

80WSE Exhibition: PAPERTAILS, curated by Valerie Hammond and Kiki Smith

Paper, while ubiquitous, is privy to the secrets of the day—a flirtatious note passed between students, a crumpled list of long to-dos, thoughts jotted on the back of an envelope. In the artistic realm, the comparative fragility and implied immediacy of paper offer viewers a sense of intimacy, enhanced by its association with the ephemeral. Compositional sketches made prior to paintings, intricate models folded and reconfigured before construction, diagrams detailed for final designs—paper is the matrix upon which ideas are inscribed, witness to the source of inspiration. Yet the fleeting nature of these examples belies more autonomous paper-based endeavors—works which convey the intimacy implicit in a sketch, but endure beyond the temporary or short-lived. Paper’s universality allows for democratic accessibility, but artists’ contributions – jewel-like watercolor, Rorschach blotches of India ink, silvery, sinewy pencil – transform it to the supernatural and sublime.

Curated by the artists Valerie Hammond and Kiki Smith, whose work on paper, and with paper, is integral to their process, this exhibition offers diverse examples of paper-based work, from enigmatic drawings to digitally manipulated prints to collages which veer alarmingly towards the sculptural. In addition to the curators, the artists included – Antony, Michael Byron, Francesco Clemente, Julia Fish, Carl Fudge, Chie Fueki, Beka Goedde, Kathleen Graves, Hilary Harnischfeger, Stephen Mueller, Rachel Ostrow and Zachary Wollard – employ paper in various ways: as a base for other materials (painting/drawing), as a material intrinsic to specific mediums (printmaking/photography), as a medium in itself (collage). Sensitivity to the unique properties of paper reveals certain paradoxes: seemingly fragile, its fibers prove strong; two-dimensional in origin, it can be transformed into a sculptural three dimensions.

Traditionally considered a stepping stone to the final destination of painting or sculpture, works on paper have been confined to a less critical, less political realm, and are often relegated to less-prominent display. However, over the last few decades, these long-standing presumptions have been under slow and deliberate revision. Artists have embraced paper and paper-driven mediums as a primary mode of expression. Paper, as a determining factor in these works, brings the concept of materiality into focus. The physical properties of artists’ materials determine their approach to art-making and influence their working process. Further, the “physical” construction of a work is paralleled by “conceptual” construction—the fabrication of an image begins with the formation of an idea, much as a flower can be traced to an airborne seed. This exhibition emphasizes both the physical and conceptual—results pre-formed in the mind or guided by an unpredictable fusion of chance and control.

The compulsion to define “works on paper” is ultimately futile. Anarchic and energetic, this show, in its way, defines it—or “un“-defines it, as the case may be. Loosely gathered, the various examples brought together here not only reflect a wide range of possibilities, they revolt against the confines of any given term, threading together disparate strains of art historical terminology (figurative art, abstract art, conceptual art, minimal art). Attributes for which works on paper have been celebrated – openness, purity, proximity to artistic intention, and association with thought, memory, and dreams – are on ample display, each artist exposing an individualistic exploration fostered by personal narrative. The paper “tails” of the show’s title is, obviously, a homonym for “tales,” citing the stories that run through artistic practice, from the old-masters to performance art. But the literal “tails” offers an alternate understanding—as if artistic practice were an appendage, entwined and inseparable from the artist, like the trailing illumination of a firework.

PAINTING AND DRAWING

The paintings and drawings in this show offer a wide range of associations. Close observation and its ultimately transitory nature influence many of the works, even, paradoxically, the more abstract compositions, where variations of color echo the ever-changing light and hues of the natural world. Hallucinogenic forms convey close observation of an internal landscape as well, receptive to the reflections of an inner eye. Figurative representation, where evident, is modeled more by the psyche than reality, conjuring images of the fanciful and fantastic.

Searching for figuration is inevitable in Rachel Ostrow's abstract dreamscapes, as when one tries to decipher images in clouds, but her work is ultimately grounded in the materiality of paint and an intuitive working process. Using thick, board-like paper, she builds up and wipes away layers of vivid color, creating forms that simultaneously emerge and retreat. Inspired by the unpredictability of Surrealist automatism, the smooth luminosity of old master painting, and the eccentricity of contemporary abstract painting, Ostrow's work straddles a space between abstraction and representation, where daydreaming and focus collide. *Guardian*, 2011 confirms her success in momentarily giving form to the elusiveness and shapelessness of thought and experience.

Stephen Mueller's lush watercolors seem to emerge from lucid dreams—a distinctive palette highlights and diffuses the enigmatic, orb-like symbols that reside in his otherworldly landscapes. Mueller is interested in the interstices between language and symbol, mythology and spirituality. Color – its practical theory and synaesthetic associations – is paramount, and the time of day informs his generous use of light. Mueller's watercolors radiate from the page. His mastery of the medium provides a subtle, hypnotic oscillation between figure and ground—between softly blurred seepages of liquid color and the elegant, hard-edged saturation of floating form. *Untitled (Charleston. I. 2010)*, 2010, is a meeting of two delineated shapes, striped with rays of pink and gold, whispering to each other above a green horizon.

Julia Fish minimizes her imagery to abstract form, yet evidence of its source remains. Precisely rendered from the interior spaces of her Chicago home and studio, Fish's work confronts ideas of perception and identity, site and self, domesticity and displacement. Focusing on transitions between rooms – the threshold, a stairway – Fish reduces the physical layout of her home to diagram-like compositions, the patterns and outlines of tiles and floorboards discernible but abbreviated. Materials directly impact her approach. Faint lines in her chosen paper provide a horizontal map for carefully woven brushstrokes of inky yellow, green, and blue. Originating with a series of color-based paintings titled *Threshold*, Fish's *Trace* drawings allude to transformation, both in the physical navigation of space and its conceptual resituating.

Beka Goedde's pencil drawings contemplate the mechanics of the mind in relationship to physical science. She often works from memory in her delicate renderings of folding chairs, approaching them, in the mind's eye, from different angles. Sometimes arranged in a circle, as if gathered for a meeting, the chairs' perspectives are skewed in Goedde's recollection (see *14 folding chairs around*, 2011, proving the instability of visual memory. Her attempts at recording movement (or the lack thereof) reveal the gap between our mental replay and the physical world in which bodies move. Goedde's use of paper asserts the transient, evolving nature of her subject—evocative of the thought process itself, folding chairs turn on the page as thoughts are turned over in the mind.

Francesco Clemente's fragmented narratives re-imagine personal and cultural experience in a new symbolic context. In *Self-Portrait as Mary Magdalene*, 2011, Clemente depicts himself as

the famous female disciple, with flowing red hair and ecstatic gaze, haloed by white light. He/ she is reflected in the mirror of a vanity, its surface strewn with the sex-driven contents of a call girl's purse – fur-clad handcuffs, a lost stiletto, a rolled \$100 bill – as well as an unidentified pair of naked feet. Clemente's color pencil lines soften his subject, referencing the classical imagery which inspired it, drapery and pathos intact. Italian identity is inherent to his work, evident in fresco-like colors and subjects steeped in the mystery and drama of an ancient civilization. Referencing the duality of his own artistic identity, Clemente taps the social constructs – religious, cultural and political – which inform it.

PRINTMAKING AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Prints and photographs have long been identified as “works on paper,” but function in a zone determined by the mediums which govern them—specific tools and training are needed for their execution. Copper plates or photographic film (now often digital) function as mediators between impulse and result, requiring pause between the act of image-making and its realization. Constructed through technological, collaborative, or machine-assisted means, and endowed with the ability to multiply, prints and photographs have intrinsic magic, witnessed when the image is revealed for the first time.

In his recent work, Carl Fudge, known for his re-appropriation and transformation of art-historical imagery, re-works British modernist (and Vorticist) Edward Wadsworth's (1889-1949) graphic woodcuts; Wadsworth celebrated the industrial and machine-age with imagery of dry-docks and specially camouflaged “dazzle” ships. Almost a century later, Fudge's silkscreen print *Dazzled Ship*, 2009, digitally re-orientates and further abstracts Wadsworth's geometry, in turn referencing a new technological era. In using hand printing (woodcut, silkscreen) and papermaking processes (as in the paper pulp piece *Platelayers Shed*, 2010) to produce his imagery, Fudge belies the computer used in its initial layout, acknowledging tension between craft and the digital.

Kathleen Graves's manipulated photographs depict a lush, flower-filled garden inhabited by infiltrating cyborgian “nanobots”—invented, futuristic life forms representing advanced technology and drawing parallels to mysterious, ever-evolving bacterial microcosms in nature. In her *Garden Bots* images, Graves's “nanobots” field an encroaching dystopia of climate change, pollution and disease—her self-contained garden a metaphor for an increasingly frail earth. Her prints are reminiscent of late 19th century “spirit photography,” in which ghosts were captured by the supposed truth of the camera's lens—precedence for the use of “new technology” to reveal the imperceptible. Graves's embrace of the digital process is predictive of photography's future and the mediating presence of the computer in much of our communication.

Often beginning with found imagery, Michael Byron manipulates and re-contextualizes its content, contrasting form, style and subject matter to question constructs of pictorial identity, perception, and the creative process. Concerned with the nature of objects (especially the contemplative or theatrical), he provokes transformation through the destabilization of original intent. His print *Scenes from the 34th City (B)*, 1996, from a series of three referencing St. Louis, Missouri, juxtaposes a subtly-lit photograph of a classical female bust-cum-candle with primitively drawn heads, seemingly culled from images of tribal masks and scientific illustration. An unusual combination of silkscreen, photo lithography and etching, Byron's print not only overlays disparate images but also different printmaking processes, further supporting his artistic methodology.

COLLAGE

Collage exploits fragmentation. It calls attention to physical and artistic construction, but should also be thought of in conceptual terms. Many, if not most, of the artists in this exhibition layer multiple images, patterns, ideas or materials. Collage is arguably a state of mind, inescapable in an age when information is available in several dimensions, fragments pasted together and dispersed through technological means. The works here confirm the medium as both process and “mental state,” the development of imagery a combination of influences and disparate parts.

Hilary Harnischfeger's dense, sculpture-like assemblages of dyed and carved paper resemble the strata of geological formations or the topographical maps of mythical islands. They are informed by Asian ceramics, early American abstraction and her experiences hiking through the natural landscape of the American West. Harnischfeger's attentive and unusual use of material is the impetus for a time-consuming process in which paper is dyed (in differing states of saturation), stacked, cut and embellished. In recent works, such as *Untitled*, 2011, she mixes porcelain, pigment and plaster to create bulbous and encrusted three-dimensional forms. Essentially abstract, her work's complex physical layers echo her multi-layered references, precariously balancing the intentional and the unplanned.

Language – its possibilities, inconsistencies, and fragmentation – is the focus of Zachary Wollard's work. Finding inspiration in folk art, art history, and poetry, Wollard depicts a shifting, multi-dimensional space, characterized by layers of process, pattern, style and scale. A collision of imagery, his work ultimately references the chaotic, often political landscape of humanity. As *Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame*, 2010, is a fairy-tale realm inhabited by human-faced, violin-playing insects, crystal-tethered butterflies, and floating, balloon-like children's heads, all swaying under an umbrella dripping with pellucid shards. Made with a bricolage-like mix of gouache, watercolor, graphite, paper collage, thread and yarn, and corner-weighted with words, Wollard's scene is both magical and unsettling.

Born in Japan and raised in Brazil, Chie Fueki's works are constructed from traditional Japanese mulberry paper, meticulously built up with layers of paper collage, graphite rubbings, paint, pochoir and colored pencil. Her compositions fuse brilliant ornamentation with skewed perspective, textile-like patterns with distended figuration. In *Josh*, 2010, Fueki depicts a hard-edged figure, lying supine on a striped support, seemingly lost in recollection. He has three hands, including one at the end of a wildly distorted arm, and is imprisoned in a kind of constricted reverie by strips of opaque gray and a variety of blue plaid house plants. Fueki sees painting as an ongoing dialogue, a scroll from the past extending into the future. Supplanting art historical hierarchies, her work is a melting pot of influences revealed in the stratification of her imagery.

Antony's *Moluccan Crest*, 2011, takes its name from the colors of the Moluccan cockatoo's pastel plumage. The shades of coral, peach, off-white, and lavender evoke a sense of paradise. Made of paper, oil paint, wax, grout, and the triangular section of a blue period Picasso poster, the octagonal work resembles a shield or crest for some minimalist tribe. Primarily known as a musician and for collaborative work with other musician-artists, Antony's collages, while quiet, have a performative aspect—one can sense the process of their making. Yet they also originate in a private, unseen place, contrasting his public persona. In his collages, which often take nature as their theme, images are sewn together or connected by

vibrating lines of charged energy, like fragments of poetry whispering among the detritus of the everyday.

THE CURATORS

Paper is vital to both Valerie Hammond's and Kiki Smith's artistic practices. Introduced by a mutual friend around 1997, the two artists are kindred spirits, linked by their Irish-Catholic childhoods, their East Village neighborhood, and their shared interest in the corporeal. Both artists draw inspiration from religious effigies, devotional objects, and the enchantment of nature. A sense of the spirit world is palpable in their work. They are also decisively unsentimental, their creative approaches filtered through a deep understanding of art history and its political and cultural determinants. Hammond and Smith are dedicated printmakers, and teach etching together at Columbia University and New York University. The inherently repetitive and reflective elements of printmaking are fundamental aspects of their work in other mediums as well.

Hammond's delicate drawings (*Who Killed Cock Robin 1, 2 and 3*, 2011) stem from childhood memories of a beloved fairy-painting, an illustration of an old English nursery rhyme, "Who Killed Cock Robin." While the poem, in which various birds prepare for the burial of a murdered friend, may have had larger political implications, Hammond links her drawings to personal themes of memory, youth and death, referencing, in particular, the loss of her mother. In the drawing, bats hover above flowers, birds mesh with butterflies. The natural world's cyclical disintegration and re-growth suggests a kind of universal story-telling, the seasons providing beginning and end. Hammond's glowing, red-orange ink is reminiscent of blood, the capillary-like stems and leaves reference the human body. Ethereal pencil lines counterbalance the red's viscosity, evoking a place where the material and immaterial collide.

Smith's *Underworld*, 2011, is one in a series of four collaged paper assemblages, each representing a different realm or state of being. Mythic in theme, the work conveys both the physical qualities of the natural world and the invisible consciousness that permeates it. *Underworld* depicts striations of rocks and water, ant tunnels, rabbit burrows and deeply embedded larvae cocoons, conjuring the mysteries of a visceral and primeval territory. The piece teems with life while inextricably related to death: a naked, sacrificial male, entangled in tree roots, is not yet decomposed, his blood nourishing the earth. Collaged from Smith's photolithographic prints (sourced from her drawings and photography), the works are constructed over a month-long period, their crinkly, textured surfaces indicative of her process. Except for its formal consistency, Smith's process is instinctive. Her end result remains elusive until revealed.

The works that Valerie Hammond and Kiki Smith brought together for this show were selected intuitively from a community of artists they have known and worked with over the years. Their choices reflect the intricacy of their own inspirations and influences, each artist's work emblematic of their interest in certain subjects or methodologies. The exhibition is a many-layered topography, exemplifying the ways in which paper is an integral part of an artist's practice. It does not strive for cohesiveness, and in fact espouses variation even within attempts at categorization. Instead, the show celebrates a single material's transformation through process and manipulation by concept. The many uses of paper shown here mirror the many divergent approaches of artistic methodology. Emanating from a fixed point, the end results travel wildly variable but eloquent paths.

-- Maggie Wright, July - August 2011