

“Silk Aquatints”

While the name “silk aquatint” is accurate, it is also a bit of a misnomer. Think of silk aquatint as a collograph in reverse. One starts with a plate that if printed would print a deep black. From this, one adds to the plate making the plate so that it will hold less ink, making the plate varied in tone.

The Process – Step by Step

The directions below adhere to what we are using here at this workshop. When possible, I will add other ways to do something. For example, we are using chipboard as a substrate. Other materials can be used – thin styrene, acrylic sheeting are two. It is important that you make the substrate impenetrable to water.

- Coat the chipboard at least twice with acrylic house paint. Gloss is best. Sand in-between coating. For the last coat, sand the top layer only. Remember to seal the edges of the plate each time you paint.
- After sanding the last top layer, cut a piece of mesh approximately ¼ inch larger than the plate on all sides. Use the fabric on a slight bias. (This mesh count can vary. Use a mesh counter to check. We are using about 180).
- Mix black acrylic paint to the consistency of thick milk.
- Make sure your plate surface and mesh are clean, no lint.
- Coat the front of the plate liberally with the black paint. Do not let the paint dry.
- Place the fabric on the painted surface and using a foam brush loaded with more black paint, brush from the middle of the plate so that the mesh lays flat.
- Immediately use a hair dryer to dry the surface. Work from the middle out. The paint will appear flat, not glossy when it is dry.
- Turn the plate upside down on a flat surface where you can use an exacto blade and carefully cut away the extra mesh
- Coat the plate again as above with black paint one – two more times, depending on how dark you want your image. (the test plates have been coated three times) , each time drying the plate after it is coated.
- You are now ready to begin painting your image. You can begin by working directly on the plate, or make some light preliminary marks with chalk.
- The mixture paint on the plate is roughly 5:1 – Five parts artist quality acrylic medium to one part artist quality acrylic paint. The white paint is in the mix mostly just so you can more easily see what you are doing. The mixture as a whole, blocks the mesh. Therefore, the more the mesh is coated with this painting medium, the whiter those areas will be when the plate is printed.

- The layers must be painted on in flat stages. If there are painting marks on your layers, then those will act as a regular collograph and *add* texture, not lessen it. With that in mind, make your layers as flat as possible. It does not matter if you work from light to dark or visa versa. What matters is how much painting medium is on the mesh – how blocked the mesh becomes.
- Periodically dry the layers as you add them.
- Check that the back and sides of the plate is coated well. If not, coat again with white house paint.
- Print a proof! To print a proof of your plate, you need to use water-based ink such as Akua Color or Aqua Wash. If this ink is too loose to print well, modifiers consisting of magnesium carbonate and Setswell compound make it easy to handle, more like oil based etching ink.
- Wipe the plate like you would any other etching plate BUT be careful not to wipe any surface completely white. Wear gloves. If you wipe the plate too much, the water-based ink will stick the paper to the plate when printing. This will require a “feel” – you’ll get used to it.
- Wash the plate off thoroughly with water and dish detergent. Air dry or use a hair dryer.
- You have used water-based ink, so that it will come off completely after proofing. This is so that you can now add more layers of white acrylic mixture to add lighter tones. You could not do this if you had inked your plate with oil-based ink.
- Add more acrylic medium mixture to your plate if necessary, remembering that once you print in oil-based ink, there is no going back.
- When adding layers, remember that they need to remain smooth. Also, it is difficult to get a real white with this process. That is where a Prismacolor might come in handy. You can experiment with different mediums after the workshop – I can give you ideas.
- If your plate is tacky to the touch, gently coat the plate with a tine layer of talc (baby powder) then wipe with a slightly damp cloth. This should take care of the tackiness. If not, do it again.
- When you have proofed as much as you need in water-based ink, decide if you are going to use more than one plate for the final image. If so, you need to have those plates prepared as above. It is easier if you use the same size plates when making multiple plates for multiple colors. To make a reference to the first plate on the second, print the first plate in a light color, then immediately print the print the on to the next prepared plate to give you an indication as to where you will work with acrylic medium on the 2nd plate. Another method would be to use Saral paper to trace, and yet another would be using stencils cut from the first proofs.
- Print in oil-based ink. Wear gloves. Our ink is litho ink. It will need to be modified with Setswell and Magnesium Carbonate.
- The plate can be cleaned after printing at this point with baby oil which is the same thing as mineral oil. The plate should probably not be tacky any more.
- Then ink slab when using oil based ink can be cleaned with baby oil, the degreased with water.