

## Paper Pushers

Richard L. Nelson Gallery, UC Davis

Sept 29-Dec 11, 2005

catalog essay

by **Renny Pritikin**, curator

A recent wall text\* about Richard Tuttle discussed the artist's earliest work (small cardboard cubes circa the late 60s) as taking a material that was and is traditionally utilized for its surface, for drawing, and transporting it into the sculptural realm by the mere act of folding. It is in the spirit of that act that Paper Pushers was organized. This exhibition of nine artists includes work that participates in a range of ways to torment paper that includes cutting, hanging, piercing, laying on the floor, molding, wrapping, making dioramas, and building ephemeral objects. The larger goal, in the spirit of Tuttle, is to find ways to create new meaning using such a modest and commonplace material.

Paper Pushers includes artists who work exclusively with paper, others who do frequently, and some who use it only in this instance to solve a specific problem. The work extends over a range of practices that place emphasis variously on: the end product or the process and techniques employed; a celebration or a deliberate disregard of the preciousness of the medium; pursuit of differing understandings of beauty, from the immaculate to the rough; a conceptual (David Miles challenges himself to tell a story in pictures in three dimensions) or an object (Nicole Fein wants to see what a box or pillow of paper would look like) orientation.

Sculptors can call upon a predictable bag of tricks to delight audiences. These tricks include making multiple identical versions of an object, making very big or very tiny versions of familiar objects, or making everyday objects out of surprising materials. Notable about the roster of artists in Paper Pushers is their ability to find new formal solutions to the aesthetic problems they set for themselves.

David Miles, an English sculptor, first became recognized for his machines that could facilitate his escape from danger. These remarkable works, which could move him through space and time, were made of cardboard. His new body of work involves the use of black cardstock mobiles that often depict dark narratives of violence through sequential images, often as many as four or five objects forming a non-linear story. They combine his ongoing fascination with quotidian danger—muggings, suicides and the like—with a Kara Walker-like precision in silhouette drawing.

Two artists in Paper Pushers are process-oriented, and work with paper to exploit its inherent quality of simultaneous fragility and strength. Their work is also highly labor-intensive requiring hours of concentrated attention. **Jill Sylvia** creates beauty out of the most banal material close at hand: her dad's old accounting notebooks. These ledger book pages are augmented with rigorous—even obsessive—discipline in which she cuts out all the negative spaces, leaving a fragile latticework where the printed lines are. Artwork on paper contains an image on a background, referred to as a figure and ground. Sylvia's objects disturb our expectations of artwork in two dimensions, and become sculpture, by being all figure with no ground. **Nicole Fein** explores the poetics of fragility in her intimate and small-scale works.

Like Sylvia, she sets up projects that take many hours of repetitive, skilled labor. She partakes of the magician's effect of cutting up an article of clothing, or paper money, and then miraculously reconstituting the object. Like a poet who hashes language to find new meaning in words, she cuts paper into thin strips to surprise us with how she can put it back together, slightly and yet utterly transformed.

**Tom Friedman**, like Sylvia, explores the boundary between two and three dimensions. His large, untitled work depicts a three dimensional event in two dimensions: we confront a (two dimensional depiction of a) pedestal that is missing any art object, save a bit of bone, juxtaposed with a virtual explosion of material on the floor that contains more bone, color, line, and other stuff. The implied narrative is that the pedestal, containing a fragile and complex art object, has fallen over and the art object has broken into smithereens; perhaps an unlucky patron has been squashed beneath it. The riot of information that is art can be dangerous.

Deliberately parodying the expected cultural tradition of fine washi paper, Japanese artist **Yuken Teruya** uses found high-end shopping bags as his art material. Placing them on their side on shelves with their open mouths facing the viewer, he cuts out the shape of a tree from the roof of his diorama and folds it down to perfectly rest on the floor of the bag. The light pouring in from the hole above creates a highly theatrical and affective miniature stage set. An aesthetic of grace fills these pieces, in the sense that the most mundane materials yield rare earthly perfection in a few simple strokes. The cycle of consumption—both shopping and tree-into-paper bag- back-into-tree has been addressed obliquely.

**Midori Harima** is a Japanese artist who has spent the last few years in San Francisco and is now, like Teruya, in New York. She makes figurative sculpture using Xeroxed images shaped into three-dimensional form. While her objects generally depict fawns, young girls and other embodiments of innocence and purity, there is usually an undercurrent of sexuality and violence. Harima argues that her work is about the essential gap between form and surface, as in a Japanese culture that has such overwhelming superficial American influence without a real connection to either Japanese or American sources.

**Jason Jagel** is a painter of narrative social landscapes. He has also produced a small body of sculptures that are, like Teruya's, a form of diorama. In Jagel's case however the paper environment, revealed in several receding stages, is a three dimensional drawing that references a wide range of sources, from Duchamp's *Etantes Donnes*, to Cornell's boxes. Jagel's drawing style is derived from vernacular and narrative sources such as *Krazy Kat* and other comics, all the way to Philip Guston's cartoony late work.

**Stephanie Syjuco's** sculpture explores the duality of the original and the copy. For this exhibition, she contributes three works. Two reference desire for material goods: jewelry and stereo components. One of these is a recreation of a street merchant's display case, enclosing dozens of watches and rings cut out from Sunday supplement ads, and the other is a paper set of various equipment: cd player, tuner, speakers, et al. It's all fool's gold. Finally, she presents a bamboo forest of images downloaded from the internet and wrapped around paper tubes. An ersatz jungle of widely disparate depictions and understandings of bamboo, the consummate exoticized plant here is put through the meat grinder of media representation and spit out as an impossible, bizarre jungle copse, sculpture in a gallery.

**Christopher Taggart** uses sophisticated photographic techniques to enlarge everyday objects to huge scale in three dimensions. We confront a pig's heart the size of a watermelon and a five-foot long recreation of the artist's hand, both made of paper photographs. It is a transformation of the body through electronic media and a result of the human desire to see what things truly look like, to understand the world by dismantling and reassembling it. Taggart's work combines elements from the two extremes of the field investigated in this exhibition: his objects reflect the tradition of labor-intensive production while at the same time the finished works are raw, energetic, lunatic and idea-based.

Tiny scraps of paper fly through our lives and connect us to each other: receipts and snapshots, scratch paper and baseball tickets, sidewalk litter and newspaper clippings. Paper Pushers pays attention to the overlooked possibilities in the material of our world, and reinvests these ephemeral bits and pieces with a semblance of deferred respect.

**Renny Pritikin**  
Director  
Nelson Gallery