Digital imaging: its current and future influence upon the creative practice of textile and surface pattern design

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- Design practice research case studies (textile design)

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DIGITAL IMAGING: ITS CURRENT AND FUTURE INFLUENCE UPON THE CREATIVE PRACTICE OF TEXTILE AND SURFACE PATTERN DESIGNERS

CREATIVE DISCIPLINE: Textile design

RESEARCH METHODS:
• Literature review
• Case study
• Disciplined noticing

NUMBER OF DESIGN CASE STUDIES UNDERTAKEN BY THE RESEARCHER: 4

LENGTH OF THESIS: 60000 words

EXAMINATION FORMAT: Thesis and oral examination

DURATION OF STUDY: 3 years full time

EXPERIENCE OF DESIGN PRACTICE BEFORE START OF PHD:
• BA Fashion and Textile design
• MA Three dimensional Design (Ceramics)
• Consultant surface pattern designer (17 years)

PERSONAL MOTIVATION FOR UNDERTAKING PRACTICE DURING PHD:
• To empathically understand the creative practice of the subjects of my study
• To develop the study from my MA a number of years earlier
• To update and extend my knowledge of technology within creative practice

AIM OF THE RESEARCH:
The aim of the research was to examine how digital imaging was impacting on the creative practice of artists and designers working in the field of surface pattern and textiles. This research was timely since there had been relatively little previous published research to explain ways in which digital practice was changing design processes. Although significant studies of technical processes such as digital ink-jet printing and textile production methods had been undertaken, there had been little detailed investigation into the influence of technology on human creativity. This study was intended to inform the development of new strategies for the innovative exploitation of this technology.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:
• How is digital imaging technology influencing the practice of designers working in the field of printed textile design
• In what ways are digital tools supporting creative cognition

OBJECTIVES:
• Critically review and analyse recent work within the field of enquiry, undertaken by other researchers, practitioners and industry, to gain an understanding of the field and contextually situate the study
• Identify key textile practitioners, reflecting some of the diversity in practice within the field, and document and analyse the creative strategies used in their textile practice
• Examine the impact of digital imaging within these creative strategies and interrogate the findings through a series of practical collaborative investigations
• Use the insights revealed in all strands of the project to inform the researcher’s own creative practice, enabling the exploration and development of new strategies for the digital generation, manipulation and output of surface imagery for printed textiles
• Demonstrate and evaluate the effectiveness of these new strategies in peer review following conference presentations and publication of papers as well as the exhibition of artefacts resulting from practical investigations
SUMMARY:
Digital imaging technology within design practice was influencing significant changes in printed textile design practice at the beginning of the millennium. Digital ink-jet printing was beginning to provide designers with the potential to print new kinds of images that challenged the conventional design constraints of analogue production processes. This study sought to investigate how printed textile practitioners were embracing the technology and how it was supporting their creative practice. The research was supported by a literature and contextual review of the field which highlighted the main areas of investigation and those areas in which least knowledge existed. The contextual review included visits to industry, small businesses, individual practitioners, higher education institutions and research centres in Europe, USA and the Far East. Four case studies of printed textile practitioners were undertaken, including a designer, craft practitioner and textile artist in order to reveal diversity in creative strategies and output. The methodology was qualitative and embraced the use of various digital technologies as research tools, including video and audio recordings, still photography and collaborative file sharing and image making.

RATIONALE FOR THE INCLUSION OF DESIGN PRACTICE UNDERTAKEN BY THE RESEARCHER:
Design practice was incorporated into the research as a means of empathically understanding the creative process of the case study practitioners. Research claims concerning the workings of the human mind are difficult to substantiate. How to understand and explore the processes and influences that stimulate creativity pose a major methodological problem. A phenomenological empirical approach was devised to overcome these difficulties based around the concept of ‘disciplined noticing’ (Mason 2002). This involved the use of interview, case study and a series of task exercises in which collaborative image-making took place. The opportunity to engage in and reflect on a mutual design experience enabled empathy to be used as a research tool. The practice element provided an opportunity to examine and reflect on creative process, use of the technology and artworks that were produced. The resulting artefacts contained a trace of the research process and made explicit aspects of the research which would have been difficult if not impossible to describe in words.

HOW THE PHD DESIGN PRACTICE DIFFERED FROM THAT OF COMMERCIAL PRACTICE:
The practice element of the study was highly experimental and was not limited by the usual design constraints for textile design practice such as size, number of colours and fashion trends. A range of digitally ink-jet printed textiles were created in a variety of formats including non repeating panels and more commercial repeating patterns. Each one represented an opportunity to break new ground exploiting the technology in ways which were highly personal and directly related to each case study interview, time and location. The main focus of the practice was on the creative process used to develop it rather than the finished product. Key differences with commercial practice can be summarised as:

• Designs produced for commercial practice at this time would be constrained by the requirements of analogue production processes
• Colour and motifs were not influenced intentionally by fashion or colour trends
• Imagery was developed experimentally by two practitioners simultaneously creating a unique co-authored image
• Digital ink-jet printing technology was used to execute the imagery; this technology was in its infancy at this time and not widely commercially available as it is today

THESIS AVAILABLE AT: http://repository.uwic.ac.uk/dspace/handle/10369/1003
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