

EASTCITYART

REVIEWS

EAST CITY ART REVIEWS—ETERNAL PAPER AT UMGC

By Claudia Rousseau, Ph.D. on December 13, 2023

Eternal Paper

The exhibition that gives Eternal Paper its title is a survey of a material terrain. It is incomplete, in the way that a map is not the territory, but the evocations here include the topographical among others. Paper as the site/space/means of artistic invention. - Buzz Spector

A large and diverse exhibition of works on, and of, paper is on view in the Arts Program Gallery of the University of Maryland Global Campus through May of next year. Featuring works by 20 artists, it was originated and guest curated by artist and art educator Helen Frederick. Frederick, well known as founder of Pyramid Atlantic Art Center some forty years ago, and more recently of her own Reading Road Studio in Silver Spring, has herself been working with the many possibilities of paper as the “site/space/means of artistic invention” as exhibitor Buzz Spector so eloquently put it, for many years. The diversity here is not only in technique and approach, but among the artists themselves. Ranging in age from their thirties to late seventies and representing numerous national and ethnic origins, they have all explored the use of paper in more ways than one might imagine. Thus, the focus here is the material itself and its traditions and legacies passed down through generations of collaborative practices in making and using paper that can serve as frameworks for new invention and expression. All of the artists selected have worked in collaborative projects at Pyramid Atlantic over the years (some going back to its very beginnings when it was called Pyramid Prints and Paperworks in Baltimore) or since 2017 at the Reading Road Studio where the collaborative character of paper making and related processes are shared between experienced artists and young assistants. Frederick brings that energy to the exhibition which feels much like a demonstration of the enormous potential of paper—quite a lot more than drawing, writing or even printing on it.

It is worth noting at the outset that the gallery itself is a long, wide corridor space, well-lit with a lower level at its end. This means that the exhibit progresses along both sides of the corridor, with some works placed in the center between them. With so many objects, Frederick met the curatorial challenge of maintaining a sense of forward movement, keeping the viewer interested as each artist’s work follows the next. At the beginning there is a video loop playing a series of artist conversations; that is two pairs from the exhibit speaking to each other—a novel way to introduce them, and to emphasize the theme of collaboration.



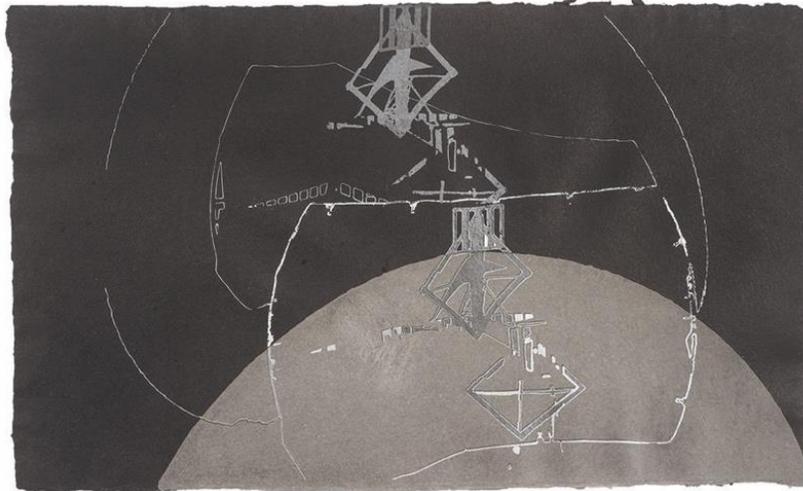
Maria Barbosa, *Social Skin Series*, detail, abaca paper printed digitally, 2008.
Photo courtesy of UMGC.

Among the individual works that stood out for me was that of Maria Barbosa. From Brazil, the artist has been inspired by the body paintings of the Amazonian Indians, with their sharply defined patterns and symbols, that, according to Barbosa, “represent the principles that organize individual relations” in these communities. Since 2008, her *Social Skin* series takes this idea and applies it to our current lives where, as clothing, it is a “symbol of class-based organizing principles”; a detachable outward cover that identifies us in our communities.^[2] Her paper shirts, dresses, and an extraordinary long wrap skirt, all reflect shapes of actual clothing worn by the Amazonian communities, and can actually be worn. However, their fragility in being made of paper suggests the ephemeral character of the “social skin”.^[3]



Buzz Spector, *Altered K*, altered found book made from a copy of Kay Rosen, *AKAK*, New York, Regency Art Press, 10 1/8 x 15 3/8 x 1 1/4 in., 2015.

Torn paper takes primary place in the work of Buzz Spector, with a somewhat equivocal meaning. Spector mostly tears the pages in found books in ways that result in amazingly intricate alterations so that the colored images that were in the books exist as strips of color with their own organization or pattern. This is not haphazard or random tearing. The altered books in the exhibit are fascinatingly controlled. Yet, the books no longer exist, as they were. Altered they become something else, a different object all together that’s not about reading but visual engagement alone.



Soledad Salamé, *Shadows VIII* (from *Shadows series*), screen print on custom-made paper, 24 1/2 x 40 in. Photo by Greg Stanley, courtesy of UMG.

Also from South America, Soledad Salamé is from Chile. Her work generally explores the intersection of art, science and technology through the lens of climate and social issues of our era. In 2015 the artist visited the ALMA Observatory in the Atacama Desert in the north end of the country. The Atacama is the driest desert in the world and it bears greatest resemblance to a moonscape—white and apparently lifeless. However, in the very rare instances that it rains, thousands of tiny flowers bloom—a phenomenon that suggests the fragility and yet resilience of life on Earth. Thus Salamé’s visit had a strong effect on her, not only for her experience of astronomical observation and marveling at the technology, but the setting as well. It resulted in *Shadows*, a series of screenprints on handmade paper and sculpture three of which are in this exhibit. We look out at the blackness of space, listening for life, “but,” she writes in her statement, “are we really looking at what is happening here on our own planet?”



Elsabé Johnson Dixon, *Spotted Lanternfly Red Wing*, cast pigmented abaca, flax, cotton paper and spotted lanternfly wings, 21” diameter, 2023. Photo courtesy of UMG.

Like Salamé, and many of the artists in this show, Elsabé Johnson Dixon is deeply concerned about the state of the environment and the effects of climate change, both on a local and world-wide scale. She too has an inclination toward the science of the problem, and has said that paper is a medium that can hold the data that records the progress of environmental change as well as pollution levels in its very fibers. Expressing this, she began a group of works addressing the invasive spotted lanternfly that entered the United States in 2014 and has been a seriously disruptive pest. By incorporating thousands of spotted lanternfly wings—collected by many volunteers from 2019 to 2023—into her papermaking process, Dixon embeds the narrative

of this destructive history into the medium itself. Probably most compelling is the circular work *Spotted Lanternfly Red Wing*. A concentric ring of the wings surrounds an empty circle on a body of cast abaca and flax paper. Visually compelling, it conveys the deadly impact of these creatures in an environment that cannot resist them.



Nicole Donnelly, *Barn M*, artist-made paper of abaca and flax with pigmented abaca pulp and Mojave Desert inclusions, 8" x 22" x 14", 2017. Photo courtesy of UMGC.

I found Nicole Donnelly's *Barn M* a fascinating use of paper in a way that I had never before encountered: a small scale frame of a house/barn-like structure made of twigs on which is a tightly stretched skin of artist-made paper of abaca and flax with pigmented pulp. Donnelly is another of the participants in this exhibition for whom environmental issues are central. She has added "Mojave Desert inclusions" to *Barn M*, and there is a hole in its side. For Donnelly, this and her other works represent an attempt to "aggregate emblems of information overload and human-generated chaos...they seem to work as allegories of landscapes, of cultural detritus...". Yet, they reflect the inherent beauty in nature and its continued resilience as well as the hope that we can recognize and save it.



Claudia (Aziza) Gibson-Hunter, *Ain't Got No Wings for Night Blues*, acrylic paint and colored pencil on artist-made papers, 22" x 15" x 5", 2023. Photo by John Woo, courtesy of UMGC.

Claudia (Aziza) Gibson-Hunter's three-dimensional works with a paper medium are more abstract but also express a spiritual source: the concept of flight, especially within the African American experience. Both of her remarkably attractive constructions convey the idea of flight as part of a larger

investigation that has involved ornithology, folklore, spirituality and history. For her catalog entry, Gibson-Hunter writes that “for the African American, flight has been a spiritual mode of travel...[it is] one of the many spiritual technologies utilized by enslaved Africans as a tool for survival.” The deeply rich coloration and delicate forms of the two pieces in this show, from a larger body of work in this vein, are reflective of that intention. I especially liked *Ain't Got No Wings for Night Blues* with its fan-like shape and dark blue and black forms that suggest a nighttime escape.



Susan Firestone, *Guardian*, pulp painting and collaged artist-made paper elements, 45 x 25 in., 2023. Photo by Nikita Kamat, courtesy of UMGC.

Using a combination of collage and pulp painting, Susan Firestone’s work here reflects her fascination with universal and historical symbols of the feminine. Interested in interpreting the vast and rich cultural reservoir of this symbolism, both in actual forms as well as mythic and psychological, the collage/paintings create their own combined metaphorical stories in an elegant language of form and color. A good example is Firestone’s *Guardian* which features imagery from Asia as well as two prehistoric attributes of the Great Mother, and one representing her as the Empowered Woman. The spiral and the serpent refer to the former, while the last is based on a type of which a number of examples exist in various collections. Beyond a mere discovery of symbols, for Firestone these are a grounding in the power of this history and for her own spiritual journey as an artist.



Female Figure, ca. 3500-3400 B.C.E. Clay, pigment,
11 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 2 1/4 in. (29.2 x 14 x 5.7 cm).
Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 07.447.505.
Creative Commons-BY (Photo credit: Brooklyn Museum)

As the corridor ends there is a level down on one side where there is a small darkened room with a high ceiling. A forty-two minute video collaboration between Helen Frederick and Shanti Norris plays on a loop with the sound of pouring water and bird songs. Titled *Self Portrait Washed*, the artists intend “a two-fold time based experience”. The viewer is invited to sit on a bench facing the large screen feeling the contemplative atmosphere of the sound and the colors of the image. Filmed over many hours and edited, the light changes over time of day. The image is related to Frederick’s *Healing Stones* series, four of which are in this exhibit. Water is poured over the translucent figure of the artist (Frederick) as a shadow (by Norris). The video, which is exceptionally calming, also refers to a Hindu ritual of pouring water or milk, sugarcane juice, etc. over a deity while chanting mantras. Here, however, water, paint and finally maple leaves are poured; a washing or cleansing reminiscent of paper being made in the studio. All together an appropriate way to conclude the exhibit.