

Workshops

Head, heart and hands

Leigh Clarke takes us on a tour of the workshops, a creative hub of the RA Schools, where tutors facilitate thinking through making – and much more



It is rare for an artist to have an idea that can be easily translated into an artwork. Making art requires a complex exchange between ideas, materials and processes, and the RA Schools workshops are an environment that fosters what psychologist Steven C Hayes, writing in 2009, called a ‘Head, Heart, Hands’ approach. This is, of course, not new. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, educational reformer Johann Pestalozzi encouraged a holistic approach to learning, believing pupils should learn psychologically, emotionally and physically, or ‘learning by head, heart and hands’. More recently, social anthropologist Tim Ingold’s discussion of ‘thinking through making’ has been influential, an idea that extends into ‘thinking with, from and through beings and things, not just about them’.

At the Royal Academy Schools, the ‘3H’ process happens organically across the workshop areas. The proximity of each space allows for a cross-pollination of processes and ideas, creating conversations between visual languages. Staff listen to students and talk through their ideas, in order to respond to the often multi-faceted demands of works that require a range of making processes to bring them to life.

The workshop tutors are practising artists and researchers (two are currently working on their own PhDs), who help nurture students’ ambitions via a wide range of traditional methods and new technologies. Bespoke workshops – Sculpture, Ceramics, Wood, Printmaking, Metal, Digital Print, Photography, Digital and Time-Based – run along one side of the Lovelace Courtyard, the Schools’ outdoor space. The teaching team embrace the obscure, and, like head chefs in a kitchen, encourage brave and original recipes for a discerning palate. Experimentation is key to unlocking the potential of an artwork, and the workshops are places where risk, failure and chance are welcomed.

The Digital Print Tutor is Madalina Zaharia, an artist-filmmaker and recent prize winner at the San Francisco Short Film Festival. ‘Being experimental in the field of digital printing has a lot to do with gently coaxing the machine into working outside its comfort zone, which often involves carrying out activities that might exceed the rigid



Top: Emmanuel Awuni and Motunrayo Akinola preparing their 2023 graduate exhibition in the Sculpture Workshop. Photographs of the workshops by Cat Garcia

Above: second-year student Rosa Klerkx working on the screenprinting press

This page, from top: Print Tutor Katherine Van Uytrecht preparing the Printmaking Workshop; Rebecca K. Halliwell Sutton metal working in preparation for her 2022 graduate exhibition; third-year student James St Findlay generating work in the Digital Print Workshop

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: working with metal; Print Tutor Leigh Clarke exposing a silkscreen with Louis Morlae ahead of his 2023 final-year show; Oliver Tirr , a 2023 graduate, and second-year student Robert O'Leary in the Sculpture Workshop; welding work; Morlae preparing digital work for the 3-D Printer

parameters imposed by its manufacturers,' Zaharia explains. 'It is also about finding and developing new relationships with other disciplines, in order to establish its role in unexpected areas such as performance or sculpture, and even painting.'

The journey of an artwork varies, and some students focus solely on generating work in one workshop, while others may travel through a variety of processes to achieve their aims. Second-year student Gusty Ferro (page 58) looks for potential in all the workshop areas, in a quest to open new enquiries in their practice. 'The workshops allow me to experiment with many techniques in printmaking, sculpture and moving images,' says Ferro. 'It's an environment that encourages risk-taking, pushing and expanding my practice beyond predictable outcomes.' Encountering their work is a multi-disciplinary experience, as the audience is confronted with unusual contrasts of materials and sensory interactions. Their display last year in the Schools' Weston Studio, 'Turning Into', brought together graphic, sonic and three-dimensional works, including a looping sculpture made from steel, reinforced concrete, cardboard, polymer modified gypsum, pigments, cobblestones and cable ties.

Third-year student Lizzie Munn has worked meticulously with the etching press, creating her own methodology for generating print-based installations through sophisticated colour fields (page 61). Her success in finding accurate colour harmonies is the result of intensive learning about mixing inks, sourcing papers and understanding the pressure gauge of the printing press. 'Discovering the print workshop completely changed my practice,' Munn says. 'It opened up so many possibilities and offered the freedom and support to try new processes for the first time. The conversations within the workshop facilities, with both tutors and fellow students, have definitely accelerated the development of my work, introducing me to lots of ideas and ways of thinking that I wouldn't encounter in my studio.'

The Schools nurtures a culture of questioning through art, where the answers are always in the making.

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