

IN CONVERSATION WITH, REVISITED: SOPHIA SZILAGYI

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by Laura Kirkham

Sophia Szilagyi is celebrated for her haunting figurative and landscape pigment prints. She humbly attributes her work to a serendipitous meeting of various subconscious and intuitive actions. However, after talking to Szilagyi, it becomes apparent that through this modesty, her works are orchestrated by a strong artistic vision and technique that belies any notion of chance in her success as a print maker. Her captivating prints are the result of a skilled articulation of a unique creative perspective. In this, humility is an idiosyncratic component of her creative identity, infusing her work with a visible honesty that is at once celebratory and melancholy. Szilagyi's work embodies the raw romanticism of human experience, in which life is a series of individual and often contradictory elements working in unison. In her ethereal landscapes and intimate figurative work, she transforms the literal into a more realistic version of itself – one that reflects the interpretation of the beholder and asserts that the emotional realm is as significant as the real. Her work acknowledges all experience as contributors to existence, both light and dark, consciousness and intuition. With two new works currently at the gallery, I sat down and talked to Szilagyi about her printmaking practice.

Your latest work, *warm winds I* and *warm winds II*, shows a visual shift in your work, that we first saw in your 2015 solo show, 'Drifting Back'. Your work seems to be moving away from the darkness of your earlier work, introducing more light and colour. Is this a conscious decision?

All my development is instinctive and intuitive. If there's a method or goal I was looking towards it's a case of looking back to discover its source once the work's completed. In regard to my latest work, I'd been thinking about the use of light. In my later work, darkness obscures the viewer's plane of experience and I'd been wondering if the same effect could be achieved by using light.

I've been thinking about that for the past... year and a half? While I consciously didn't set out to explore that idea, it's surfaced in my recent work because I was in that frame of mind.

Similarly with colour, I went to France last September and visited Monet's Water Lilies, something I've always loved and wanted to visit. Looking at the work now, it has ended up with a kind of painterly Impressionistic feel. In terms of the colour and movement of this, they have a warmer, more lively dimension. So, again, the subconscious has driven the work rather than a pursuit of an idea or feeling.

Your work is divided into figurative works, or landscapes. Do you draw any correlation between the two, or is this distinction significant?

There is a definite difference. When looking at scenes of nature, I feel it's a natural human condition to picture yourself in it and you can project your own subjective relationship to them. Nature is a contemplative, reflective environment for me. When I create landscapes, I try to recreate that space for the viewer, letting them bring their own experience to the work. It's difficult to do that with objects, or figurative work, as the experience of the work is more prescriptive. If there is a person within the work, it's more difficult for the viewer to relate to the piece on a personal level because as humans we realise that people have experiences different to our own.

On the other hand, using a figure to this end means that the work is more grounded and declarative, which is why the works included in (March Exhibition) Eclipse work so well as a part of the exhibition. Each of the artists in the show have a clear vision they're trying to get across that they're directing their viewer towards. At first I doubted that the series of works I have in the show 'worked' I just thought they worked best, but this connection with the other artists is something I have realised works looking back. Like I said, it's that intuitive process that ends up making sense to me when it all comes together.

Terms like 'dream like' and 'other-wordly' are often used to describe your landscapes, how does this manifest in your creative approach?

I simply go somewhere I want to go to and take photos with the hope that they might evolve into a body of work. The photograph never lives up to the experience of what the environment was really like, so I try to bridge that gap by moulding the image into something that reflects how it felt to be there. It's not just the weather on the day I visited, or mood I was in, but how I perceive experience of that place in retrospect. I think of them as emotional landscapes. To me, figurative reality is irrelevant to my finished work, the physical place is just a backdrop to the things that contribute to the experience of a place.

YOU HAVE A VERY DISTINCT AESTHETIC, CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT YOUR PRINT MAKING PROCESS?

I start by taking snapshots of a place. I don't have a whizzbang camera, sometimes I just use my iPhone. In photoshop I layer up to a hundred of these snapshots, rubbing away in some areas and adding to them in others. I don't want people who view my work to necessarily see these layers at first glance, but rather present a work that is cohesive at first appearance, but can reveal more if you look closer. It feeds into my idea of letting the viewer bring their own experience to the landscapes I create. They can look further into the work if they want, but it's not imperative. I sharpen or blur the images, and play with temperature and warmth. The latter a lot more in my most recent works.

I usually bring in a colour that is completely outside of the palate of the original image/s. As an artist, I usually associate the remembered feeling of a place with the emotions that other paintings stir in me. To apply this emotional dimension, I use a dominant colour from that other work and use it as a filter over my work. Like my version rose tinted glasses, it's how I perceive that place from my vantage point in the future.

When something's done I do a proof at home, then once the colour's right I get it professionally printed with pigment ink on archival paper.

How do you decide when a work is “done”.

I just keep working until I intuitively feel something's finished; I have lots of images I've worked on that are sitting there that I don't think are 'done'.

WHAT STRIKES ME ABOUT YOUR WORK IS HOW YOUR PROCESS CONTRIBUTES TO THEIR EMOTIONAL INTENSITY. ESPECIALLY IN YOUR MORE RECENT PRINTS, THE PHYSICAL LAYERING AND MANIPULATION OF THE WORK IS EVIDENT WHEN YOU LOOK CLOSELY. FOR ME, IT ADDS A DEEPER EMOTIONAL DIMENSION TO IT BECAUSE YOU CAN SEE HOW INVESTED YOU WERE WITH ITS CREATION. IS THIS INTENTIONAL?

I've never thought about that element, but it definitely does that. It's like I was saying, things evolve without me realising it – it just comes together in the end.

All of my works have the same layering, but it's hard to convey that with the darkness of my earlier works; they had the same overlay manipulation process, but you can't see it as well with darker colours. Working now with colour and light, it becomes more evident, even though the process is the same

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR WORK TO SOMEBODY WHO HAS NEVER SEEN IT?

So hard. I call myself a printmaker because that's my main study and work, but I'd also say that I use photos in a painterly fashion on a computer. My work is romantic with a big focus on landscapes.

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