

Some Thoughts on AGKC, Giclée Printers Par Excellence, the Connection between the Printer and the Artist in Giclée Printing, and Other Things

by Karen-Claire Voss

During the course of the two years Andy Green and I have been in partnership producing giclée prints, first under the rubric of Kempock Digital Limited and the shop we rented in Glasgow's Merchant City, and most recently, our new company, AGKC Limited, we began to realize that we needed to develop the concept of giclée printing, because most people, even many artists, really have no experience of what it is. It became clear that we ought to produce a full articulation of giclée printing as well as a statement of what our work was all about, because our agenda goes far beyond printing. The present document constitutes a good start towards both.

Long before we rented the glorious, gallery-like space overlooking the Broomielaw that we now call home, I began doing research on the topic of printing and found something quite remarkable. In her preface to *The Tamarind Book of Lithography: Art & Techniques* [1] June Wayne explains how and why she designed the Tamarind Project in 1959. The purpose of the project was to revive lithography as an art after it had fallen into a state of near extinction. Apropos of setting forth the goals of the authors in writing the book, Wayne says something that I find to be a stunningly meaningful *non sequitur*: "If mankind is to save itself from the horrors of misused technology, every aspect of behavior will have to change radically in both concept and expression. Life enhancement must become a *modus vivendi* as well as a *raison d'être* and perhaps, for once, the goals of life and art will be symbiotic for everyone."

When you use phrases like '*modus vivendi*', *raison d'être*, and 'the goals of life and art' in a preface to a book about lithography it alerts one to the fact that something very deep is going on. In this case, it concerns the fact that printmaking itself is, or rather can and should be, an art, and further, implies that the computerization of formerly mechanized printing processes ideally could turn out to be an opportunity to rehumanize the connection between the artist and the printer, an idea that is indeed close to our hearts. This is a concept from another era, but one of the things we want to do is to advance this concept so that it once again becomes part of the current coin of the art world, as it should.

To begin with, in the case of lithographs, possibly the one form of printing that everyone is aware of, the old relationship between the artist and printer is almost always different than it was. In times gone by, artist and printer worked together very closely to make the print. Nowadays, an artist may not have even seen the print before it is produced if he/she is getting involved with mechanized lithographic production. There is also the question of money. Except for those few who have "made it," most artists simply don't have a lot of spare cash. Setting out to have a modern litho copy done means signing up for a minimum quantity and that means paying a lot of money up front. Giclée printing and giclée prints are very, very different from ordinary printing and ordinary prints. To begin with, giclée prints give artists the possibility of making just one print, but much, much more is involved.

It is probably best to begin at the beginning and explain exactly what giclée printing is. Giclée refers to a new method of creating prints. The giclée process begins after a transparency is produced from the original painting, or the painting is scanned directly by a high-end scanner, or even photographed with a high-quality digital camera. Special software programs are used to manipulate the attributes of the digitized image to achieve the artist's own desired requirements. The approved image is then output to a sophisticated printer while the printmaker verifies the colour management elements. The word 'giclée' itself is French, and means 'spurt' or 'squirt', however the spray is more like mist, each droplet being no more than the size of a red blood cell.

Modern giclée prints are expected to show no sign of fading after 100 years, provided the prints are kept in suitable conditions; for example, out of direct sunlight. It is worth remembering that the materials commonly used by artists survive no better than that.

In the case of the digital reproduction of a work, the artist usually hands over a transparency to the printer who puts it into a computer hooked up to a machine and selects the 'Print' button. In comparison, however, we work hard on the transparency—color matching, distinguishing artifacts that have to be removed from painterly characteristics, and the like—so that the end result is something that is beautiful in its own right. We have found that preparing the digital image for printing is always a long and complex process because simply switching the systems to "automatic" just doesn't work. It is at this stage that our skills are required and at this stage that the

[1] Garo Antreasian and Clinton Adams, *The Tamarind Book of Lithography: Art & Techniques* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1971).

quality and accuracy of the final print is defined. We pride ourselves on our printmaking skills, just as did the 16th century printer, Urs Graf, who actually signed his prints! In our view, the best giclée prints have a definite quality of their own; we would argue that a really good giclée could be considered a work of art in its own right, in the same way that a work created using traditional print methods is considered a work of art. This may seem a very radical statement, and there are some who will disagree, because giclée printing involves machines, but for us, you see, the process of printing is by no means a purely mechanical act. Even though we use computers and machines, printing, for us, is never simply a question of putting a digital image into the computer and then pressing the button that says 'Print.' There is heart in everything we do.

There are three ways in which we can digitize an original artwork—that is, to transfer it to the computer that will eventually send the image to one of our printers. We can scan the image into the computer. This is ideal for a watercolour, or any other “flat” medium up to A2 size. It gives the highest definition and very accurate colour rendition. It is very clear to us that the artist should work closely with the printer and the printer with the artist. In an earlier generation, some artists even took their printer with them when they traveled. While we don't travel with our artists as printers did in days gone by (for one thing, the printers are too big to pack!), we do have a very close connection with each of them. We work with a lot of artists, some of them well known. Peter Howson worked with us for some years, and once said that Andy Green was the best printer in Scotland. George Wyllie, Ronnie Ford, Andrew Fitzpatrick, Pamela So, and Joe McLaughlin, for example, seldom go to anyone else for prints.



Pamela So, with an image printed by AGKC, at the Collins Gallery in Glasgow

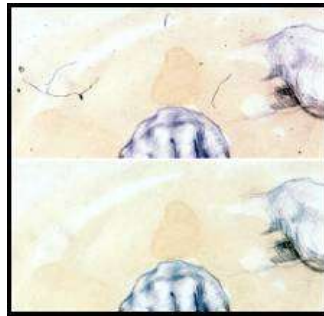
Sometimes, after an artist gives us a transparency or we have photographed their work, they tell us to just go ahead and make the print without even worrying about seeing a proof. They know the finished product will be right. Now, that's trust. Often, the artist will approve the very best print we can make, even though it may be different than his/her original. As for our working with the artists, these are relationships built up over time. Andy has gotten to know even the brush strokes of individual artists. He has to know. For one thing, when he works to clean up a transparency he's got to be able to figure out which are artifacts to take out and which are not. One artist might typically spatter paint; another might never do this. We have to know which artist does what. We have to be able to distinguish art from artifact.



We get very close...



Specular light flashes from the canvas must be removed...



Dust and hairs on transparencies have to go...



Well, this is our favorite! The artist had this photographed in his garden, and a little bit of flora settled on the painting (still wet!). We did not notice that this was not just another impressionistic yacht. Not until it was pointed out by a buyer of the print. We learned a lesson – reprinted and replaced. The original must have the “twig” though, we think. We still wonder – did we do the right thing?

To return to the question of money, we do this work because we love it, but we also do it to earn our bread. Everybody needs to eat. Unlike some gallery owners, however, we are not in this business to gauge our artists. This is one big reason why, when we know we are going to work with an artist, we make sure there are no up front charges. We photograph the artist’s work, using an 8 mega pixel camera (once the only one available in this area). Sometimes, we even go to the artist’s studio and photograph the work *in situ*. Then we prepare a proof (working with the artist when necessary to make sure we get it right) for no charge. Since the current charge for photographing a work is around £40 and most printers charge by the hour for preparation, this represents a big saving.

Trust really is at the core of our relationship with each of our artists. Not only do they know they can count on us to produce a giclée of the highest quality, they also know that we are always ready to talk about issues they may be struggling with in their artistic process, or philosophical considerations of one kind or another they may be dealing with. There aren’t many print studios where visitors are likely to come upon a group sitting around talking about the meaning of life, but this is a frequent happening at AGKC.

What could be termed our preoccupation with the meaning of Life takes many forms. One thing that made it immediately obvious was the sign we had over our shop in the Merchant City. It read ‘Kempock Digital & Transdisciplinary Atelier. Printing, Framing, Restoration, Enabling.’ Although we no longer have a sign, we are still dedicated to the same thing. Oh, oh, what is all this?, you might be asking. Here I have to be honest with

you. I cannot possibly write up a succinct explanation of ‘transdisciplinarity.’ You’ll have to call us and make an appointment to drop by our flat to talk about it. Here, however, I can begin to explain the ‘enabling’ part.

In the case of our giclée prints, as I’ve already explained, we try to minimize or eliminate up front costs, and we pay well for the artist’s signature on a print when we sell it. Also, as I’ve said, Andy and I make ourselves available for philosophical discussion of various kinds. But we also get involved in more ambitious projects, as well.

For example, during the fall of 2003, after a visit to St John’s on Princes Street in Edinburgh, I conceived the idea of creating a project especially for the church. What I came up with was based on the concept of finding the sacred in the 21st century. First, I invited the artists we work with to create something on the theme, and then went on to invite leading Scottish academics and writers to contribute papers on the theme, and finally, I asked some musicians to perform. The end result was a month long art exhibition in August 2004, along with four days of academic presentations, and four evenings of musical events. In the brochure for the event I explained:

In some circles in contemporary Scotland the word ‘sacred’ is apparently problematic, usually because it is thought to entail something having to do with religion. However, the ‘sacred’ has little or nothing to do with dogma or doctrine. As human beings we are continually involved in the process of trying to locate our finite selves within infinitude. The process of finding the sacred simply means to be in the process of attempting to gather up the fragments, to bind together the finite with the infinite, so both form one great whole; thus, finding the sacred is a process that touches everyone, whether believer or an atheist.

It must be said that the sacred indeed seems to be difficult to locate in the space/time of the early 21st century. The main reason the sacred is so hard to see or feel has everything to do with the fact that most of us live in an environment that is continuously bombarded with images generated by the media. Even if we do not watch television, we are still subjected to advertisements in magazines and newspapers, on billboards, on the walls we pass while walking, on public transportation, on the radio, and lately, even when we go to the theatre to watch a film. These images do nothing to connect us with the sacred; rather, they actively function to dis-connect us from it. Unlike many of the events on offer at a cultural endeavour like the Edinburgh Arts Festival, it is hoped that this event will actively and explicitly function to help people re-connect with the sacred. All of the talks, images, poetry and music presented will be geared toward forging a connection with what poet Adrienne Rich referred to as “the rockshelf furthering all that is.”

A lot of people thought we were mad, and perhaps we were, but we remained convinced that it was divine madness, that an event like this was sorely needed. Indeed, the enthusiasm with which the project was greeted by the artists, scholars, and musicians who agreed to participate, attested to that.



St. John's was just filled with art...

What happened? Well, sad to report, we didn't sell any of the art in the exhibition. Perhaps that was to be expected, because, for the most part, the people coming into the church were self-selecting, and they didn't have the idea of visiting an art gallery in their heads. However, what did happen was, first of all, that as a result of working so very closely with our community of artists, we built up incredible relationships, relationships that surpassed what we had previously had. Secondly, we connected with a number of people who wandered in, people we might not have otherwise had a relationship with. Thirdly, we forged a connection with the academics who contributed, many of whom spoke about various pieces in the exhibition. The musicians who played during our alchemical evening told me later that they found themselves absolutely fascinated with the alchemical images we were projecting during their performance. What all of this meant—means—is that we caught the imagination of a number of people who normally might not have been involved in the kind of thing we were doing. By the end of the month, we had gathered together an entire community.

At the moment, we're still contemplating ways to develop the rich connections made during that festival and are engaged in making a 'whole cloth,' as it were of that, our printing activity, and the project of exploring a number of alternative and personalized ways of exhibiting art. We've already held one exhibition here and are planning more. We organized an 'artist's soirée' which attracted seventy artists who loved the space, and were thrilled to have an opportunity to talk with and network with other artists. We'll be holding more soirées. At this writing, I have a strong sense that, in the words of the 14th century mystic, Julian of Norwich, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."



AGKC at home – this is where we work!

So, that's AGKC. We are giclée printers, but we think artists need more than that. Do take us up on this, phone us at 0796 327 8233 and arrange to stop by. Besides printing, photography, restoration, enabling, and philosophical conversation, we also offer tea and coffee and a truly fabulous space to explore.