

SOFT

Exhibition essay by Victoria Marie Barquin

“The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead, patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves.”¹

To be emotional and to be soft are qualities enmeshed with negative connotations and are typically used to describe women and emasculate men. By exhibiting works that are all at once emotive, graphic, skillful, and strong, *SOFT* confronts the often-gendered interpretation of the word by offering a broader definition—soft is power.

Guest curated by Victoria Marie Barquin and Cassie Tompkins, *SOFT* features prints and textiles displayed within a working print shop—the Chicago Printmakers Collaborative. It diverges from previous print-on-paper exhibits and features artists who reconsider the traditions and boundaries of the medium. Here, the term soft is used as both an experience of fabric against skin and a quality of emotional intelligence. In fact, a “soft skill” is defined in the workforce as “personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people.”² Further, soft can be used to describe the marriage of media coming together in one piece. This joint textile and print exhibition invites comparison between different modes of making and stresses the importance of combining various materials, dimensions, and techniques into one’s practice.

Sonnenszimmer, the collective output of artists Nick Butcher and Nadine Nakanishi, work in a variety of media including painting, printmaking, sculpture, and design. Their work has soft edges, blurring the delineations between these categories. The two pieces featured in this exhibition, *Step* and *Image As Afterthought*, have soft insides too. These monoprints on stuffed canvas are plush—squishy, but still maintain enough form to fold like paper. They’re displayed here stacked and layered. The

1. bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York City: Washington Square Press, 2004), 66.

2. *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. “soft skills,” accessed February 1, 2019, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/soft_skills.



Meg Roberts Arsenovic “grooms” a piece from her *Chesapeake Bay Impact Crater Color Study* series.

background image is masked while the foreground piece is exposed, its underbelly revealing the artists signatures—a standard authenticity protocol for works on paper.

Nicole Del Rio, another multidisciplinary artist, works with prints, rugs, ceramics, and books. Throughout each media, her work remains tender. “And then,” Ursula K. Le Guin writes, “people are supposed to be tough. Tough is good. But I’ve never been tough. I’m sort of soft and actually sort of tender. Like a good steak. Or like Chinook salmon, which isn’t lean, or tough, but very rich and tender.”³ Like the salmon, Del Rio’s exhibited works—a hooked rug and screenprint on paper—are raw and specific; they confront the awkwardness of having soft thoughts in a harsh world. These pieces are consistent with Del Rio’s larger body of work, in which she often depicts blob-like characters in interior environments—sometimes alone, sometimes together, and sometimes on the toilet.

Meanwhile, Meg Roberts Arsenovic’s compositions of faux fur are strong like steak. The four works exhibited in *SOFT* are from her series called *Chesapeake Bay Impact Crater Color Study*, which arose from her obsession with the history of her home state Virginia. Her bright, fully saturated colors mimic the tough, hard-to-chew, leathery quality of a rare meat. Not printed, but still existing on paper, these collages of synthetic fur use fiber as paint, as ink, as line.

3. Ursula K. Le Guin, from “Introducing Myself,” in *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2004), 3.

4. Fraser Taylor, “Statement,” last modified 2009, <http://www.frasertaylor.com>.

5. Cassie Tompkins, “Artist Statement,” last modified 2019, <http://www.cassietompkins.com/about>.

Similar to Arsenovic in her non-use of a press or traditional print processes, Melissa Leandro uses cyanotype and Jacquard weaving in the works on display. Cyanotype, often considered a photographic process, could easily be argued as printmaking. A cyanotype is created by placing objects or a film positive onto a piece of paper, which has been coated with a photosensitive chemical. Then, a light source is used to expose the image onto the paper. For *Untitled*, Leandro used the sunprinting process where the cyanotype is exposed using sunlight. To create *Discarded Rags*, Leandro scanned the cyanotypes into a computer and input the images to a Jacquard loom, which reproduced the prints in thread through digital weaving. These three hanging cloth works started with print and now exist as fabric but still refer to print in two ways; first, their presentation in an operational print studio and second, their mimicry of soiled black and white rags used in print shops to clean up oil-based inks and chemicals.

Rags and fabric scraps of all kinds can be used to clean up a work surface. For Chris Williford, pieces of fabric are the primary material for his collaged imagery. By purchasing second-hand fabric from The WasteShed, a reuse store in Humboldt Park which resells donated art and craft supplies, Williford is able to incorporate print and patterning from otherwise discarded textiles. Additionally, in his application of tulle in selected areas of *Killer Shades*, transparency is created—a visual effect frequented by the print community. The imagery of this large fabric collage inspired an edition of small etchings which feature the same glasses and fang-eyes, a motif of Williford's self described trash glam aesthetic.

In *Figures at the Edge of a Wood*, Fraser Taylor's aesthetic is quiet, calming, and gestural. Taylor's works "conjure the delicateness of cellular composition, the vastness of topographical vistas, and the intricacy of architectural structures."⁴ In one piece, all of these references blend together in a fabric field. To create this work, Taylor dyed the piece of fabric and then applied deColourant paste with a brush to create his marks. deColourant allows artists to work reductively, post-dye; similar to burnishing out highlights in an etching, or scratching back grease on a lithography stone.

Taylor's former student, Cassie Tompkins, uses "the extensive process of hand dyeing and screenprinting on fabric—inherently defined as craft work and traditionally considered female roles—(to) recontextualize the clean, straight lines explored in Minimalism and challenge the painting canon."⁵ Her work on

view, *Salt*, was produced by screenprinting onto shibori-dyed cotton—the ink was pushed through one piece of fabric (a fine, silk mesh) and onto another (a cotton typically used for quilting.) Her layered shapes are the result of vibrant inks passing through layers of cut paper stencils. Tompkins also interpreted the concept of soft in the storefront display, bringing her printed shapes into three-dimensions through a series of soft sculptures. These bodily objects live alongside Williford's foil stamped rugs and screenprinted pillows.

Bukola Koiki's two works—*Corporate Raiders I*, and its variation printed with palm oil—are powerful in imagery, message, and process. Both prints depict a mesh, drawstring bag with text referencing a financial document from the year 1836. These images are compelling—not only do they depict the bags, they are the bags—the white space around the objects disappear, the bags are on the wall. Much of Koiki's work confronts uncomfortable topics in an effort to find common ground and spark conversations⁶—these issues are emboldened by the embossment of text and numbers. Koiki's process for these works involved hand-stitching the characters onto pest netting and then printing the fabric matrix as a collagraph—offering a unique perspective on the relationship between textiles and printmaking.

There are many areas of overlap between textile and print production; comparisons can be made between stitching and cross-hatching, or between tufting and stippling. *SOFT* explores the shared appreciation for craft, repetition, imagery, and physicality between textile and print production and invites viewers to reassess their ideas about printmaking as a medium and soft as a term.

6. Bukola Koiki, "Artist Statement," <https://www.bukolakoiki.com/about>, accessed June 10, 2019.

***SOFT* is on view through August 31, 2019.**

Gallery hours are every Friday and Saturday 12–5:00 p.m. or by appointment.

A workshop will be taught by artist and guest curator Cassie Tompkins on Saturday, July 27. Register online at chicagoprintmakers.com.



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