

IMPACT 9 diary

Should I refer to you as *dear diary*? Or should I address you as the *reader*, perhaps even more personally as *my friend*? Over the course of the next week I am going to write a journalised documentary of my visit to Hangzhou in China. I am on my way to IMPACT 9 international printmaking conference to exhibit East/West, a portfolio of prints made by students and staff from the BA and MA Fine Art courses at Norwich University of the Arts. IMPACT is the largest and most influential printmaking conference in the world, bringing together delegates from all continents for a 5-day bonanza of exhibitions, academic papers and illustrated talks, workshops, trade fair, networking and socialising. This year it is being hosted at China Academy of Arts (CAA) in Hangzhou.

Our portfolio project East/West has been conceived specifically in response to the geographic location of IMPACT this year. We invited students and staff from Falmouth University to collaborate (in the past we have invited Boston University, Asagaya College of Art Tokyo and California State University), the simple concept being the extreme of easterly and westerly locations of the two universities - Norwich in the east of the UK and Falmouth in the west. The project was proposed to the IMPACT selection committee underlining the conceptual cadence of showing this whole Western-European originated project in the Far East.

Day 1

19.09.15

So here I am sitting in a departure lounge at Hong Kong International airport waiting to catch an internal flight to Hangzhou. Without a doubt, international air travel engenders a surreal state of being - simultaneously everywhere and nowhere in particular. It is the hinterland that Foucault refers to as *heterotopia*, a restless, feverish paradigm. Sleep disruption and skipped time zones account for much of this dislocation. The only indication of outside temperature or humidity is by virtue of the occasional zephyrs intruding through sliding doors positioned beyond prohibited zones. Otherwise, it would appear that Earth is in a constant state of 'bearable'. But moreover it is the ubiquitous nature of airports that does much to erase any sense of continuity or cultural identity. Global locations flickering on departure boards, announcements, multitudinous languages, these things reinforce the timeless, placeless temporary envelope of existence. Add to that the atlas of food outlets such as sushi bars, Italian baristas, Irish pubs, and Vietnamese street food. And then there's Burberry, Versace, Out of Africa, Tommy Hilfiger, Hello Kitty.

I am a well-dressed, well-fed, sweet-smelling cartoon and I don't know what time it is. Someone passes me on an escalator and embroidered on the back of their polo shirt are the words "Enhancing Your Airport Experience".

Day 2 (the same day)

19.09.15

A taxi drive from Hangzhou International Airport enables a first impression of the city's fringes. Bewildering amounts of concrete and steel are being utilised to build sky-rise housing and a transport infrastructure to serve it. Dotted in and around the new, fragments of an older and much more modest city hang on - smallholdings, textile mills, timber yards. Like much of the eastern coast of China, Hangzhou is developing and expanding with palpable urgency. On arrival in Hangzhou city centre, the individual sounds of hurried movement meld into one overall metropolitan chord. From my hotel room I can catch glimpses of the West Lake, a cooling calming buffer to the city and one of the reasons why Hangzhou has become so favoured as a place for Chinese people to take a holiday.

Not by chance, Professor Richard Berry, Director of NUA International Office meets me at the hotel. We have a stroll down to the lake and something to eat. It is Saturday night and Hangzhou is jam-packed. I am tired and still stuck in a time zone elsewhere, so I turn-in and plan to find my contact at CAA tomorrow.

Day 3

20.09.15

After a breakfast of steamed fish-balls, straw potatoes, greens cooked with shrimps and assorted pickles, I get a taxi for CAA. I know it's not far, but none of the apps work on my phone and when I took the Hangzhou street plan that cost me 50pence out of its cellophane wrapper, I was unable to separate the folds due to some mysterious and seemingly miraculous exposure to water (or glue).

China Academy of Arts is an impressive complex with a stunning entrance. I am greeted by some of the students studying printmaking, who demonstrate an inexhaustible enthusiasm and desire to be of assistance. They lead me to the Henglu Art Museum, the venue for East/West and after a little uncertainty about which space is allocated for the show, I eventually set down my long travelled portfolio box and tools ready to install. Aided by the students assigned the task of assisting delegates, the plan unfolds and my system of wide pins and devilishly powerful miniature magnets works. With surprising speed, we get most of the prints neatly affixed to the wall in time for lunch. The students invite me to the place where they all eat, a small unfussy noodle bar just a stone's throw from CAA. Conversation is impeded by language difference of course (I can say hello and thank you in Mandarin but that is it) although remarkably we manage somehow to talk about contemporary art, English food, post-punk and indie music, fashion and Norwich. After lunch, we finish the installation of the work and add the vinyl wall text, which explains the project and position a plinth to hold the portfolio box along with the printed details of the individual works. In my opinion, the show looks really good and the students that have helped like it too. Over the coming days I'll be able to gauge the response and hopefully make some new contacts in the print world as a result.

No need for a taxi back, I'll use the lake as a navigation tool. Set back from the main road, the pockets of recreational park engender a sense of the woodland that is visible rising up the hills on the other side of West Lake. There are Cicadas, softer sounding than the Mediterranean ones, tree frogs, tuneful birds and large hornets. As I near the point adjacent to the road that gets me back to the hotel, the park widens and people are ballroom dancing to slightly distorted music issuing through loudspeakers hidden in the undergrowth.

Day 4
21.09.15

It is the IMPACT conference registration day and after toast and coffee (managing to negotiate my way past the fish and pickles) I head for CAA. There is a little time before registration starts so I detour by literally crossing the road to visit the Temple of King Qian. It costs the equivalent of £1.50 to walk among the tranquil gardens of bamboo, ginkgo and pomelo trees. The large wooden statues of Buddha are impressive and so are the temple buildings with pitched, tiled roofs.

IMPACT 9 conference title is Print in the Post-Print Age. I can't help but sense the irony, when I am issued with two tote bags full of exquisitely produced printed catalogues, comprehensively covering every aspect of the conference. Our project, East/West is featured in the 351-page book of Exhibitions, Open Portfolios and Workshop Demonstrations. This lavish production is translated into Mandarin as well as the official conference language of English.

Late afternoon, a number of delegates, myself included, take a 30-minute coach ride to the fringe of the city to view an exhibition of contemporary colour woodblock prints by the artist Wang Chao. At first glance there is nothing to indicate that these works are from this century, indeed they could be prints from the Chinese translation of the *Diamond Sūtra* printed in 401 CE. On closer inspection, depictions of US stealth bombers, army personnel and airmail envelopes emerge. The technical skill has to be admired, because although these images look like pencil lines, they are actually cut from hard wood; the fine lines left raised. Moreover, I think it is the contemporising of a traditional process that brings these works to the forefront, through provocative cultural and post-colonial references.

You know, when you are told there will be food at a preview, you should always ask how much. I walk back from CAA with one little scented cake thing in my stomach.

Day 5
22.09.15

IMPACT 9 opens officially with keynote speeches from Xu Jiang, President of CAA, Dr Carinna Parraman, Deputy Director of the Fine Print Research unit at UWE, Cao Yiqiang, Director of Advanced School of Art and Humanities and Professor Jo Stockham, Head of Printmaking at the RCA. The essence of these opening addresses centred on the influence that the digital has on the continued viability of traditional print. There were merits in all four speeches, but one thing in particular stuck in my mind; an example of a surgical application for 3D printing mentioned in Carinna Parraman's talk. MRI scans of children's' brains are rendered using a 3D printer in order that neurosurgeons may rehearse surgical procedures with their teams prior to operating on the patient.

At the conclusion of the keynote speeches, and after group photos, a fleet of coaches shipped us away from the CAA Nanshan city campus and took us to the more rural (city fringes at least) Xiangshan campus. Built in the last couple of years on what appears to have been run-down westerly suburbs of Hangzhou, the immaculate Xiangshan campus hosts a crafts museum with collections of vernacular furniture, screens, pottery, tools and a fascinating display of shadow puppets. The campus also has a Bauhaus Research Institute and Gallery, which represents one of the most complete collections of original Bauhaus artefacts I am aware of outside Germany. What's more, the nearby student accommodation, which is nestled on a wooded hillside, subtly fuses Walter Gropius minimalism with Chinese architectural fundamentals. A campus signpost points away to the 'Foundation Department' and I wondered if Walter Gropius' curriculum is followed, at which point three students shuffle past, carefully balancing fragile modular structures fashioned out of card, glue and dowel.

Back to Nanshan campus and to the official opening of IMPACT. As always, it is difficult to take in the work effectively as people jostle with their tote bags still bursting at the seams with catalogues. There is hardly enough time after speeches to see any work before the welcoming banquet is declared open and we all jostle and shuffle to the CAA Gymnasium, where a table groans with an array of food. I make mistakes - choosing spider crabs legs cooked in chilli, which burst and splatter their contents all over the table, followed by prawns that repeat the embarrassment. And then, as if possessed by some malevolence, a pear does exactly the same...a pear I ask you!

Day 6
23.09.15

Raining. In fact it is the remains of a tropical storm that swept up the east coast of China last night. But without the drama of a typhoon, it is simply heavy rain, albeit warm. After gazing for a few minutes at rivulets of water meandering down the window, I am thoughtful of home and family and autumn and Marmite.

The day is spent between viewing the numerous exhibitions (eager not to miss anything) and attending academic papers and themes panels. The highlights of the papers include Catherine Hehir of the Crawford College of Art and Design Cork and Noelle Noonan of Limerick College of Art and Design talking about their

collaborative projects with artists and students in Ireland, which conjoin print process and social media. Caren Florance, a research student from the University of Canberra presented accounts of her recent text, language, performance and book works. Jo Ganter and Raymond MacDonald of Edinburgh University co-delivered a paper and short performance to illustrate their collaborative work on abstract musical scores.

In the main Nanshan campus galleries I was able to be more systematic about viewing work. My breath is taken away by a 10 minute animation by Sun Xun using woodcut blocks for each frame. Immaculate and intricate screen-prints by Stephen Chambers RA are contrasted by the raucous colour of Endi Poskovic's cartoon-like woodcuts and the sheer scale of Kiki Smith's raw earth etchings. A short walk from the main Nanashan campus is the Xihu Contemporary Art Gallery where I found Stephen Mumberson's hypnotic film/interview where he describes making *Invalid Geometry* using 'solid works' software and rapid prototype process. Further still, about 20 minutes walk, is the Sanshang Contemporary Art Gallery, which is unlike all of the other gallery spaces and perhaps a little more European and provisional or basement-like. There is a slightly more political edge to the work here as well, with examples being Inger Lise Rasmussen's photogravure plates of regeneration in China, Bianca Cork's Screen-prints of shipyards, docks and breakers yards, and Bodil Sohn's imprints from needlework samplers.

There is student work on display from CAA and seven other prominent institutes and academies within China. The work ranges from highly figurative to risky, edgy, socially critical imagery, in some cases upholding traditions and in others expanding the field and exploring contemporary method and agency. What unifies all of the work is the undeniable quality, scale and ambition. These students invest everything in their art.

Actually, somewhere in between seeing all of these exhibitions today, I managed to visit the printmaking studios. They are underground, the only facility on the entire Nanshan campus that is in a basement. And as I descend the concrete stairs to reach the main entrance, I understand why. Above the door there is a sign in both Mandarin and English "Air Defence Basement" and a schematic of a person entering at speed. The doors are massively thick steel with heavy rubber seals. It is a remnant of the growing tension between China and Soviet Union in the 1970's, which underlines how the proliferation of arms is in nobody's interest. I advance into what thankfully looks reassuringly like a printmaking studio and take in the vastness of this provision. There are several large rooms accommodating undergraduates and postgraduates, each with their own set of presses and associated processing areas. Not surprisingly, the postgraduates get slightly better equipment, but it is all very generous. CAA supports woodcut and other relief processes (but not lino – there is no such thing in China), Etching, Lithography (stone and plate) and screen-printing (authographic and photographic). They use water-based screen inks but I notice all other processes and materials are traditional oil-based.

There is a special opening at the Henglu gallery tonight, which is the gallery that East/West is being exhibited in. It is packed and I spend two hours talking to delegates about our project. Business cards are exchanged, potential collaborations sketched on imaginary cigarette packets, compliments reciprocated and all in all the evening is a wonderful thing.

Rain has stooped. Half moon. Making my way back to the hotel, past the open-air ballroom dancing, just at the bottom of Pinghai Road where the lights and LED screens dazzle, I notice a slug slipping its way over a PVC hoarding towards the ground. I empathise.

Day 7
24.09.15

I have tried walking a different way every morning so far, in an attempt to widen my chances of finding something interesting and unexpected. But this morning I am joined by one of the conference delegates, an American who has just finished a residency at the Guanlan Printmaking Centre in China and I think it best to walk the way I know, rather than embarrassing myself by getting lost.

Some good talks today, most notably Professor Dominic Thorburn of Rhodes University South Africa, who talked about the censorship of political prints and graphic works in SA. A series of open portfolio sessions afforded other delegates the opportunity to show work, in some cases work in progress. I had time to get to the trade fair section as well and talked at some length to the director of Polymetaal, a Dutch firm specialising in the production of print presses aimed specifically at multi-purpose printing. There is an abundance of samples of paper, ink, cutting materials, which I dutifully load into my bag (I am already rehearsing the dialogue for customs).

But I want to tell you a little more about Hangzhou. As I mentioned, I have quite deliberately walked in eccentric routes around the city, to try to absorb it as best I can. First and foremost it is a friendly city and the people are very open and helpful. OK, I am not so sensitive that abruptness in a city, especially one as frenetic as Hangzhou, is going to offend. I expect that. But it really is friendlier than many other cities I could (but won't) name.

Nanshan Road, which traces the perimeter of the West Lake is an ostentatiously wealthy part of the city, and when I say wealthy, we are talking Aston Martin, Rolls Royce and Lamborghini showrooms. The pavements smell of expensive perfume, the shop fronts glisten and by night the neon illuminated logos of global brands bleach out the night sky. Over the road is the lake, which despite being corralled by paved walkways, is really very beautiful; hazed and limpid by day and at night the horizon is punctuated by twinkling lights far off on the other side. Cicadas rasp like overhead electricity cables and Asian Starlings catcall from the trees. At dusk there are numerous bats performing skilful flight in order to catch evening insects.

Throughout the city, in between the high-rise and the confidently contemporary, there are little enclaves of old Hangzhou. Surrounded, engulfed and seemingly hiding from sight of the developer, these fragments fit like unruly tetras blocks into the grid of steel and glass. There is washing hanging, bikes and scooters propped, children's toys scattered, outside washbasins, banana tress and other vigorous growth, chairs, tables, flasks of tea. From these warm hearted places comes the smell of cooking and the sound of clattering woks, conversations and arguments, distorted radios, scooter alarms, chirping crickets and shrilling mobile phones. I know I'm going over the top with the poetry, but it is so vivid and incredibly illustrative of humanity.

Day 8

25.09.15

This is the final day of the conference. I want to hear about the collaboration between Emma Febvre-Richards of the University of Wellington and Nicole Starky from the School of Psychology University of Waikato New Zealand, on their investigation of memory, colour and pattern. The work focuses on how physicality combines with complex emotional stories in order to reconstruct unique realities and experience of place. Jo Stockham, RCA presents a paper on the multitudinous interpretations of 'scanning' and talks about her curated project for The Bluecoat, Liverpool. Professor Gu Juyi of the CAA talks about digitisation and new technology in Chinese printmaking, which appears to be at an elementary stage. This last topic has been discussed at great length during the conference – do digital processes threaten printmaking or become a necessary part of the proliferation of print? Whilst the vicissitudes of this argument have been sounded from every angle, and I certainly have my view, I'll leave it up to you to ponder dear reader.

We all move to the Pan Tianshou Memorial Museum, which houses some exquisite Tibetan Buddhist Sutra woodcut prints, along with the blocks themselves, which is something I have not seen before. Running alongside this in a room off the main gallery is a demonstration of woodcut moveable type given by Jing Jun. Whilst the Chinese gave us woodcut printing and paper in about 200BCE, it was Johannes Guttenberg that developed metallic moveable type and mechanical presses in 1455. However, the Chinese had invented moveable type using ceramics and cut wood (rather than metal) in about 1040CE, which I have to admit I didn't know.

I suppose there is a melancholy in the air as we shuffle to the main lecture theatre for the closing ceremony. Dr Carinna Parraman extends warm thanks to all who have enabled the conference and professor Gu Juyi reciprocates by thanking delegates and very importantly the students who have helped. There is gift giving and gentle applause. We all shuffle back out, a little weary but fulfilled. As I exit the lecture theatre, the students that helped me install East/West apprehend me and extend the warmest best wishes, which I exuberantly emphasise in return. This spontaneous gesture from the students exorcises the

slightly flat feeling that I have and I leave CAA knowing that it has been really worthwhile, not simply for my benefit, but for students – NUA and CAA students.

Tomorrow I fly back to the UK. I want to get back home. Long-haul flights and hotel rooms do not agree with me. I am not looking forward to the flight back; the fake global miasma of airport lounges, the desiccating air and lack of legroom, the jet lag. I have enjoyed telling you about my experience, but if you don't mind reader, I'll not write anything tomorrow, I think I'll just concentrate on getting home.

Carl Rowe, September 2015.