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In Chautauqua Visual Art's 'Passion for Paper,' artists innovate, explore with everyday material

by JULIA WEBER on JULY 11, 2024



“Passion for Paper,” curated by the Susan and John Turben Director of Chautauqua Visual Arts Galleries Judy Barie, on display in the first-floor gallery of the Strohl Art Center.

On the first floor of Strohl Art Center, paper — in many forms — has taken over.

“Passion for Paper,” an exhibition curated by Judy Barie, Susan and John Turben Director of Chautauqua Visual Arts Galleries, is on view now through July 21. The exhibition showcases the breadth of work being created by artists using paper through a selection of sculptural, figurative and abstract works.

Toward the back of the exhibition, a massive, all-encompassing installation piece towers over the viewer. Holly Wong’s “Phoenix” is a double-sided work first drawn in sections with graphite and then sewn together.

Wong frequently uses sewing in her work, incorporating it to bind textiles and paper together. She sees it not only as a way of stitching or binding material together, but also as a way of drawing or mark making.

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“All of my work is very much about mending and repair — the idea that you have a wound, that you expose a wound, that you heal the wound,” she said. “I always make things, break things and repair them, and my work is a constant process of doing that.”



Holly Wong's "Sisters 1"

Wong uses her art as a catalyst to navigate and process grief, and she said her repetitive work utilizing paper and fiber connects to her identity as a woman; she uses her art practice as a way of reclaiming part of herself.

She sees many parallels between her physical act of mending and the content of her work. Her three pieces in the exhibition each approach healing, whether through physical stitching or the gradual, grown-over healing process of a scar.

In contrast to Wong's work, Roberto Benavidez's sculptural piñatas, located throughout the gallery space, are playful, energetic and dynamic. His abstracted forms are full of movement and captivate the viewer.

With a background as a metal artist, Benevidez was inspired to create piñatas because of the convenience and accessibility of the material.

“There was something very appealing about paper, especially the piñata technique, where it really was whatever you want to use,” he said.

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Demonstrating similar preciseness in an aesthetically different way, Matthew Shlian's geometric, angular paper creations show a razor-sharp understanding of materiality and form. Each piece manipulates light and shadow through the formation of alteration of paper, creating complex compositions.

"It's a way to express myself and to get my ideas out," he said. "Paper is just one of those things that's ubiquitous; we handle it every day. ... It seems like something you wouldn't necessarily pay attention to, and then the idea of taking that thing and transforming it and making it into something that could contain wonder or could bring joy or just express an idea, is really fascinating to me."

Many artists in the exhibition nod to the accessibility of paper as a medium, primarily for its price point and availability.

"I grew up pretty poor, so there's this security in having a medium that I can't be separated from, necessarily," Benavidez said.

For Kevin Auzenne, the pieces in the exhibition "represent for me, in some ways, a returning," he wrote in his artist statement for "Passion for Paper," "a return to the depiction of figure as well as a return to my own early practice as an artist in which paper figured prominently because it was cheap.

Auzenne has both two-dimensional and three-dimensional works in the exhibition, with a series of works on paper and paper-based sculptures using papier-mâché.

Auzenne became interested in the relationship between form and what is depicted on a form after working in pottery with a technique called slip casting.

Born out of this interest, the "Useful Things" series on display in Strohl is an exploration of this idea with a more accessible, approachable medium.

Also captivated by figural work and the process of depiction, Patricia Bellan-Gillen is inspired by fairytales and fables, drawing from these stories as she creates detailed, intricate pieces.

Each piece takes Bellan-Gillen months to make. First, she does extensive preparation — at least a week, she estimates — laying out imagery in Photoshop before drawing the composition.

Though the end product is vastly different, Bella-Gillen's painstakingly precise drawings parallel Elizabeth Mooney's abstract maximalist collages in an unexpected way. Both artists are exploring assembly and compilation through their work.

Mooney's collages interrogate the artist's surroundings and investigate the built landscape that surrounds her. Coming from a printmaking background, Mooney is captivated by how space is constructed and layered, both in the physical world and within her art.

"As a maker, what I really like about that is the way it challenges me to think about how I can build up and construct space, and what assumptions I make about how space works — and I actually don't really know how space works — and the challenges that it presents to viewers in terms of destabilizing yourself within a particular space," Mooney said. "That really excites me."

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She said she was drawn to the scraps of a different piece because of how they layered over top of one another, and that inspired her to push the boundaries of spatial relationships further using paper as a vehicle for exploration.

"I liked how all these bits that were like residue, the debris of making something, could then start to become its own thing, and then how when I started gluing them together, they started informing the paintings," she said. "Then the paintings started informing the collage, and it almost became ... these things that started making each other, but also consuming each other in this really exciting way."

For many of the artists, the act of working with paper is about the process just as much as the outcome.

"I am drawn to the tactile experience of it all; there is a physical aspect to interacting with my work that I want to convey with each piece," Kelly Moeykens wrote in her artist statement.

Moeykens' textured collages are meticulously composed and complex. Her compositions reflect foliage and biodiversity, demonstrating both the methodical nature of her paper-based process as well as her desire to represent her natural surroundings and raise awareness about the climate crisis.

Benavidez hopes that viewers will draw their own interpretations from the exhibition and will come in with an open mind, ready to see all that paper can offer. He said he looks forward to hearing what others gather from his work, rather than explaining it overtly.

"Sometimes I prefer not talking about it, because I really enjoy hearing people's take on my work regardless if it's representational or abstract. I always get some crazy, crazy interpretations and I don't want to take that away from an audience," Benavidez said.

Many of the artists said they hoped that Chautauquans will take the time to slow down and observe the scope of creativity that paper fosters.

"I hope that it gives people a respite, to feel the moment because of an ungodly busyness that we have, and I think that art allows us to pause and actually have an authentic feeling or a present moment," Wong said. "I hope that people can somehow feel rejuvenation, feel replenished, feel inspired."

Shlian said he hopes the art will continue to resonate after viewers leave the gallery.

"I think the best art stays with you after you've viewed it; like, 'The painting can escape its frame,' is the phrase. Years later you're thinking about this thing, or months later, and maybe it's something as simple as the light hits this thing a certain way," he said. "If you can pay attention to that thing, maybe you can pay attention to other things in your life."

The way that artists and their works come together in "Passion for Paper," Mooney said, is in many ways a collage of its own kind.

"It is kind of like collage in a sense where it's all these disparate parts that get distilled together into something as a whole," she said.

Full article: <https://chqdaily.com/2024/07/in-chautauqua-visual-arts-passion-for-paper-artists-innovate-explore-with-everyday-material/>