Jackson's

THE BIG ETCHING GROUND

A step by step guide to using BIG Etching Ground

1. Bevel the edge of the plate, not only for conventional reasons but also to preserve your roller.

2. Degrease the plate (using vinegar and a little whiting as this is a healthier option) making sure all deposits of whiting are removed from both sides of the plate when drying it. (Don't dry with a hair dryer as some water systems have quite a lot of chlorine, which can be left on the surface of the plate, use newsprint or equivalent)

3. The secret to a successful application of the BIG ground is to roll the plate up evenly and not too heavily. Squeeze a small amount of the ground onto a glass pallet. Spread it out with a pallet knife and roll it up (a good quality roller helps). Pass the loaded roller over the plate in a fairly vigorous fashion. At first the plate will take on a sort of eggshell appearance. Occasionally spin the roller to give an even coverage of ground.*

4. At this stage you can treat the ground in the same way as you would a soft ground.** If however you wish to create a hard ground you must now bake the plate. (The ideal method is to do this in an oven, but a hot plate will do. It is also possible to use a cardboard box with a round hole cut out of the top to which a hairdryer can be inserted, blowing hot air onto the plate. This latter process is a simple one but can take a little longer to bake the plate. The timing for baking will be dependent on the size of your box and the strength of the hairdryer.)With each of these methods it is important to keep the dust levels low. It is equally important that the temperature and the length of baking time are correct relative to each other, as although the ground would perform well at the initial stages, problems may arise when removing the ground if the temperature has been set too high for too long. As a benchmark, a temperature of 135C for 6mins works well, but of course you can increase the temperature and reduce the time slightly if you wish. Just be aware that too high a temperature will burn the ground. This will be indicated when smoke rises from the plate and the colour of the ground changes. To assess whether the plate is dry or not, first let the plate cool down, as while the plate is still hot the ground remains tacky.

5. You should now have a perfect working ground. Unlike traditional grounds BIG will retain its quality indefinitely and will not dry out. It is also possible to draw preliminary sketches on the surface of the ground using a soft pencil; I personally use a litho pencil No.1. If you accidentally scratch the plate you can use a permanent marker pen to cover the marks, or alternatively, apply BIG stopout. It is important to allow the ground to cure for at least half an hour after cooling before you bite the plate.

6. To remove the ground, simply give it a quick polish with Brasso or you could use a non toxic stripper, I would recommend Home Strip as it is very safe and will not harm the environment.

Remember, if removing the ground proves difficult you have probably baked the plate for too long. The ground can also be removed with any washing powder and hot water if the plate was backed several days earlier.

*If at stage three you are covering an earlier etched plate, roll the plate up with a little more ground than you would for a bare unetched plate. Then with your finger work the ground down into the etched lines. When you are happy that this has been achieved you can then strip back some of the ground with a dry roller.

**If you want to use BIG as a soft ground to create impressions of leaves, feathers etc., tape a sheet of screen printing mesh larger than your plate to the bed of your press. After coating the plate with wet ground register the plate under the mesh and run it through the press (two etching blankets are usually sufficient). A small amount of ground will be removed onto the mesh. Re-apply the ground to the plate, place items on top and run through the press making sure you have placed the plate in the same position with the mesh dropped on top. Then, by baking the plate you can combine soft and hard ground techniques, if you wish, on the same ground.