Transfiguration: A Study in Intaglio

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Transfiguration: A Study in Intaglio

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation in the Honors College

By
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Abstract

Printmaking is an art form that reaches across millennia. Contemporary artists utilize the same practices and techniques as the earliest printmakers. In the same tradition, I have made a contribution to this art form by creating a series of etchings over the course of two years. These four pieces are representative of different aspects of my life and personality. The result of this project is a far more thorough understanding of the art form itself, including the technical skill involved as well as artistic ability. Undergoing this process has taught me the meaning of self-expression and its importance in my current and future work.
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Introduction

When I first signed up for Printmaking I in the spring of 2015, I wasn’t even sure what “printmaking” was. I had no idea what exactly I’d be making, what skills I’d learn, or if I’d even enjoy it. All I knew was that it was a required course to complete the Bachelor Fine Arts program. That was when I was first introduced to Debra Fisher, who would become my thesis director and mentor throughout the rest of my time at Brockport. We started by making simple relief prints, until finally we moved on to etchings. Etchings, or intaglio, were what really caught my attention. It was something I had never done before; a completely new and unique medium with endless possibilities.

As I learned more about the technique and skill required to work with etchings, I knew I wanted to pursue this art form even further. Before the semester was over, I had already signed up for Printmaking II. It was in this class that I really began exploring printmaking and its versatility. During a discussion with Fisher about where my work would go from there, she suggested that I make a larger piece. Until that point, I had only worked with very small etchings, no larger than 9” x 12”. So I decided to take on the challenge of a single 18” x 24” etching. However, as this piece started to take shape, Fisher suggested I turn it into a series of four.
That summer of 2016 was filled with endless sketching in between miserable shifts at my warehouse job. I kept in constant communication with Fisher, sending her in-progress photographs and my thoughts on where I’d like to go from that point. By the time I returned to school in the fall, I had three drawings ready to become etchings. Since this was such an in-depth, large scale project, I would devote the next 18 months to these four images. The series, entitled *Transfiguration*, naturally became my thesis.

The Mechanics of Printmaking

The series was created by using a variety of techniques. They all followed the same general order of processes, before I began refining them individually. It all begins with sketching, of which I spent months working on. Each sketch was carefully thought out, using reference materials such as photographs and diagrams. I spent a long time planning out the images before moving forward, since they would require my full attention. Printmaking is a time-consuming process, and I’d spend about two years on this series, so I knew I wanted to be satisfied with the images.
Concept sketches for Regalia at different phases of completion.

Once the sketches were finalized, it was then time to prepare the plates. I had four 18” x 24” copper plates to use. The copper was polished and degreased until it was clean. Then I applied a hard ground to the plates, which is a substance made with beeswax and asphaltum. When it is heated on a hot plate, it cures and forms a smooth thin coating. Then it is time to transfer the drawing on to the plate, by either running the sketch and plate through a press together or by using graphite transfer paper. Once I am satisfied with the transfer, I begin to draw on the surface using a stylus to add line work.
Drawing into the hard ground with a stylus creates preliminary line work.

The basic idea of creating an etching with hard ground is that every mark you make on the hard ground reveals the copper beneath. When it is submerged in ferric chloride, the acid “bites” or etches into the plate where you’ve drawn. This is when I usually simply retrace the lines I’ve already established with the original sketch, but sometimes I expand on it as I’m working. This is also the stage when stippling can be added. Stippling is a technique that adds value and gradient by adding small dots: dots that are closer together creates a darker value, while more space between them creates a lighter value. On plates this size, I spent
several days on the stippling alone, adding subtle value to my drawings. It is time consuming, but in the end creates the effect I'm looking for.

An example of stippling, which creates a unique gradient and textural effect.

Once I have finished drawing on the surface of my plates, it’s time to actually etch them with the acid. Ferric chloride is used, which dissolves copper but is relatively safe to use with gloves. If there is enough blank space on the surface of the drawing, we can use pennies wrapped in duct tape to support the plate while it is etched upside down. This allows any particles of copper as it’s being etched to fall off the surface and not get in the way of other line work. If there isn’t enough room to use pennies, however, that means the plate must be
removed from the acid every 15 minutes and rinsed off, removing particles. The time it takes to properly etch a plate varies on the strength of the acid. The more the acid diluted with water or has been used over time, the weaker it will be. Typically, I leave my plates in the acid for about 3 hours. This bites relatively deeply and will hold ink.

Printing an Etching

Once the plate has spent the appropriate amount of time in the acid, it’s time to pull a proof, or a test print. Inking an etching is a skill on its own. First, the printer will cover the plate in ink using cardboard or plastic inking cards. Next, most of the ink that you just put down will be scraped back up using the clean edge of a new inking card. The next step is to use a tarlatan, a starched, open-weave muslin fabric, to wipe away excess ink from lighter or white areas of your plate. It is important that this is done with care; wiping too hard can remove ink from darker areas. Your print will then come out too lightly. Once most of the excess ink is removed, the printer uses newsprint to finish. This removes ink completely from white areas of your image, as well as any dark blotches. With the size I’m working with, it usually takes about twenty minutes to properly ink my
plates. Once this is complete, the final step is to clean the edges of the plate with a rag. This eliminates a rectangular border of ink on your print.

Printing an etching is simply a matter of using the equipment properly. After the pressure on the press has been adjusted to accommodate the thickness of the plate, it can now be placed on the press bed. Next, it’s time to prepare the paper. It should have been soaking in a water bath for a minimum of 30 minutes before printing, to make sure it is fully saturated. With printing etchings, a cotton rag paper is used. For all of my prints, I used BFK Rives printmaking paper. To remove excess water, the paper is pressed between two blotters – absorbent cotton sheets. A brush is used on the surface to remove lint and dust particles. The paper is then placed on top of the plate. This is when registration, or the alignment of the print to the paper, becomes important. To help with registration, usually the printer will have a make ready prepared on the press. A make ready is a sheet of paper with an outline of where the plate will go, and an outline of where the paper will go, to ensure the print is straight and centered. A cover sheet made of newsprint is then set on top of the paper, protecting the press from staining. Once the plate has passed through the press, the print is ready to be pulled. It should immediately be pinned to the wall along the border, to ensure improper wiping.
Additional Techniques

At this point, the artist can decide what areas need to be reworked with lines, or accentuated with value. For my prints, I would draw on my proofs with white and black colored pencil. I start to really resolve the image. There are other considerations, as well, including the use of color, layering on top of other prints, and what other techniques can be used. Typically, my next step is to aquatint my plate. Aquatinting is the process of lightly spraying the surface of the plate with black spray paint. When it is placed in the acid, for a much shorter span of time than line work, it etches tiny dots into the plate that create value when inked. Depending on how long the plate is in the acid, the value can be very light or very dark. The longer it is left in the acid, the darker it will be, since it will be etched deeper and hold more ink.
Soft ground is another way of introducing softer line work into the image. Soft ground is a substance that melts with heat, and is applied to a hot copper plate. Then, textured fabric is placed on top and it is run through the press. When placed in the acid, it creates a light grey pattern, similar to graphite. Other materials that I have used for soft ground textures include lace, feathers, canvas, and burlap, which all have different effects. While there are many other techniques that can be used to enhance an etching, aquatinting and soft ground were what I used predominantly.
Refining an Etching

At this stage, it is time to be conscious of the small details. This is where I would correct small imperfections to bring the image to a more finalized state. I say “finalized state” because I don’t consider any of my work ever finished. It is simply reaching new, more resolved stages that can always be expanded on. To do this, I usually begin scraping and burnishing the surface, bringing back in highlights where it may have gotten too dark. Highlights also act as accents over more important features of my pieces. I also use sandpaper to help lighten areas that have been previously aquatinted. For the sake of expediency, I can use clear
contact paper to protect darker areas of my plate. I place the contact paper over the surface, and remove it from areas I want to sand with a blade. Then, I am free to sand without damaging anything. It is even possible, at this stage, to add line work or stippling directly onto the plate. This is called drypoint, when there is no acid involved to create an etching. An electric engraver may be used to create extremely rich, velvety blacks.

Scraping and burnishing highlights into my plate for Primordia.
While it is the time to clean up the image, it is also time to consider color. For this project, I decided to add color that would represent different auras or energies. The process of adding selective color to an intaglio print is known as a la poupée. The color is wiped on in a specific area, and carefully wiped so that it gradually blends in with the surrounding black. Since the color was going to be blending with black, I chose dark jewel tones that mixed well with black.

The Creative Process

I titled the series Transfiguration because this project is a record of my progress at Brockport. Transfiguration is the process of something transforming into a more beautiful, spiritual state. During my time at Brockport, my work has improved in a similar way. I’ve not only learned and practiced techniques, but I’ve also become more open and expressive. My work is my own, and unashamedly so. I’m far less concerned about expressing my personality and opinions than I once was.

I believe that my best work comes from a personal place. Not only does it give me the chance to reveal and express myself publically, but also I enjoy work that have this sort of connection with. When you compare work I’ve done in my own way, such as these etchings, to a class assignment, there is a clear difference
in what I preferred working on. In my experience, if you dislike what you’re creating, you will never be satisfied with it. Because of this, I wanted these images to relate to different aspects of my life. I also wanted them to address contemporary issues, so that any viewer who sees them can create their own connection to the work regardless of their individual experiences.

Centralia

After a number of different sketches, I could see my ideas begin to solidify. For my first of four etchings, Centralia, I drew from my family’s unique history. Particularly, my paternal great-great grandparents, Mary and Patrick Kane. They were Irish immigrants, who settled in a town called Centralia in Pennsylvania. In 1962, a fire started underground, igniting a coal vein. This fire is still burning after all this time, because there is no way to extinguish it. As a result, Centralia is now a ghost town because of toxic fumes and fire coming from underground. It even inspired the filmmakers behind the horror franchise Silent Hill. However, several residents have remained, refusing to leave their home despite the danger. While my family eventually moved on from Centralia, it was in that town that the roots of my family grew.
My great-great grandparents, Mary and Patrick Kane. Photo taken in 1890.

St. Ignatius Church, where my great-great grandparents were held in high regard, was torn down after years of slowly falling apart. I included an image of this church in my piece, because I feel that it should be remembered. It was part of not only my family history, but the histories of countless others who worshipped and had a community there. My image is a tribute to and a memorial for a town that, and one point, was the home to thousands.¹ In addition to

including an image of St. Ignatius, I’ve also included other religious symbols. The Sacred Heart is best known for its association to the Catholic faith, and is representational of the love of Jesus Christ for humanity. While the church itself is now gone, it did serve a purpose. It allowed the gathering of like-minded individuals, brought together by a mutual love and devotion to their faith. It allowed children to be baptized, to feel part of something larger than themselves. Including the Sacred Heart is suggesting that, even when the church is gone, its impact on the world will always be. It is my personal belief that religion isn’t limited to a man-made building. One can believe in a faith without believing in the flawed humans behind it.

St. Ignatius being demolished in 1996, after years of falling into disrepair.
Since I want the viewer to have their own interpretation of my work, I included the rather ambiguous symbol of a snake. In the Christian faith, snakes are often associated with evil and deception. However, it holds several other meanings. Snakes are symbols of rebirth and renewal, of transformation, and even immortality. Many consider religion a place where they can be “reborn.” Where forgiveness and acceptance are possible. Where someone who was lost can find a place of community and support. The ultimate goal of Christians is, after all, to obtain spiritual immortality in the afterlife.

My intent with this piece is to illustrate my religious views, while also including information about my family’s history. It is something to remind others about the existence of this town, this church, and this community. And, above all else, it was the spark that inspired this series in the first place.
Hysteria

My next piece, Hysteria, is especially meaningful to me. As someone who has struggled with mental illnesses, specifically anxiety and depression, I am fascinated with the history of psychiatry. Nowadays, we can look back on how we used to treat the mentally ill, and shudder at the thought of lobotomies and straitjackets. Women, in particular, were vulnerable to being diagnosed with hysteria. The word "hysteria" actually originates from the Greek word "hystera", "meaning woman". It is interesting to note how the word has changed meaning over time, reflecting the changing attitudes towards mental health.
which literally translates to uterus. It was thought that women were feeble-minded, and that the source of erratic or disagreeable behavior was in her genitals. In actuality, women were expected to behave and think in a very specific, socially acceptable manner. Women who were free-thinking, opposed religion, or who were open in their sexuality were all considered mentally ill.² I was inspired to research this topic not only because of my personal connection to the subject, but also because of one of my favorite musical artist’s work. Emilie Autumn composed an entire album dedicated to psychiatry set in the Victorian Era. As she writes, “It's all to do with reproductive organs, which are naturally unstable in a dame.”³ Here, she is referencing the common misunderstanding that the uterus is responsible for mental illness. Autumn’s contemporary music referencing the past led me to think about how far, exactly, we’ve come in terms of our treatment of the mentally ill.

We’ve most certainly made great strides in treatment, but with a growing opiate crisis, I question modern psychiatry. Doctors are still too ready and willing to write a prescription for barbiturates and narcotics, without considering psychotherapy. As a result, the patient becomes physically and psychologically

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dependent on the drug while avoiding the actual cause of the problem. This is why I chose to include images of laudanum and neuralgia mixture bottles, which were common treatments for the mentally ill in the past. People are afraid to ask for help when they need it, because there is still a huge stigma against mental illness. A person who needs therapy is seen as “weak.” We shouldn’t need to talk to others about our feelings. They are afraid of judgment, that someone will call them “crazy”. That they need to be isolated from others if they admit to having a mental illness. Which prevents a number of people from receiving the care that they need, and forces them to suffer in silence. I believe that admitting that you need help is a sign of strength, rather than a weakness.
An in-progress sketch of Hysteria.

Since I have personally felt such a bias, this is a self-portrait. The blindfold is a representation of hiding a mental illness, concealing what you’re truly feeling from the public. Living with mental illness is a daily struggle, where some days are better than others, with no clear explanation for why one may be worse than the other. It is irrational, it is difficult. While I am not ashamed of my mental illnesses in the slightest, there are days when it is just easier to put on a brave face instead of showing my true feelings to the world. There are days when I’d rather stay quiet and struggle with myself than explain the situation to others. I’ve often
compared my mental illness to an infestation of sorts. I included the insects and spiders in my piece to illustrate that feeling, like I’m surrounded by disgusting things that I can’t seem to get rid of. I recognize that mental illness is something a large number of people struggle with, and it is my intent that the viewer might be able to connect their own struggles with my work. Since I am affected on a daily basis with my disorders, I feel that it deserves a place in my series of personal imagery.

* A final print of Hysteria.
Regalia

This next piece, Regalia, is an expression of my personal aesthetic and how we present ourselves to the world around us. My personal style generally falls under the alternative label. More specifically, I associate myself with the Gothic subculture. While it is most notable for its fashion, that is only part of it. It is also a movement of musicians, artists, writers, and creators of all sorts that find beauty in dark or unconventional places. I admire people who are able to proudly wear whatever it is they want to wear, and be who they want to be, without caring what others may think of them. I also consider people who are so true to themselves as nonjudgmental, promoting others to be just as unique.

There is a great deal of hypocrisy in how we judge others. As kids, we were always told to be ourselves and that we are special individuals. But that only seems to apply to a very narrow spectrum. If someone wants to dress in all black, suddenly they are seen as criminals rather than just different. As someone who has literally had mothers move her children away from me in grocery stores, I recognize that there are a lot of people who have huge misunderstandings about alternative lifestyles.

The mannequin is often a symbol of conformity, a standard for everyone to follow. But I drew this one in a corset and fishnets with a raven on her shoulder
because everyone has their own idea of what is “normal.” I know people who wear top hats and capes to the park, and that is their normal. I know people who tour cemeteries in Victorian mourning gowns, and that is their normal. Negative stereotypes against alternative lifestyles only exist because there is a lack of understanding and tolerance, and an unwillingness to learn. I titled this piece *Regalia* because we should be open and honest about who we are, and what we proudly wear is our regalia, our badge of honor, and we shouldn't have to face judgment or discrimination because of it. It is my intention with this piece that the viewer think a bit about conformity, and what exactly their definition of “normal” is, if they have one at all.
Primordia

Just like with my other three intaglios, *Primordia* continues the theme of personal expression. It is, in summary, a dedication to my relationship with my best friend, Mary Beadle. We met in a health class in the ninth grade, but really started building our friendship after graduation. She was my rock when nothing else in my life made any sense. She was the one who inspired me to go on in life, despite my debilitating mental illness. In return, I have helped her in her own
personal struggles. We balance each other out; I am more aggressive while she is more passive. I encourage her to put herself first when it's necessary, and she helps pull me back when I'm overbearing.

Since Mary intends to become a neuroscientist, I felt it was fitting to include the brain and lab rats she has worked with in the past. The broken gears symbolize both our difficulties with mental health. We often joke that something in our brains “just doesn’t want to work right.” The face lacks eyes and specific features because I wanted it to apply to either one of us, or any viewer to see...
themselves in it. The castle represents the “spooky” aesthetic that we share, our affinity for the bizarre and creepy. Our favorite flowers have meaning attached to them: the iris means hope, and the rose means balance. We definitely balance each other out in terms of our passiveness and aggressiveness. Hope is an important factor in our relationship, because there have been moments when that is all we have. We have both been in a position where nothing feels right, where nothing looks like it would get any better. It’s hope that keeps us from just giving up on our aspirations and helps us see more possibilities. It’s saying that, admittedly, things are not okay, but someday they will be.

Working alongside my best friend to create this image was a meaningful experience. Communicating back and forth about the image’s development and what elements to include taught me a lot about our relationship. When I asked her what would be a good symbol for my personality, she suggested a haunted house. Something that looked a little creepy, a little fun. Which was what inspired me to include the house in my final image. Including my friendship with Mary in this series was natural; she was the inspiration I needed to push through my anxiety to attend Brockport in the first place.
Conclusion

As *Transfiguration* was the largest project I have ever worked on, it was the most educational as well. It offered me the chance to learn about the process more thoroughly. The practice I had while printing them helped improve my technique. Since this project had a long period of time allotted to it, I was able to experiment with different processes to discover what I preferred. This was truly a meaningful, enriching experience that expanded my knowledge on printmaking as
an art form. My plans for the future include working on etchings even further, possibly expanding on the series as well.