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Art review

“Slash: Paper Under the Knife”

A humble material takes center stage as an artistic medium.

By Jane Harris



From the papyrus rolls of ancient Egypt to the first sheets of tree pulp manufactured in 19th-century Europe and beyond, paper has been central to the evolution of knowledge, art and commerce. It’s almost impossible to imagine life without it. Even with the advent of the Kindle, online commerce and digital art (not to mention the apocalyptic prospect of deforestation), statistics show that paper use hasn’t really abated. Enter “Slash: Paper Under the Knife,” organized by the Museum of Arts & Design’s chief curator, David McFadden, the traditional handcraft materials and techniques. With 52 artists from 16 countries,

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“Slash” proves that the cheap and humble material is still a fundamental tool for creativity, despite waste issues (and it’s hard to think of paper today without considering waste). Thankfully, a lot of the paper being cut in “Slash” (as well as burned, shredded, torn, rolled, etc.) comes from a vast array of recycled materials, including subway maps, love letters, pharmaceutical instructions, coffee filters, cereal boxes, porn magazines and atlases.

Of course, the point of “Slash” is not to foreground this sort of usage, but rather to explore the various means by which the centuries-old craft of paper cutting, aided by recent advances in laser technology, has been revived in the diverse works of artists, filmmakers, architects and illustrators. In this regard, the show very much succeeds. Broken down into eight rather elaborately titled sections—“Cutting as Gesture: Drawing with the Knife”; “Cutting as Topography: Exploring Landscape”; “Form and Space: Slicing Architecture”; “Corporeal Concerns: Revealing the Body”; “Dissecting the Past: Myths and Memories”; “Culture Clashes: Politics on the Edge”; “Shredding the Word: Books and Language”; “The Moving Image: Paper and Action”—“Slash” presents a thorough and beautifully executed survey of paper-based creations made in the past five years.

The most interesting works are the most extreme: those that reference paper’s basic material and performative nature (its ephemeral, malleable qualities, for example), and by contrast, those that convey its transformative potential, its ability to become something other than itself—a window, a body, a forest, an urn.

Examples of the former include Lu Shengzhong’s *Human Brick II* (2004), made from layers of red tissue paper cut to reveal masses of human figures; Shaul Tzemach’s *Concretion/Conglomerate* (2005–07), featuring whirlpools, trees and fractals cut with surgical precision; Adam Fowler’s swirling, spaghetti-like confections in *Untitled (74 layers)*, from 2009; and the folk-inspired works of Dario Robleto, Aric Obrosey and Michael Velliquette. Examples of the latter are just as numerous, if not always as successful. Perry Staverman’s fountains and trees cut from cardboard recall those accordion-like bells that fan out when opened, but never quite transcend their facture. Tom Friedman’s *Quaker Oats* (2009), on the other hand, takes a familiar product and stretches and blurs its trademark container until a large, totemic structure emerges (one capable of excreting its own contents if the clumps of cereal attached here and there are any indication). So too, Ishmael Randall Weeks’s *Landscape* (2009) is a tour de force of metamorphosis: a slab of architectural plans carved into a mountainous landscape, which is then fused with the drafting table on which it was made. The results are as alien and beautiful as a relic from the moon.

McFadden does a lot to make the exhibition user-friendly, and the touch-screen videos featuring each artist in their studio discussing their working process are one such highlight. Reflecting MAD's larger concern with the role of museum as educator, these videos never dumb down the creative process—often the case with such exhibition aids—but instead give it a lively human face. The accompanying catalog does much the same, focusing on the artist's point of view in writings that can be as powerful and direct as the works they represent. Consider Ariana Boussard-Reifel's description of *Between the Lines* (2007), a white-supremacist tract from which she has removed all trace of hateful words: "I cut out all of the black ink, left the white pages pristinely intact, and consequently rendered the book meaningless."

With so much emphasis on the labor-intensive, those seeking works more fleeting or purely conceptual in design may be disappointed, as will those who might have expected more emphasis on the issue of waste and recycling. But as a survey of the widespread resurgence in the use of cut paper, "Slash" is a triumph all the way.

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