

Journey through not knowing

Simon Ripley tells how printmaking can help people with dementia and mental illness

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Simon Ripley was talking to Greg Neale.

Two short films demonstrate the work of Double Elephant print workshop: *Conversations*, at vimeo.com/106802656 and *Print on Prescription*, at vimeo.com/62487018

www.doubleelephant.org.uk



have always been interested in ways in which the arts can be used therapeutically. I took a

degree course in Fine Art at Plymouth University in the early 1990s, and my dissertation explored the subject of art and healing. Before my degree course, I worked in a law centre in London and also for the United Nations in Sudan and in Hong Kong representing asylum seekers in immigration appeals. My early prints reflected my interest in social action, but I became frustrated by the way in which my representational imagery attempted to tell a literal story. I became more focused on abstraction, which I think allows for greater individual interpretation and greater freedom in making images.

I inherited my love of art from my two grandmothers: both of them painted in oils and showered me from an early age with gifts of crayons and paints. My grandfather established the family printing business in London, printing labels for wines and spirits, including for some notable brands such as Beefeater Gin and Chivas Regal – using five colours and embossing on foil – which were mini-masterpieces. In the 1980s the company bought a factory in Perth, to be closer to the Scotch whisky industry. In the basement of that factory was the large, heavy, 1850s cast-iron Columbian printing press that I use now for my work.

After leaving university, I set up Exeter's Double Elephant print workshop in 1996, with the Columbian press as its centrepiece. We are now a community interest company – a community resource for artists and for people wishing to learn printmaking. From the

outset we started to reach out to organisations and individuals who had limited access to art. With the help of European funding we started what was to become Print on Prescription – a programme of work-shops and projects with adults experiencing mental health problems. Now we are part of the Time to Change national campaign to end mental health discrimination.

In 2012 I started working with elderly people through a 12-month residency at Plymouth's Derriford Hospital. I spent afternoons painting and drawing with patients, many of whom had suffered falls and were sometimes in a state of anxiety and confusion. This led me to run a series of printmaking workshops at Exeter's Franklyn Hospital, which cares for people suffering from acute dementia and adults

with mental health problems. The workshops were of such obvious benefit to patients and in turn so nourished my own practice that I successfully gained Arts Council funding to continue the project.

I think of my own practice as a printmaker in the same way as one might think of practising yoga or meditation. For me it is a way into a spiritual life too. Printmaking is very process-based – I make monoprints by cutting with gouges into wood and linoleum, rolling out ink and printing in layers

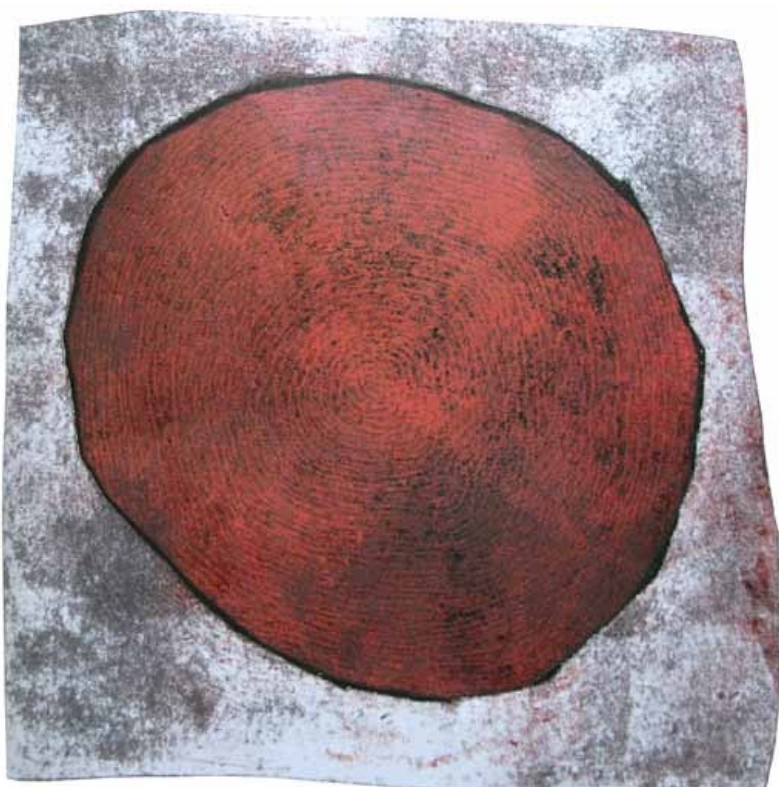
The spiral motif is perhaps a spiral journey, rings of growth in the trunk of a tree, a labyrinth, a brain or ripples in a pond

onto handmade Japanese papers. I use the Columbian press to drive the ink into the fabric of the paper under great pressure. This process of plate-making in printing means that there is a distance between the marks you make and the end result of the image. I work without any clear plan and almost allow the image to make itself.

At the start of each print I usually cut my block and print black as my first colour. This almost nihilistic act forces subsequent colours to work harder. I print the black, see how it looks, cut again and print colours one on top of another, each time reflecting upon what emerges from the process. In this way I surrender to a ritualistic practice out of which emerges something new to the world, something that I hope reflects a metaphysical enquiry, that prompts questions about life. The very physical and repetitive way of making is itself a form of surrender to whatever emerges: I encourage the 'happy accidents' so beloved by printmakers. I like to be unable to control what is revealed to me.

Working with people who have dementia brings these questions of control and surrender fully to life. During my second series of workshops at Franklyn, the aim had been to respond directly to the images made by patients. I would bring in my work, invite comments and responses, then see....(continued below after images..)





what the patients made and in turn go back to make my own reflections in my studio. Of course, nothing so neat and tidy resulted – patients would say, “This is awful,” “It doesn’t do anything for me,” “The middle bit is too solid,” and so on.

What this illustrated for me was the way that dementia is part of a journey from childhood and finally back to a kind of not knowing and not being responsible or able. The series of prints that I made in response make reference to the passage of time. The spiral motif is

perhaps a spiral journey, rings of growth in the trunk of a tree, a labyrinth, a brain or ripples in a pond. But I also don't like to make the story too straightforward; hence the small interruptions in each image – small glyphs that point to alternative possibilities. I hope that the images and the way in which they are made point towards a spiritual life in its most open sense – not rooted in story or a particular way of seeing, but more of an opening to possibility.

And so the making of this work and its inspiration really are about coming closer to an understanding of love. As the personality falls away through the onset of the disease, traces remain of who that person was, and sometimes a transcendent moment of calm emerges – most often when the individual is engaged in making art. My work aims to pay homage to those moments.

End.