

## The Constraint as Impulse Tools, Techniques, and their Impact

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### Abstract

Having spent several one- and two-month artist residencies within twelve months made me reflect and reconsider my practice linked to the tools I had access to. While I have an intaglio printmaking studio at home, not having access to printmaking tools and equipment for several long stretches of time—a constraint—resulted in a productive outcome. The lack enabled me to develop a deeper connection with drawing, which had up to then “only” been the basis for my prints. I reflected drawing’s inherent qualities, especially its seismographic character, and started to use transparent Japanese paper to make visible bodily sensations. This proves to me that the constraint of not having printmaking tools and equipment at hand does not necessarily have to be an obstacle but can spark new impulses to expand one’s practice.

### Keywords

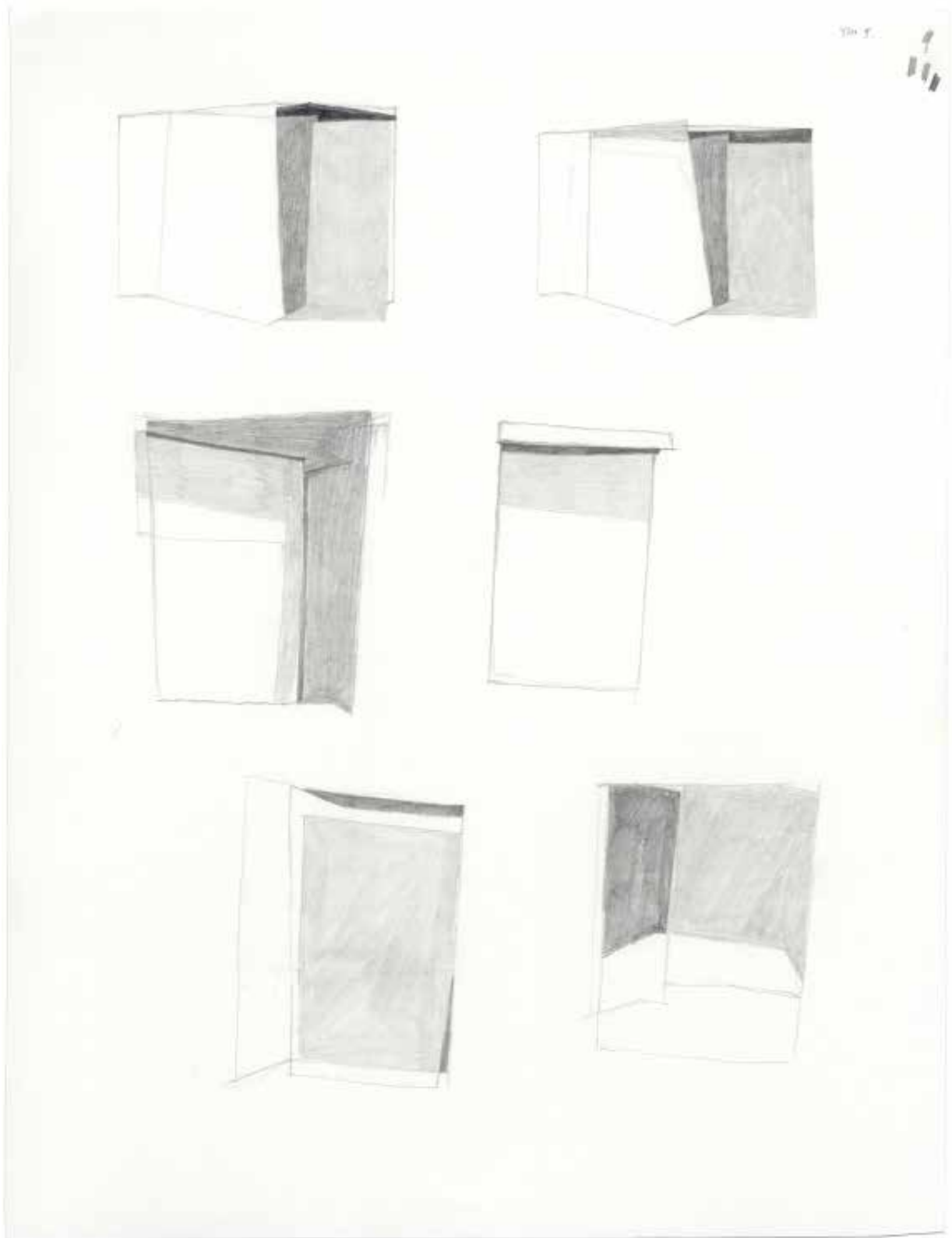
tool; technique; aquatint; embossing; pencil; residency.

### 1. My Printmaking Practice before the Residencies

#### 1.1 Drawing to Print

Up to the series of residencies<sup>1</sup>, my practice has been firmly based in intaglio printmaking for more than ten years. As printmaking techniques such as aquatint are slow, time-consuming, and complex, I have been using drawing to think and develop my ideas. Drawing allowed me (and still allows me) to spontaneously and directly follow the departures and detours of my mind. At the same time, whenever I was drawing, I was thinking of the copper plate and the intaglio printmaking techniques. I used drawing tools that resemble fine drypoint lines and light aquatints so as to think in intaglio printmaking (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Christina Kirchinger, sketch sheet, 2022, pencil, 32 x 24,5 cm / 12.6 x 9.6 inches. Scan: Christina Kirchinger.



## 1.2 The Necessity of Printmaking

To me, several peculiarities of intaglio printmaking are inherently necessary. First, there is the indentation or embossing. To print a plate, a lot of pressure is required, and thereby, the matrix will indent itself into the paper. I have started to acknowledge and make use of this embossing by shaping the plate, cutting, and sawing out the copper plate. By relating and integrating the plate's shape, the indentation becomes a meaningful embossing. As opposed to an unrelated by-product, the shaped matrix reverberates with my process and mirrors that I literally borrow fragments from nature, alienate, and impress them on paper. Second, this object-like and self-contained printed image is not only created by the shaped plate but further enhanced by the reductive and condensing quality of intaglio printmaking in the way I use it. In one single printing process, everything is printed with the same black etching ink. Thereby, the whole

printed image melts together. Third, the peculiarity of aquatints and the way I print them on nearly dry paper results in vividly structured, atmospherically spatial as well as homogeneously flat planes. This comes with a sense of space, with a three-dimensional openness into the depths—and a flatness, a reference to the pictorial plane that reveals the fictionality of that space. Fourth, this is reinforced by the glass-like transparency of the plate tone. When wiping the surface in the printing process, I leave a slight plate tone, a very thin layer of ink all over the plate. In combination with the cut-out form and thin drypoint lines or light gray aquatint planes, it appears to be glass-like and transparent. This transparency is opposed to the dense translucency of the aquatints. It seems that one could see through the plate tone fields, whereas the aquatints obscure and cover, while they appear also atmospherically open.



**Figure 2.** Christina Kirchner, *RDV*, 2023, drypoint, aquatint, and embossing, 41 x 31 cm / 16.1 x 12.2 inches. Photo: Thomas Lomberg.

These four peculiarities of my approach to intaglio printmaking—the shaped embossing, the condensed self-contained printed image, the atmospherically flat aquatint planes, and the glass-like transparency of the plate tone—tie up in *RDV* (Figure 2). They help bring about an ambiguity of closedness and openness, and reinforce the character of a threshold. One protagonist of the threshold can be a curtain as in Rilke's line "[...] rideau, / robe du vide [...]" which translates "[...] curtain, / robe of emptiness [...]" (Rilke, 1990, p. 51). Rilke's curtain dresses the emptiness in reference to a beloved who is absent. A curtain can enclose, seal, or veil space, which involves layering, hiding, and revealing. To me, the curtain is interesting in this physicality and its potential to lock up a

space and yet to unlock imagination. This way, Jullien's guiding conviction that an absence can enhance presence comes into play (Jullien, 2018, p. 24; Jullien, 2019, p. 88). In the way an absence can enhance presence, a locked-up view can set free imagination.

## 2. Excursus: A Hinge Between Printmaking and Drawing

In 2024, before going on the three residencies, I had just finished an artist's book. This book came about after a collaboration with an American poet. As we planned to not only have an exhibition but also a book, I started to research book arts. This is why and how I first came across artist's books in 2023.

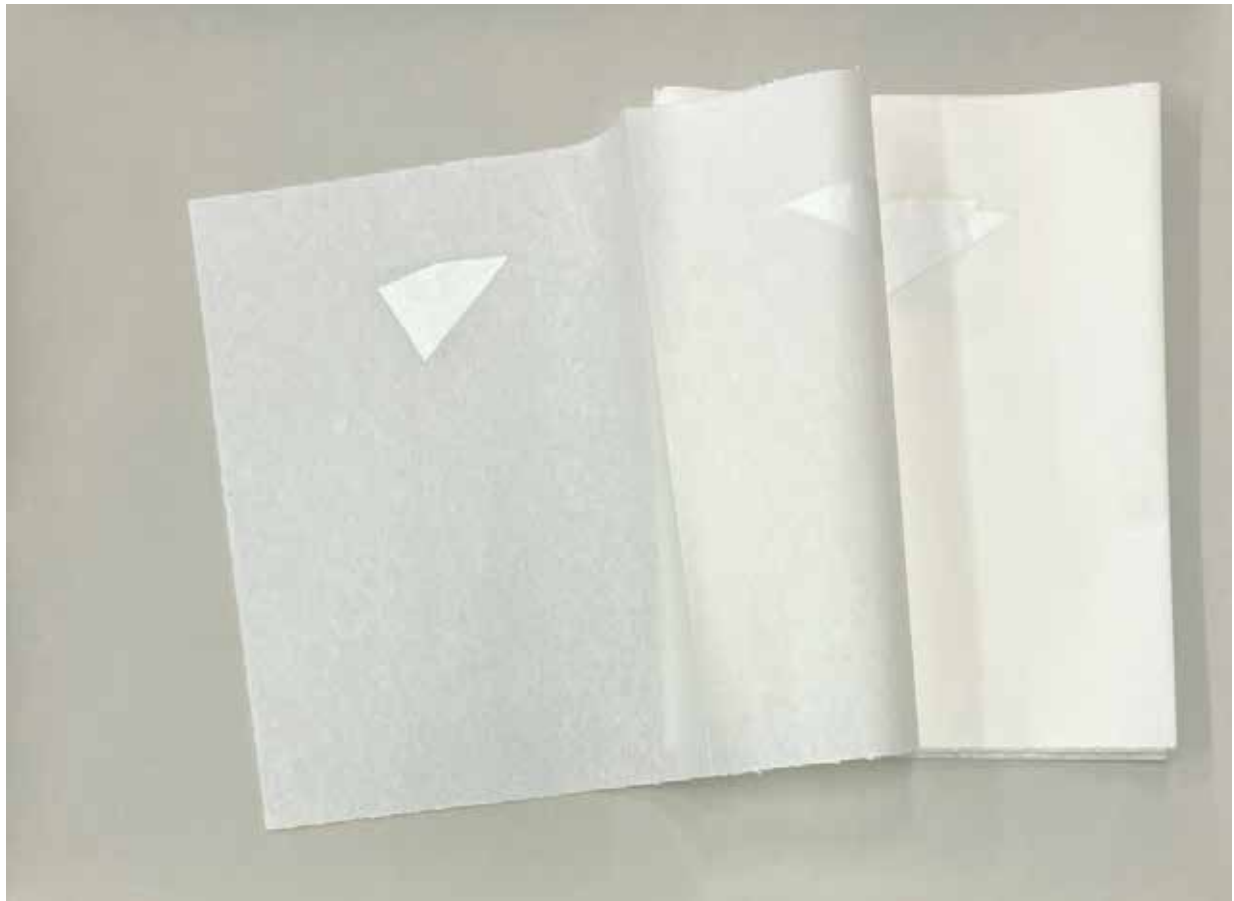


**Figure 3.** Christina Kirchner, *Encounter*, 2024, artist's book, watercolor on Japanese paper, 32 x 24,5 cm / 12.6 x 9.6 inches (closed). Photo: Christina Kirchner.

The pages of *Encounter* (Figure 3) look as if they were printed, but actually, I painted the white forms. To gain an absent quality, I painted them on the back sides so that they shine through to the front of the thin Japanese paper. This can be revealed due to the unbound accordion structure that allows one to unfold the pages and lay open the reverse. One sees the slightly shimmering white (as opposed to the matt white on the front) that seems to be wet, as if it were on the inside, where it actually is. Thus, the white forms are done indirectly and reversed, like prints are being made indirectly and reversed through a matrix. The reversal is “[...] at the heart of printmaking [...]” (Roberts, *Contact*, p. 41). In my book, the reversal itself becomes visible each time a page is turned, and the white form reappears mirrored, as the forms are visible from both sides. Whereas in printmaking, one often only sees the printed result (Roberts, *Contact*, p. 41), in my book, the form and its reversal are both visible. Finally, while still reflecting and working on printmaking, for the first time, I have not worked in printmaking but have used watercolor on Japanese paper.

### 3. Drafts and Drawings Done During my Residencies

#### 3.1 To Draw

Having finished the above mentioned artist's book, I repeatedly brought leftover Japanese paper and watercolor to the upcoming residencies. Also, I brought various pencils and watercolors with me.

During the first of the three residencies, I mostly kept drawing in order to develop ideas for prints. During the second residency, besides drawing in order to print, I also started repeatedly experimenting and drawing on the Japanese paper I had used for the artist's book. Also, I started reflecting on why and how to use drawing in my practice. This continued on during the third residency where I have been mostly drawing.

This “technical” shift towards drawing came parallel with a shift in my interest. Still being fascinated by thresholds, I moved from surrounding, architectural spaces inward-

ly, towards bodily spaces. I came to focus on a bodily counterpart of the curtain: lips. Like curtains, lips pose locations and sources of opening and closing, hiding and revealing.

#### 3.2 The Necessity of Drawing

During the residencies, I discovered several peculiarities that drawing and Japanese paper offer that go hand in hand with my interest in lips, bodily spaces, and thresholds. First, I use pencil drawing's seismographic character. Drawing with a pencil can be fragile, fleeting, and direct. The process of drawing is more openly visible and traceable (Meyer, 2014). Moving a pencil on a sheet of paper visualizes this very movement of the hand and thereby reveals the inner state of the drawing person just as a seismograph traces the trembling earth. This indicates a greater exposedness of the drawer, which reverberates with my focus on drawing intimate bodily spaces. Second, drawing is liberated from the indentation of the matrix or an embossing, and the outline of the printed form that is inherent to the process of intaglio printmaking. Unless the matrix is bigger than the paper, printed lines and forms are outlined by the indentation of the matrix. In contrast, in drawing, single lines can protrude feather-like and flame-like into the sheet's space. This allows fringed or flickering forms that seem to be reaching out, breathing, and moving in the pictorial space of the sheet. Third, drawing with a nearly black 14B pencil or painting with white watercolor from both sides of thin Japanese paper or on layered sheets of that paper, creates actual layers and can refer to an inwardness of bodily sensations and spaces. Fourth, drawing on the back of the sheet causes a blurring. Those drawn lines and forms appear detached. The layers and the blurriness bring forward senses of hiding and revealing.

**Figure 4.** Christina Kirchner, VL, 2025, pencil and watercolor on Japanese paper, 32 x 24,5 cm / 12.6 x 9.6 inches. Photo: Christina Kirchner.





**Figure 5.** Christina Kirchinger, *UB*, 2025, pencil and watercolor on Japanese paper, 32 x 24,5 cm / 12.6 x 9.6 inches. Photo: Christina Kirchinger.

In both drawings, *VL* (Figure 4) and *UB* (Figure 5), I make use of the fragile and seismographic quality of pencil drawing. The direct and sensitive pencil lines reverberate with the intimacy of lips, bodily openings, and movements. In *VL*, I literally work with layering: I have drawn on two sheets of paper, a thin Japanese paper and a thicker drawing paper that is placed underneath. I use these layers to refer to an inwardness. Through layering the sheets, the bottom sheet's drawing becomes blurred and obscured. This creates another doubleness, an openness and a closedness, or closeness. On the one hand, as the bottom layer drawing lacks direct visual access, it

is detached. The innermost is hidden inside or behind. It can only be assumed and can barely be seen directly, just as the intimate is barely unprotectedly exposed.

Drawing—as compared to intaglio printmaking—also liberates my work from the contour of the plate and its indentation. This goes hand in hand with the formlessness of a flame—it is reaching upwards, and its fine lines intertwine with and search the white space of the paper.

In *UB*, I have drawn from both sides, front and back, of one sheet of Japanese paper. This heightens the ideas

of touching, enlacing, and embracing. Layers are melting together, and it seems that some forms are shifting along each other or pulling off themselves only to come even closer to each other. The layers here again reverberate with an inwardness, lying behind and coming forward, hidden and yet visible.

### 3.3 Consideration of the Circumstances

Looking back, I reflected on why the constraint of not having access to a print shop, printmaking tools, and equipment for several long stretches of time has been productive for my practice. I see several reasons. First, I have always been drawing to develop drafts for prints. Drawing was not new to me. Also, drawing and intaglio printmaking in the way I use them are closely related. Second, as printmaking is a complex process that involves a lot of tools and equipment, I had planned to only bring drawing materials such as different pencils, drawing tools, watercolor, and different kinds of paper to the residencies. During each of the residencies, I could explore drawing tools and paper. At the same time, there was no distraction by printmaking or by finishing up work in printmaking. Third, I did not plan to do so or force anything. It happened intuitively within my openness and desire to explore and further expand my practice. I have long had a desire to draw, but so far had not found any reason to do so. Mostly, I was occupied with justifying why and how I was using intaglio printmaking techniques and further exploring their potential. Before the residencies, I had done experiments and taken notes while analyzing drawing tools' and papers' potential for new work, and continued and intensified during the residencies. Fourth, and most importantly, my fascination for bodily spaces and my explorations in drawing added up to each other. They have mutually reinforced and ultimately enabled one another.

### 4. From Printmaking to Drawing

To conclude, the absence of printmaking equipment during several residencies and for months has provided an impulse to my work. I had to find a way to adapt and reconsider my practice linked to the tools I had access to. Thereby, it has shaped, opened, and diversified my

practice. It has led me to explore drawing and Japanese paper, intertwining it with my fascination for bodily spaces and thereby further developing and expanding my practice. To me, this proves exemplarily that a constraint in terms of inaccessible tools or technical equipment does not necessarily have to pose an obstacle but can rather turn into a fertile ground for exploring new terrains—parallel to the way Rilke suggested “[...] to love the questions themselves like locked rooms for which you lack the key [...]” (Rilke, 2018, p. 36). Like a locked-up view can set free imagination, a constraint can spark new impulses.

### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> I have spent November 2024 at the *Virginia Center for the Creative Arts* in the U.S., April to May 2025 at *Chalet Lecoq* in Clermont-Ferrand, France, and September to October at *GEDOK Schleswig-Holstein* in Northern Germany. This makes five residency months within twelve months. During the few months between the residencies, at home, I continued working on the residency project and did not return to printmaking, as it would have taken time to readapt and there was not much time until I was to leave again.

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### Use of Large Language Models (LLMs)

I did not use any LLMs in any of the processes involved in writing this essay.