The Collateral Transfers of Soft-Ground Etching

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A HISTORICAL REVIEW ON DRAWING FOR SOFT-GROUND AND THE CASE FOR THE OUTCOME PROCESS IN CONTEMPORARY ART

ABSTRACT

Drawing-like prints with soft-ground etching strictly depend on using paper to decal on top of a special tacky ground. In the traditional manner, the resulting sheet will host both a drawing and a transfer on opposite sides of the paper, recto and verso, respectively.

Considering that prints with the technique date back as early as the 17th century, papers with soft-ground transfers must have been produced throughout many generations of printmakers. However, catalogued examples are scarce and difficult to track among print collections. Used as intermediate surfaces, printmaking literature often regard these as collateral waste to the process. This apparent lack of relevance seems to be due to their processual role in etching-making.

Preserved soft-ground transfers can be identified from the late 19th century onwards, showing that artists have not always perceived them as disposable. The soft-ground transfers can be a key component to learning more about the creative processes of relevant printmakers, as well as of their workshop materials, such as papers, drawings instruments and etching grounds recipes. We propose a revised new study on soft-ground transfers to increase recognition of processual objects and their role in today's practice of printmaking.

NOTE TO THE READER:

The technical descriptions found in the figure legends are not coherent throughout the text. As the reader will have a chance to understand, there's no consensus regarding the terminology for the procedure in question. For that reason, we decided to keep the original expressions, descriptions and terms, as found in art institutions or museums, and as provided by the artists.

INTRODUCTION

A layer of soft-ground coating a metal plate is sensitive to the merest touch, allowing a fingerprint to produce a mark which can be etched. Drawing-like prints with this technique are possible, by drawing on a sheet of paper placed on top of this malleable surface. The pressure applied by the
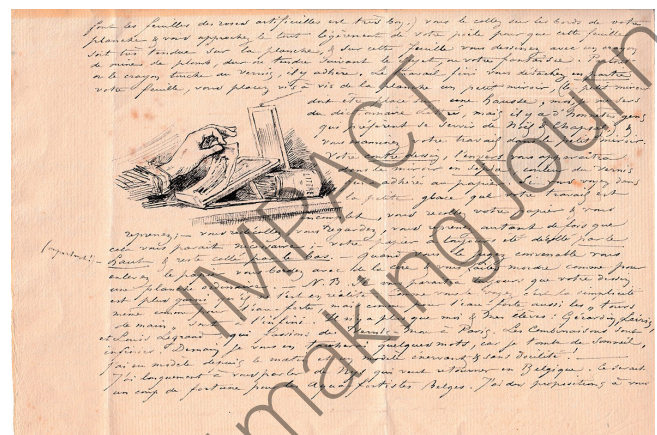

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 1. Lifting the paper after completing the drawing for a soft-ground etching. The drawing being peeled belongs to Samuel Prout (British, 1783-1852). A Series of Ancient Coulidings and Rural Cottages in the North of England: Ayton, (1821). Soft-ground etching. The Cleveland Museum of Art. 1980.64. Digital illustration by David Lopes, 2020 Pure Print (I2ADS: FBAUP)

Figure 2. Hand-written letter with drawn illustration. From Félicien Rops (Belgian, 1833-1998) to Edgar Baes (Belgian, 1837-1909), Paris, 12th of January 1885. Namur, Musée Félicien Rops, Coll. Les Amis du Musée Félicien Rops, inv. Amis/LE/030. Retrieved from: www.ropslettres.be, n° d'éd. 3431.

practitioner will remove the ground beneath by making it stick to the back of the paper. When completed, the paper with the drawing on it is lifted, peeling the ground with it and revealing the bare metal surface where the pencil has been. The transfer is found on the back, mirroring the drawn motif and displaying the same colour as that of the etching ground. Once etched, the plate will not only reproduce the drawing but also the texture of the paper used in the procedure.

Laying paper on top of the grounded plate in order to draw is the original method to approach soft-ground etching. Such practice is described in classical textbooks, dating back to the beginning of its invention (Bagelaar, 1817; Fielding, 1844; Lalanne, 1866; Alken, 1849; Short, 1888). Considering that prints with this technique have been identified as early as in the 17th century (Blunt, 1970), papers with soft-ground transfers must have been produced by several generations of printmakers. However, very few examples are found in today's print collections, and most of them date only from the late 19th century onwards.

It raises the question of how could there be a gap of almost two centuries without any evidence of preserved soft-ground transfers? Have the papers not survived due to conservation issues or were they perceived as disposable, thrown away by practitioners after completing the etching?

TERMINOLOGY

There is evidence that the soft-ground etching technique was invented in the first half of the 17th century (Blunt, 1970), but it was only more widely practiced and shared from the mid-18th century onwards, (Stijnman, 2012) and only officially described in late 19th century treatises. Most technical texts pay little attention to the papers used in lifting the ground, and an official terminology seems to have never been established.

The earliest reference to soft-ground etching transfers is found in a letter, written by printmaker Félicien Rops in 1885, who refers to the transfers as "counter-drawings[1]". Regardless, today we find technical descriptions presenting different terms, shifting between "offset soft-ground", "soft-ground wax on paper", "soft-ground transferred pencil drawing", "reverse tracing in soft-ground", among other terminologies[2]. The naming is not consistent and seems to be chosen freely by each institution as a description of the process. Often, we find etching manuals and practitioners using the term tracing paper – which refers to a specific kind of surface generically used in drawing processes. The term 'lift paper' has also been identified and it is used today by printmakers working with the medium.

Drawings with soft-ground transfers are very unique objects, as they are neither just a drawing, nor regarded as prints – typically coexisting on opposite sides of a single sheet of paper – the artefacts of soft-ground remains can be tricky to categorize. The hybrid nature of
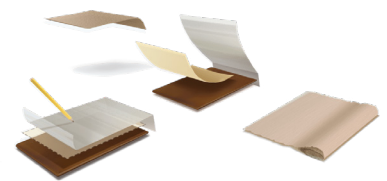
Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 3. Mary Cassatt (American, 1844-1926). Knitting in the Library (recto and verso), c. 1881. Graphite (recto) and soft ground lines transferred from etching plate (verso) Plate: 280 x 220 mm; Sheet: 313 x 401 mm. Bequest of Charles T. Brooks 1941.85. Cleveland Museum of Art. (CC) Creative Commons Licence

Figure 4. Félicien Rops' method of tracing and drawing for soft-ground etching Digital illustration by David Lopes, 2020. Pure Print (FBAUP: I2ADS)

these materials and the diverse terminology found in art institutions makes them difficult to track in print collections, and many may even be misidentified. Ultimately, the lack of studies focusing specifically on soft-ground transfers may be simply connected to their isolated function, as an intermediate step in preparing the matrix.

FUNCTION AND UTILITARIAN PURPOSE

Early notes on soft-ground etching are scarce, but textbooks concur when presenting the suitable traits for choosing the type of paper to draw on. In a letter written in 1775, Paul Sandby briefly explains drawing on top of the soft-ground with 'thin post paper' (Hardie, 1933, p. 364). Thin papers are highly recommended, given the need to mark the ground indirectly through pressure. Requirements for thinness and lightweight surfaces are mentioned in several other treatises, such as those by Fielding (1844, p. 28), Lostalot (1882, p. 88-89), Short (1888, p. 25) and Lalanne (1866, p. 53). The exception is the treaty by Alken (1849, p. 39), in which he favours fine textures rather than thinness. In addition, Lalanne stresses one should prefer drawing on top of soft-ground with grainy surfaces, ruling out smooth papers (1866, p. 53).

According to Walsh (1996), between the 15th and the 17th centuries, textured surfaces were limited and most sheets of paper produced for printing were laid (p. 50). Laid papers – characteristic for their mechanical structure of parallel lines – could be used for printing but also to draw on top of soft-ground. These structural marks can be identified in the earliest printed examples[3], as well as in modern-century prints, like Käthe Kollwitz's soft-ground etchings.[4]

Drawing for soft-ground is a task that requires great care, as stressed by most literature, which provides a warning not to touch the ground's surface when doing so. Remarks are also made to follow the transfer evolving, lifting the paper to check it corresponds to the drawing. André Béguin (1977) argues this can be a helpful method to ensure that too much of the metal isn't being exposed (p.107). The paper used for drawing can be stretched over the freshly applied coat of soft-ground. When the ground hardens slightly, the drawing sheet will not move, thus allowing the transfer to stay undisturbed, Unless, of course, as Béguin remarks (1977), if the type of paper does not adhere well (p.106). In that case, the placement can be fixed according to a method described by Alken (1849, p.41), in which the paper – which must be larger than the plate – is wrapped around the edges and stuck to the back of the matrix.

Folding creases of this method can be identified in Mary Cassatt's drawings with soft-ground transfers on the verso, such as Knitting in Library[5] (ca.1881) and also in Sewing by Lamplight[6] (ca. 1883).

None of these methods allows the practitioner to check the transfer beneath, which is why Béguin (1977) states his preference for fixing the paper only to the top edge of the plate (p.107), enabling the sheet to be lifted and easily placed back. Furthermore, here lies the key to
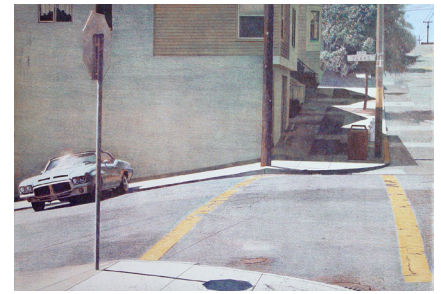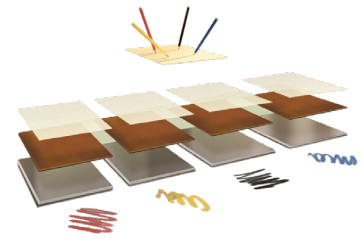

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 5. Robert Bechtle (American,1932) Texas and 20th Intersection, 2004. Colour soft ground etching with aquatint. Plate: 558 x 780 mm; Sheet: 787 x 99 mm. Edition 30. Published by Crown Point Press and printed by Catherine Brooks (Reproduced with the permission of Crown Point Press)

Figure 6. The method of reproducing a coloured-pencil drawing with soft-ground etching. Digital illustration by David Lopes, 2020. Pure Print (FBAUP: I2ADS)

understanding the experimental method of Félicien Rops.

PAPER SURFACES AS CREATIVE TOOLS

Belgian printmaker from the 19th century Félicien Rops, was probably the first artist to use multiple papers while drawing for soft-ground etching. His method, as discussed in a letter and later published in Delâtre's treatise (1887), explains a system where the ground is covered with two overlaid sheets of paper. While the top layer would be assigned to the drawing, the paper below would be responsible for lifting the ground. This second layer could be replaced when needed, switching between different textures and surfaces.

For his soft-ground etchings, Rops worked with four kinds of paper, numbered to follow an order of increasing texture. The first was the drawing layer, for which Rops selected a sheet of 'tracing paper'[7]. Being neutral in texture and also transparent, Rops could register the motif and plan his drawing. As discussed before, this tracing paper was fixed only to the top edge of the plate, enabling the sheet to be lifted and allowing the artist to introduce or replace a sheet beneath (p. 27). "Crêpe paper" would be the second surface – a paper which was at the time used by florists to make fake white roses (p. 27). The third, specified to be a student's paper brand, was of a "strongly grained paper". Finally, it was followed by a fourth, described as even more pronounced in texture and designated as "Holland paper" (Delâtre, 1887, p. 26-28).

Having a default layer, underneath which the papers facing the ground could be changed, allowed Rops to create a rich variety of textures for his etching plates. The surface quality of the papers used in transferring soft-ground influence how an etching will translate a drawing and such principle reveals a strong creative potential, as one can experiment with different types of texture, pattern and grain. As Béguin has remarked (1977): "the choice of the paper is at least as important as the instruments used for drawing." (p. 106). Based on the requirements expressed in literature, other surfaces – which may not necessarily be paper – could potentially undertake this task. The woven structure of fabrics such as rags or canvas can be seen in Käthe Kollwitz's series of Peasants War[8].

Moreover, Rops' working method points out that historical soft-ground transfers might exist detached from their original drawings. Thus, presenting enough reason to assess these papers' uniqueness and to establish a category of their own.

SPLITTING DRAWING AND TRANSFER

Most of what we can find in textbooks recommends that the artist uses one sheet of paper when drawing for soft-ground etching (Lambert 1987, p. 123-4; Griffiths, 1996, p. 97). More recent literature however, has been covering to a great extent the various supports tested throughout history, such as Rops' system as well as new working

Figure 7

Figure 7. George Elbert Burr (American, 1859-1939) Untitled, after 1906. Soft-ground wax and pencil on paper, Sheet: 156 X 249 mm. Object number: 1983.83.67. Smithsonian American Art Museum, USA

possibilities (Béguin, 1977; Stijnman, 2012).

A method used today by American artist, Robert Bechtle (California, 1932) is carefully described in Saez del Alamo's treatise (1989), in which the soft-ground is employed to faithfully reproduce a multi-coloured pencil drawing. Unlike in Rops' case, where the paper was replaced to diversify the textures of one etching plate, in this method, the practitioner draws with coloured pencils on a fixed surface, while switching between a series of metal plates which are all coated with soft-ground beneath. The colour separation depends on making sure each plate is drawn on with a corresponding single coloured pencil. The plates are etched, then printed in registration, with each matrix inked with a colour matching the pencil drawing that created its marks.

Another key point to this method is that it also requires the soft-ground to be worked on through two layers of overlay paper. Like Rops, Del Alamo (1989) assigns separate functions to each piece of paper: one to draw on, and one to lift the ground. In practice, the artist has to replace the paper between the drawing and the matrix each time they switch plates. Although it might seem unimportant, the second paper is necessary to prevent the ground from saturating the underside of the primary drawing surface. A multiple coloured-pencil drawing will presumably require cross-hatching – useful for achieving colour and tonal variation. If the lifting surface were the same throughout the whole process, this paper will soon become saturated and stop sticking to the ground. (Saez del Alamo, 1989, p. 77).

Unlike Rops – who preferred textured papers – Del Alamo recommends the use of tissue paper, due to its smoothness and neutral texture. As Del Alamo (1989) explains, the textures of the etching should be faithful to the drawing, as the lift paper is only necessary to prevent the ground from soaking the paper (p. 76). With reference to the surface responsible for lifting the ground, Del Alamo employs the term papel calco (Del Alamo, p.75), which can be translated in English to 'tracing paper' or 'decal' (p.80-82). For instance, Robert Bechtle, who performs his coloured etchings with the same procedure, lifts the soft-ground with kozo japanese paper[9] called "misu" (19 g/m²). Whereas, the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts in San Francisco, – being the institution where Bechtle's papers with the soft-ground remains are kept – refers to these as "wax removal sheets".[10]9

TRANSFER AS AN END IN ITSELF

An interesting use for soft-ground transfers can be found in the studio material left by American illustrator and printmaker George Elbert Burr. Lead strokes made with graphite are visibly combined with the brown remains of the soft ground. Because soft-ground transfers on paper mirror the executed drawing, they're in the same alignment as the final prints. Therefore, practitioners may choose to draw on top of transfers, as an opportunity to sketch and to plan new compositional elements for further etching stages. Burr's tracings, however, seem to have been produced with a different purpose.

Figure 8

In his Untitled series of the Grand Canyon,[11] the delicate tones carefully made with graphite on top of the brown ground does not suggest the artist was working to further the composition for the print, but rather that he was producing a work on paper as an end in itself. In contrast with the difficulty involved in tracking the soft-ground transfers in museum collections, the large amount of soft-ground transfers left by Burr is reasonable enough[12] to argue that these were not only kept intentionally but also that he had a special interest in producing them. An argument supporting this hypothesis can be made by looking at how he edited his work. Some of Burr's soft-ground plates were printed with light brown inks[13], resembling the colour of asphaltum, which is a traditional ingredient in etching ground recipes.

As a practitioner of the medium, familiar with the entire process, it is possible to argue that Burr developed an aesthetic preference for colour of the etching ground. The collateral soft-ground images peeled from the plates may have already possessed the aesthetic qualities which Burr intended to create.

THE COLOUR OF THE ETCHING GROUND

At a first glance, The Visitor (verso) might suggest that Cassatt was also drawing on top of her transfers. The black strokes, distinguishable from the light hue of brown lines, appear as if they were sketched on top, perhaps drawn in ink with a fountain pen. Given that most of Cassatt's identified transfers are the earliest stages of the prints – later combined with other techniques such as aquatint – it would be reasonable to argue that the artist was reflecting on her composition, perhaps deciding where to etch darker toned areas.

However, it's found that The Visitor is the result of two drawing sessions on top of two different kinds of soft-ground[14], as supported by research conducted at the Cleveland Museum of Art (Richard, 1978). The uniqueness of this example is intriguing. Cassatt could have been working with the two grounds in the same etching plate, to check if differences between these could be perceived in the prints. A small number of dark coloured soft-ground transfers belonging to Cassatt[15] and also to Edgar Degas[16], can be found in a few collections. According to Louise S. Richards[17], Degas had written to Camille Pissarro asking 'how to darken the ground' (p. 272), one year before the execution of The Visitor. As it is known that Cassatt and Degas not only shared admiration for each other's work, but also that she learned the etching processes from Degas (Richards, 1978, p. 273-4). If the artists worked alongside, the answer to where Cassatt had access to a black soft-ground might be that it came from Degas' studio, possibly even prepared by the artist himself.

Soft-ground transfers will retain the colour as that of the etching ground they are peeled from. In this sense, the transfers can be windows to the time they were created. Cassatt's The Visitor transfer paper may well be a useful prompt for researching soft-ground etching:

Figure 8. Mary Cassatt (American, 1844-1926) The Visitor (verso) ca. 1881. Soft-ground lines transferred from etching plate Sheet: 400 x 309 mm. Gift of Fifty Members of The Print Club of Cleveland on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary 1966.176.b Cleveland Museum of Art. (CC) Creative Commons Licence

looking at the paper for clues to specific etching ground ingredients, evolution, accessibility and variations throughout history.

TRACKING THE TRANSFERS

It seems very likely to us that soft-ground transfers have been mistaken for prints or drawings over the years, even by well-known institutions. Mary Cassatt's The Visitor is an example of such, as it was first identified as a print. The different values of hue in the lines were explained as being the result of the 'depth of the grooves' etched in the matrix (Richards, 1978, p. 271). It did not help that the recto side – showing the drawing – was hidden by a glued backing paper. The removal of this backing paper by Keiko Mizushima Keyes in July 1978 ultimately revealed the drawing. But museum staff were only able to successfully identify it after comparing the paper to another of Cassatt's transfer papers, Knitting in The Library, in which the colour of the ground was a determining factor (Richards, 1978).

An insight from a practitioner is certainly necessary to help recognize these drawing and print derivatives. In this sense, geographical distance is another constraint to this research, as we were unable to assess all important material first hand. Rops' method of making soft-ground etchings suggest that his transfers must exist, or have existed, independently to the drawings. However, a primary inquiry to Belgian institutions hosting Rops collections, such as the Musée Félicien Rops in Namur, the Museum De Reede in Antwerp, and the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR), offered inconclusive answers[18], leaving little evidence of the existence of such papers. Further research on Rops' work needs to be undertaken (Lopes, 2018, p. 80).

In the pursuit of soft-ground transfers, we manually conducted analysis on Käthe Kollwitz's prints at the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin[19]. As a German printmaker, who was a practitioner of the medium, Kollwitz was selected as a case study. Even though the papers' laid structure of her drawings matches her soft-ground prints, we didn't find a single example of a transfer paper.[20]

This is not to say that these findings are conclusive. There are enough printmaking collections and institutions with works on paper that may still have transfer papers in their collections to be identified.

THE NEED FOR A NEW TERMINOLOGY

The lack of consistency in terminology in regard to both the papers and the remains of soft-ground transfers was a primary obstacle to this research, which depends on accessing examples and studies conducted by specialists and museum institutions.
While some of the names seem to be too descriptive – such as 'soft-ground transferred pencil drawing' or 'soft-ground lines transferred from etching plate' – others are in conflict with other print and drawing vocabulary. This is the case of 'off-set soft-ground', which is a coined name for another etching procedure developed in the

20th century.[21] The term 'tracing paper' is not suitable as well, since it's easily employed today to designate most transparent surfaces, like industrialized polyester papers. Prior to industrialized centuries, printmakers were preparing their own tracing papers to transfer their designs on the ground's surface.[22] The process is described by Abraham Bosse (1758) and he refers to it as calquer[23] (fr.), which translates to 'tracing'. Moreover, looking back on history, we can see how similar methods of tracing or transfer preceded – and even overlap – the invention of soft-ground etching. While we would like to argue that transfers produced in the making of drawing-like prints are specific to soft-ground etching, we know that in the late 18th century, Cornelis Ploos van Amstel and Tischbein were sprinkling dusty materials such as sand, on top of prepared papers and ordinary etching grounds[24] to etch granular lines (Stijnman, 2012, p. 219).

A definitive nomenclature is necessary to set all of these nuances apart. The new term should be specific enough to narrow all research findings, making it accessible for artists and academics to track the soft-ground transfers in printmaking collections. Both 'soft-ground wax on paper' or 'lifted paper' seem to us, to be suitable terminologies. Nonetheless we'd like to propose "lift(ed) paper" as in "the paper that lifts the ground from the plate", as described in literature (Mayer, 1991, p. 594; Stijnman, 2012, p. 212).

Figure 9

TECHNOLOGICAL RESEARCH: THE PURE PRINT PROJECT

A research project dedicated to soft-ground etching[25] was launched in 2016, within the educational and academic framework of Pure Print[26] (Classical Printmaking in Contemporary Art). Based on initial experiments, we selected tissue paper and newsprint paper as the most efficient surfaces to perform the task, due to their thinness and absorbency. Later on, results favoured the use of Chinese and Japanese papers, now considered by the research team as the ideal surfaces, providing the etching with delicate textures, while being the most efficient at lifting the ground.[27] Such papers, often translucent, very thin, uncoated and flexible, fulfil all of the traits requirements recommended in the literature. Wenzhou rice paper 30g can produce etchings with smudge textures provided by its furry side. The Gampi Silk Tissue paper 12g, on the other hand, being lightweight, very thin but flexible and durable, efficiently lifts every kind of drawn mark (Lopes, 2018). The disadvantage of using these types of paper is that these need to be protected with another sheet, as the pressure of the pencil can easily tear the paper if used on its own.

Within Pure Print's practice based-research, drawings and transfers are classified as two separate outcomes. Working participants at the studio – artists, printmakers, students or researchers – are urged to be sensitive to their individual qualities. Singling out the transfers is useful to research, making it more practical to catalogue the results in technical charts and manuals.[28] The lifted papers have also been exhibited within our project activities, helping us to communicate printmaking as a process to a non-specialized audience. As the

Figure 9. Pure Print: Soft-ground etching research, 2016. Exhibition set: zinc plates, Wenzhou rice paper 30g as the lift papers; graphite drawings, polychromatic print. David Lopes (2017). Presented in "D'après" (2018), Exhibition Room, Rectory of the University of Porto, Portugal. Pure Print: i2ADS. FBAUP

technique is unfamiliar to many, the presence of drawings, transfers, plates and prints, recreates the stages of production. These papers can therefore be presented with an educational aim and help to raise interest in the medium.

Yet, we keep the "lifted papers" not just because we are researchers, but because we are artists. When working with soft-ground etching for the first time, beginners are often caught in awe when lifting the paper and finding the transfer. There seems to be an unspoken interest that overturns the fascination for these objects as mere subjectivity. As reinterpretations of the drawings, soft-ground transfers unveil an unexpected materiality. To confine their purpose to simply illustrate the process does not cover the extent of their potential, especially considering that other transfers' methods are well-established as art objects in contemporary art.

Industrialized carbon transfer papers are often found in exhibitions, used by artists to press objects or to perform wax drawings. In relation to other printmaking techniques, remarks on the similarities between traced monotypes[29] and soft-ground transfers have been pointed by Louise S. Richards (1978, p. 276), when discussing Cassatt's The Visitor. Furthermore, while soft-ground transfers are mostly unknown to the general public, all types of monotype are readily regarded as artworks and exhibited as such.

As participants in contemporary art, how can we shed a different light on these objects? Perhaps we should turn our attention away from the act of transferring as a process and focus on the outcome.

PROCESS-DRIVEN ART PRACTICE

The presentation of early etching states (often called proofs), preparatory drawings, the final prints and the etching plates themselves as a group can be traced to 19th-century exhibitions. Etchings: Trials and states of the plates[30] (1880) by Degas is a firm example, but it's worth mentioning that in his close circle of fellow artists, Cassatt and Pissarro, among others, were also showing multiple stages of etchings. (Kruckenberg, 2016) Art critics of their time, Duranty, Gautier and Baudelaire argued in favour of exhibiting preliminary work as a greater demonstration of the intention of the work, and as an expression of the artists' state of mind (Kruckenberg, 2016). This display also underlines the narrative of making: the actual display of tools, materials and the processes employed, continued or abandoned. Kruckenberg (2016) argues that work of Degas has to be understood within 'the aesthetic of process'. Being an etching practitioner, it's not surprising to find Degas's name among the few identified examples of soft-ground lifted papers. Degas' experimental approach with printmaking was freed by his disregard for the established perception of the status of the medium. His prints were painted on top of with pastels, retracted, photographed, transferred, drawn from and so on. As Druick and Zeghers (1984) have stated, Degas wasn't against the borders of traditional printmaking but he didn't allow them to limit his pursuit of image-making (p. XV).

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 10. Pure Print: Soft-ground etching research, 2016. Exhibition set: zinc plates, Wenzhou rice paper 30g as the lift papers; graphite drawings, polychromatic print. David Lopes (2017). Presented in "D'après" (2018), Exhibition Room, Rectory of the University of Porto, Portugal. Pure Print: i2ADS. FBAUP

Figure 11. Marta Bełkot (Polish, born 1989) In Process, 2019. (detail). Printed soft-ground, etching, linocut and dry plants on Kozo. Sheet: 210 x 700 mm (each). Exhibition view at Sala Comum: Rectory of the University of Porto. (Pure Print: FBAUP) Photo courtesy of the artist

Pure Print collaborator and artist Marta Bełkot[31] exhibited the transfers of soft-ground instead of a series of editioned prints. In fact, having completed the transfer, Marta's lifted papers were never stored away into drawers, they were worked on simultaneously and in parallel to the etching of the plates. The soft-ground transfers showing the negative marks of leaves, flowers and plants – achieved by placing such objects on top of the ground and running them through the press – were superimposed with linocut and etching, which was printed in brown ink. The brown ink was clearly influenced by the colour of the ground, as seen in Burr. The luxurious support of the Kozo Japanese paper, chosen to lift the ground, and the title given to the artwork In Process (2019), confirms the artist's decision in highlighting the making of the artwork as the subject for the piece.

PRINTING WITH THE GROUND

The practice of printmaking entails a continuous exposure to specific materials and protocols. No matter the technique, when making a print, one is constantly shifting between systematized tasks and adapting these to new configurations or needs. Whether this is a conscious process or not, we argue that such materials, tools or processes become intrinsic to the making. Thus, we've interpreted Burr's soft-ground etchings, which we believe were printed to emulate the brown hue of the soft-ground transfers themselves.

On the other hand, we find transfer inks, non-drying blacks and asphaltum – materials usually employed in preparing the lithographic stone – displayed in the printing artworks of Graciela Machado (Portuguese, b. 1970). The artist builds her images by operating between several processes such as counter proofing, ink bleeding, "ghost prints" or maculatures[32] as final images. These are functional tasks, typically performed in the preparatory stages of printmaking with the purpose of cleaning, revising, inverting, tracing and transferring the pictures on the matrices. The final prints display the residues – materials such as the ground, resins and ink binders – which result from the accumulation of the different tasks. Similarly, the soft-ground transfers are as much of a display of the materials used in the process, as they are the result of a functional task, required in preparing the drawing for etching.

The presence of these substances – embodied in the finished artworks – is fairly unconventional, but what better materials can we find to display the process of printmaking, than the ones used in preparing the matrices themselves? Giving visibility to these materials is not about replacing the ink with the etching ground or selecting new methods for editioning prints, it's about allowing the process to emerge in a more significant way.

ALTERNATIVE LIFTING SURFACES

The wax coating of a carbon paper is transferred to another surface

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figure 12. Graciela Machado. Montagem Iceland, 2019 Lithography and Etching Sheet: 420 x 594 mm. Photo Courtesy of the artist
Figure 13. A carbon transfer sheet displaying the marking creases of folding the paper; [right] David Lopes, (Portuguese, b. 1993) Galileo, 2018 (detail)Soft-ground etching on top of watercolour painting on paper sheet: 160 x 222 mm. Photo Courtesy of the artist

when pressed or traced from the back, leaving behind a negative mark. The realization that used carbon papers – displaying the subtracted drawing – were similar-looking to an etching ground coat with the lifted drawing, cleared a path for new experimentation employing soft-ground etching.

Despite a difference in material composition, soft-ground and the coating of carbon papers are both malleable waxes. Behaving similarly through pressure, the two waxes cancel each other out, meaning that carbon papers cannot be used to lift soft-ground as a regular paper sheet. The subtracted negative drawings however – the outcome of drawing with the carbon paper and removing areas – exposes the paper sheet support. With the wax removed, these areas will adhere and lift the soft-ground. Using this technique, one can make drawings with carbon papers instead, and transfer the drawings by running the negative sheet on top of a coated plate, in the same manner that printmakers place objects on top of soft-ground and run them through the press to create texture in prints.

This method was useful in solving a technical problem related to an MA art project, in which the artist wanted to record with detail the wrinkles of paper folding, without having to resort to photomechanical processes (Lopes, 2018). In practical terms, the carbon paper can be folded as any paper – but being a coated-wax surface, the mere folding enhanced the creases. The creased and unfolded carbon paper sheet was then pressed against the ground, then lifted off, revealing the transferred wrinkles on the surface of the plate, which were then etched. This isolated case serves as an example to show how artists can benefit from researching the history of technical procedures they are working with. Specifically, this experimental approach was created when reconstructing Rops' method of drawing and lifting the soft-ground with different kinds of paper.

SUMMARY NOTES

Soft-ground's transfer sheets can be found in different formats and supports. While traditional soft-ground remains are found on the back of drawings, we know they might also exist as single sheets, thanks to the insight into creative methods of artists such as Rops. The supports in which one can transfer the ground are not limited to paper alone, as shown in prints by Kollwitz, fabrics were used as well. Due to their complex materiality, a definition for these objects might seem hard to find, as they are neither just prints or drawings, nor conventional transfers or tracings. The most correct answer is perhaps that soft-ground remains are a sort of traced monotype, isolated and specific to etching. The lack of a better name and the diverse terminology is connected to the inconsistent development of soft-ground etching in history, as it did not provide a stable environment for significant literature to be written. Nevertheless, a unifying terminology is certainly needed to help track catalogued examples.

The clear identification of historical soft-ground remains can help art

historians and museums conservators to understand the past. Indeed, when analyzing the lifted transfers by Cassatt, scholars have identified missing figures in the prints (Richards, p. 273) and even speculate on the use of alternative instruments. Relying on specific marks – which appear only on the transfer remains and not on the drawings – we know for example that Cassatt and Degas pressured the ground with a blind stylus.[33] Such artefacts help to show us the artists' willingness to experiment. Information like this is easily lost, if it were not for the clues left in these papers. The analysis of these objects is certainly useful to etching practitioners, as these transfers not only reveal the process, but also hint at the evolution of the etching ground recipes. The detected use of a brown and a black soft-ground by Cassatt and Degas shows that we're missing access to knowledge of a wider variety of workshop materials, considering that printmakers of those centuries were in control of the preparation of their own etching grounds (Stijnman, 2012. p.110).

While most of the historical soft-ground transfers seem to have been thrown away, the identified examples from the late 19th century reveal that these were not always perceived as disposable. Print practitioners have been sensitive to these materials; whether their interest rely on the remains alone, or in the combination of the ground with other mediums or supports, it seems that 19th-century artists saw the potential for soft-ground remains to become artworks. Contemporary art practices with a focus on process can help artists discern what to do with this intermediate outcome. We are today in a different position to previous centuries when artists were more constrained to the reproductive goals of printmaking. The practice of soft-ground etching in the 18th-century was made with the main purpose of reproducing drawings, therefore it is not surprising that these papers might have been regarded as collateral waste.

Pure Print's efforts in researching traditional printmaking aims to rekindle the practice of forgotten legacies. As we understand, no technique, process, tool or material should be limited to reproduction or to their utilitarian purpose. Our discussion has shown how soft-ground transfers can be exhibited. The ground's ability in recording surfaces can help print practitioners and artists to expand their understanding of the materials and methods used when drawing for printmaking. It has already opened the door to question whether substances traditionally found in the process, like the etching grounds, can be used as printing inks. Pure Print's research is built on technological reconstruction, dependent on studying the past, relocating forgotten practices into contemporary use. A seemingly complete historical review on the soft-ground etching may entice others to look for more examples of transfers, which are hidden or unknown. On the other hand, the study of those who innovated with the medium has placed us in a better position to select and find new paths to explore.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Translated from contre-dessin (french). In: Letter from Félicien Rops

Figure 14

Figure 14. David Lopes, (Portuguese, b. 1993)
Exhibition views displaying the soft-ground etchings.
[up] 'Imagens Que Não Servem Para Ver' (2020), in Fundação Júlio Resende – Lugar do Desenho, PT / [down] Exhibition view in 2018, Casa da Imagem, Vila Nova de Gaia, PT

to Edgar Baes Paris, 1885/01/12. Province de Namur, Musée Félicien Rops, Coll. Les Amis du Musée Félicien Rops, inv. Amis/LE/030. www.ropslettres.be, n° d'éd. 3431.

[2] "Offset soft-ground" is used by the Art Institute of Chicago. Both "soft-ground transferred pencil drawing", and "soft-ground transfer from the plate" are used by The Cleveland Museum of Art, in Ohio. "Soft-ground wax on paper" is used by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC. And "reverse tracing in soft-ground" was used by Louise S. Richards (1970) in a publication for the Bulletin of The Cleveland Museum of Art.

[3] Stijnman (2012, p.219) points out Benjamin Green, Head of a Monk (1771, 144 x 118 mm, London: British Museum) to be the earliest identified soft-ground print, in which, for example, the structure of laid paper is visibly etched.

[4] Kollwitz, Käthe (ca. 1905) Frauenkopf. [etching] At: Berlin: Kupferstichkabinett. Ident Nr.

223-1912,(G); Kollwitz, K (ca. 1905) Gesenkter Frauenkopf [etching]. At: UK: The National Galleries of Scotland. Accession Nr. GMA 200

[5] Cassatt, Mary (ca. 1881) Knitting in Library. (recto and verso). At: Ohio, Cleveland Museum of Art. Inv. 1941.85. Available from: https://clevelandart.org/art/1941.85|author=Mary Cassatt|year=c. 1881/, access-date=06 February 2020|publisher=Cleveland Museum of Art.

[6] Cassatt, Mary (ca. 1883) Sewing by Lamplight. (recto and verso). At: New York: Morgan Library & Museum. Inv. 2006. 33. Available from: https://www.themorgan.org/drawings/item/247388, accessed 07th February 2020

[7] 19th century French 'tracing papers' specifically meant a type of transparent surface made of hemp or flax fibres, also known as 'vegetable paper'. (Chesnel, 1858, p. 442; Ure, 1853, p. 344; Traugott,1855. p. 554). Although the transparency of the paper is not mentioned by Rops, we are able to verify it, looking at several technical dictionaries from Rops' time, such as Chesnel's (1858), Ure's (1853) and Béguin's (1977-1).

[8] Kollwitz, Käthe (1908) Die Gefangenen (7th proof). Etching, drypoint, aquatint, soft-ground etching, with pencil strokes and brown ink and identification of Ziegler paper transfer etching. At: Berlin: Kupferstichkabinett. Ident.Nr. 546-1910,(G); Kollwitz, Käthe (1903) Losbruch. (5th proof) Etching, drypoint, aquatint, soft-ground etching, with pencil strokes and brown ink and identification of Ziegler paper transfer.etching. At: Berlin: Kupferstichkabinett. Ident.Nr. 495-1909

[9] Misu is a Thai Kozo paper, handmade in Kochi, Japan. In its composition there is clay form incinerated clam shells making its surface soft and insect free. Information can be retrieved from: store.

hiromipaper.com/products, under the reference of HP 55.

[10] The Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts in San Francisco owns 14 papers used in tracing soft-ground for Robert Bechtle's Sunset Intersection. ca. 1982-1983. Objects accession numbers range from AFGA 1993.51.12 to AFGA 1993.51. 26.

[11] George Elbert Burr at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Object numbers: 1983.83.63, 1983.83.67, 1983.83.68, 1983.83.69, 1983.83.70, 1983.83.71, 1983.83.76.

[12] The Smithsonian American Art Museum holds over 30 catalogued objects under the designation of 'transfer drawing'. Available from: https://americanart.si.edu/search?query=elbert+burr+transfer, accessed 7th February 2020. Upon examination, we understand that such objects are identical to those identified under the name of 'soft-ground wax on paper'. We tried to confirm this with SAAM but our inquiry was not answered in time for the release of this paper.

[13] See: George Elbert Burr: Sand Storm on the Little Colorado River, ca. 1921, (from 'Desert Set' series). Soft-ground etching printed in ochre ink on wove paper. Detroit Institute of Arts. Accession no. 21.82.4; or George Elbert Burr: Evening, New Kingman, Arizona, soft-ground etching printed in sepia. Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco: Achenbach Foundation.

[14] The darker lines are actually not on top of the brown lines but under. It might be 'difficult to grasp it by looking at the image', as Richards puts it (1978, p.273), but the darker soft-ground was drawn first, and such is confirmed by looking at the printing proofs, where a woman appears sitting in the left corner of 'The Visitor', recto drawing, (Accession No. 1966.176.a. Cleveland Museum of Art), only in the third printed state. (Richards, 1978)

[15] Cassatt, Mary (ca.1880) Two Girls Playing in a Sandbox [soft-ground transfer pencil drawing, on thin wove paper, signed with initials 'M.C.' in pencil, the full sheet, with remains of soft-ground medium offset on the reverse] (197 x 152 mm.) (B. supp. IV; Br. CR 732). At: New jersey: Provenance Robert Hartshorne, (L. 2215b). Christie's auctions, New York. Retrieved on February 15, 2020 from url: https://www.christies.com/

[16] Images sources for Degas' Study for 'Mary Cassatt at the Louvre" [recto and verso, ca. 1879, Accession No. 1995.47.36.a and 1995.47.36.b) can be found at the digital archive of the National Gallery of Art Collection. url: https://www.nga.gov/collection.html, retrieved on February 7, 2020. The resulting print of this soft-ground transfer is also on open access. Degas, Edgar (ca.1879/1880) Mary Cassatt at the Louvre: The Etruscan Gallery (Au Louvre: Musée des antiques). [etching, aquatint, and electric crayon] Plate: 268 x 234 mm; Sheet: 415 x 306 mm. Paris: Rosenwald Collection. Accession No. 1943.3.3366.

[17] Louise S. Richards, (1970- 2013) was the Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio.

[18] As discussed in 2018 with Joris Van Grieken, Keeper of Prints and Drawings from the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR) and David Verbeeck, Coordinator at the Museum de Reede, Antwerp, Belgium.

[19] Research conducted at the Study Room Max Jakob Friedländer, Kupferstichkabinett, in Berlin.

[20]   We individually analyzed the back of 146 drawings belonging to Kollwitz, to check if any remains of transferred soft-ground could be identified. George Josef Dietz, Head of Conservation at the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin kindly answered to a few questions and has given permit to release the following statement on the topic: "So far I am not aware of the existence of any identified transfers for soft-ground etching in the collection of the Kupferstichkabinett Berlin. But I have to state that I cannot imagine that anyone has ever done research on this specific question. (...) I can absolutely imagine that misidentified objects may exist in the collection." (transcript from an email exchange. Dietz, Georg Josef <g.dietz@smb.spk-berlin.de> Date: Wednesday, 27/11/2019 at 2:48 pm).

[21]" Tools and Materials: Offset soft-ground – a new etcher's medium", written by Kalman Kubinyi. The American Magazine of Art. Vol. 28, No. 11 (November, 1935), pp. 679-683. url: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23940847, retrieved on February 7, 2020.

[22] Transparent tracing papers were prepared by printmakers, made of organic matter like fish gelatine. Another method was to impregnate ordinary papers with oils and resins, which renders them translucent. Due to their organic composition, these manufactured 'tracing papers' can become brittle and fragile with time and are subjected to tears with use. This might be one of the reasons why these historical process materials have not survived to our days.

[23] A sheet of paper is rubbed with chalky materials, such as charcoal or sanguinea (p. 19). This surface is placed against the etching ground, the motif is drawn and the design is transferred. This paper can be the back of the pre-made drawing or, in another scenario, the prepared sheet can be placed in between, if one intends to preserve the original drawing.

[24] The 'ordinary etching ground' – also known as hard-ground – solidifies into a stable surface, as opposed to the 'soft-ground' which will remain malleable for a longer period of time. This is due to its recipe, which contains tallow, traditionally derived from animals. The grease is a determining ingredient in allowing the lifting procedure to even be possible in the first place.

[25] "Levantamento: o verniz mole em contexto reprodutivo e original" (original Portuguese title) is a research project conducted at the Faculty

of Fine Arts of the University of Porto (FBAUP), created and coordinated by Graciela Machado, the Printmaking teacher at FBAUP, member of I2ADS. This project covered the following research guidelines: (a) the manner of making drawing-like prints, (b) the use of soft-ground to record the surfaces of objects, (c) and the preparation of the soft-ground based on traditional recipes. For more information, please see Levantamento – The Soft-Ground Etching Research Project

[26] Pure Print is a research platform, working within the academic context of FBAUP: i2ADS: Research Institute of Art, Design and Society. Aiming to promote classical printmaking in contemporary art, the research projects are conducted within the practical work of MA and PhD students, with focus on technological historical reconstructions. The guidelines and tasks are designed to fit the students' proposals, in which their artistic practice is supported by technological research in printmaking.
https://gravura.fba.up.pt/
https://pureprint.fba.up.pt

[27] Robert Bechtle's coloured soft-ground etchings are drawn on top of two layers, the one marking and lifting the ground being a Japanese paper, according to Emily York, Robert's technical assistant at the Crown Point Press, USA.

[28] Two manuals have been edited and made accessible for the Printmaking Workshop of FBAUP. Manual: Plein-Air with soft-ground etching (2017) by Maria Catarina. Manual: Recipe ground for soft-ground etching by David Lopes (2018). PurePrint: i2ADS. FBAUP. Open access: gravura.fba.up.pt/en/647-2/research/

[29] Indeed, traced monotypes and soft-ground transfers share the same procedure, as both are made by pressuring the back of a paper, collecting material – whether ink or ground – from a prepared surface beneath. Interestingly enough, the monotype process is pointed to have been invented by Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (Reed, 1991). The same artist who is also believed to be the inventor of the soft-ground etching technique, as identified by Anthony Blunt (1970).

[30] "Eaux-fortes: Essais et états de planches" is the original French title. The translation is presented by Whitney Kruckenberg (2016).

[31] Marta Bełkot (Katowice, Poland), printmaker and artist, is a Pure Print collaborator since 2016. Currently, Marta is taking her PhD at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto.

[32] Maculatures are the waste sheets produced within the process of editing or preparing a print. (Tolhausen, Durand, 1854. p. 248). Maculatures are often mentioned when processing the lithograph stone but these can also be the result of reprinting the same matrice without recharging it with ink. Such types of maculatures can be identified in etchings from the 17th century. See for example Rembrandt's portrait of Jan Lutma I in the British Museum (Museum number F,7.82).

[33] Report by Kimberly Schenck. 'Mary Cassatt and Soft-ground Etching, 1879-1890.' Conversation Gellow, 2017-2018, Ailsa Mellon Bruce National Gallery of Art Sabbatical Curatorial. Research » CASVA » Research Projects. Retrieved from: https://www.nga.gov/research/casva/research-projects/research-reports-archive/schenck-2017-2018.html. Accessed 14th February 2020.2:36pm

[2] "Offset soft-ground" is used by the Art Institute of Chicago. Both "soft-ground transferred pencil drawing", and "soft-ground transfer from the plate" are used by The Cleveland Museum of Art, in Ohio. "Soft-ground wax on paper" is used by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC. And "reverse tracing in soft-ground" was used by Louise S. Richards (1970) in a publication for the Bulletin of The Cleveland Museum of Art.

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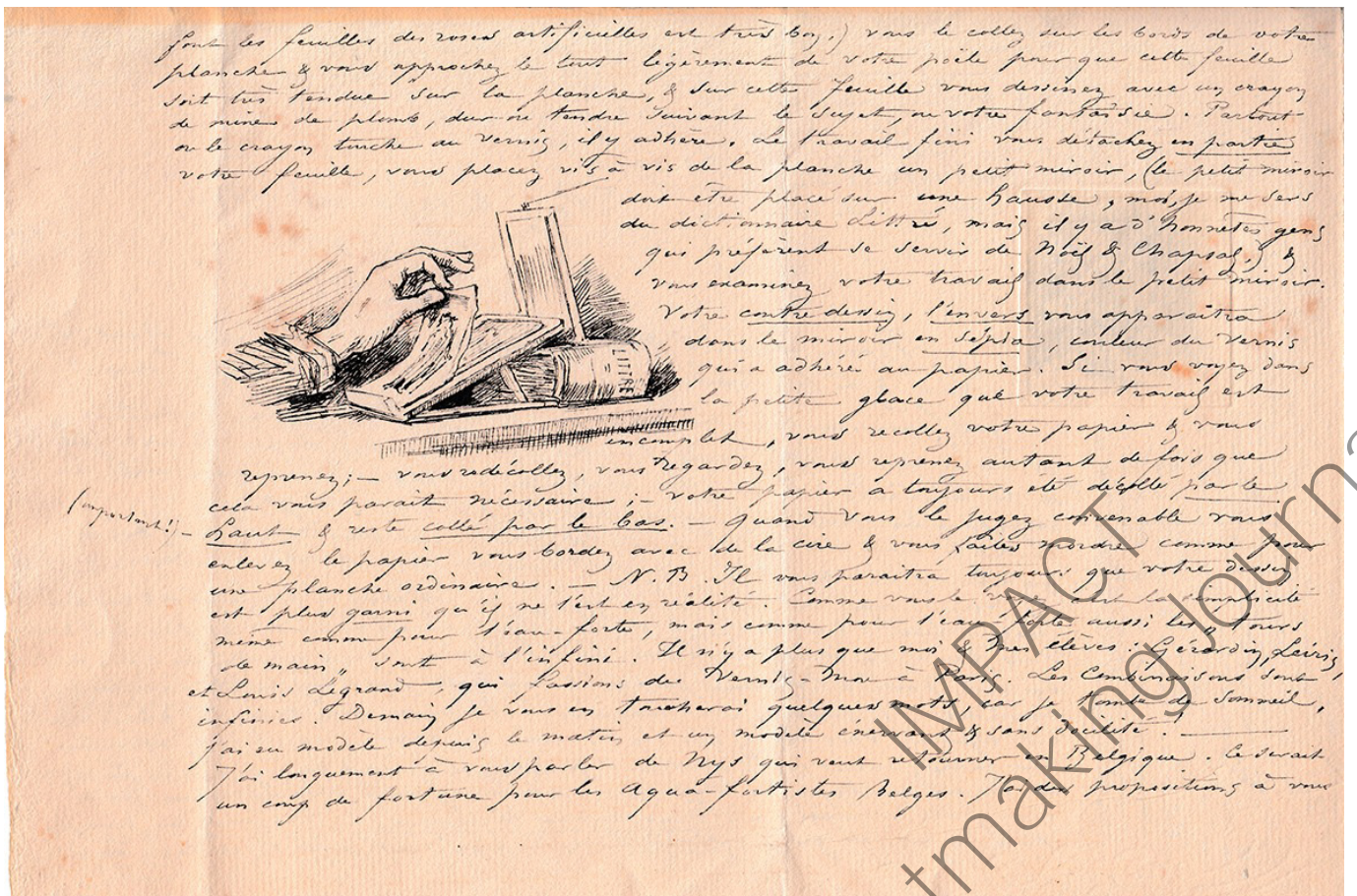mgmachado@fba.up.pt

Figure 1. Lifting the paper after completing the drawing for a soft-ground etching. The drawing being peeled belongs to Samuel Prout (British, 1783-1852). A Series of Ancient Buildings and Rural Cottages in the North of England: Ayton, (1821). Soft-ground etching. The Cleveland Museum of Art. 1980.64. Digital illustration by David Lopes, 2020 Pure Print (I2ADS: FBAUP)

Figure 2. Hand-written letter with drawn illustration. From Félicien Rops (Belgian, 1833-1998) to Edgar Baes (Belgian, 1837-1909), Paris, 12th of January 1885. Namur, Musée Félicien Rops, Coll. Les Amis du Musée Félicien Rops, inv. Amis/LE/030. Retrieved from: www.ropslettres.be, n° d'éd. 3431

Figure 3. Mary Cassatt (American, 1844-1926). Knitting in the Library (recto and verso), c. 1881. Graphite (recto) and soft ground lines transferred from etching plate (verso) Plate: 280 x 220 mm; Sheet: 313 x 401 mm. Bequest of Charles T. Brooks 1941.85. Cleveland Museum of Art. (CC) Creative Commons Licence

Figure 4. Félicien Rops' method of tracing and drawing for soft-ground etching Digital illustration by David Lopes, 2020. Pure Print (FBAUP: I2ADS)
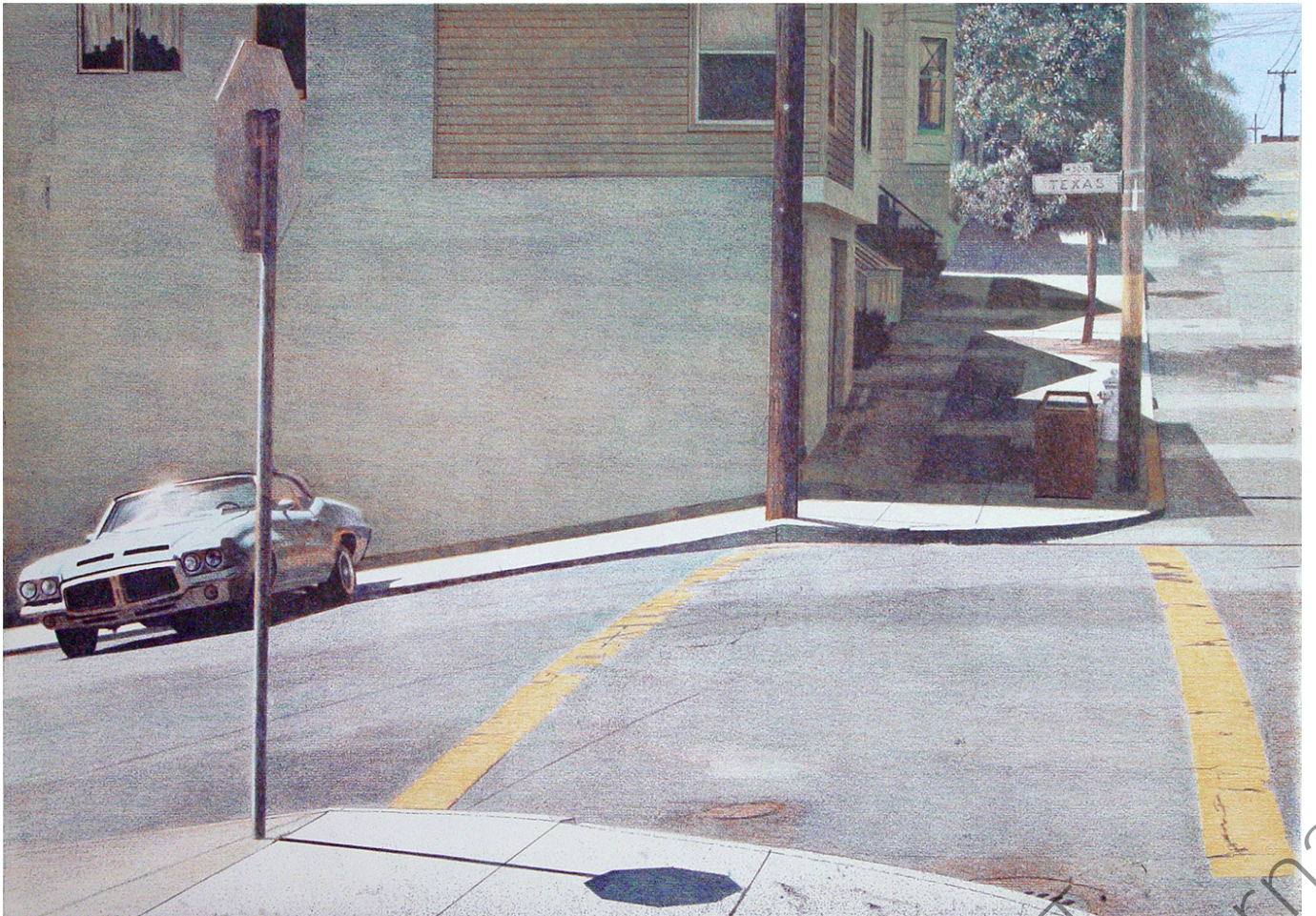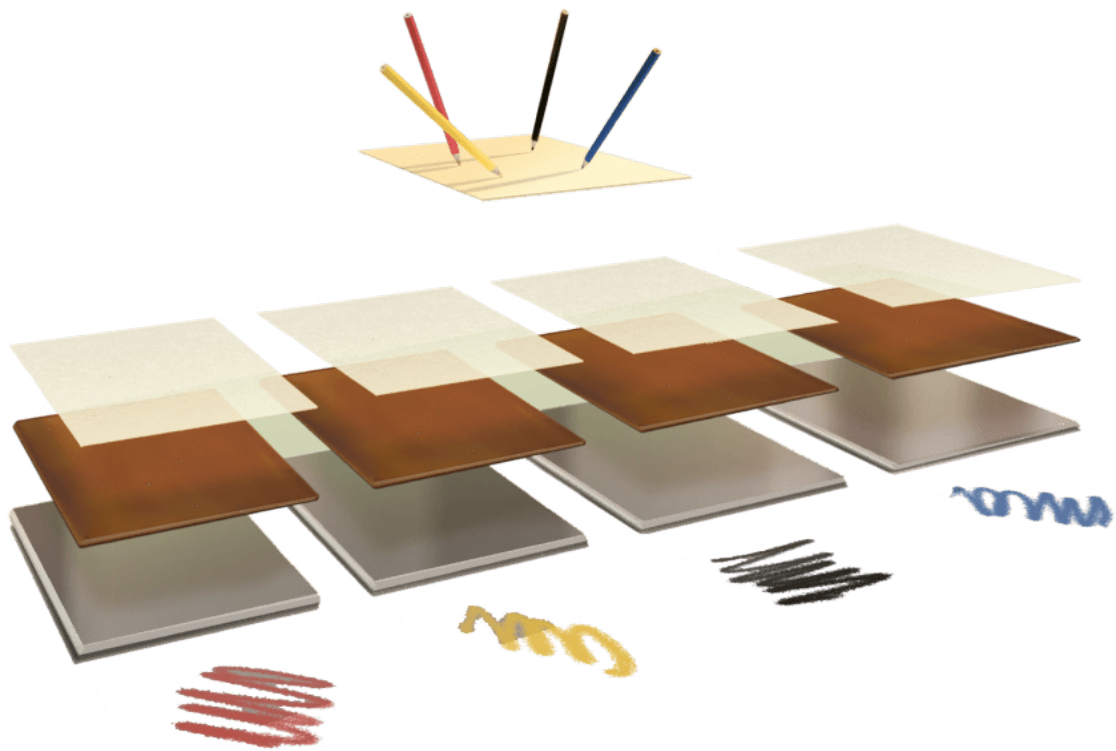
Figure 5. Robert Bechtle (American,1932) Texas and 20th Intersection, 2004. Colour soft ground etching with aquatint. Plate: 558 x 780 mm; Sheet: 787 x 99 mm. Edition 30. Published by Crown Point Press and printed by Catherine Brooks (Reproduced with the permission of Crown Point Press)

Figure 6. The method of reproducing a coloured-pencil drawing with soft-ground etching. Digital illus- tration by David Lopes, 2020. Pure Print (FBAUP: I2ADS)

Figure 7. George Elbert Burr (American, 1859-1939) Untitled, after 1906. Soft-ground wax and pencil on paper, Sheet: 156 X 249 mm. Object number: 1983.83.67. Smithsonian American Art Museum, USA

Figure 8. Mary Cassatt (American, 1844-1926) The Visitor (verso) ca. 1881. Soft-ground lines transferred from etching plate Sheet: 400 x 309 mm. Gift of Fifty Members of The Print Club of Cleveland on the Oc- casion of the Fiftieth Anniversary 1966.176.b Cleveland Museum of Art. (CC) Creative Commons Licence

Figure 9. Pure Print: Soft-ground etching research, 2016. Exhibition set: zinc plates, Wenzhou rice paper 30g as the lift papers; graphite drawings, polychromatic print. David Lopes (2017). Presented in "D'après" (2018), Exhibition Room, Rectory of the University of Porto, Portugal. Pure Print: i2ADS. FBAUP
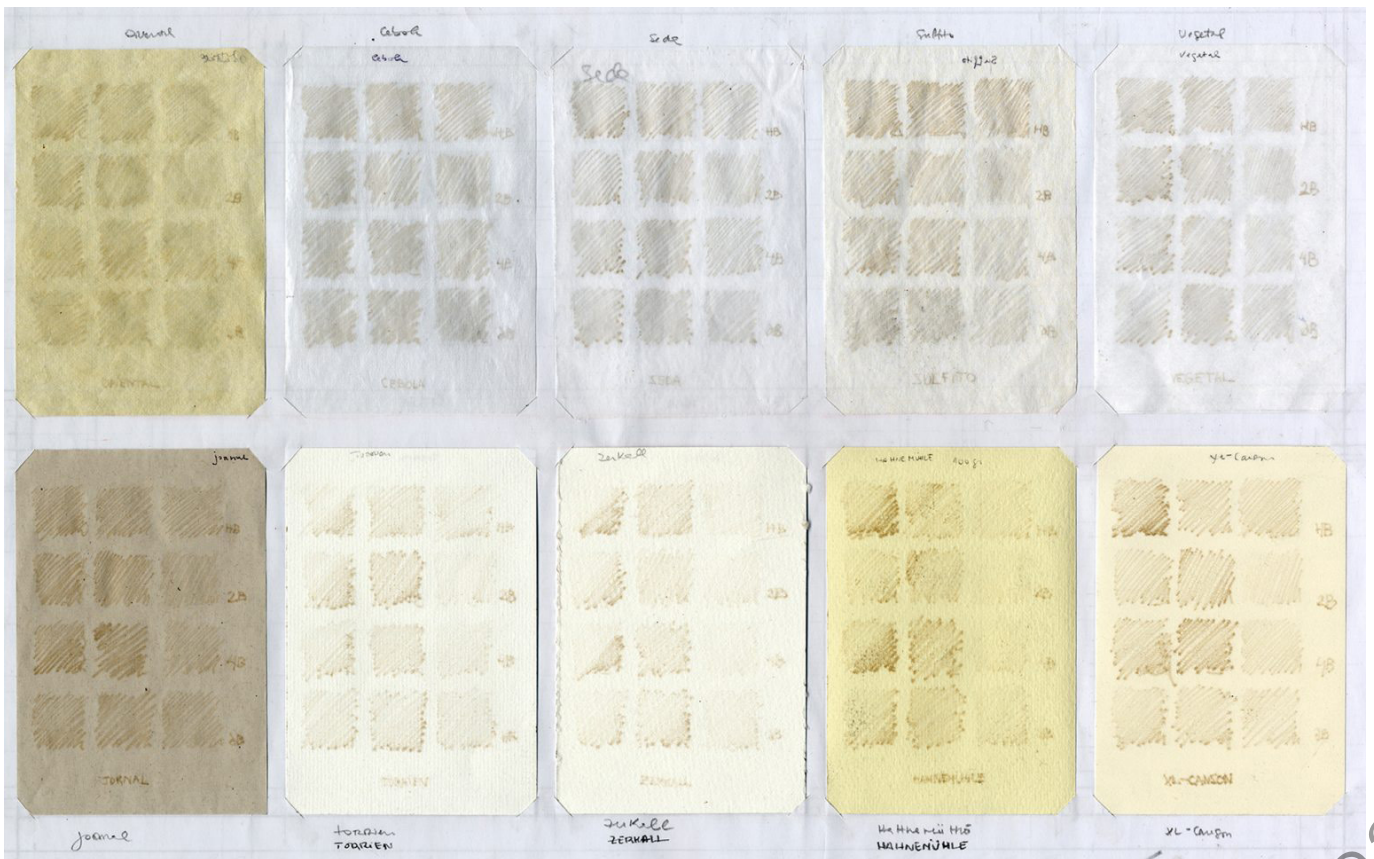
Figure 10. Pure Print: Soft-ground etching research, 2016. Exhibition set: zinc plates, Wenzhou rice paper 30g as the lift papers; graphite drawings, polychromatic print. David Lopes (2017). Presented in "D'après" (2018), Exhibition Room, Rectory of the University of Porto, Portugal. Pure Print: i2ADS. FBAUP

Figure 11. Marta Bełkot (Polish, born 1989) In Process, 2019. (detail). Printed soft-ground, etching, linocut and dry plants on Kozo. Sheet: 210 x 700 mm (each). Exhibition view at Sala Comum: Rectory of the University of Porto. (Pure Print: FBAUP) Photo courtesy of the artist

Figure 12. Graciela Machado. Montagem Iceland, 2019 Lithography and Etching Sheet: 420 x 594 mm. Photo Courtesy of the artist
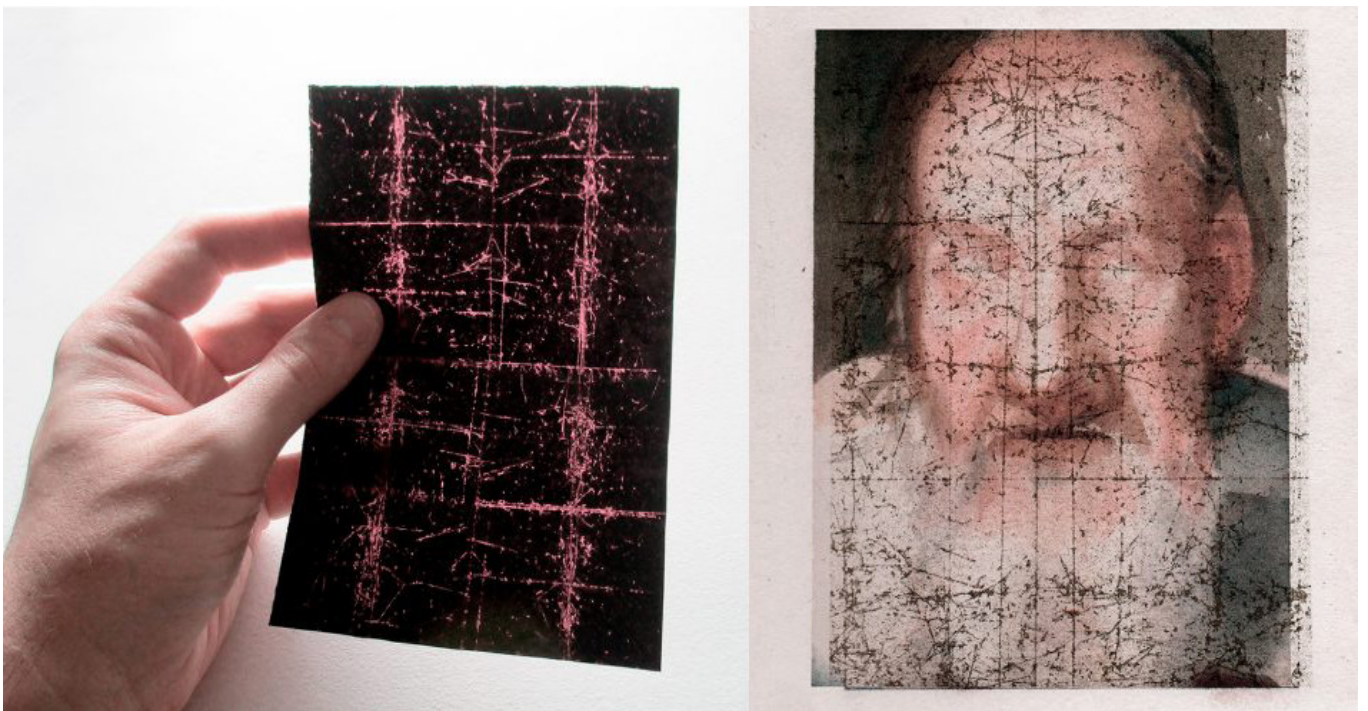
Figure 13. A carbon transfer sheet displaying the marking creases of folding the paper; [right] David Lopes, (Portuguese, b. 1993) Galileo, 2018 (detail)Soft-ground etching on top of watercolour painting on paper sheet: 160 x 222 mm. Photo Courtesy of the artist

Figure 14. David Lopes, (Portuguese, b. 1993)
Exhibition views displaying the soft-ground etchings.
[up] 'Imagens Que Não Servem Para Ver' (2020), in Fundação Júlio Resende – Lugar
do Desenho, PT / [down] Exhibition view in 2018, Casa da Imagem, Vila Nova de Gaia, PT