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Will 'fn.' ever be finished?

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This contribution to the catalogue is my way of explaining the creative process that went into producing my particular artist's book. This book, entitled *fn.*, consists of 14 laser-engraved landscape fragment drawings encased in Perspex and stitched together to form transparent pages. This technology allows me to literally burn and engrave images of the landscape into delicate cotton Fabriano paper, until only fragments of the paper remain. Certain areas are completely burnt away, allowing one to see the layers underneath. This can be likened to an archeological excavation – but without the treasure one may expect. One can also regard this appearance as a process of revealing and ever-deepening burn, a burn that reaches into the soft tissues of the earth. The stitching is reminiscent of a somewhat futile attempt to repair what is destroyed.

In November 2007 Pieter Tolmay, the manager of the fablab at the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus) invited me to come and see the fablab. During this meeting Tolmay demonstrated some of the equipment and explained the basic philosophy behind the fablab concept. He was convinced that the inclu-

sion of creative disciplines would bring a different dynamic to the fablab. At this point in time the facility was for the most part being used by engineering students to build prototypes for their projects.

The machine that immediately caught my eye was the laser cutter that could cut Perspex and cardboard with extreme precision. The initial idea was that students could use the machine to cut packaging and die cuts. And so began an exploration of what the machine could do other than cutting gears and cogs for engineering projects. I think there was an inherent understanding that this machine held great possibilities and that design students, once familiar with this technology, would push the boundaries of possibilities. I also knew that I wanted to utilise this technology for my own creative practice, but realised that I first needed to explore the potential uses and link these to a concept rather than making work that was technically interesting but conceptually weak.

Initially there were several basic technical issues that had to be sorted out. Firstly, we needed to find a way to design in the

image-making software with which we were familiar and then find appropriate file conversion formats so the laser cutter could read the files. It was relatively simple to convert vector-based designs, but the conversion of photographic images was more problematic. However, after much trial and error we finally managed to print (cut) photographic images (jpeg format). This caused much excitement and was followed by a battery of tests with different power and speed settings. In the meantime, we had cut templates for embossing and even started to experiment with laser cutting embossed paper and embossing cut paper.

By the end of 2009 we had figured out how to laser cut and engrave various stocks of paper and Perspex with amazing precision. By this time the students had been introduced to this technology by means of a workshop, and they continued to find new and innovative uses. They were die cutting printed elements for design projects and using paper as an integral part of the design process. Some students even produced the majority of their projects on the laser cutter and the technology was used as a conceptual and well as a technical tool. Wilmarie Kruger, for example, did a project for the International Society for Typographic Designers (ISTD) in which she used the laser cutter to produce tactile effects to explain conventional type terminology to the blind. This project subsequently won an ISTD award. Even the illustration students were combining drawing, laser cutting and engraved elements to produce work that would not have been possible in the past.

In terms of my own creative practice, the first 12 months were used to play, explore,

and understand. Many of the experiments led to further exploration and all of these were recorded in a somewhat informal process book. At first I was not sure what the process would be used for, but I realised that I had to find a use that was conceptually justified and not merely technological wizardry.

I realised in retrospect that my training as a printmaker was instrumental in the way I explored the medium. My prior knowledge of printmaking paper allowed me to more effectively explore the engraving process. The thicker and more durable papers I used allowed the engraving of fine detail and the addition of embossing and drawing.

As a printmaker, I have always admired the beauty of the etching plate. Plates are seen as printing matrices and not as artworks in their own right, but the engraved paper became almost like etching plated in reverse. Instead of eating into the plate by means of acid, the laser was burning into the paper. This burning process discoloured the paper gave the prints a sepia tone.

During this time I started to work towards a solo exhibition at the ABSA towers in November 2009. This exhibition was entitled *Landscape by design* and elaborated on the concept of the landscape as a malleable construct in the hands of man. The title of the show refers to the way in which man imposes his will on the land, in a sense toying with its natural design.

The images presented are of overworked, processed, exhausted, mined and exploited landscapes, toyed with until its scars assume the nature of traces of hu-

man aggression. The process of bruising transforms and mutates the landscape so that it is silenced and the wasteland of destruction remains. Man's power to impose himself on the earth becomes a process of superimposition of his will, as if the landscape can be customised like a designer toy. The land remains, empty and dumb, bearing little evidence of rehabilitation. It is a landscape under erasure.

The drawing process consists of scouting for landscapes that bear witness to these scars: mine dumps, toilet dumping sites, cosmos that thrive on disturbed soil (as such, the cosmos become flowers of evil in a highly unsettled landscape). These landscapes were transformed into large-scale charcoal drawings – charcoal itself grew out of the natural environment and is transformed in fire.

It was at this point that that experiential learning gained during the fablab experimentation and my normal drawing process started to converge. Firstly, the notion of cutting into and engraving paper surfaces as a drawing process inspired me: a handheld engraver was used to engrave into the drawings and reveal the white below the blackened charcoaled surface. The engraver became a means to create different textures that are not possible or extremely difficult to make by means of conventional drawing. At the same time, the process became destructive in nature: I was cutting into the paper in the same way as mankind is cutting and erasing the landscape.

These drawings were then photographed and laser engraved onto printmaking paper such as Fabriano. Initially the quest was to get a perfect laser engraved image,

but I soon realised at these were mere copies of the original drawings on a smaller scale. On one occasion the experimentation went wrong and a section of the paper was completely burnt away. This creation by erasure and working with the fragments that remained became the starting point for a series of works in which certain parts were deliberately destroyed, often leaving delicate fragments of paper and image which could only be handled with tweezers.

These fragments were then used in *fin.* to reconstruct the landscape by layering them at different levels between small sheets of Perspex. In this way, an illusion of depth was created and the fragment were encased, almost like historical documents. The use of this technology was finally both conceptually appropriate and technically apt.

In some of my early work such *Virtually pondering Parys*, the idea of trying to draw the viewer into the landscape and thus into the experience of the landscape itself was investigated here by means of creating a 3D game-like environment. This idea along with the new-found technology informed the conceptualisation of my artist's book for the *Transgressions and boundaries of the page* project. The ideal was that one would literally page through the landscape: moving from the cosmos flowers through various layers of fragmentation and dismemberment until only a black page remains with the word "fin." engraved on it.

In a sense, this process is what Paul Carter refers to as "material thinking" which is what happens when artists dare to ask simple but far-reaching questions. Often the material becomes subservient to the dreams of the artist.

"... in solitude, it is enough that a dough be offered to our fingers to set us dreaming"

-Carter

Sources cited:

CARTER, P. 2005. *Material thinking*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing.