

PLAYING

WITH

SHADOWS



Reminiscent of ghostly portraits from the 19th century, *Laurence Briat* uses photography, collage and engraving to explore intangible parts of the human experience through print.

Photos courtesy of **LAURENCE BRIAT**

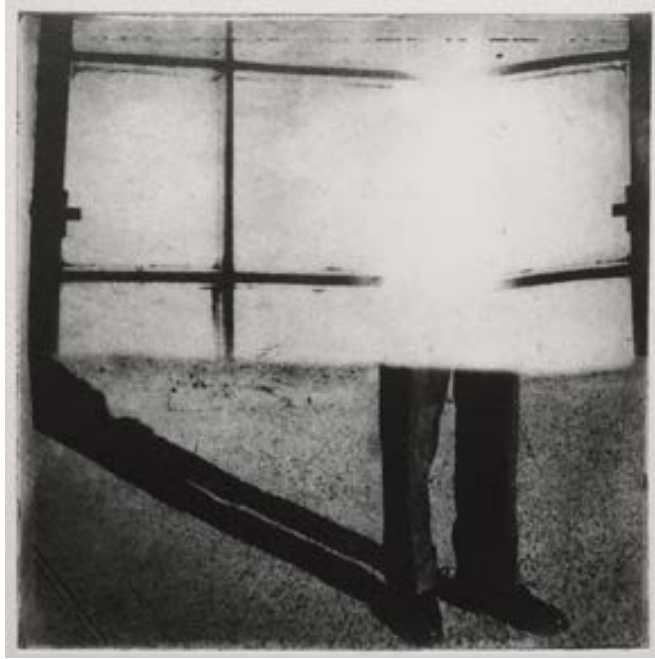
Words by **VINCA POWER**



There's an uneasiness to Laurence Briat's prints, a sense that she can commune with something that exists just outside the field of conscious perception, like the fractured memories of a feverish dream, giving substance to the amorphic through the transfer of ink onto paper. Her haunting figures and shadowy apparitions conjure scenes of austere dalliances with the great beyond, strange spectral phenomena caught on film by besuited Victorian men and their oversized photographic contraptions. As long as there have been cameras, people have been manipulating images to bring the unseen into view, and with her use of photopolymer printing, Laurence is continuing that tradition. As with eerie spirit photographs of the 1800s, these prints explore notions of memory, the passage of time and the fragility of the human presence, but Laurence does it without the 'knock three times if you can hear me'.

"My characters represent doubt and uncertainty," says Laurence. "Past and present collide and merge creating ambiguities." This ambiguity is an inherent part of her chosen process too, an element of randomness and chance that she must accept and embrace. "I keep a great curiosity about the result," she says. "I design my work with an open mindset and move forward without guarantee of how it will be." Combining new technologies with traditional techniques, the immediacy of digital design and the patience required for film photography and engraving, Laurence brings old and new together here as well. She makes photomontages in Photoshop and transfers her images onto photosensitive plates, then once they have developed and dried, adds ink and pulls her prints manually on a hand press. "A photoengraving





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From her “quite large” home studio near the city of Montpellier in the south of France, Laurence cuts, crops and layers her own photographs with found images to create atmospheric compositions. She began studying at the Beaux-Arts in Marseille back in the ‘70s and took her time soaking in different influences and trying out a broad assortment of artforms before coming to engraving. “I was drawn in by artist friends who were impassioned by printmaking. Through them I joined the adventure,” she remembers. “I understood very quickly that engraving is a joyful experience – I was, and still am, amazed by the countless possibilities it offers.” Laurence went on to study ‘seriously’ in France and Italy. “Once I was trained in the classical methods, driven by curiosity, I experimented. Above all, mixing techniques is my favourite field of experimentation,” she says.

“I seek to bring together disparate elements, to create tensions, open contradictions that people can read in their own way,” says Laurence. She will cut her plates and combine the various pieces and incorporate embossing into her printing, enjoying the contrast between photographic rendering and hands-on processes. Collage features often and provides a spontaneous, intuitive counterbalance to her process-heavy printmaking. “I have never managed to choose or focus solely on either collage or engraving. Each

feeds on the other and I remain engaged simultaneously and in cycles,” she explains.

The disquieting prints of Antoni Tàpies and Eduardo Chillida’s strange black forms, artists with distinct visual languages, inspire Laurence to take up tools and get into the studio. Unfinished figures are a recurring motif in her own work – headless bodies, blurred presences and shadows, disembodied limbs. “Rigorous cropping, cuts, interruptions run through everything,” she says. “Perhaps it is a response to my desire for simplification.” Concealing part of a scene represents fragility for Laurence and when the face is hidden, the subject becomes both universal and unknown, adding to the enigmatic quality her images exude. “Engraving is for me a vast space of freedom which always reveals something unexpected,” says Laurence. “I love print and photography, and photopolymer allows me to complete all of the process in my own studio, being autonomous in my practice.”

Several projects vanished into the ether during the pandemic, but Laurence is engrossed in a new series of photomontages and has an artist’s book in progress too. “I keep working with as much pleasure and curiosity as always,” she says and is open to new opportunities coming her way, whether through terrestrial or metaphysical channels. **T**

www.laurencebriat.com



- Where are you based and where do you currently print from?

I live and work in the South of France, close to the Mediterranean sea and the city of Montpellier. I have the chance to have a quite large studio with an engraving press. I always print in my studio, except for very large formats (which I print at « Maison de la Gravure Méditerranée »).

- Can you tell us a little about your background in art?

My interest in art dates back to the "seventies", when I started studying at the Beaux-Arts (University) in Marseille, which I stopped after three years. It was a time of a lot of influences, and it took time to find my way. I practiced many forms of art (drawing, painting, monotypes, ink...). I have always been interested in crossing the techniques.

Since the early, my concerns are the same : the human presence, its fragility, the passage of time, memory.

- What drew you towards printmaking as a medium?

At the first beginning I was drawn by print artists friends of mine passionate by printmaking. To their contact, I understood very quickly that the engraving is a joyful adventure. I was, and I am always, amazed by the countless possibilities that engraving offers.

I learned seriously the classical methods of engraving (strong water, copper aquatint...) and did a lot of training in France and Italy.

Then driven by curiosity, I experimented all kinds of techniques and supports. Above all, mixing techniques is my favorite field of experimentation.

- You seem to mainly use the photopolymer technique for your prints - can you talk a little about this approach and how you use it?

As I love to print and I do some photography, the photoetching process suits me perfectly !

Throughout the implementation of the process, there is always a part of randomness, of chance, accepted and chosen, and I always keep a great curiosity about the result. I have an intuitive approach, and I design my work with an open mindset. I accept often to move forward without guarantee of results.

This process offers me so many possibilities like, for example, cutting the plates and combining the obtained pieces. It does not use acid, and I can use several times the same plate which is more ecological.

Above all the polymer film allows me to realize all the process in my own studio, and to be autonomous in my practice.

- Can you tell us about your printmaking process?

This process uses practices and technical know-how as far apart as digital technology, photography and traditional engraving. It combines the immediacy of digital, the patience of film photography and engraving.

It requires several steps:

- digital transfer of an image onto a transparency

- positioning of this transparent on a plate on which a photosensitive film has been laminated

- insolation, development, drying and post-exposure

Then the plate is inked and pulled manually on a hand press, like traditional engraving.

A photoengraving always offers a kind of mystery to me and no other technique can give the same feeling result rendering.

- How do you source the original images for your prints?

Most often I use my own photographs and I make photomontages with Photoshop. I use also vernaculaire old images. That is what I like : mixed new technologies and tradition.

- You are also a collage artist - how do choose which images to make into prints and how do the two approaches relate to each other?

With the collage the material is already given. It is a completely spontaneous and intuitive practice with a recreational side for me. While printmaking requires so many steps! I like both and I have never managed to choose or focus on a single one. My different practices feed on each other. I remain engaged simultaneously, and in cycles.

- I've noticed a few people without heads and/or sinister shadows in your prints can you talk about how you use print to disrupt the images and make something new and intriguing?

The unfinished forms run through my entire work and perhaps respond to a desire for simplification. Rigorous cropping, cuts, interruptions, participate in giving my plastic writing a formal power. Furthermore, when the face is hidden, the presence becomes more universal. Also the concealment of a part of the scene is intended to represent the fragility of memory. These shortcomings probably contribute to making the image enigmatic and intriguing. Shadows are natural images, having a strong emotional power for me.

- You add some mark-making and embossing / collaged elements to some of your prints - can you talk a little about this process and how you mix things together to create an image?

I seek to bring together disparate elements, to create tensions, open contradictions that everyone can read in his or her own way. I add signs, marks, as a kind of language. I like the contrast between photographic rendering and the unique possibilities of manual printing, that why I use embossing sometimes.

- Could you tell us about your art/printmaking influences?

I do not know. The prints I admire the most are from Eduardo Chillida or AntonyTapiés. It's not really an influence but they make me up to work.

- What are you working on at the moment?

At the moment I am working on a new series based on photomontages. This work is close to the creative process of collage. And I have an artist's book in progress.

- Future plans/projects on the horizon?

With the pandemic several projects have vanished. I am waiting for new opportunities. Anyway, I keep working with always as much pleasure and curiosity.