so interesting to see a nurturing and sympathetic side brought out of my brother when he became a father. He is a large, Nordic man whose rough, vulgar and cocky exterior softened as he gently and cautiously held his newly born daughter. I was also interested in how someone so independent (my brother) was the right fit for someone so dependent (his infant daughter). In other instances, I reflected on experiences with others in coming together to repeatedly fight off an enemy, and the strength of the bond that was formed; and various experiences of intimacy, of love, of resilience. I was focused on relationship scenarios where I could see myself, and those around me shaped by one another.

As I developed my imagery I emphasized line-work to bring importance and feeling to these thoughts and experiences. I abstracted the figure to bring focus to the essence of the connection between these people. Line is an expressive mark and very personal. Experts can determine personality types purely based on someone’s handwriting, or the way they use line. From the moment I observed the interaction, I attempted to understand why I was drawn to that scene, and what connection I felt with those whom I was observing. I took this idea and distilled the figures so that only the essence of the interaction, or the connection that I felt was emphasized. When navigating a rapid on a river, the term for understanding which path to pursue is called
finding or following “the line.” I used line to direct the viewer to what was important or significant to me in the imagery.

I allowed the rest of the drawing to become less dense and more abstract. I used sinuous lines in the areas where I wanted the focus to be drawn, such as the clasp of two pairs of hands, the cradling of a head, or the reassuring touch of an arm. My use of line was my way to be personal and vulnerable, with ideas and thoughts that were hard for me to share openly. Through line I could express complexity, balance in opposition, interaction, peace, or turmoil. It was also a way to draw the audience in, a method of visual seduction, that rewards the viewer for spending time with the work. Yet once finished, the image still felt too personal for me to allow it to be so open, so public. By layering the plates one on top of another it allowed me to (1) create images that were close, personal and meaningful to me then (2) make indistinct through layers of ink in the areas of the images that I was not ready to reveal and (3) cause them to interact through layering, allowing the imagery to form a new relationship of its own.

These moments etched in the copper plates are very precious to me, and even with some degree of abstraction they still feel exposed and vulnerable out there by themselves. I purposefully begin to veil and hide chosen aspects of the image through the layering of the plates during printing. During the printing process I respond to the print layer by layer, just like the etching process, a back and forth process that is both frustrating and rewarding. I begin by printing selected areas of a plate with chosen colors. Color choice is important as it naturally conveys feelings and mood. If I wanted to create a whimsical effect I would not choose to layer heavy opaque blacks and oranges. Yet at times as the colors layered upon one another, they would change in a way that I had not anticipated. Sometimes the overlapping line work would not convey the relationship that I was intending, so I would have to reevaluate the work. The way I print is a very intuitive process.

For Undercurrent, I wanted much larger prints than was is traditionally used in the intaglio process. I felt the need for these images to make an impact on the viewer from both across the room and close up. To accomplish this I had to go bigger than the norm. Instead of 8”x10”, or even the “large” 16”x 20” format, I went a bit larger. With
the help of friends, family (and an eager student or two) we carefully chopped two fragile and extremely awkward 10’x3’ sheets of copper into eight 24”x36” intaglio copper plates, the largest our studio would allow for. I then prepped, grounded, smoked and etched these plates. I loved the negative spaces that these plates gave the line-work in the images. It also allowed for manipulative possibilities later in printing with layering, relief rolling, (using a roller to ink up the surface of the plate, keeping the etched areas un-inked. Same technique that a relief print is printed), monotyping (painting directly onto the plate with ink) and stenciling techniques. It took a bit of a learning curve technically by jumping up so large in scale in the etching process, as well as some new (to me) inventions, such as a new hanging system for a huge acid bath.

The biggest technical challenge was printing these large copper plates! When printing multiple layers on the same paper, you have to account for many technical variables that can happen during the process. For instance, if your paper is either too wet or too dry the paper can rip, crease, or not print completely. Paper will stretch under the pressure of the press each time it is sent through. This stretching can make registering (system to correctly align the plate and paper for multiple layers so that the images are not layered askew form one another) a challenge, especially with larger paper and plates; as the stretching is more extreme. Handling such large materials while printing was a challenge in itself. For example; inking up, wiping, and printing a large plate before the thin areas of ink became too dry; handling large wet paper sheets that were prone to collapsing in a giant wrinkled heap; registering the large plates with the paper; and not getting unwanted ink on the paper during the multiple runs through the press were some of the challenges.

For the 10x3 foot prints it took a bit of trial and error and creativity to print. It would have been easier, and much more forgiving, to print five large individual prints and then mount them together, creating one print; or to print images on smaller pieces of paper and chine colle (or permanently adhere them) to the large paper creating a giant print. I did not want these to be pieced together. I knew I wanted a seamless effect, where layer built upon layer, and without distraction guided the viewer
throughout the long print. It was a big risk, but I felt the need to commit to see it through despite the huge disasters and heartbreak that would be very likely to happen.

In order to print the large prints, I would have to wet the paper, roll it up, thread it thought the press, and then lift it again to align the inked copper etching plate on the press-bed. At first, this was an overwhelming feat that required more than one person to print. Further, because of the scale, to print one layer on 1/5 of the largest prints easily took upwards of 4-6 hours. Furthermore, the largest prints were five 3’x2’ plates wide and I printed up to 5 layers for each plate location (20-30 runs through the press for each of the largest prints). This required much patience; hope that it would be worth it, and the assistance of others. This was not something that I could accomplish alone. I found that interesting that a piece talking about relationships would not exist if I had not had the helps of those around me. It also took some trust that they wouldn’t mess up the work as we were printing. The metaphor of relationships was very evident in the printing of the largest prints. It takes courage to jump in to a commitment, knowing that there is a likely chance that it will become a disaster. But, it can be worth the risk. And, like our self-consciousness, I could not create the print by myself. I needed others to build it up.

I continued to print and to respond to the surprises as they came along. Naturally this process changes how I think about the original concept as I react, adjust and select. These small choices sometimes added up to challenge or alter my original concept for the print. Again, even though I begin with a specific idea in mind, this process will demand alterations and adaptation in order to make the print successful. As printing progresses I build a relationship with the image by attempting to read and respond to what it needs, and being willing to change course. What should be hidden? What should be more open? Sometimes the prints turnout very close to my original idea, and other times they end up being far from my original expectation. The printing process is similar to navigating rivers and building relationships.

The level of abstraction chosen for each plate and print encourages the viewer to consider why certain areas are obscured or not, and form individual interpretations of the work. For example, viewers will find clues through looking and sighting recognizable
aspects within the prints, be it a more obvious line-etched hand or rock-like formations. Viewers could then consider these aspects to inform their readings of the more obscured areas of the prints. By requiring the viewer to bring themselves and their own experiences to the work, it helps them to find a more personal interpretation and build a unique relationship with the print. I use color and line-work play to entice a commitment from the viewer to invest in understanding the work. The juxtaposition of bold colors and/or strong value contrast adds drama to the work that catches the viewer’s eye from a distance. Then the sinuous line-work draws the viewer in even closer to the prints. These formal elements alone (dramatic colors, seductive line-work) become a reward for the viewer’s investment of time. It encourages the viewer to linger longer, with greater reward as they find interpretations that are personally meaningful to them.

I am asking the viewer to go through levels of investment to find meaning in the prints because it is similar to how I find meaning in my own work. The process of creating the prints is vital to my own interpretation. While I always begin with an initial concept for each print, I always interact or respond to the printing process. Sometimes the final print is different than I had first anticipated.

Figure 9: Jumping off point: layout of big print using transparencies of plate proofs.
Figure 10: After printing the plate

Figure 11: (three photographs) Setting up the paper to print (registration)
Figure 12: Beginning to ink etched copper intaglio plate

Figure 13: After printing the plate
Figures 14-19: Inevitable in progress

Figure 14

Figure 15

Figure 16
Figure 20 (left): Monotyping a stencil for “Return Flow”

Figure 21 (right): Making stencils with the dampened print for reference

Figures 22-29 “Return Flow” in Progress

Figure 22
Discussion

For Undercurrent I wanted a variety of prints referencing several river features to serve as a metaphor for my experiences and observations of human relationships. This was accomplished through the significant shift in scale, compositional orientation, presentation, amount of layering (or the lack of) to obscure or make apparent specific areas, along with color choices, and the variety in the degree of abstraction in the printing process and the plates themselves.

The show is comprised of 14 prints ranging in scale from 10’x3’ to 4”x4”. The variety in scale references both the dynamic flows of the river and the inspirational heritage for the body of work: my experience with the “raining rocks” on the Blackfoot river. As the river rocks are shaped by each other through the current and time, their scale diminishes significantly until eventually they devolve into fine grains of sand. As the viewer travels the room in either direction beginning at the large etchings (Return Flow & Inevitable), they encounter prints that scale down in size from the larger prints and end in a “backwater” area with six small prints.

With Return Flow and Inevitable the horizontal orientation and the sheer size of the pieces, 10’x3’, encourages the viewer to physically move as they interact with the work. Their length and size demands that they be viewed from a distance, but because of their length the viewer must also walk a few steps perpendicular to the prints in order to see them fully. This encouraged movement is more apparent when the viewer moves closer to the pieces. When they are right in front of the prints they slowly and physically move with the work, or “downstream,” walking alongside with the work in order to take it all in. This is also symbolic of external forces that, like the river rocks, cause people to move through different interactions with others leading them to new relationships that ultimately shape them.

In contrast, the size of the little prints (4”x4”) in the “backwater” area requires the viewer to physically walk themselves into a corner, close to the walls in order to interact with the work. This is after the river rocks have been tumbled downstream and settle in calmer sections. I want the viewer to feel a sense of progression, or reference
to the process of scaling down and the idea of unique shaping and forming over time, like the rocks that were so figurative to me, as they move through the gallery.

*Figure 30: Gallery photographs of “Undercurrent”*
The title *Keeper Hole* gives reference to a river feature. A “hole,” or hydraulic jump, is easy to find on rivers and in rapids. A hole is generally created when water drops over a submerged rock, causing a steep drop in the water. This rapidly dropping water then hits the edge of a pocket, created by currents coming from around either side of the rock. As the dropping water hits these currents it has nowhere to go but back upstream and towards the surface. A very simplified visual example is to imagine the water as sideways washing machine on a constant spin cycle. If caught in a strong enough hole, it will churn and churn whatever is swept in for an extended period of time. While all holes have some degree of aeration because of the churning water, the stronger holes have more aeration and are more dangerous. Trying to swim in these particular holes is like trying to swim in air. The keeper hole reference for this print was the idea of holding on to something in the depths of oneself, keeping it churning inside and not being willing to let it surface.

My previous works were mostly portraiture oriented, giving a sense of a moment captured or a microcosm. The variety in scale in *Undercurrent* helps to break this one viewpoint and bring consideration for both the macro and micro perspectives (i.e. *Return Flow vs. Sieve*).
The presentation of the prints also suggests a parallel to the flow of the river. Without the barriers of a frame, and being hung a few inches from the wall, they give the illusion of floating (the shadows on the walls help this illusion) or suspension, referencing process and movement. The consistency of the floating presentation encourages the viewer to draw relationships between all the works. Without glass between the viewer and the print it creates a more intimate interaction.
In *Fine Line* the print has strong references to rock and water, allowing the viewer to find their own sense of place, allowing a personal interpretation of the work. *Fine Line* is derived from a collection of memories of a very specific place. There is a
sheer red-rock walled canyon rapid and a strong eddy on the Colorado River named Skull Rapid and the Room of Doom respectively (yes, really, the Room of Doom). The current takes you directly into a hole and then tries to suck you into the Room, where if caught in the Room’s eddy, one fights the swirling logs and debris that are trapped there as well. Many times the only escape is to be airlifted out because of the strength of the current. In this spot my Father almost lost his life, twice. His raft flipped, his neck pinned against the rock wall with the full force of the current pushing down his airway. The river finally gave up on him and swept him into the Room of Doom, where he righted his raft and then was able to row out through the swift contrasting currents. This is where he had a heart attack, and where part of his heart died. These events changed my father’s life, and by extension the way that we interact with one another.

A few years before, on the same rapid, another raft in our group flipped and a son and mother were swept into the Room. I witnessed the son tying a rope around his mother’s waist and then his own, then swimming out into the main current. He made it past the eddy line, but his mother did not. As the two currents pushed against them from different directions (main current and eddy current) they were swept to the bottom of the river like underwater kites on a string. From where I stood, I had a perfect view to watch my friends begin to drown. They were eventually swept into the main current and were able to surface and breathe again, both of their chests and abdomens severely bruised.

While Fine Line has very personal and powerful experiences for me, I do not expect the viewer to understand and read my experiences specifically. Even though the experiences I had in this area were dramatic and perilous, other experiences in that same spot were just plain fun—times that we ran Skull with nothing but joyful screams as we were soaked by the waves. Also, many people pass through that same spot each year, unaware of my father’s experience or that of my friends, experiencing the same spot that we did but in different ways. So instead of trying to convey heightened drama, I wanted to show my impression, my memory of the place, what it is: a place that holds many people’s memories, both enjoyable and traumatic. The line-work is subdued, layered by transparent colors, to me representing current and memories. The plates
that are used are moments of parents holding their children close to them, referencing my relationship with my dad and our friend’s relationship. While the water is lighter, more transparent, the red rock cliff shapes are dark, heavy and hint at a foreboding feeling. Even though there is more movement within the line-work, the dark areas have a glacial-pace like movement as they move to pinch the neck of water flowing between them. The rock and the water have contrasting colors, red and green, that hint at the contrasting experiences that have occurred there. The lightness and heaviness in layering of the greens and reds also emphasize contrast. What I want the viewer to get from this piece is not a specific interpretation of my experiences but rather a sense of place that has both beauty and a subtle sense of danger. I used a similar approach with the prints Anastomosing, Ice Jam and Inevitable as I did with Fine Line.

Figure 35: Anastomosing

Anastomosing is based on another series of personal experiences that I had as a guide in Denali National Park, Alaska. In Alaska I created a unique and intense bond with a few other female guides, as a defense against the constant combat with some other male guides. It was as if we had stepped back 100 years: because as we were women, in order to be taken seriously and respected we had to become very abrasive and confrontational with the veteran male guides. We literally had to fight and constantly threaten to get work and needed gear. The male guides would do what they could to make us look bad so that our tips would suffer. It wasn’t unusual for these frequent,
daily disagreements to turn into physical confrontations. We were outnumbered and isolated. It was no small expense to have moved to Alaska, and with fewer job opportunities at home, so many felt stuck until the season’s end. The female guides banded together against the abusive veteran guides (including our boss who by law was required to employ a certain ratio of female employees, but eagerly wanted to be rid of them) and learned how to run the unique challenges of the glaciated Nenana River. Because of these experiences we became very close and formed a relationship that I have not experienced since. We will be forever connected.

In this woodcut I wanted to print it black and white to represent the stark contrast of angst and accord that was experienced. The woodcut process was chosen over etching because of the more aggressive and physical mark-making nature of creating the block. I felt that this grueling, physical process was more appropriate for the concept of the image. Instead of scratching away at a copper plate and allowing the acid to bite grooves to create recesses, woodcutting requires one to carve away at the block to create the image to be printed. It is a simple process, but an incredibly physical one. One wrestles with the resistant wood, carving fluid lines through knots and at times against the woods natural grain. As I cut into intricate areas, I often hold my breath. There has been many times where the carving tools have skipped out over the wood, nicking areas that I was hoping to leave untouched. At this point, like the processes before, I have to re-evaluate and respond. I felt that the process helped to record the struggle that we felt that summer in Alaska.

The image is of two of the female guides; one has her arm draped over another in a supportive and protective manner. She is looking over her shoulder, being wary of an eminent fray. *Anastomosing* is a fluvial term that describes a braided river system, or streams that consist of multiple channels that divide and reconnect, and are separated by such cohesive material that they would likely not be able to migrate from one channel position to another. Despite our differences we were able to come together repeatedly to sustain each other, after leaving Alaska we have reunited to share new experiences, or when one is in need. We have become a unique family.
The inspiration for *Ice Jam* was derived from a river experience in Alaska where during spring run-off big icebergs of river ice, the size of cars, would get tossed playfully downstream. Just before the ice break, there is an “ice jam” in the river. The current is moving below the surface of the ice, but you cannot see exactly what is going on.

![Figure 36: Ice Jam](image)

Every year the local communities put significant cash betting on the day, hour, and minute that the Nenana will break free from her winter ice prison. It is a tradition taken very seriously; similar to awaiting the birth of a baby in the latest stages of pregnancy, there is always an excited anticipation for when the grand event will occur. When the ice did break, the river had a terrible groan and what sounded like dozens of cars repeatedly crashing into one another. From the riverbank we watched a wall of churning ice push down the river. It looked as if a snowplow was slowly pushing the wall of ice. It was surreal to see it come and move past us, the ice towering over our heads. Then we had to run, as the water behind the ice jam began to flood the banks, churning ice blocks like a blender, tossing them skyward as if they were feathers that had been beaten out of a down pillow. When the water receded, there lay an ice field, easily ten times the width of river as a record of what had happened just a few hours before. Besides the uniqueness and magnitude of the event, what really impressed me was how quickly it transpired. This solid Alaskan ice, which seemed so impenetrable and permanent, was forced away in a matter of minutes. This event changed the river completely. It moved boulders the size of houses, shifted the rapid-making train cars under the surface, cut new banks and side channels. It created a new river, one that we
needed to get to know each year. Waiting for the ice to break had us waiting in anticipation. We were ready for spring to come, with hopes for what could be in the near future. This is similar to the promise of a new relationship or a fresh start. I showed this complete veiling of the river surface by printing etched white upon white line-work, contrasting the warmer colored rock; a promise that what is beneath is possible to understand eventually.

While in some prints I have purposefully hidden the meaning or the figures in the prints, in others I have made the imagery much more obvious. For example, *Confluence* has two colored areas that flow next to and then combine with each other. The figures in the piece are more recognizable than some of the other prints. I’m referencing how two lives merge into one, the depiction of how those lives overlap and mix is more evident than the narrative of *Fine Line*.
Similar to the river’s seasonal changes in flow, people ebb and flow in their relationships with others. At times they are direct and obvious, at other times a more subtle transition before a dynamic change. *Return Flow* and *Inevitable* show the transition from specificity to obscurity. Because of the size and length of these pieces (10’x3’) I can show or demonstrate how areas of the prints transform from highly abstract to recognizable forms. In *Return Flow* I convey the idea of how surface and groundwater interact. The river at any given moment can flow through divided paths in the substrate, beneath and to the side, of the river becoming groundwater. Further downstream this ground water can then return to the river, or surface water, once again. There is a feeling of struggle in this print, of wanting to break through. It is a metaphor for how at times people are struggling to be understood or struggling to understand someone else. The desire to be understood or “really seen” by others is a strong motivator. To be understood by others means that you are connected to others, there is an attachment to something larger than yourself and to a force that has greatly shaped your individuality.⁴ *Return Flow* flows into a deep section of river, connecting it to *Inevitable*.

![Figure 39: Return Flow](image)

The majority of *Inevitable* is a deep river section that drops quickly into a turbulent rapid. Through my experience the most turbulent rapids almost always follow a flat calm section of the river that is deep and slow. This deep and slow section is

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misleading because the river is building up potential energy. Similar to a hydroelectric dam, the pooling of the water is the force that drives the generators.

On the Salmon River in Idaho there is a rapid named Big Mallard. It is preceded by a very long and deep section of river that lulls you to sleep. As you come around a tight corner in the canyon the sound of turbojets fills you ears and you are awaken to the inevitable release of potential energy in the form of shear force, turbulent waters and massive rapids. If you are smart, you pull the raft to the shore and scout these rapids, or follow the lead of an experienced boater. The first time I encountered the rapid, we did not realize where we were until it was too late. We were following a Salmon River veteran who had left us behind. Because of our lull of security during the calm sections, we had to scramble to find a line through the rapid. This rapid is unique, as the currents are especially deceptive, and at the particular water level we were at, the cleanest line was through a “sneak chute” that was squeezed between the left shore and the Big Mallard rock. This chute is impossible to see upriver because it is completely obscured by standing waves and holes. Because of our inexperience with the rapid, and not knowing about the sneak chute to the left, we chose a misleading line to the right that lead us onto the top of the massive Big Mallard hole. Those who were waiting downstream said they saw us completely disappear into a 15’ hole. This hole was in front of Big Mallard Rock and through a huge rush of adrenaline and some lucky maneuvering, as we were about to get perched on top of Big Mallard Rock, or boat slid
slowly off the topside of the rock and safely to the right side. It was a terrifying experience, especially as I had family in my boat for which their safety was my responsibility. One week later I encountered the rapid again, only this time I was not caught unawares. This time I stayed close to another raft. We plummeted into the rapid towards the sneak chute to the left. Halfway through, I still could not see the chute, only a wall of churning whitewater. I began to get very nervous and to look for another line that would save us from the approaching mayhem. Then the white foam parted, and the current pushed us through the chute. I was not able to see it until I was going through it.

While working on Undercurrent, I thought about this experience. There are times in relationships where it is peaceful, calm, and you feel secure. But because individuals are constantly changing, there will always be tensions that build and conflict will happen. People are similar to the dynamic river processes. Sometimes changes happen quite quickly and drastically, other times more subtly and slowly, but we do change. And sometimes it can be prudent to rely on the wisdom of others to see you through rough times, as they guide you to solutions that you did not know existed, like the sneak chute. While printing Inevitable, I was thinking about these cycles of calmness and conflict, and how conflict or opposition in life and relationships can help people grow together and help increase individual strength. Inevitable shows the deep currents with figure swirling through, addressing the subtle but deep changes that are happening. The water pools, and the potential energy is built up near the right end of the print. As the potential energy comes to a tipping point, the water level rises and tumbles down into the rapid, or is forced down once again into the substrate as groundwater. The cycle that is represented between Inevitable and Return Flow is similar to what we experience in our lives. There are times when we feel disconnected, or misunderstood and search for that connection with others. There are times that we are in the calm, and feel secure. And there are times when we are forced to encounter conflict with others or ourselves.
Conclusion

There is parity between my print process and why I made my thesis work. I make my art because I want to explore people’s relationships and how our interactions with each other shape us. My print process is similar, in that I interact with each layer and develop a relationship or experience with the work that eventually shapes it. The work does not always end up as I had planned, similarly our relationships do not always end up how we expect.

It has been said it is not the destination but the journey that is important. I feel the process of making choices and interacting with our environment and each other is the journey, it is the most important. We choose how we will interact with others and how much influence their interactions will have on us. This in turn shapes us as individuals, influencing our future choices and relationships. This body of work attempts to address this issue. Not only in how others experience my work but also how I create it.

The existence of a river rock would not be possible without the force of the rivers current and other rocks. Similarly, we as individuals are not alive or self-conscious without our participation in relationships. No matter what role we play in our relationships they will inevitably shape us. Whether intimate or casual, relationships are a significant human experience. My hope is that through my work I can drawn attention to the process of relationships and help others see how important we are to one another.
Undercurrent Image List

Figure 1: Photograph. Hardground on copper. First image is as it wet, second after it has been heated and cooled.

Figure 2: Photograph. Smoking the Hardground

Figure 3: Photograph. Drawing into the hardground

Figures 4: Photograph. Etched lines in copper.

Figure 5: Photograph. Copper plate being etched in acid bath

Figure 6: Koichi Yamamoto’s engraving *Crude Aspiration IV*, 2004.

(http://www.yamamotoprintmaking.com/view_product.php?item=71)

Figure 7: Selected stages of *Confluence*. Copper plate etching, monotyping, relief rolls, 36”x24”, 2011

Figure 8: Photograph. John Armstrong working with stencils.

Figure 9: Intaglio print from John Armstrong’s series *Relating Shapes-Remembering Color*, 2009.

(http://matrixpress.blogspot.com/2009/05/john-armstrong_8474.html)

Figure 9: Photograph. Jumping off point: layout of big print using transparencies of plate proofs.

Figure 11: (Three photographs) Setting up the paper to print (registration)

Figure 12: Photograph. Beginning to ink etched copper intaglio plate

Figure 13: Photograph. After printing the plate

Figures 14-19: *Inevitable* in progress. Copper plate etching, monotyping, relief rolls, 43”x10’, 2011
Figure 20: Monotyping a stencil for Return Flow. Copper plate etching, monotyping, relief rolls, 43”x10’, 2011

Figure 21: Photograph. Making stencils with the dampened print for reference

Figures 22-29: Return Flow in progress. Copper plate etching, monotyping, relief rolls, 43”x10’, 2011

Figure 30: Gallery photographs of Undercurrent

Figure 31: Keeper Hole, copper plate etching, monotyping, relief rolls, 32”x24”, 2010

Figure 32: Return Flow, copper plate etching, monotyping, relief rolls, 43’ x 10’, 2011

Figure 33: Sieve, copper plate etching, monotyping, relief rolls, 36”x24”, 2011

Figure 34: Fine Line, copper plate etching, monotyping, relief rolls, 36”x24”, 2011

Figure 35: Anastomosing, woodcut, chine colle 48”x22” 2011

Figure 36: Ice Jam, copper plate etching, relief rolls, chine colle, 4”x 4”, 2011

Figure 37: Confluence, copper plate etching, monotyping, relief rolls, 36”x24”, 2011

Figure 38: First Light, copper plate etching, monotyping, relief rolls, 36”x24”, 2011

Figure 39: Return Flow, copper plate etching, monotyping, relief rolls, 43’ x 10’, 2011

Figure 40. Inevitable, copper plate etching, monotyping, relief rolls, 43’ x 10’, 2011
Undercurrent Bibliography

Gonzlez-Mena, Janet; *Child, Family, and Community* (Pearson Education, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 2009)