

Debra Eck – Weeks Gallery Visiting Curator

My perspective as a curator has always been shaped by my background as both a maker and an educator. The studio artist in me is drawn to the material and emotional qualities in the work, but the teacher in me is always looking for ways to exploit the tangle of meaning and context tied to each work that might present an opportunity to widen the field of view.

This work was firstly selected because it is good art, each of the artists has a strong individual voice, and creates resonant, beautiful work with a clear perspective, but each piece also brings to the table something more. There are a great many lenses through which this exhibition can be explored. I'd like to offer a few ideas that came to my mind as I worked with Colin to assemble the work on view in the gallery.

As with many cross disciplinary endeavors, it can be hard to find a place to start, each thread of thought is tied to another. Let's begin then with the stuff itself, and the different technologies employed to turn fiber into a sheet of paper. Several of the artists use Kozo, a fiber harvested from the inner bark of the mulberry. The long fibers make for light, very strong paper with great versatility, and a neutral pH which makes it a favorite for book conservation. In the gallery you can see Kozo which has been printed (bob Collignon) and Kozo which has been employed using traditional techniques like twining, spinning and felting to create textiles (Linda Collignon).

Those textile techniques could take us in a whole new direction, towards anthropology, twining is amongst the earliest uses of fiber in human history, or cultural anthropology and the traditional creation of textiles from paper in Japan and Korea. From that literal thread, woven paper (shifu) we could wander off into the realm of fabrics and fashion, or fibers and colonialism. And that thread could wind itself around to other sculptural pieces in the room like the tiny paper corset of Cecelia Price, or Carrie Tredo's dress and shoes, and a start a conversation about gender, or patriarchy or nostalgia perhaps.

If we pick up again that first thread of the material itself, but a slightly different strand, instead of mulberry, let's choose cotton. Cotton and hemp replaced Kozo as paper travelled west. Making paper from different fibers requires different tools, and creates a paper with different qualities, an avenue that engineers and designers might want to investigate. This kind of paper has more loft, it is fatter and fluffier making it ideal for imprinting with a letter press in the creation of a book. You can press it in different ways, and treat the surface to make it ideal for the application of paint (Sarah Brown) or couch layers of wet fibers together to make unique sheets (Janna Willobhy-Lohr).

We could start of on a tangent, thinking about the historical impact of cotton-based paper. For example, one could make a strong argument that without paper the institution that houses this gallery wouldn't exist in this form, for while debate and education obviously existed before paper, paper has been the way ideas have travelled for centuries. Without paper, printing would not have created standardized texts which allowed long distance exchange between scholars which became the foundation of universities. Paper is the medium of transmission of Western thought wrapped up between covers in a codex.

And thinking about books as objects would lead down a long maze-like series of ideas about books as art objects, which is definitely several more potential exhibitions. Artists began adapting art to fit inside books almost immediately after the object itself came into being, and then

adapting the medium itself to be art shortly thereafter. You can see some examples of artist's books in this exhibit too (Janna, Jill Dawson, Carrie Tredo) It's such a long path, I'm just going to drop this thread here, but if you want to pick it back up, it goes to some interesting places too.

If we return to our starting point, the material that forms the paper, one more time, we have a couple of more contemporary examples still to pursue. The most obvious is paper made from wood pulp, the most ubiquitous form of the stuff in our culture today. Wood doesn't make the greatest paper, it gets the job done, but in early experiments it made paper that was highly acidic, which becomes brittle with age. Like its predecessor cotton, it hasn't done much for the planet we live on, and this leads to another avenue of thought which crops up more than once in this exhibition, the environment although most clearly in Julie Dodd's recycled paper.

The last candidate, the last thread to pull on, is rock paper. A paper made using contemporary technology in a patented process that makes paper from ground rock. It's many qualities are explored in the work of Wendy Bale, but Wendy's work as an artist using cut paper, could itself take us back to many places we have already been. Paper cut outs appear in countless cultures, each unique in their expression and we are back around close to where we began again with cultural anthropology and the overlapping web of human expression.

And technology is also where I'm going to leave my thoughts. Several of the artists explore ways to fuse technology into their work. Wendy and Sarah both experiment with stop motion animation, while Jill Dawson uses micro circuits and LED lights to add dimension to her book forms. Her pop-up books use the structural integrity of paper and its material memory to create three dimensional forms. Just as the art of folding paper, informs how engineers fold things to send them into space.

As this exhibition came together my thoughts have travelled from our ancient past to the present day. I've followed paper technology along the silk road and out into space. I hope this exhibition will spark your curiosity, and offer you a place to begin your own journey. I hope one of these art works will intersect with your interests and passions, because standing at a crossroads is always an exciting place to begin.