

King of Stamps

Sarah Bodman interviews artist Stephen Fowler on the eve of his new publication

Stephen Fowler has been utilising relief printmaking processes to create artists' books for many years, and is particularly known for his expertise in rubber stamp printing, a skill he has been passing on to artists and art students for more than 15 years. Initially Fowler used rubber stamping to produce endpapers for his books, but through teaching countless workshops and seeing how students used the process, he quickly realised rubber stamping's potential as a means of producing more than multiple images and spot colours, evolving into a sophisticated practice of narrative artists' books, exquisite corpses, printed food, body prints and graffiti.

More recently he has become hooked on producing faux stamps or 'artistamps'; portable, tiny artworks that play with the notion of authority, culture and officialdom, as he explains "With the right stamp you can get in and out of jail, clubs and across borders". Researching books at the V&A's National Art Library, interspersed with trips to his favourite supplies shop Bladerubber, he has studied the history of rubber stamping from the early 70s, from Fluxus artworks to *Rubber*, a monthly bulletin published by Stempelplaats in Amsterdam. *The Rubber Stamp Album Book* by (Miller & Thompson, 1978) was a seminal influence on his work, as was Thompson's *RubberStampMadness* magazine first published in 1980 in the USA, which started a craze for making cheap, multiple artworks, and is still going today.

Fowler also exchanges mail art with artists around the world, one of his favourite collaborations is with artist Jo Cook of Perro Verlag in Canada. He is inspired by her "strong graphic shapes and punchy colours, her work is free and immediately inspiring to respond to; when something like this clicks you realise you have an affinity with the sender that everything turns into magic". Producing 'artistamps' first occurred to Fowler when he visited Exchange Stamps in Bristol's St Nicholas Market, where the owner explained how charities and clubs produced their own stamps as fundraising currency. For example The Scout Association sell 'Scout Post' stamps which can be used for local delivery of Christmas cards by scouts. Fowler soon realised there was "a whole world of stamps outside the 'real' stamp world". The idea of underground exchange was exciting, "as an artist you have all the means of production at your disposal, you don't need a studio or expensive machinery". Fowler began creating what Philatelists refer to as 'Cinderella stamps' (i.e. fake), and using official stamp terminology to inspire his puns and plays on mail/male art, pigeon post, blotters etc. Also influenced by the beautiful Curwen Press endpapers designed by Marx, Nash, Ravilious and Bawden from the late 1920s onwards, Fowler explored the endless possibilities of working in repeat, cutting his stamp designs and alternating colours during printing, "it becomes like magic, as if someone else is doing the work for you".

His understanding of repeat pattern was helped through conversations with the artist Jantze Tullett, and on reading a book from the 60s on potato cut printing, things fell into place. "It used the simplest language - rather than saying adjust 45 degrees it just said - turn upside down -, it was an organic, crazy patchwork of ideas and through that I understood how patterns work, it was quick to learn and exciting". Having mastered the repeat stamping process, Fowler could see how it was informing his use

of colour in woodcut and relief printmaking, “I understood the positive and negative so much more, it all became intuitive”.

Researching for his new book on rubber stamps, roller printing and plaster and clay print was a truly rewarding experience. Fowler’s book is “very much in the spirit of 60s and 70s Batsford art books - to share an open recipe rather than say ‘you have to do it this way’. It’s about inspiring people with examples and letting them think how they will use the process, it’s a beginning of something rather than an end”. Teaching workshops and classes have informed his practice enormously: “Participants within a group each have a different approach or find a different object to print with then lose themselves in that meditative moment of concentrating on hand /eye coordination before the big reveal at the end when everyone realises how much they have made! Teaching constantly shows me potential from someone else’s perspective, you learn from their tastes too. I’m endlessly fascinated by what people make”.

Stephen Fowler’s new book *Rubber Stamping: Get Creative with Stamps, Rollers and Other Printmaking Techniques* is published by Laurence King.