

On Productivity, Paint and Polaroids

Sometimes I feel unproductive, or not productive enough. Making paintings is taking me longer these days, all the layering, trashing and repainting that I do takes months, years even. I see other artists doing a 'drop' of a whole new series of 15 or more paintings every few months with amazement. I cannot match that, my work gestates way more slowly.

But what if I'm not actually unproductive, it is just that I have developed a blind spot for the images I work on with greater speed and frequency in my studio all year round? I look in drawer and see all my work on Polaroids: fully-formed semi-abstract works that I build up in oils over instant snaps.

On Snaps

Polaroids are an ongoing element of my practice and have been for years. But it has only just occurred to me that I have not been counting them as part of my 'real work' lately.

I am a painter not a photographer. But I have made hundreds of images using oil paint over instant film exposures, since I started working with this medium in 2009/10. For nearly a decade it formed my entire practice, I was a self-avowed *Polaroid Artist*. I believed in the worth of this work and still do. I have lectured in a symposium and published a paper* on it in an esteemed journal. I even did a video** talking about it for the SSA, that is still on YouTube.

But I seem now to have developed a blind spot to the existence of this half of my own creative practice. Is that something all artists do maybe; fail to acknowledge all the images that get made around the edge of the works you consider entering for shows? The risk is that we may be ignoring some of our most experimental work.

On my studio wall

On entering my studio, on the wall behind my worktable, there is a blu-tacked-up grid of Polaroids in the process of being painted, generally around 50 of them. They get made iteratively in tandem with the paintings I make on linen stretched over boards, at larger scale, on the opposite wall. Far from quick colour sketches, they often take just as long to complete. And they are images in their own right. I pull them off the wall when each seems to be done. Then I clean up their edges and put them in a drawer to dry. Each leaves a splattered frame of colours behind on the white and is quickly replaced by a new Polaroid for me to start on. Some

finish fast but many of them have so many layers of oil paint on top that they become physically heavy with it.

Painting over Polaroids was my all from 2012 to 2018. I have worked over my own Polaroids, mini instax snaps taken by my child and donated ‘fails’ from photographer friends*** (Noting that once I begin work on anyone else’s shot the photographic subject is obliterated and all image copyright lies with me). All the instant shots I use in making paintings are simply substrate for me to work over. In my initial work with Polaroids I made hundreds of City Skies images over shots I took in London, Berlin, Hong Kong, Sydney and Glasgow, having moved here in 2017. Latterly I made a huge Polaroids print called “I Love This City (even more when the sky is blue) Glasgow” that is still a best seller. Similar London and Hong Kong prints are also available. Each shows a grid of 48 actual size painted Polaroids, that mimic my wall installations of originals. Now I mostly make semi-abSTRACTS in this format.

Ways of Not Seeing

But since then have I inadvertently adopted the negative attitude that I found galleries had to my paint + Polaroids work**** seeing it as risky or inconsequential, even unserious?

Now that I have decided to show my Polaroid-based work again (solo exhibition in April 2026, at Edelweiss Glasgow) I realise that I haven’t exhibited them for years and almost none are on my website. I never stopped making this work, I just stopped seeing it perhaps.

And what happened to make me stop noticing the stacks of paint-obliterated Polaroids that I produce constantly? With Covid, travelling internationally had to stop so that meant no new cities to explore. When I moved to a bigger studio post-lockdown, I returned to working at scale with great eagerness because now I could. In the past five years my Polaroids got relegated to one wall and sidelined to this other thing I do, alongside the bigger bolder work on canvases. I even wondered if Polaroids had no place in my work any more, was it just convenient while my child was a toddler? An artist friend said not to leave it behind entirely. Good advice, so I carried on..

On Polaroids

Paintings on instant film were never a potboiler for me either, having proved resolutely unprofitable – Polaroid film is costly and the final images sell infrequently - but still I make

masses each year. And for me Polaroid still has analogue appeal. In part it is the press click brr whizz and out pops a real, mostly imperfect, weirdly-coloured thing. And it gives me a regular, squareish, pre-framed, pocket-size format to work against over and over again. Using Polaroids is habitual for me by now. All my work is overtly handmade and in this digital age, obstinately perhaps, I like applying the centuries-old medium of oils onto the 1950s technology of instant film and seeing what I can make of it.

On Productivity

Writing this has made me realise that productivity as a metric is probably best left for manufacturing, for the production line. Maybe I shouldn't worry about it in the studio.

I've also been quietly and slowly painting over the surface of discarded vinyl records for a couple of years, with grooves to work against. And a skateboard. But that is another story.

Footnotes:

* In 2020 Kudirka presented her paper "The Photos By Women You Just Won't See" as part of "Ways Of Seeing. Women and Photography in Scotland" the National Trust for Scotland's Second Morton Symposium, presented in conjunction with Glasgow Women's Library. That paper was subsequently published in the Spring 2021 edition of the journal 'Studies in Photography'

** Watch it if you wish on Youtube, SSA Council Forums 2020

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1yzcC-raDg>

*** The artist is indebted to Allastair Cook and to Steven Lawson for their gifted failed shots

**** Commercial galleries proved loathe to deal with Polaroids I found. The analogue film community were however positive about what I was doing with Polaroids, cf. interviews with Kudirka on Emulsive.org 2016 and The Creative Bar podcast 2018, linked from SarahKudirka.com