

Paper has its own mind and memory. While we tend to encounter it in its final material form, it is never far from its origins in the natural world. Women artists acknowledge this history. They also honor the complex and changing identity of paper as they manipulate, mutilate, and rework it in the stunning pieces chosen for this exhibition.

Why is it important to showcase women artists who work with paper? Because the long history of art and patriarchal culture denied women access to most media, but paper has consistently remained one of the most accessible and affordable materials.

The common life of paper—its ubiquity—has guaranteed women a ready source for art making and craft work. Paper has also invited women to take an active hand in shaping it: whether cutting, shredding, printing, or collaging, female artists have been able to fully engage—and, often, subvert—social expectations for passivity and permission-seeking when working with paper.

As you will see in this exhibition, paper can be remade, reimagined, repurposed, and recruited for both creative and political ends. It can provide women artists with a source of personal agency, narrative power, and unmediated voice. It can also provide women with the room to imagine new and utopian worlds, share devastating social commentary on various forms of injustice, and confront a culture that has stopped asking questions about our material waste and unsustainable consumption.

As a curator, I have been deeply inspired by the women paper artists that I have come to know in this exhibition and, in this time of uncertainty and change, I have found great beauty, determination, and wisdom in their work. As you sit with their truth, I hope the same for you.

Katie B Funk! recruits collage for a larger investigation into the commodity and aesthetics of the book, the idiosyncrasies of book collection, and the pleasures of looking. In 'Handheld Devices', Funk stages photographic scenes that feature cut-outs of her hands holding various books that live in the libraries of her friends and mentors. These collages are private glimpses into the reading habits and proclivities of her social circle. In this way, they invite and satisfy a deeply human voyeuristic impulse. The collages are also meditations on the book as material artifact and intellectual object. Made of paper and bound to a cover that is itself an artistic creation, the book provides Funk with endless opportunities for self-referentiality.

Sydney Joslin-Knapp imagines the power of immersive spaces where people can feel both safe and vulnerable at the same time. For this exhibition, Joslin-Knapp has created a dark 'Cosmic Cave' that is home to paper flowers and glitter, and it is their hope that this cave will encourage viewers to practice growing comfortable with uncertainty. As they see it, the cave is both a refuge and an offering. Joslin-Knapp wants viewers to find a space where they can sit with what is unknown in the self, what is little understood in the self, what is disavowed in the self. In this space, there is fear, but there is also the promise of a deep knowing that is finally able to reconcile darkness and light. The paper flowers and glitter illuminate the cave without ever denying the darkness that is there. In this way, Joslin-Knapp creates an interactive and sensory-rich installation that simultaneously challenges and affirms the viewer as a complex and whole self.

Natalie Lanese joins collage and painting in the construction of visually arresting works that play with spatiality and color. Laying down flat colors in uncommon combinations and geometric patterns, Lanese's painted surfaces create three-dimensional effects for the viewer. Through her selective use of cut-out paper images, she positions human hands on the surface of the works—producing startling juxtapositions and enigmatic narratives. The hands gesture to and for the viewer, but their meaning remains indeterminate. It is Lanese's willingness to marry this conceptual collage with masterful color design that distinguishes her work in this exhibition.

Susan Li O'Connor asks us to interrogate both memory and identity in her installation 'Mountain to Climb.' Her piece, composed of cuttings from both Chinese and American newspapers, explores our tragic incapacity to learn from the personal or historical past. In the piece, Li O'Connor manipulates the material of newsprint—normally designed for obsolescence, much like the 24-hour news cycle itself—in an effort to make 'something last that wasn't meant to last.' As a result, 'Mountain to Climb' becomes another way of reviving memory, attending to the past, and refusing to move on from what is not yet over. Her abstract mountain of rolled newsprint testifies to the many cultural histories and personal memories that are swept away by the news cycle as well as human habits of forgetfulness. As an Asian-American artist, Li O'Connor is also interested in the process by which people of color navigate a world of ongoing obstacle and othering. Her piece both reflects and confronts the cultural tension and misunderstanding that shape the relationship between China and the United States.

Charlotte McGraw is both a renegade collage artist and the self-proclaimed mayor of Charlottesville, a fictional town that welcomes and celebrates misfits, outcasts, and aliens. In Charlottesville, you never have to doubt that you are loved. You are also finally and fully liberated from the constraints of social norms and expectations. In this way, McGraw's Charlottesville is an artistic and political dreamscape. Her vivid collages of fictional characters in Charlottesville are striking in their exploration of--and enthusiastic delight in--fantasy and incongruity. At times McGraw's work is unapologetically whimsical. At other times, her work provides pointed social commentary on subjects as varied as incarceration and the spectacle of political power. In both a literal and figurative sense, McGraw uses her distinctive collage work for a larger world-building project.

Emily Moores works with folded and cut paper as well as fabric to create large-scale and dynamic installations that rescale the viewer in their physical environment. When the body feels small and the artwork is impossible to view from a single location, the body must move in order to experience the installation. This physical engagement is heightened by the exuberant tactility and texture of Moores's large pieces. She allows paper to do what paper does, and this creative surrender to the medium opens space for her to listen to the memory of the paper rather than impose an artistic agenda. Moores's pieces sprawl, meander, and take unexpected form as she builds them out. And, in doing this, they become powerful catalysts for affective experience, for the art is itself craving intimacy. They beckon the viewer to come closer.

Carmen Romine reminds the viewer that paper itself has a history, that paper is an ancient technology of communication, and that paper is plant material long before it serves the ends of consumerism. Crowdsourcing and collecting thermal paper receipts that are the end-product of every retail transaction, Romine returns the material to itself in her 'Thermal Series.' In the series, she builds abstract mountainous landscapes that remind the viewer of the natural origin of the thermal paper. In recycling the receipt to its original form, Romine draws our attention to the lived reality of both material waste and our degraded relationship to the environment. In her companion piece from her 'Dimensional Paper Drawing Series', Romine works with paper in its purest form: she creates and frames an undulating landscape that mimics the organic flow of the natural world.

Adrienne Slane creates hand-cut collages on paper that imagine new and unexpected conversations between pieces of found art. Drawing on old illustrations as well as antique and decorative papers that Slane meticulously collects in a 'curiosity cabinet,' her collages are deeply textured experiments in narrative and scene-making. Slane is a cataloguer; she aligns images in unanticipated ways and, in the process, imagines categories that are non-linear and relationships that are unconventional. Fascinated by the interplay between creation and decay as well as the mystic and the grotesque, she plots new stories with the help of old images. Slane's collage work also evokes earlier forms of women's folk art, craftwork, and quilting that were both practically accessible and socially subversive.