

# New Experiments in Printmaking in the Age of Digitalization in India

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## Abstract

This research discusses about Digital printing as an extended possibility of printmaking techniques. Printmaking has evolved as a process of making artworks, primarily from the early printing techniques. In the history of printmaking and its development over centuries, there is a continuous appropriation of different printing technologies, hence Digital printing is also adopted as a fine art medium by printmakers and artists. This research aims to explore the meaning of Digital printmaking because at present digital printing technologies are used to produce various fine art products. In these circumstances, the paper aims to explore two individual practices both use digital printing i.e. Digital printmaking and digital fine art printing from the perspective of image-making and techniques.

**Keywords:** Digital; Image-making; Printmaking.

## Introduction

The word graphics is often pronounced with printmaking, even after this long journey, when printmaking established itself as a significant medium of fine arts, the reason is probably the parallel encounter as a commercial and artistic medium, the word 'graphic' typically describes commercial design or illustrations.

Throughout history, art, as well as printmaking, went through continuous evolution, that affects the purpose, content, style, and above all the techniques. Printmaking techniques are acquired from printing technologies, following the same path Digital printing is also adopted by contemporary printmakers and artists as a medium to print fine art.

But Fine Art Digital printing broadly explains almost anything that is

printed for the sake of fine art, i.e. Photography. Paul Coldwell mentioned in his book *Printmaking, A Contemporary perspective*, with the emergence of digital printing “the boundaries between printmaking and photography, have become blurred; once two distinct processes, they are now defined by histories and intention rather than the nature of the studio or darkroom, each accessing the same equipment and materials.”<sup>1</sup>

But the question is how can we distinguish the ‘Digital printmaking practice’ from fine art digital printing. To understand this let us go through some of the Indian artists working in the digital medium.

### **New Experiments and Discussion**

Ranbir kaleka is internationally recognized because of his Video-Painting, yes that is what he used to call his hybrid art pieces, a physical image, most of the time hand-painted image brings in to life with animated projection; his idea is to encounter the possibilities when a physical image interacts with an image made out of light. His mixed media, oil on digital prints is also an attempt to create hybrid art.

The violence of his birthplace, Punjab, which he did not perceive physically in his adolescence but he can sense it was there, actually created a strong psychological understanding with the other associated phenomena from the outer world which he perceives through cinema, theatre, books and stories, this tolerance and brutality of mankind are expressed through his visual narrative which is universally familiar and at the same time temporarily ambiguous in nature.

All of his articles, publications, and research thesis are about his painting and video painting but we hardly talk about his mixed media, oil on digital prints, as a researcher of Printmaking and considering digital print as an extension of printmaking, motivated me to observe his digital prints in respect to his art practice and video-painting.

His association and love for animated images and cinema are implemented into his digital prints. Whenever someone sees his digital prints, the first impression is- a single frame from an animated image is being extracted and pasted on an inanimate surface. He used the scope of digital image-making unconditionally, hence digital image-making gives us the Ultimate possibility to create an entire composition by assembling images

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1 Coldwell Paul, *Printmaking a Contemporary Perspective*, Black dog publication, London, P-33.

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from different sources, 'Digital collage.'

All the elements in his prints were not his photograph, he had used images from open sources. But for large-scale works he used his own high-resolution photographed image because of exquisite printing quality. He worked on Photoshop with breathtaking numbers of layers and printed them digitally with archival support, then he painted small areas with oil, thus every single edition is exclusive. Sometimes he also printed his edition in variations.

*Lion and the Milk Bowl*, a digital print on canvas and oil painting created in the year 2011, is one of his famous digital print, dramatic gestural presence of nude and seminude Baroque like figures, are the photographs of wrestlers, while the middle ground and background are juxtaposed with the Lion and a nude female figure, creates a sense of anxiety that is often described as surreal, this is possible because of the digital image-making. The rich details of the objects, textures, and last but not least using dramatic ambient lights makes it a unique piece of art. His other digital prints such as *Conference of Birds and Beasts* and *Cobbler* are a perfect example of digital image-making. Both compositions are an assemblage of different images that culminated into a unique experience.

Artist Manjunath Kamath is also a multidisciplinary artist working with both traditional and digital mediums. His digital prints are also formulated in the same process as Gulammohammed Sheik and Ranbir Kaleka's digital collage. The Nathdwara collages influenced his digital collages.

He was born in 1972 in Mangalore and did his BFA from Chamarajendra Academy of Visual Arts, Mysore. Later he went to UK for further studies. After returning to India, Kamath started working as an illustrator in a newspaper and first got his hand at Photoshop, soon he became a master in digital image cutting, stitching, and layering. From these technological developments, Kamath saw a way to assemble images from different sources, i.e., old oleographs, postcards, calendars, comic books, photographs taken by him, images from commercial advertisements even pictures downloaded from the internet. Kamath compared his digital collages to 'Showcase of typical Indian room,' where objects from West and Indian, e.g., "miniature bottles of spirits, little models of Eiffel tower & Tajmahal, dada dressed in dhoti, dadi in sari," are juxtaposed ludicrously.

He created his own pictorial space by placing elements from real-life situations and from the fantasy world. Space, where imaginary and reality

juxtaposed that evoked viewer conscious and unconscious mind to meet in a single point."I can play in my own space, I can place my images as I want, and I can create unbelievable stories that you have to believe. Just like my grandmothers' stories that I grew up with."<sup>2</sup> Most interestingly he transformed a regular space and scene into an imaginative reality. *Night Poem* and *As You Know* this two compositions based on the same space a rooftop at night and in daylight. In the composition, night poem artists transform the rooftop into a fairy tale scene. A dear on a table with flower trees like the horn is embraced by an angel in full moon night. The most interesting part is the use of light, he used spotlights on the figures in the middle ground thus embark a dramatic set-like appearance. While the same rooftop is converted as a shared platform for daily life activity in the shade of fantasy realism.

Using the power of digital image-making he bound to place two different cultural elements of a different time in a single frame. *Cupid on Stupid* is one of the instances, where cupids from a classical western painting being placed in the sky of India besides a Netaji public statue.

In the composition *How Come He is Here?* Ravi Varma's *Shakuntala*, Sita with Caravaggio mythical figure sharing the same frame. His indoor digital compositions are more surrealist in nature, the elephant, birds, flying pig, horse, swan, etc are often seen, this displacement creates a ludicrousness that is different from the kaleka's displacement anxiety. Characters are cropped from their context and placed in his collages to act in his stage, that comment "how globalization has led to a certain kind of homogeneity, morphing cultural identities and indigenouness, for me, they appear to be searching for their own identities in the global era."

Another spectacular contemporary artist working with different aspects of digital and digital technologies is Baiju Parthan. Parthan's work encounters the cultural change with digital technology, we can't ignore that we are surrounded by digital possibilities. Internet as a medium of communication makes our daily life easier and faster than ever before. Internet with digital technology actually replaces some of our cultural originality with virtual, e.g. letter writing, printing even money became translated into virtual with the advent of digital wallets. We are in a situation where half of our life lives in reality and another half in virtual reality. Parthan's works deal with the universal impact of this cultural shift in the context of

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2      Prakash Uma, Manjunath Kamath, art etc, April, 2011.

India. His association with digital technology reflects through his previous education as an engineer. Yes, he meant to be an engineer but a book by Harold Rosenberg, *'The Anxious objects: art today and its audience'* turned around his career as an artist, he joined the college of art Goa for a B.F.A in painting, at the same time he has also studied Mythology. Mythology along with technology accumulated to form his artworks. His search for metaphor worked as a catalyst to meet science fiction and mythology in a vantage point, which facilitated to generate symbols and motifs he often used in his works. "I think technology and mythology feed of each other."<sup>3</sup> He works from painting to new media such as interactive programming based art as well as large-scale print on a metallic surface, "I work essentially with 3D graphics directly link with animation and virtual reality"<sup>4</sup>.

Particularly his work with 3D Digital Lenticular Print is an extraordinary example of experimentation with digital image-making to make it more communicative, interactive and playful to viewers. What is a lenticular print? A lenticular print is a static image with an illusion of depth, frames with different movements of a single object or two different images combined in a single print which animates when seen from different angles, that means 3D lenticular picture represents a different image depending on the viewer's angle. Maximum 20 sequences or images can be included in a lenticular print. The sequence must be compressed into a single image format before printing, this process is known as interlacing. After printing the encoded image, a decoder is needed to present the corresponding projection for each viewing angle. Fine array of cylindrical lenses, a lenticular lens sheet is enclosed with the print as a decoder. "Each eye of the viewer sees the picture from a slightly different angle, and therefore sees a different image. If the two images are the correct projections of the object, a 3D sensation is invoked."<sup>5</sup>

In his another project, *Displacement of Mill Junction* he tries to trace the cultural and political alteration of the urban landscape in the context of the city Mumbai. The mill area and its architecture became the identity of the city and translated into an iconic symbol that appears in many old movies but is slowly replaced by towers. To present, this Parthan created an urban

3 Sarma Ramya, Living with virtuality, The Hindu, July 23, 2011.

4 Ibid.

5 Weissman Yitzhak, 3D Lenticular Imaging for Art.

landscape in the form of panoramic photo composition using horizontal mirroring.

Parthan's work is very labour intensive in nature, he worked on his own without an assistant, he experimented with different mediums because of this it takes time to acquire skills and towards developing a new body of work.

While Parthan's work focused on digital technology and its impact on the socio-cultural aspect, Rohini Devasher's deals with biology, space and science. Her works are liberated from the social and cultural phenomenon, rather she draws parallels between the observed and imagined-reality that lead her to create a hybrid form. She is influenced by science fiction, to her science fiction is "powerful imaginative tool and its keyword is 'investigation'. It challenges established assumptions and forces you to turn what you think to be true..... It makes you ask the question 'what if?'" She did BFA in painting and MFA in Printmaking. She began to take her interest in botany, influenced by the writings of the philosopher and poet JW Goethe and plant morphologist Agnes Arber.

As an instance, her body of works from 2007-2009 is based on the complex organic form of plants, *Archetypes* that she developed during her art and science residency in khoj, New Delhi. She worked with the professors of Botany, New Delhi University, they help her to get macro and microscopic images of plant surface "as viewed under a scanned electronic microscope, including hair-like trichomes, highly ornamental pollen structure; and stomata with mouth like apertures." This images then restructured probably using raster graphics software to build his hybrid forms that play between imagined and observed reality, *Hybrid I*, is one of the examples, it is a "bizarre amalgamation of eleven cactus-like, prickly organic plant forms that surround a pink and orange centre exuding an outrageous sexuality: a vagina dentate in its thorny density."<sup>6</sup>

Another process she prefers to create hybrid forms is video-feedback, this a simple technique similar to the old kaleidoscopes. Video feedback is created by pointing the lens of a regular camera to a monitor and at the same time the camera is connected to the same monitor, because of this there's an even so slight delay that it takes to display the information thus a loop

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6 Brodsky Joyce, Crossing Boundaries: The art of Anjali Deshmukh and Rohini Devasher, University of California, Santa Cruz.

is created between the video camera and monitor. By adjusting brightness, contrast, hue, focus, camera angle it is possible to create a wide range of pattern and effect. After recording, the footage is edited using the software. One of the instances is her project *Hopeful Monsters*, using the video feedback technique she created almost 140 digital hybrid forms that she both used in digital printing and video. Her pictorial elements are generated using technology, a new species born from her practice that is unique and representation of asexual reproduction. Another interesting printing method she used often as part of her installation is printing on clear vinyl. One of the examples is *Genetic Drift*, this is a part of her project *hopefull monster*, in project 88, where she pasted different abstract texture similar to fungus on the gallery wall, as clear vinyl was used as the printing surface, it easily managed with the gallery wall and transform the space into a supportive ambient environment for the exhibition. The main print is 12 x 33.4 feet in size, a complex hybrid from originated from the photographs she has taken from the public domain and from the visit to the different botanical gardens.

As mentioned earlier; with the advent of digital printing the boundaries of printmaking and photography became merged, a photographer is a person who takes photographs either as a job or hobby,<sup>7</sup> but Pushpamala's digital prints is far ahead, which could not be fit into the regular instance of photography neither it is an imagery that is created or formulated virtually. In this process she didn't take the photographers rather she collaborates with the photographer, to take the pictures of certain situations created and directed by the artist; the way a director collaborates with the cinematographer in cinema. Her works do not fit into the category of 'digital printmaking', as these compositions are not formulated digitally, rather composed physically as a cinematic set then photographed and printed with archival support. Her works could be considered in the category of fine art digital printing. I will try to describe her practice briefly along with some other artists work to understand how digital printing is employed by the artist and what could be the possibility of digital printing in fine arts.

Pushpamala trained as a sculptor but she started working with photo performance when a gallery based in Mumbai curated a show to celebrate hundred years of Indian cinema probably in 2000. She mentioned that it was a turning point for her practice and as well as for Indian art, hence conceptual photography was never done before. She got interested in Indian cinema because of her husband, who is a scholar and researcher of

Indian cinema and they watched lots of Indian films together. Her works are largely cinematic, melodramatic and native in nature, she largely influences by cinema, India Mythologies and also from popular art, moreover from classical to the popular cult. Her works are focused on the politics of feminine ideology and Nation, therefore she played the key role as a model in her works. Recreation of existing visual is also a challenge towards her practice, she successfully recreates many classical painting and prints with process photographs.

Her methods are extremely complex in nature, it usually takes several months to develop a body of work because it almost like a film shooting, it requires costume design, location selection for outdoor shooting and set designing for Indoor shoot, makeover, lighting, rehearsal and everything that includes in a film shooting. She also collaborated with other actors to play the associated roles. She mentioned in one of her interviews that, she didn't prefer very dramatic facial expression rather the gesture of the models and the whole setup actually express the nature of the subject. Several shots were taken for each project and then edited through software and the final image get printed with archival printer on the different surface from archival paper to the canvas in an edition of 10. *The Arrival of Vasco da Gama*, an oil painting by Jose Veloso Salgado in 1890, is recreated by Pushpamala when Kochi Muziris Biennale commissioned her in 2014, Pushpamala recreated this old oil painting in the context of Kochi, hence Calicut where Vasco da Gama first landed in India, both are located in the same state of India, Kerala.

Waswo X Waswo is an American artist based in Rajasthan, Udaipur, famous for his miniature style painting. Most of his miniatures describe the artist as a foreigner, wearing a fedora taking pictures on his old camera. Being an outsider the artist's thought is to document its architecture, flora and fauna moreover the life and its surroundings similar to the European artists' practice in colonial India.

This practice actually triggers the handpainted photography series, as these photographs are the pictures of that man in the miniature paintings. The man in the miniature was primarily not created by the artist as his representational identities but gradually he adopted the avatar of his own created character. And he began with the hand-tinted photographs. The subject of his photographers is mainly the local people and their daily life but also in some of his series he himself became the role-model and recreated the miniature in form of had-tinted photography. Another interesting aspect is the characters and the scene from his miniature get



transformed into the real-life with his photographers.

He used process photography as the method to create his photographs similar to Pushpamamal. Waswo collaborated with the *Rajesh Soni*, a third-generation Rajasthani hand-colorist to colour his black and white photographs and local miniature artist *R Vijay* who painted the miniatures and backdrop of the photographs.

His models are generally the local peoples and friends. local peoples wanted to get photographed but they can't afford it, while Waswo photographed them for free and also gave them a free edition. Waswo set-up his photographic set in layers, the hand-painted backdrop in the background, some plants in the middle ground and models are placed on the middle ground and foreground.

They pose and look at the camera directly like an old fashion photograph. The photograph is taken by a digital camera in colour and then converted into a black and white file and printed on archival paper. This black and white print then carefully hand-tinted by Rajesh Sonoi.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we can identify two individual styles of practice, one of them are where the compositions are formulated virtually using different software and individual methodologies adopted by the artists such as Ranbir kaleka, Manjunath Kamath, Baiju Parthan and Rohini Devasher which could be considered as Digital printmaking. On the other hand, Pushpamala and Waswo X Waswo's practices are more lens based which fit under the fine art digital printing.

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