

CUSTOM SERVICE – A PRINT COLLABORATION WITH KUSHANA BUSH

Marion Wassenaar

INTRODUCTION

Kushana Bush is widely acclaimed for her creative, masterly skills with colour, pattern and paint brush. These skills were challenged when she was offered the opportunity to translate her delicately rendered subject matter into screenprints with the assistance of custom printers Kiri Mitchell and Marion Wassenaar. The outcome was not only two editioned screenprints, but a rewarding and companionable partnership involving both social and professional engagement.¹



Figure 1. Kushana Bush, *Plumes, Arrows* (2015), gouache and pencil on paper, 505 x 700 mm. Image courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery.

Custom printing offers artists with a reputation for working in media other than print the opportunity to develop their work through alternative modes of production. Custom printing embraces various print techniques including screenprinting, etching and relief processes. There are a number of established artists – for example, Grayson Perry, Peter Doig and Anish Kapoor – who regularly undertake projects with print studios and publishers.

Screenprinting, also known as serigraphy and silkscreening, uses a method of forcing ink through a stencil on a fine mesh screen onto a printable surface. The technique is renowned for its versatility in printing on a range of materials. Pop artists of the 1960s exploited screenprinting's established relationship with mass culture, using the medium to create fine art prints. It is now ubiquitous in both the fine arts and commercial printing, creating synergies between art and design. Both approaches are inextricably linked through the creative endeavour involved and, I believe, the contemporary shift from the digital to the handmade.

The Print Studio at the Dunedin School of Art has a teaching philosophy that engages students in collaborative professional practice through custom print projects. This approach was instigated by senior lecturer Neil Emmerson. We both acknowledge with gratitude the valuable experience we have gained through our participation in Print Studio projects.

THE PROJECT

My initial encounter with the work of Kushana Bush was at the Dunedin School of Art's 2004 Graduate Show, exhibited in the unwelcoming, dingy space of the Blue Oyster Gallery, at that time located down a dark alley in Moray Place, Dunedin. I was especially interested in seeing the results of Kushana's four years of study to gain her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the DSA. Looking back, at the time I experienced a feeling of discomfort in witnessing her seductive figures indulging in carnal pleasures, and at the same time I felt a desire to look closely at her meticulous rendering of detail. The predominant background colour in these works – a deep, fleshy pink – was perhaps a subtle reference to wearing rose-tinted glasses when engaging closely with such detail. What had possessed the young artist to explore this provocative subject matter with such graphic draftsmanship? My unease, I now realise, was a result of my art historical naiveté, which was somehow intensified by the seedy locale of the gallery.

In following Kushana's development and dedication as an artist over the past decade, I have come to understand the context of her work and her multiple references to art history, which include childhood memories of growing up with Indian miniature paintings. A serendipitous meeting following her tenure as the Frances Hodgkins Fellow at Otago University led me to make a verbal proposal intended to gauge her interest in undertaking a custom print project. We would provide her with technical knowledge, production assistance and a willingness to experiment with graphic expression in the creation of limited edition prints. Her use of the opaque, chalky medium of gouache, and the line detail achieved by brush or pencil, suggested that the screenprint process would be appropriate to her visual language.

Production commenced with Kushana providing us with test drawings for screenprinting, with a view to reassuring her of the fine line detail achievable through the fine mesh of the screens. Having had her concerns satisfied with a series of samples, Kushana's next step was to contribute colour mock-up designs which enabled separation of each colour; digitally, from the line works supplied. She also took responsibility for the colour mixing of the screenprinting inks. The paper used by Kushana for her paintings is an Italian 100% cotton, 300gsm, mould-made paper that we found to be ideally suited to the screenprint process. The two A3 images that resulted embodied her trademark cast of colourful characters contained within the margins of the paper. Based on Kushana's colour mock-up designs, *Night Thoughts* separated into 11 layers of colour; while *The Life Raft* incorporates nine layers in softer, muted shades. Each print is in an edition of 35 plus printers' proofs and artist proofs.

We are very grateful to Kushana for giving us the opportunity to work with her on this collaboration. I share her response to the project:

The process of working in collaboration with Marion and Kiri was an immensely enjoyable and rewarding experience. Initially, I was struck by the contrast between painting (which is often made in an inherently reclusive environment) and a printmaking workshop: a 'shared' working space, and consequently by its very nature, a social environment. This change of environment was a refreshing gear shift for me, with students popping in and out, working on their own projects and curious to see how things were progressing. Visually though, one of the most enduring and fruitful revelations was learning to rely solely on line to indicate the form. This has become one of the most enduring by-products of this dip into screenprinting, which has been immensely helpful in consequent drawings and in my current experimentations with egg tempera.²



Figure 2. Kushana Bush, *Night Thoughts* (left) and *The Life Raft* (right), 2014, screenprints on paper, 560 x 380 mm. Custom printed by Kiri Mitchell and Marion Wassenaar.

Marion Wassenaar holds an MFA from the Dunedin School of Art. She specialises in print practices with a research interest that focuses on the collision between humans and their environment, either through social justice or ecological concerns. She lectures in the Print Studio at the Dunedin School of Art.

Kiri Mitchell holds a BFA and is enrolled in the MFA programme at the Dunedin School of Art. She specialises in print, drawing and stop-motion film with a research interest in sexual politics narratives that are expressed through satire. She lectures in Studio Methodologies at the Dunedin School of Art.

Kushana Bush graduated with a BFA from the Dunedin School of Art in 2004. She was the recipient of the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship in 2011 and was awarded the Arts Foundation New Zealand New Generation Award in 2013. She exhibits both in New Zealand and internationally.

- 1 In acknowledge of the friendship that was formed with Kushana as a result of the collaboration, in this project description I refer to the artist by her given name, while the pronoun 'we' is used to denote the working partnership of Kiri and myself.
- 2 Email correspondence from the artist.