

JHANA MILLERS WHARE TOI TE WHANGANUI- A-TARA

Editions, Group Exhibition 9 May — 1 June 2024

I've been tutoring for a first-year art history paper this semester: ARH303: SURV OF RENAISS THRU MODERN ART. Bored, sitting in the back of a lecture hall on some miserably hot Thursday afternoon, eyes glazing over the one Dürer engraving that's always used to make this point, I listened once again to the story of the printing revolution. It's a story about seriality and accessibility, about their mutually reinforcing abilities to alter the world of images. Large-scale printing changed the game, brought art to the masses, spread it throughout Europe and then the world or whatever. I felt the same kernel of discomfort I'd experienced the first time I heard this story a dozen years ago in a Victoria University classroom. Growing up, the only prints we had in my house were the disastrously cringe Klimt poster I spent most of my week's New World paycheck on, and a framed cartoon in the kitchen of ants dancing on a transistor radio. I know that accessibility is technically an integral part of the story of printing, but we do ourselves a disservice by pretending that it's still what makes art prints important. Especially in the twenty-first century, accessible popular imagery is something else entirely, belonging to another suite of technologies. I think the value that really sustains creative interest in printmaking and multiples in contemporary art is seriality.

Prints have a complicated relationship with other artforms, they always have—ask any photographer or artist who regularly works in multiples. Large-scale reproductive technologies showed up in Renaissance Europe almost simultaneously with the humanist obsession with the individual, genius artist as producer of individual, genius artworks. In their seriality, their multiplicity, prints were somehow individually less than this ideal while collectively reinforcing its overall importance. In a lazy read of Benjamin, there's the argument that the multiple equally divides its aura—it's individual artistic authority—amongst itself. A print is only a portion, a lesser unit of a fractured whole, and that lack becomes the only real meaning available to it. If you take the piss—say, the frequent appearance of Banksy prints at our auction houses with a fraction like 121/300 pencilled in the bottom corner—then that argument holds water. But it misses the magic of seriality done well.

The actual experience of enjoying a multiple is something different. In a gallery, in a home, spending time with a print (one without an egregious edition number) doesn't initially or immediately trigger the abstraction of its multiplicity for me. They are multiple, but not infinite. Prints belong to a small group, made in a shared moment, bearing the traces of their reproductive medium across serial surfaces. Prints are a family, and when they leave the studio and spread across geographies, they remain a family—each indelibly connected to the moment of their making. They contest the autonomy of the art object while also expanding it.

Some of the artists in this exhibition are well-versed in working with multiples, for others, this is their first time experimenting with seriality. Many showcase the unique capacity offered by reproductions to translate images across media, changing their surface and form. Ruby Wilkinson, for example, has turned a working drawing from a previous project into a screenprint, playing into the multiple's baked-in ambiguity about the nature of the work—about the impossibly defined and always problematic moment of when the artist's labour is realised as art object. Instead of the diminished offspring of a 'real' product existing somewhere else, Wilkinson's multiple evokes process, the act of making, the endless decisions of development.

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Kereama Taepa's digital print consciously mimics the formal attitude that Brian Brake brought to the Te Maori catalogue in 1985. Brake's use of dramatic lighting contrasted with deep black backgrounds became a widely reproduced strategy—if not a norm—for photographing taonga in the decades following. Taepa already engages in a kind of repetition and reproduction before bringing his print into the world. A digital render, Taepa's work crucially doesn't exist in the physical world. His Brake-like mixing of whakairo and 1980s cultural symbolism enters physical space as a multiple. Rather than fracturing the aura of a physical original, the act of printing produces a kind of materiality for an object yet to possess it.

Executed with enough sensitivity, and for the right artwork, print reproductions can be much more than lesser copies of a greater original. They can be complementary objects, affective responses in a conversation between work and reproduction. Emily Hartley-Skudder's contribution to this collection falls comfortably into this latter camp. Her digital print is a reproduction of a photograph taken of a painting made during her Frances Hodgkins Fellowship in 2023. That oil painting on a clamshell support is itself a reproduction of reference photographs capturing the details of its constituent forms, brought together into the composition of the work. That collage is a reproduction in kind of Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, as close to an 'original' for Hartley-Skudder's print as you might find. Her print is full of repetitions, not just formally through the repeating clamshell motif, but in process too.

The acts of iteration, from Botticelli, through reference images, through oil paint, are continued in the print. The work remains active, a sense of historical motion—essential to its creation—is no longer forestalled by the completion of the painting. Hartley-Skudder says of her process:

I have often thought about how my paintings are in some ways 'reproductions' of my photographs, and even though the paintings are considered more 'original' than a photograph, the photograph always comes first and the painting cannot exist without it.

That's what's going on here. The print furthers a structure of repetition and iteration already inherent in the painting it reproduces. It doesn't 'finish' this process, a photographic print can't usurp the status of a painting and I don't know if it can or should ever work like that. But a reproduction can complement its referent, capturing and continuing the method of its making.

And then there is the way in which keeping the act of printing at a contextual centre can offer richer understandings of familiar media. Harry Culy's photographic edition shows bedsheets and a pillow, haphazardly twirled into a vortex. It's a quiet and beautiful image of a small, domestic observation—sweeping lines arrested by firm diamonds, a corner of exposed mattress where a fitted sheet has sprung loose. Due to its ubiquity, we tend to hesitate before thinking of photography in material terms. But Culy's contact prints are some of the richest material objects image-making offers. Light captured in emulsion, negative transferred to positive through physical touch, silver gelatin crystals literally absorbing the remnants of a past moment. Each print is connected through light and chemistry back to an instant of exposure. Each edition a vortex that connects the prints to one another, and to a shared shutter depression hovering over swirling linen.

Text by Lachlan Taylor