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October 20, 2009

ART REVIEW

Move Over, Humble Doily: Paper Does a Star Turn

By KAREN ROSENBERG

Is paper passé? Your answer will most likely depend on whether you're reading this sentence on newsprint or on a screen. But it's safe to say that artists and designers aren't ready to quit the stuff, at least by the measure of the latest show at the [Museum of Arts and Design](#).

They are, however, willing to pierce, shred, carve and slice it. "Slash: Paper Under the Knife," the third show in the museum's Materials and Process series, explores the sometimes violent, always intricate art of paper cutting. (It follows "Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting" and "Pricked: Extreme Embroidery" in 2007 and 2008.)

"Slash" looks a lot better than the other two shows, but only because it's in the museum's year-old home at Columbus Circle. Twelve site-specific installations that are part of this show engage Brad Cloepfil's controversial architecture, particularly his windows, in savvy ways.

Otherwise, this show sticks to the museum's conservative, crafty-contemporary template. The art is impressively detailed and eager to please, though rarely challenging. And from a design standpoint, it's late to the party; neo-Victorian, laser-cut works by Tord Boontje have become ubiquitous in galleries and gift shops.

It's also overpackaged, with the accompanying artist statements and the seven categories that slip back and forth between technique ("Cutting as Gesture: Drawing With the Knife") and content ("Culture Clashes: Politics on the Edge"). That political edge, by the way, is pretty dull.

Fortunately, the artists' discipline and enthusiasm make up for a lot. Paper cutting has less to prove, as a serious art medium, than needlework or embroidery — but the best works take nothing for granted.

In the hands of Jane South paper becomes not only serious art but also serious architecture. Her installation "Wall," one of the show's most ambitious pieces, evokes fire escapes, ventilation systems and other elements of the urban-industrial landscape with slotted gray paper stretched over a thin wood scaffolding.

And few works are as dynamic as Mia Pearlman's "Inrush" — whorls of white paper that descend on the gallery with gale force from a recessed window. The installation brings to mind Hokusai's "Sudden Gust of Wind," as well as the chilling paper storm of 9/11.

Ms. Pearlman is one of several artists who use paper cutting as an extension of drawing. Other able practitioners include Adam Fowler, who extracts and layers thin graphite arcs, and Anne-Karin Furunes, who makes perforated-paper portraits.

Often more interesting, though, are the works that don't pretend to be something else. Michael Velliquette's shrinelike "Power Tower" is forthright about the fact that most of us associate paper cutting with party decorations and grade-school art projects. It's festooned with paper flowers, paper dolls and even those Thanksgiving classics, paper turkeys.

A large wall relief by Judy Pfaff takes up some of these arts-and-crafts clichés without winking. Combining earth-toned honeycomb, hosho and joss papers with coffee filters, rice starch and silk flowers, Ms. Pfaff's "Bogue Lusa" looks like the creation of an overly enthusiastic gift wrapper.

Still, it's more germane than some of the works by trendier contemporary artists. You can tell that paper is central to Ms. Pfaff; so, too, to Thomas Demand, [Kara Walker](#) and Tom Friedman. (Mr. Friedman's elongated Quaker Oats package is the only piece here to attempt something like wit successfully.) But for [Olafur Eliasson](#) and Mona Hatoum, it's just one weapon in the postconceptual arsenal.

The chief curator, David Revere McFadden, might have passed over Mr. Eliasson's laser-cut artist's book or Ms. Hatoum's variation on a paper snowflake in favor of lesser-known artists who work primarily with paper. (Yuken Teruya and Nicola López come to mind.) Also puzzling is his inclusion of at least two artists from previous Materials and Process exhibitions: Nava Lubelski and Andrea Dezso. Both are talented, but maybe it's time to give someone else a chance.

In the catalog Mr. McFadden relates contemporary paper cutting to Japanese katagami stencils, Mexican papel picado and the medieval practice of excising illuminations from manuscripts. (This last reference is especially relevant to the creatively altered books in "Slash," which include an encyclopedia, an 1844 parish psalmody and a white-supremacist tome.)

The books, and similarly layered works involving maps, reflect nostalgia for a physical engagement with documents. You can't tear into a Kindle or a GPS with an X-Acto knife. (Well, you can, but you won't get the same topographical, jigsaw-puzzle results.)

Oddly, the show barely acknowledges the environmental impact of paper. There are works that make references to slavery, colonialism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but nothing about deforestation or the shift from a "dead tree" to a digital economy. Many of the cut-paper projects

in “Slash” are as wasteful, from an environmental standpoint, as they are beautiful.

Maybe that’s why contemporary artists are driven to produce such elaborate confections from this humblest of materials. It’s not precious, yet. But someday soon it will be.

“Slash: Paper Under the Knife” runs through April 4 at the Museum of Arts and Design, 2 Columbus Circle; (212) 299-7777, madmuseum.org.

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