

## The Clever Girl Painter - The Blocks

Black or white, left or right. These were concerns my grandmother Joan Ellis had when she made her wood-engraved blocks for printing. I am less interested at this point with the prints that these blocks produced, but in the wood blocks themselves, divorced from the much loved monochrome images that hang framed in my home. I'm fascinated by the materiality of these blocks, their surface, mass and behaviour in relation to the body - the handler, the observer, the maker.

Handling these blocks in my studio I study them closely. I find myself looking while feeling with my fingertips in search of something I can't see. They are smooth as well as textured, a range of repetitive cuts and grooves, some so fine it is impossible to detect through touch - the sensors on my fingertips are simply not sensitive enough, my fingers just run over these details as if they don't exist, but with my eyes I explore their minutia detail and precision. The back of the blocks are much coarser, unkept and slightly furry even, the impressions left from hard metal surfaces - cutting saw, printing press, desk clamps, a reminder of what this raw material can withstand and the process it has undergone. There are also some pencil sketches on the reverse, ideas that were never realised and the workings out that would eventually become the final image. How can I gather the maximum information from these objects, with my eyes or my hands as I explore front, back and sides, occasionally lifting right up to my face to smell them?

Cracks occasionally occur separating the individual wooden cubes that are dowelled together to make up any one engraving block. Most of these cracks run between the grid structure, but occasionally stretch across the entire surface following neither the geometry of the multi block or the grain of the wood. This is a consequence of the wood breathing, changing its shape as it responds to different temperatures. Each time these blocks are stored whether that be an attic, cupboard and now my studio the boxwood reacts to the temperature of that location, and dare I say once in the gallery may alter again. Some of the cracks I fear have widened in the last few months in reaction to the heating in my studio, but maybe they have always been there, it's just that I did not notice them before. These cracks will be widening slowly over time, pushing apart the wood to create dark creeping lines, like a crack in a cliff face leading to a cave deep inside.

These are different to the intentional cuts made by my grandmothers' skilled hands, crafted incisions sitting shallow in the wood producing a multitude of marks, textures and subsequent shadows. Both types of dissections operate within their own time and history - material time meets makers time (this includes the wood block maker, artist and printer). The slow seasoning wood interrupted by the artists' intervention, grounding each block in a unique material condition.

Blacks - cool black, warm black, charcoal black, coal black, metal black, leather black, grease black... from the ink build-up on the surface of each individual block. (Every time a block is inked up for a print, a thin film of ink adheres to the surface, building up gradually with every print run.) These blacks vary from shiny smooth reflective black, like pools of oil, to coarse deep absorbent matt black, which appear to retreat deep into the block. Each variation fragmented and partitioned by cuts and furrows. These colour readings depend on the light that reflect off the surface. With the colour black this is extreme - black appearing silvery grey almost mirror like, revealing the ripples of the annual growth rings of the wood, and as a deep dark black as if the lights have gone out, so dense one cannot understand the surface at all. There are also shades of brown where the wood is exposed, where no ink has come into contact, roughly cut away and never to be evidenced on the paper print. These brown shapes are the exposure of the woodblock interior and natural wood structure, darkening over time through prolonged exposure to light.

The tight uniformed wood grain is dense and very stable facilitating lasting sharp edges. Boxwood, which all these blocks are made from comes from the boxwood slow growing shrub, the main stems rarely reaching more than five inches in diameter, and when cut into small pieces to make up a wood-engraving block produce a very strong and versatile material to work with. A softer wood such as pine would not withstand this process, the edges crumbling, bending and losing their definition when carved, or collapsing under the pressure of the metal weights of the printing press.

These print blocks are the art objects that are usually never seen - OMG what am I doing! Am I exposing the process my grandmother may have wanted to have kept hidden. I'll never know!

The shapes between overrule the figuration for the intended subject matter of the print, exposing the gaps between things and the process and interaction between artist and material. How did Joan work on these blocks? Did she hold in one hand and cut with the other? Or did she use a work surface to wedge/clamp the block leaving both hands free to exert the force required to push the cutting tools into the wood? These are the objects most close to the artist - many hours spent handling and working on them. I can follow each mark she made, her precise calculations and then the pressure, angle and action she applied with each cutting tool to create the incisions. If you look closely you can see small mistakes, where tool slips too far and travels with less control, but these are very few. Most marks are incredibly precise and I can only imagine how this was done. Did she use magnifying glasses for the delicate minute cuts? How did she maintain so much control with wood and tools?

This is the work of a professional artist, one that knows exactly how wood and tools behave - and then takes that skill to create extraordinary carvings that simultaneously think in reverse, while never losing sight of their printed ambition.

