Narrative Color

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*In this paper I’d like to outline how color plays a narrative role in my printed works of the past four years. I will talk about how I use a specific way of applying ink that extends the color range of each plate and how the resulting effects convey mood, direct attention, and depict areas of darkness and luminosity.*

In 2016 I was awarded a print fellowship at the Royal Academy Schools and decided to create a project which would span a duration of 60 weeks. I would make a print each week, keeping to a portable size of 6” x 8”. There would be a maximum of two blocks per image, exploring color and the use of humor in contemporary print­ in direct rebellion against the post-modern greys of the graphic output of the Royal College of Art, from where I had recently graduated.

This series of prints became a postcard project for my father, who remains in a care home after breaking his neck in 2014, a project that allowed me to leave an image of my weekly impressions on the walls of his room. I wanted to show him a deeper conversation about what it felt like to be a woman, an ethnic minority, a veterinary surgeon, a keen swimmer, an artist, his daughter and to weave in common political events, freak weather occurrences, specific dates and locations, hidden conversations and jokes. I wanted to use the imagery to convey slower narratives and keep him engaged and entertained.

Color was integral to all these aims, as they made the images brighter and more appealing. Color directs the eye and creates emotion and mood which is separate from the precision of the carved line. In some cases, the color is the direct source of entertainment.

I’ve since created some 130 images in this way. In fact, the latest twenty prints have become a portfolio and moving image piece on their own, called *Covid Tales* which you can see here https://vimeo.com/435765992. The images speak to the lockdown situation that we have all experienced in recent months, addressing issues of isolation, yearning, moments of connection and absurdity.

As seasoned printmakers will be aware, transparent oil-based inks have a lovely way of both sitting on the surface of the paper and sinking in to create new overlapping colors. I like using a brand of ink called Sakura Oil-based Relief ink for printmaking. As my project was speedy, and only used two blocks, I started to use monoprinting in specific ways in order to create two tones of each color. This was done in the following way:

I would roll the block up three times with the flat color, and then wipe away (using a rag) the areas which I wanted to be a paler version of said color. I would then apply an even sheer coat of color to the whole block with a brayer, using one pass, so that it would be covered with selectively thicker and thinner areas of ink. When printed, the thicker areas would be a full intensity, and the thinner areas would come out as a half-tone, sometimes with a very slight pattern (which can resemble an aquatint) where the ink had separated into tiny specks with the simple action of the brayer passing once over the block.

This is probably best understood by looking at a couple of specific images. In *Spotlight* (2018) (a print of me trying to find a suitable outfit for meeting the Queen), the first block (in navy blue) has the shape of the breasts and belly and thighs wiped away on the central figure and printed as a half-tone. Other areas such as the folds of the hanging dress also display selective wiping. In the second block (a peachy-pink), the cone of light that forms the spotlight is also a half-tone. Thus, the modulation of colors tells a story about the space and shadows and the shape of the figures and clothes which is independent from the carving that exists on both blocks. The comedy of the bulging body in the tight dress is entirely described by the color application.

In *Mirror Mirror* (2016) (a print about the distorting mirror in the changing room in York Hall Pool, London), both blocks have been wiped just in the area of the mirror’s reflection, creating an illusion of brightness. Once again, this element of the story: the questioning of a mirror’s veracity, its similarity to a doorway to another world, the shimmering space that shows hidden perspectives, has been created specifically through the use of half-tone color, and does not exist in the carved lines.

My second approach to extend the range of colors was to use blends (or rainbow rolls), which I printed at similar or different angles to each other. The blend would be created either with selective thicknesses of ink (from scanty to thick); or with the use of extender; or by using separate colors that merge one into the other.

For example, in *Blue Table Porto* (2019) (a café in Porto which served terrible cake, but had the most wonderful interior space), the red roll has a hint of orange in the center and green at the edges, bringing a coffee-like murkiness to the shadows. On the second block, a slightly acid-blue that modulates to full intensity left and right, the overlap with the first color plunges the edges into darkness. Wiping the tabletop and rolling it up once to produce a half-tone blue exaggerates this effect of darkness surrounding the central figure and her space.

Sometimes the blend would be very subtle, in a slight lightening of tone in the center of the work, such as in *Study in Millennial Pink* (2018). The palest hint of pink satin sits behind the black. If two blends are combined, the effect is intensified. For example, *We Tried* (2019) shows an operating theatre with a tiny guinea-pig swamped by surgical drapes and the large figures of a vet and vet nurse. The effect of the overhead light is created with bleaching color blends that coincide in the same area around the point of the action around the hole in the drape.

When the blends are perpendicular to each other, as in *The Scream* (2017) (a print about the time my left index finger was almost eaten by a poodle, which did actually make dad laugh out loud), the overlap of colors is triangular, reaching their maximum darkness at the bottom left and right corners, and their palest at the apex of the work.

In very rare cases, I relaxed my two-block policy and added a third block such as a transparent yellow. In *Lockdown Chop* (2020), the figure was originally a shade of dusky red, reminiscent of dried blood, printed with a teal across it to create the shadows. Since I was making this during the height of Black Lives Matter protests, I felt I should be more true to my East Asian origins and introduce a yellow block, carving out only the whites of the eyes and the flash of the scissors, adding a honeyed richness to the image.

I have used color to create shadows that speak of a different emotional state, such as sleep or a state of not knowing. In *Holding Air* (2019) (a print lamenting solitude), the shadows encroach upon the main subject like a tide, as if a metaphor for immersion in the blueness of night. In *Death by Email* (2020) (made in the height of the pandemic, when the UK was also paralysed by unprecedented warmth), the paprika orange of the figure and furniture is tempered by a purple that overlaps to form a tone reminiscent of black treacle, suggestive of the melting heat. In *Orchid Baby* (2020), the orchid blossoms glow because of the blue that covers everything else in the scene describing the experience of night.

I try to keep notes with color swatches, although sometimes my instructions are a bit vague. One of my recipes for blue in *She Doesn’t Care (If We Stare)* (2017) states ‘blue, red, green, X’ (the X meaning extender), but with no hints on quantity. It took me a while to figure out that there is a lot more red in the mix than I thought, and that the green was there to cut the optimistic clear purple towards more of a blunted violet.

My portfolio of prints focuses on depicting everyday humor and contemporary moments. The use of color has helped attract attention to the work so that I can engage the viewer in deeper storylines and subject matter, some of which may be on uncomfortable topics such as loneliness or aging. The colors describe elements of the story such as shadows, shapes and mood. My selective inking technique outlined above is a way of extending a block’s expressive potential and narrative function, allowing for the creation of quick and simple color images.