

Background/Context

Disperse dyes were developed in the 1920s to colour synthetic materials, some results can also be achieved onto natural fibres but the colour is always more subtle. Unlike other dyes, disperse dyes do not dissolve in water but the dye droplets are suspended in the solution and then penetrate the fibres when heated. When synthetic fabrics cool they trap the particles of dye within them and the colour is instantly fixed.

The dyes can be painted onto paper and heat pressed onto fabrics to create colour and pattern. Pre-coated heat transfer papers are also available to purchase and use in the same way.

Mixing and Applying Disperse Dyes

To make a disperse dye solution you'll need to weigh out 15g of disperse dye and mix this with 250ml of cold water. Take care when mixing and ensure you are wearing an apron, gloves and face mask. Thoroughly mix the solution with a spoon. Once mixed the dyes have a long shelf life of up to 2 years. If the dye settles on the bottom just give it a good stir to reuse.

Use paint brushes and sponges to apply the dye to thin paper (newsprint paper works well) and leave the papers to dry thoroughly.

Using the Heat Presses

Set the heat press to 180°C and set the time to 40-60 seconds.

Once the painted papers are completely dry you can then cut shapes out and position them face down onto your fabric. It is important to remember that your imagery will need to be mirrored so that it isn't back to front when printed.

Make a 'newsprint sandwich' with a sheet of paper on the top and the bottom of your artwork and carefully slide it under the heat press, pulling down the lever.

Never leave the heat press unattended when in use.

You can add multiple layers of colours and patterns to the fabric and it can go through the heat press multiple times.

Depth of colour can vary and a wide selection of colours can be achieved by experimenting with temperature, time, pressure and the strength of the dye solution. Various different effects can be achieved using resists such as stencils or thin found objects such as threads, lace, feather etc.

Fixing

When synthetic fabrics cool after heat pressing the colour is instantly fixed to the cloth and is washable. As disperse dyes are not designed to dye natural fibres they achieve more subtle results and don't fix as well to natural materials when washed.

Further Reading

- Wendy Edmonds is a textile artist who uses the heat transfer process in her work <http://www.wendyedmondstextiles.co.uk/>
- Heat Transfer Techniques by Dawn Dupree, 2011 is a paperback book which explores a wide variety of heat transfer methods and is a good source of inspiration

Useful Resources

- George Weil online supplies a range of colours of disperse dyes
<https://www.georgeweil.com/materials/dyes>
- Penny Marriott is a Leeds based supplier of heat transfer pre-coated papers. See separate colour sheet for details

Suggested Courses for Further Development

Leeds Print Workshop runs a 5 week Introduction to Textile Printing course which covers the basics of screen printing and heat transfer printing onto fabrics and will allow further exploration and combinations of techniques.

You might also be interested in our 2 day Textile Screen Printing course which explores screen printing onto natural fabrics.

Our annual membership will also allow access to use our facilities and heat presses should you wish to explore the process in more depth.