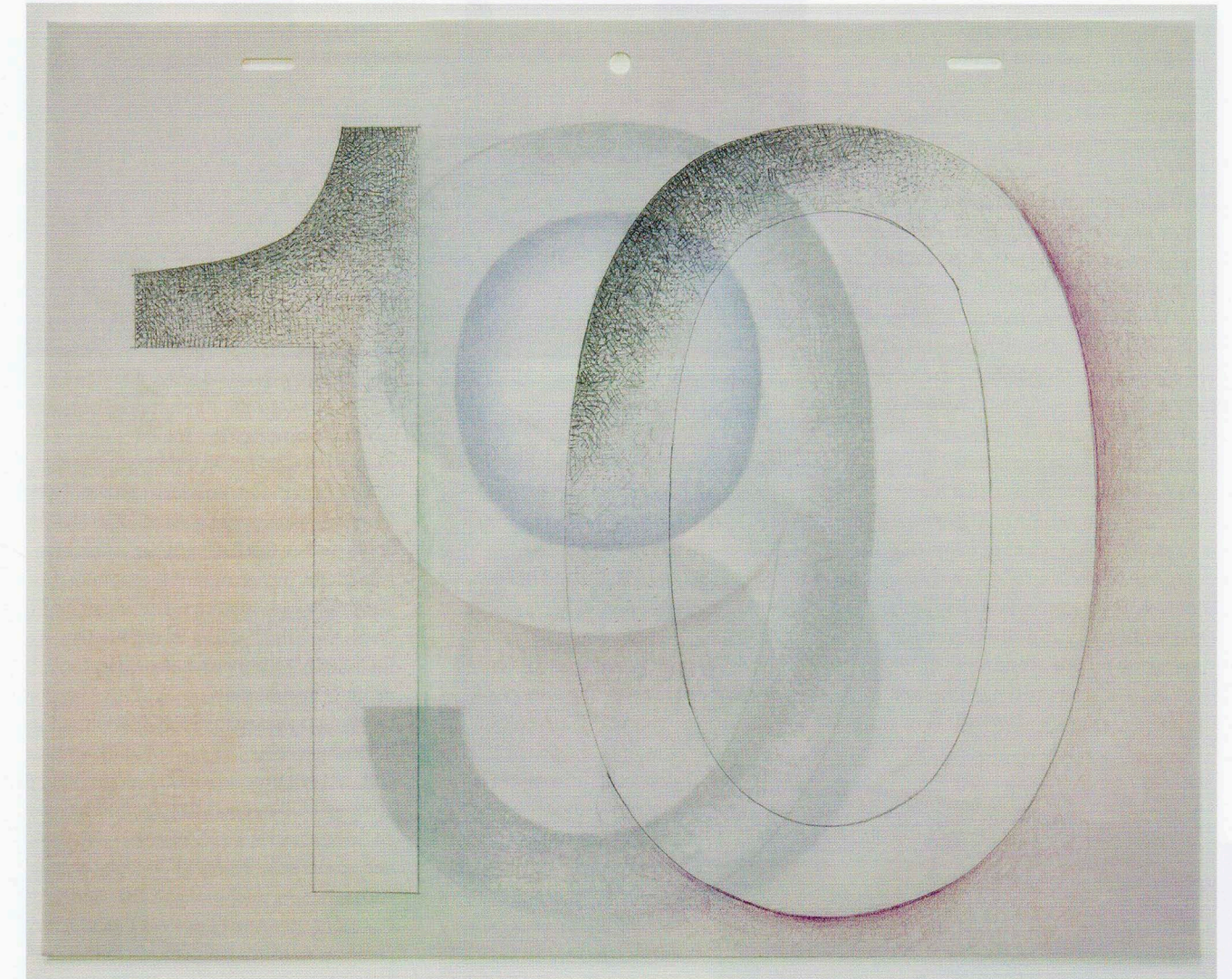




Untitled (I Am Taking Up Valuable Space) (1985) Screenprint on ruled and punched paper, 297 x 210 mm. Photo: Matthew Booth

**Below** *lapse* (2020) Cycle of nine drawings in nine iterations, graphite and coloured pencil on animation paper, each: 267 x 328 mm. Photo: Matthew Booth and Eleanor Rogers



## Valuable Space

For artist **Nicole Polonsky**, print allows her to create multiple interrelated and self-referential series that exactly align form and content, writes **Tessa Peters**

**A**rriving at Nicole Polonsky's east London studio I am greeted by a screenprint, *Untitled (I Am Taking Up Valuable Space)* (1985), that closely resembles a sheet of handwritten lines, of the kind that used to be given to schoolchildren as a punishment. It was made during Polonsky's first year at the Royal College of Art and paraphrases the head of department at the time, who complained she was spending too much energy exploring non-print media and

not making enough prints to justify her place on the MA Printmaking course. Her subversive riposte was to make a very large number of copies of this screenprint, flyposting them across the department. The following year the work was selected for *New Contemporaries*, taking up even more valuable space at various venues during the exhibition tour.

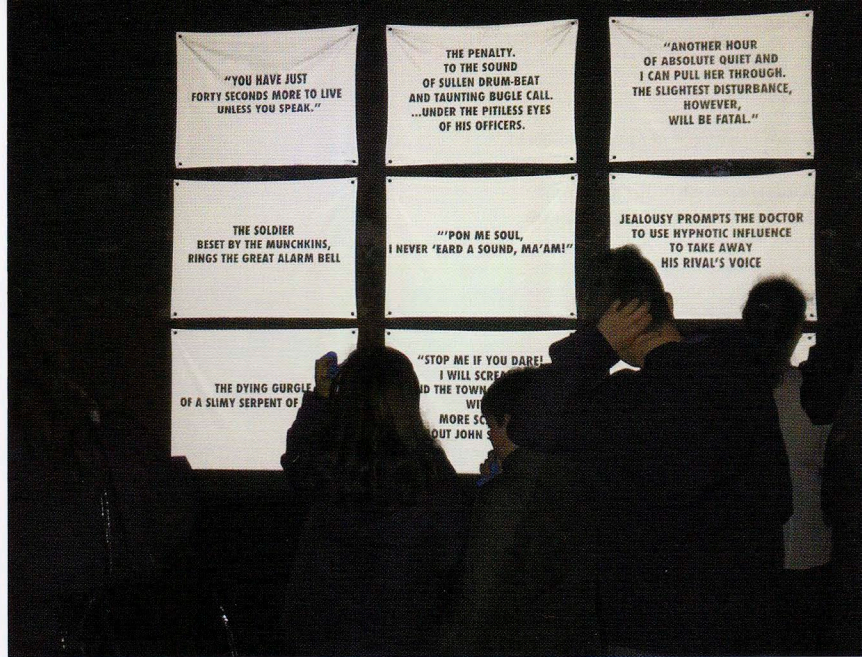
Considering Polonsky's body of work, I am struck by its spare visual qualities and lack of expressive flourishes, of which the

screenprinted lines are but one example. She uses material that is seemingly familiar and reworks it in succinct and surprising ways, employing a rigorous process of distillation, so that every element serves to amplify the concept. A powerful expression of this is found in screenprints from 1993 that reproduce mottos from Love Heart sweets: 'Forever', 'True Love', 'Heart's Desire'. In place of ink, the screenprints incorporate lipstick – not known for its lasting quality, and thereby serving to cast doubt on the



authority of the words themselves. Times New Roman, chosen for its ubiquity as a default typeface, brings a sense of humdrum, lived experience to these expressions of romantic love.

For Polonsky, print becomes a subject as well as a chosen process. In her *Stationary* series (2012) she depicts overlooked and undervalued paper products – indeed, her work is often an examination of subjects that are thought to be marginal, banal, or otherwise taken for granted. Here raffle tickets, an index card, an unassuming sheet of lined paper are reiterated using etching, chine collé and debossing. There's a knowing contrariness in this inversion, using time-consuming methods to arrive at limited-edition prints of items that are cheaply produced and widely available. *Stationary* is a paean to everyday design and functionality as well as an elegiac rumination on fine art printmaking. The punning title refers to the stillness of the images, as much as to their content.



Installation view at Northern Print, Newcastle: *Lighting Up Time* (2019) Dimensions variable.  
Photo: Bridget Fleetwood

The series includes various additions: perforations, hole reinforcement and string, a coloured pencil line. She likens this approach to synthetic cubism, oscillating between object and image, the real and the represented.

An aspect of print that attracts Polonsky is its suitability for creating a series of related images. This allows her to explore concepts and visual possibilities in depth; she rarely creates a single all-encompassing expression of an idea. For the artist, *Y not I* (2017) is, to date, her most expansive exploration of this way of working. The suite of 20 screenprints meticulously rearticulates typed and handwritten scripts left behind by her younger brother, Toby, who died at the age of 20. The work required sourcing a wide variety of archival papers, so that

each print would echo the look and feel of Toby's poems and song lyrics as they were found in exercise books or on loose sheets of paper. The final print in the collection is rendered in photoluminescent ink. Viewers bring the work to life when they direct torchlight at its surface, briefly illuminating the words before they dwindle into darkness once more. The cross-disciplinary instincts that caused Polonsky trouble as a student have endured in a productive way: *Y not I* is accompanied by specially commissioned audio by composer A.C. Lovett – visuals and acoustics in resonant dialogue with each other. As references for this work Polonsky cites Anne Carson's *Nox*, a plangent collection of poems relating to Carson's late brother, as well as *In Our Time*, R.B. Kitaj's screenprints of book jackets from his private library. *Y not I* was launched at a temporary installation in the Chapel of the House of St Barnabas, London. This context created an interplay between two contrasting types of memorial: the transient and fragile screenprints and the fixity of the chapel's commemorative wall plaques.

### Collaborating partners

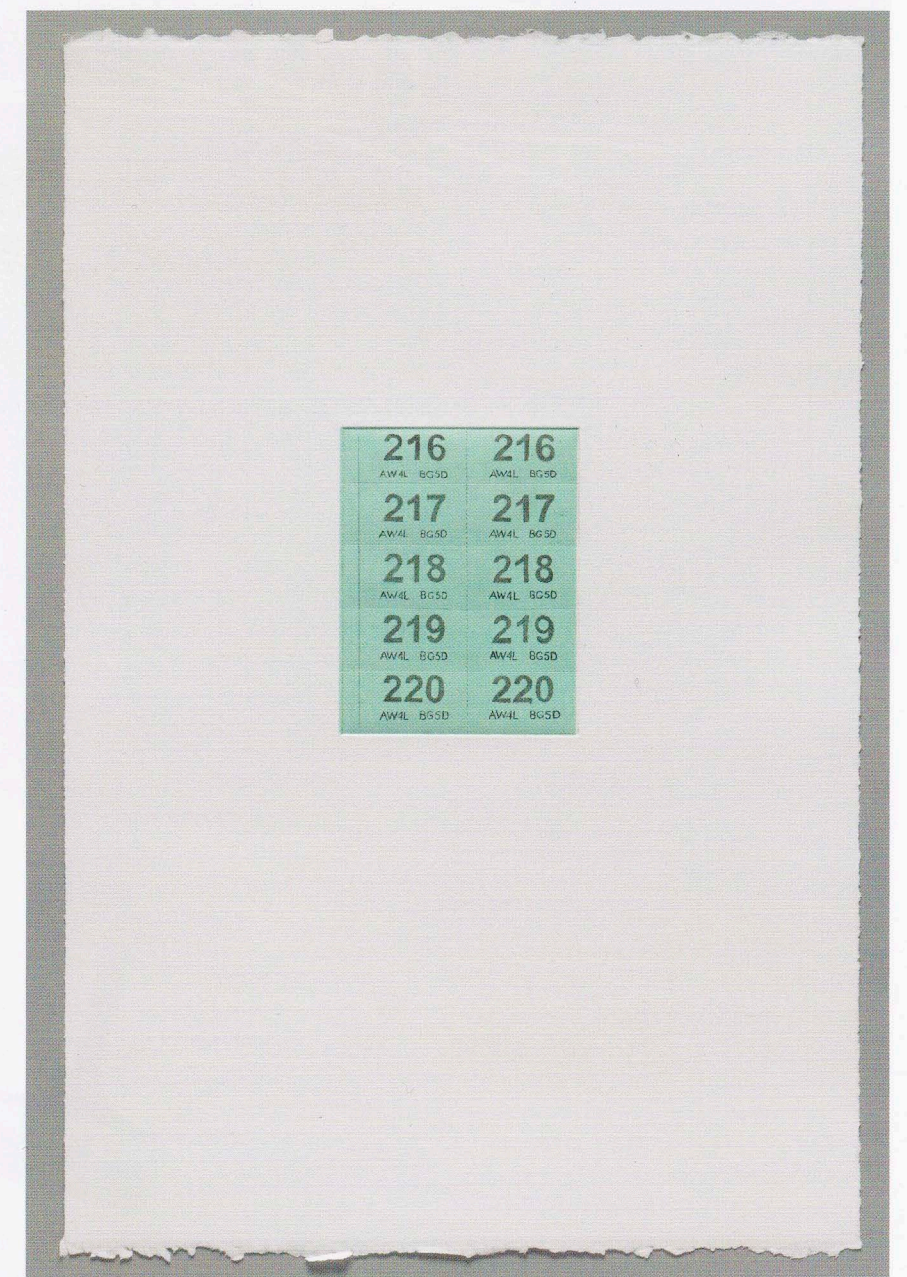
Polonsky's intersectional practice sees printmaking in combination with unique pieces, multiples, bookworks, film, audio and performance. Her interest in collaborating with other creative partners and inviting viewer participation is powerfully demonstrated by *Lighting Up*

**Left** *Y not I* (2017) 20 screenprints with mixed media on archival papers in leather case lined with velvet and memory foam, 263 x 340 x 65 mm.  
Photo: Matthew Booth



*Time* (2019), a work in two parts inspired by the silent film era and its Deaf actors. Commissioned for NewcastleGateshead's *The Late Shows* and supported by Arts Council England funding, it comprises screenprinted banners and a 60-second looped video. The former features 'intertitles' – or captions – from silent films, printed onto reflective fabric. The textile ink acts as a block; when viewed under artificial light at night, the letterforms appear silhouetted against the luminous white banners – a cinematic effect in keeping with the subject. Meanwhile, Polonsky's video momentarily flashes names of Deaf actors of the silent era across the screen – an allusion to careers that flourished and were then eclipsed by the arrival of the 'talkies', as well as a metaphor for the way analogue film has been superseded by digital video. *Lighting Up Time* is teamed with unique sound compositions, again by Lovett, whose experience playing live piano accompaniments at silent film screenings was the impetus for the entire venture. Further forays into film-as-subject can be found in Polonsky's movie, *re:lapse*, and a related cycle of drawings, *lapse* (2020). In them, 'synchronising leaders' – or numbered countdowns used to cue celluloid stock – become the subject instead of the preamble to it. The artist's drawings in graphite and coloured pencil were animated and then exhibited at MOCA London's online gallery – another intersectional piece spanning polarities of analogue and digital.

Reflecting on this artist's practice, I have an enduring impression of her ability to winkle out interstitial subjects and ones hiding in plain sight. The materials she uses contribute to the construction of meaning quite as much as what is depicted. The pieces that emerge are visually satisfying and conceptually rich, and frequently humorous too. An early work, *Untitled (I Must Be More Spontaneous)* (1999), reproduces a quip Polonsky made to a friend, shortly after which she grasped the marvellous absurdity of the notion of 'premeditated spontaneity'. The text is hand engraved on a copper plate in small serifed caps, whose controlled appearance is the very antithesis of spontaneity. The verso bears



*Stationary I* (2012) Etching, aquatint, chine collé and perforations on Moulin du Gué, 575 x 380 mm.  
Photo: Prudence Cumming

machine-engraved numerals '29/11/1997 – 05/05/1999' that record the period covering the inception of this unique work to its completion, further emphasising both its inherent lack of spontaneity and its characteristic absence in her practice.

The more I think about them, the more resonant Nicole Polonsky's works become. Through her semiotic play involving subtle shifts of syntax, she deftly rearticulates the apparent meanings of everyday items and phrases, imbuing them with numerous possible readings,

which also change depending on the context in which they are encountered. With the artist currently embarking on an innovative project involving a creative partnership with textile specialists at Zenzie Tinker Conservation, I keenly anticipate a further visually engaging and thought-provoking body of work. This will undoubtedly deserve the right to be taking up valuable space in a public gallery soon.

[www.nicolepolonsky.com](http://www.nicolepolonsky.com)  
[www.instagram.com/nicolepolonskyartist](https://www.instagram.com/nicolepolonskyartist)