

Printmaking **TODAY**

ARTISTS' PRINTS, BOOKS AND MULTIPLES

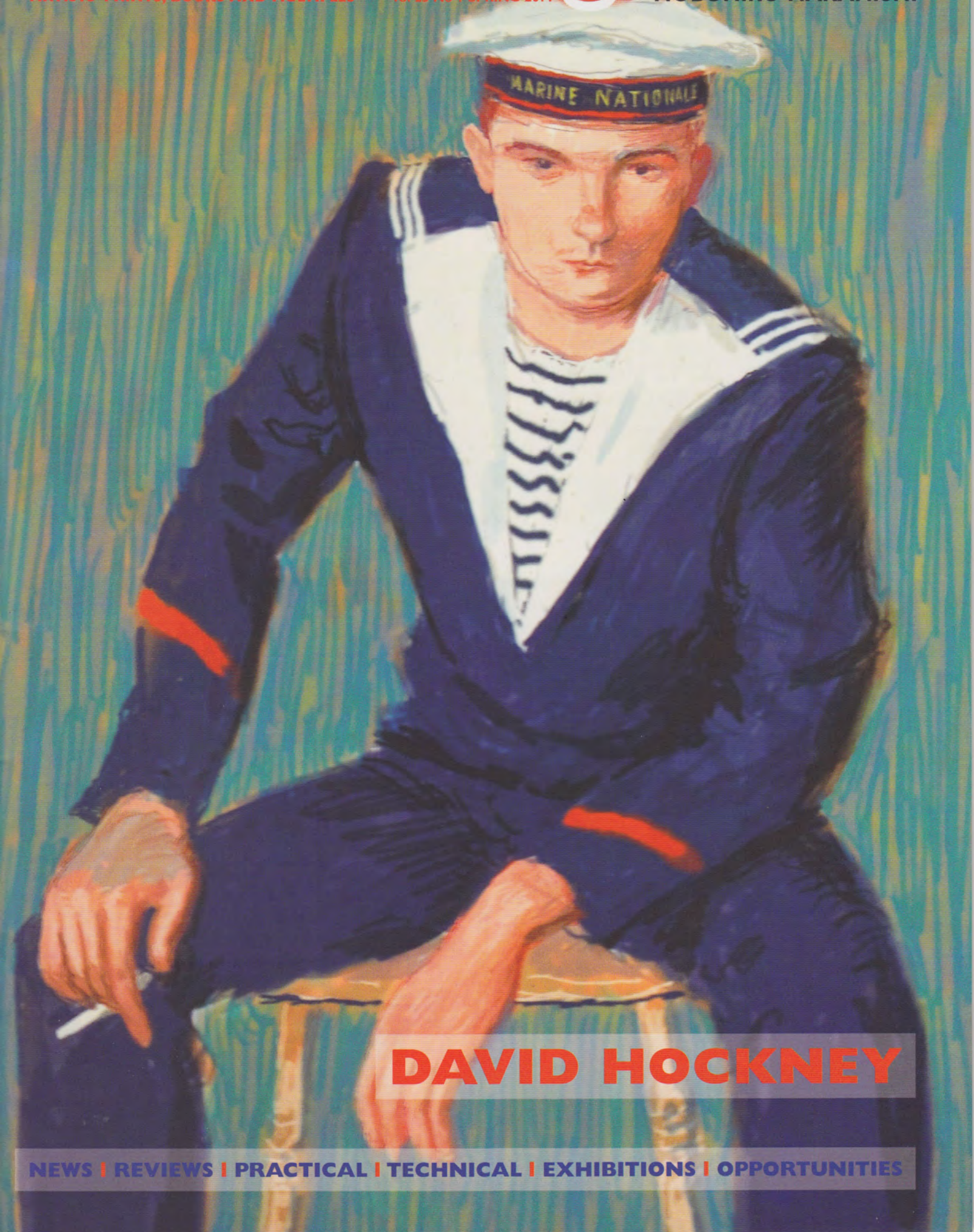
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IN FOCUS

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Experimentation with the Senses

TECHNICAL Sarah Dudley spills the beans on Keystone Editions' experiments with some unusual materials, including perfume, snails and sparklers

When Ulrich Kuehle and I started Keystone Editions in Berlin three years ago we knew we would need to distinguish ourselves by carving out a unique niche in the vast and densely populated Berlin art scene. Outfitted with our Tamarind training in one hand and eight years of working in printshops around the world in the other, we made a conscious choice to add a focus on experimental printmaking to our repertoire. Part of the impetus for this decision came from finding our place in Berlin alongside but not in direct competition with our colleagues at the well-established Tabor Presse lithography workshop. The choice to explore unusual printmaking methods came easily, as making prints with unconventional materials is something that has always interested us. A few years ago I doubt I would have imagined we would be printing images made with perfumes, birthday cake sparklers and snails, but before we knew it, artists were wanting to make prints with the most unexpected materials, asking us with delightful innocence, 'Do you think it will work?'

Scent and imagination

It is exciting to collaborate with artists whose usual practice is far removed from the world of ink on paper; sculptors, video artists and composers bring with them a unique approach to printmaking that allows for a particular openness to experimentation. Dane Mitchell, from New Zealand is a conceptual artist whose installations invite visitors to explore the intangible, fugitive properties of substances such as interstellar dust and perfume.

The series of 12 monotypes entitled *Perfume Plume* incorporates a scent that is reminiscent of a white, brightly lit, freshly cleaned empty room. Mitchell worked with a master perfumer to design this scent, which is comprised of only four molecules: two synthetic citrus, one ozone and one undisclosed molecule. Imagine an empty room flooded with sunlight on a warm day, about an hour after the housekeeper has been by. She used a lemon cleaning product that has left a sinus-clearing, yet slightly acrid 'aftertaste' (the ozone). The sky outside is a bright, cloudless blue.

This is the same blue that Mitchell chose for the backgrounds of his monotypes; its clarity and brightness perfectly complements the perfume and even adds to the effect of the scent. The simplicity of the printmaking technique he chose also reflects the simplicity of the perfume's composition: each of the 12 prints was created by taping off a rectangular shape on a sheet of perspex/plexiglas which was then rolled to a solid shape with sky blue ink. Mitchell then sprayed the perfume directly onto the ink. Within seconds, the alcohol and the essential oils in the mixture began to dissolve the ink into the most beautiful spotted patterns. After between 45 and 60 seconds the paper was laid on the perspex and run through the press. Of course the prints carried the scent, which lasted for months on the prints that were framed shortly afterwards.

While making these monotypes, it was difficult to control the type of pattern made by each new spray of perfume. We experimented with allowing the perfume to sit for different

lengths of time before running it through, and Mitchell practised with the angle, distance and number of times he sprayed the perfume. A slightly weaker concentration of the perfume created dramatically different patterns on the ink. It was exciting to see how spontaneously and seemingly randomly the ink reacted to the effect of the perfume. One aspect is common to all of the images – each halo of white dots and marks looks like a collection of tiny snowflakes; and like snowflakes each image is absolutely unique, impossible to reproduce.

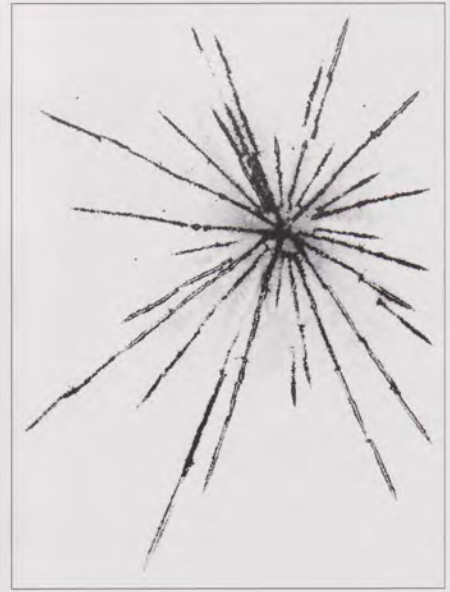
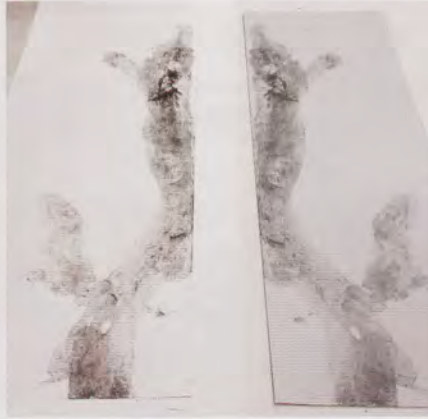
Once all 12 images were printed, we were faced with the same decision a collector might have: do we frame the prints straight away in order to preserve the scent for as long as possible, or do we allow it to fade naturally and focus our appreciation on the permanent mark the perfume has left behind? That is the crux in Dane Mitchell's work: satisfaction of curiosity or letting the imagination create the experience. Which to choose?

Touch and trust

When Swiss artist Anselmo Fox arrived with his snails packed in a styrofoam box filled with foliage and cucumber slices, I figured the snails would be the size of a golf ball. I was wrong. They were big.

Our first challenge was to persuade the snails to relinquish the safety of their shells and venture across the unfamiliar terrain of a freshly grained litho stone. The first thing we did was wrap the stone in an electric blanket to warm it up; if it were too cold the snails wouldn't come out at all. Secondly, as cucumber is one of their favourite foods, we prepared a few juicy slices and placed them at the opposite end of the stone. Luckily the snails were feeling energetic that day and all three promptly made a 'run' for the cucumber.

As the slime trail is so delicate and dries relatively quickly, we had to come up with a way to make the marks printable with as little interference as possible. Snail slime is a water-based, sugary solution, so how could we make it water-



resistant in order for the gum arabic to be able to do its job? The easiest way was to dust the trail with photocopy toner shortly after the slime had been set down. Bringing the snail into contact with the toner could also be completely avoided this way. We set the toner using a fume box and processed the stone in the usual way, etching the image with a weak mixture (pH 3.0) of 6 drops nitric acid to 28 ml (1 oz.) of gum arabic.

The results were encouraging but much of the pale and middle grey tones were lost, likely due to the layer of slime being either too thin or too dry to take enough toner. A few more tests yielded similar results, some quite acceptable, though difficult to reproduce. It seemed to depend on a number of factors over which we had no control: how quickly the snail moved, how much slime it deposited and how quickly it dried. That is the nature of the beast – a snail is not a reliable drawing material.

The best results were produced after putting the snails in a darkened room on a positive-working photo-lithographic plate, again dusting the trails with toner to blacken them for exposure. In order not to damage the slime marks, we set the plate on top of the glass of the exposure unit instead of putting it inside the vacuum frame. Once exposed, the plate was developed and fixed with gum normally. The photo plate was better able to capture a delicate tonal range as well as a lot of crisp detail.

Sight and memory

Monika Goetz's light installations were the inspiration for her three *Sparkler* lithographs, drawn entirely with the common grey sparklers sold for use on birthday cakes. As the burning tip and flying sparks are so much weaker than the light from an exposure unit, we were sceptical at first whether it would be possible to get any printable marks on the photo plates. To get the strongest possible exposure, Goetz set the sparklers directly on to the plate and let them burn down. Over 40 were used to create the star-shaped forms and the workshop was filled

with their familiar smell and comforting crackling sound.

In the end, we had a wonderful surprise: the heat from the sparkler hardened the photosensitive emulsion just as UV light does. This effect created shapes similar to the sparklers, with a broken white line in the centre where the metal wire's heat was strong enough to burn the emulsion away completely. These shapes changed quite a lot depending on the consistency of the sparklers' contact with the plate's surface, i.e. where there was a bend in the wire, the shape became thinner due to the distance from the plate.

Goetz also wanted to see the sparks in the image, but they were not bright enough to affect the emulsion. Tests showed that the soot particles were dense enough to put under the UV light and create a fine spray of tiny dots, much like the sparks. Working this way we could get more out of a photo plate than we had before – using the heat of the sparkler to create solid black shapes, burning off the emulsion with the extreme heat of the wire to create fine, negative spaces and finally exposing the plate traditionally, using the soot particles as a light-resistant drawing material.

To expose the soot, all sparklers were left in place after having burned down and Goetz added more until the complete shape was created. Then the plate was set on top of the exposure unit's glass and exposed to the UV light. During printing we needed a stiff black ink mixture to avoid losing detail in the dense concentration of fine points. To keep the plate printing cleanly we used a rubbery sponge (the kind used to polish cars) after every print to pick up any ink scum that may have built up on the surface.

The amount of detail in the works is remarkable. Goetz has created images that capture the energy and feeling of a lit sparkler, with light and shapes bursting out in all directions.

Since completing these projects, a number of other exciting artists have visited the workshop, some working with chine-collé and others,

monotypes on felt. It is a pleasure for us to experiment with such a wide range of image-making techniques and we have learned an enormous amount in the process. Things don't always work the way one would expect and that's the best part about it – it is in the surprises that new ways of using the medium can be discovered. The next frontier we want to explore is combining print with time-based media. The possibilities are endless!

Further information

A video showing the process of making the *Perfume Plume* monotypes is available on www.keystone-editions.net where details and images of all these projects, published by Keystone Editions, can be found.

Images

Perfume Plume I 2011 by Dane Mitchell. Monotype on BFK Rives 250g, 500 mm x 400 mm. Printed by Ulrich Kuehle

Dane Mitchell spraying the perfume on to the ink
Close-up view of the perfume reacting with the ink
Artists David DuBose (left) and Dane Mitchell (right) examining the prints

Keystone printer Ulrich Kuehle dusting the snail's trail with toner

Proof and photo plate showing the snail's trail

Sparkler II 2013 by Monika Goetz. Single-run lithograph on Somerset White Satin 250g, 700 x 540 mm. Printed by Sarah Dudley