

At the cutting edge: an investigation into creative practice
Charlotte Hodes and Cathy Treadaway

Abstract

This paper presents a recently completed collaborative research project by Charlotte Hodes, Senior Research Fellow in Drawing at the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London and Dr. Cathy Treadaway, Reader in Creative Practice, University of Wales Institute Cardiff and Visiting Research Fellow (Computer Science) at the University of Bath. This practice led research project: *A Collaborative Investigation into the role of the Hand Craft and Digital Processes within Creative Practice* was supported by an award from the Arts and Humanities Research Council in 2007-8.

A case study is described which documents the creation of a body of artwork for exhibition by Hodes. The research methodology is explained and the context, for both the artwork development and the investigation, is described in the light of the artist's on going practice using digital print and collage and Treadaway's broader study of creativity supported by digital technology.

This paper addresses the pivotal role of digital print within the working methodology of the artist and how it impacts on her creative practice. It is fully illustrated with examples of the artworks, which are considered an embodiment of the research process. The motifs used in Hodes' paper cuts were stimulated by drawing research into historical paper dress patterns from the research archive at the London College of Fashion.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the artist's future practice based research, providing comparisons between the printing processes involved in large format digital paper printing for paper cuts and those involved in the creation of a body of ceramic artworks using ceramic transfer prints. In addition, findings are presented that illuminate the ways in which creative decision making is influenced by memory of physical experience and bodily knowledge acquired through the hands.

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Floating, touch of pink detail 134 x 112cm digital print with collage 2007

Introduction

Digital technologies provide methods of creating, manipulating and replicating imagery that would be difficult, if not impossible, to create any other way¹. Many artists now combine both digital and hand crafting processes within their practice in order to create their work². The research presented in this paper investigates ways in which the integration of digital processes impacts on both creative cognition and practice, revealing the important influence of hand craft and bodily acquired knowledge in the development of the artworks.

This investigation focuses on the practice of fine artist, Charlotte Hodes, who combines digital and physical cut and paste techniques to develop intricate large scale digitally printed and hand cut collages. Digital print plays a pivotal role within her working methodology and impacts significantly on the creative strategies she deploys. Her creative practice exploits the potential of the *copy*, *cut* and *paste* functions in CAD software to create artworks of considerable complexity and detail that it would be unlikely that she would create any other way. The facility to digitally cut and paste is contrasted in the second phase of her creative process in which large format digital prints are developed using a manual cut and paste process using a scalpel and adhesive. Insights into the artist's creative cognition have been gained through studying these processes using documentary video and verbal descriptions of the work in progress.

¹ Coldwell, P. (2003) 'Digital Responses' London, Victoria and Albert Museum

² Treadaway, C. (2009). 'Hand and mind - shaping experience'
Australasian Journal of Arts Health 1(1): 1-15.

Although Hodes integrates digital processes into her practice, various hand making techniques are selected in preference to digital alternatives at various stages; for example she chooses to cut by hand rather than use a laser cutter. She describes how hand processes are useful for embedding emotional weight into the work by facilitating variations in line qualities and a wider gamut of visual characteristics than she is able to achieve using the technology.



Skirts, deep shadow 98cm x 137cm digital print with collage 2008

Methodology

A phenomenological qualitative investigation of this kind is heavily reliant on the willingness of the subject to reflect openly and in substantial detail on her practice; the relationship between artist/commentator and researcher/observer has been key. Hodes and Treadaway worked together over several months using video documentary techniques to describe and reveal the artist's creative process during the making of a new body of artworks, which were subsequently exhibited in 'Drawing Skirts' Baring Wing & University Gallery, University of Northumbria³

The research process incorporated video recording of concurrent verbal accounts by Hodes as the work progressed: from the initiation of the ideas through to the public exhibition of the completed paper cuts. This intense period of observation and self reflection provided data for subsequent analysis in which periods of digital working could be compared with parts of the process which involved physical making by hand.

³ 'Drawing Skirts' a solo exhibition of new papercuts by Charlotte Hodes was held at the Baring Wing, Northumbria Gallery, Newcastle University 18 April – 30 May 2008. The ten minute research video was shown on a large format screen as part of the exhibition.

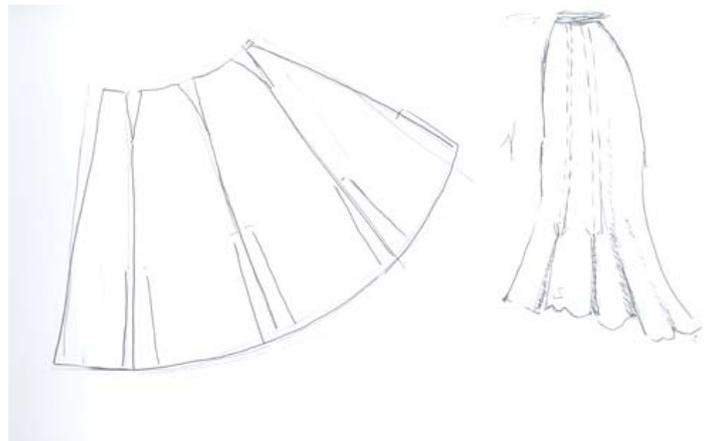
www.northumbria.ac.uk

The video can be viewed online www.fashion.arts.ac.uk/lcf-research



Figure pencil drawing from artist's photographs 30cm x 42cm 2007

Hodes' subject matter is the female figure, juxtaposed with alternative historical representations enveloped by pattern and skirt motifs. The female figures are sourced from photographs and drawings of the artist's self. The skirt motifs evolved via a period of detailed observational drawing, focused on garment pattern diagrams, from both the digital and physical library archive at London College of Fashion where Hodes is a researcher.



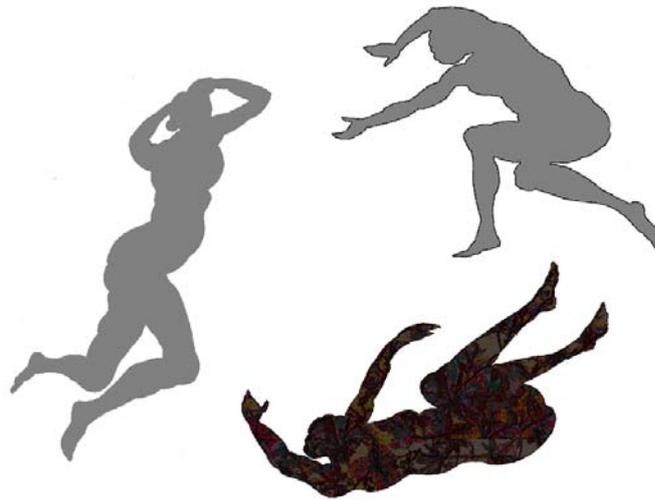
Skirts observational pencil drawing of pattern diagrams 21cm x 30cm 2008



Drawing with pencil from artist's photographs 2008

Findings

The video data served to capture in detail the creative decision making process. Hodes' visual research, comprising photographs, drawings from life and archival material, were scanned into the computer providing a rich digital archive as a source of stimuli for motif development.



Figures computer mediated drawings various dimensions 2008

Digital imagery was manipulated and juxtaposed to form large compositions using Photoshop®. These were subsequently digitally ink-jet printed on a large format Epson printer prior to being cut and collaged by hand using a scalpel blade and adhesive. Evidence of the artist's creative process was therefore embedded in the creation of the artworks.



Digital composition printing on Epson printer

Findings from the research illuminate ways in which creative decision making is influenced by memory of physical experience and bodily knowledge acquired through the hands. The physical activities of drawing and cutting involved in constructing the work were found to impact upon the development of creative ideas and influence digital practice. In particular the laborious nature of hand cutting with a scalpel provided the artist with time to reflect on the work under development.



Cutting with a scalpel

The intensely tactile collage process involved using paper fragments, paint, colour and pattern and was observed to be more direct and intuitive than digital working methods. Serendipity and chance played a greater role in how the work evolved and decisions once made were less likely or impossible to change. By contrast the digital process provided a proliferation of choices and decisions which could be undone or saved demanding a more logical, systematic approach to the creative process. Nevertheless the technology facilitated the rapid production of complex pattern imagery to be incorporated in the work which would have been unlikely to have been developed via any other means.



Section of papercut revealing studio process in progress

Hodes has developed a hybrid digital and hand craft process that exploits potential of each method to aid her creative practice. The physical manipulation of tools and materials, when crafting by hand, was found to enable her to imbue the paper cuts with what she perceives to be greater emotional gravitas. This is evidenced in the characteristics of the lines and

marks created by hand; these qualities arise from purposeful, serendipitous and accidental movements that embed the hand of the maker in the work. The research data reveals the ways in which Hodes uses traditional drawing tools to capture her physical and emotional experience through the lines and marks created by hand. In the recorded data she states:

"the hand drawn line on the computer does not need me to have a physical experience and so you do not imbue the drawing with the same emotional weight as you do when you are pencil drawing...the pencil embodies a different emotional weight."

By comparison, the digital equivalents - Wacom graphics tablet and pen, were found to be less responsive to muscular tension, grip and pressure and offered less range for direct mark making providing less potential to convey emotional expression through the body.



Digital drawing using graphics tablet and pen

The drawn line created using the Wacom pen lacks the modulation and variability of a pencil drawn line. Nevertheless, the research indicates a number of benefits in the digital drawing process. The 'undo' function and facility to step backwards to rapidly amend and modify the 'cut' and 'paste' actions contrast with the slower hand making process in which mistakes may not be easy to rectify and changes are slower to execute. The data also indicates the creative advantages of the technology to create, store and manipulate a visual archive. It was shown to provide expanding possibilities not only for the creation of a proliferation of patterns but also for facilitating the production of artwork of immense complexity.

The physical satisfaction of the cutting process is also revealed in the recorded data. Hodes states that when the collage technique is progressing well it provides her with a sense of wellbeing. The slowness of the making process also provides mental space in which to develop ideas about the whole series of artworks of which each paper cut is a part.



Floating, apricot pink 101cm x 150cm digital print with collage 2008

This broader approach to the development of the work happens less frequently when working digitally due to the demands of the logic and memory recall required to navigate the software. Gladwell (2005) argues that productive decision making occurs when there is a balance between deliberate and instinctive thinking; that too much choice is detrimental and when too many options are offered the brain becomes paralyzed⁴. This state is amplified when decisions are made rapidly, for example, when developing a graphic image using computer software.

Collaboration

The video filming for the research described in this paper was reliant upon collaboration; informality and empathy were instrumental in the methodology that was adopted enabling the artist to reveal her creative practice in considerable detail. There is often a reluctance for artists to openly reveal their practice; notable exceptions being Hans Namuth's film of Jackson Pollock 1950 and the film of 1955 *Mystère Pablo Picasso* by Henri-Georges Clouzot. This genre of film was focused on the performer rather than revealing a critical analysis of practice. Hodes' concurrent reflection on her creative process whilst simultaneously making the work yielded unique data providing a rare insight into the practice of an individual artist's working methodology and the decision-making processes that are crucial to creativity.

Further Research

Hodes' latest body of ceramic artwork⁵ provides an opportunity for observation and comparison between the artist's manipulation of imagery in two and three dimensions. The ceramic vase forms provide a curved but equivalent 'picture' surface on which the digitally printed ceramic transfers are collaged. Digital print output is central to both the papercuts

⁴ Gladwell, M. (2005) 'Blink : the power of thinking without thinking' Little Brown and Co., New York

⁵ This work was exhibited in Hodes' solo exhibition 'Silhouettes and Filigree' Marlborough Fine Arts London 2 December 2009-08 January 2010

and ceramics and both are further developed through hand crafting processes in the studio. Although the working methodologies used in making the papercuts and ceramics are similar, the role of digital print in the creative process is different. The papercuts are conceived using scanned drawings and digital photographs which are digitally collaged, constructed into compositions and printed digitally. This same body of preparatory work is mediated on the computer for the ceramic transfer prints but the composition is not constructed digitally. Sheets of the individual elements: fragments of pattern, figures, decorative motifs etc. are outputted either directly as digital ceramic transfers or on acetate to be printed as silkscreen transfer prints. Each printing method is used for its particular qualities; the digitally outputted ceramic transfers provide photographic, continuous tone images but the print deposit is fairly thin whereas the silkscreen ceramic transfers provide a richer, denser colour and ink deposit. Unlike the papercuts, the composition for the ceramic vase forms is constructed intuitively as the individual elements are applied directly and freely collaged to the ceramic surfaces.



Filigree Green digitally mediated imagery printed as digital ceramic transfer, silkscreen transfer (pattern on base only) onto earthenware 38cm x 32cm 2009

Conclusion

Digital print processes provide Hodes with a means of exploring the pictorial surface of both two and three dimensional forms. Her interest in the depiction of the female form as a motif in both historical and contemporary format has been greatly aided by the use of technology which has enabled her to integrate complexity, historical authenticity and personal imagery into her work. Hodes uses digital print processes in two specific ways: firstly, in the case of the paper cuts, to construct a composition useful for the body of the artwork which is then cut through or collaged on top of by hand; secondly, in the application of imagery to ceramic forms, to develop a storage bank or library of useful printed imagery which is then collaged together in layers to compose the picture. The digital print process facilitates addition of complex motifs, patterns, detail, repetition and speeds up the creative process enabling the artist to create works which could not be made any other way.

Findings from this investigation have been presented in the exhibition catalogue essays⁶ and expanded and contextualised in subsequent publications⁷. Knowledge gained from the research regarding the use of digital tools contributes to understanding concerning the ways in which digital technology is able to support creative practice. It has the potential to inform the future design of software and tools used in computer aided design environments⁸.

⁶ 'Drawing Skirts' London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London ISBN 978-1-903455-16-6

⁷ Treadaway, C. (2009). 'Hand and mind - shaping experience'

Australasian Journal of Arts Health **1**(1): 1-15.

Treadaway, C. (2009) 'Hand E-craft: an Investigation into Hand Use in Digital Creative Practice' Creativity and Cognition 09 Berkeley, California, USA, ACM, New York

Treadaway, C. (2009). 'Translating experience'

' Interacting with Computers Vol. 21 (1-2): PP. 88-94.

⁸ Shneiderman B., G., Fischer et al. 2006 'Creativity support tools: report from a U.S. National Science Foundation sponsored workshop.' International Journal of Human Computer Interaction **20**(2): 2006, 61-77.