

EXHIBITION REVIEW

## Paper as Politics and Process

By Jaclyn Jacunski

### "Social Paper"

Columbia College Center for  
Book and Paper Arts, Chicago  
10 January – 15 April 2014

"Social Paper," at the Columbia College Center for Book and Paper Arts (CBPA), illuminated how papermaking has been used by artists, activists, citizens and designers to address social ills. Organized by curator Jessica Cochran and professor Melissa Potter, the exhibition revealed the interdisciplinary practices and multiple roles of socially concerned artists as micro-business managers, educators, historians. By blurring the line between amateur and professional artists, the exhibition downplayed individual authorship and emphasized the social energy of papermaking.

The show opened with self-published, take-away literature such as *Phyto-Paper* (2014) by Maggie Puckett—handmade paper embedded with sunflower seeds and printed with planting instructions. Once planted, the sunflower's root system absorbs toxic lead from soil. Other homemade-paper flyers were available from Jilian Bruscherrea's Mobile Mill—a pop-up papermill that debuted in 2014 and shows the public how to repurpose paper waste. The curators also designed and distributed a newsprint timeline of papermaking and socially engaged art, providing historical context to the exhibition.

The show's greatest strength was the balance achieved between the artworks and the social exchanges that produced them. Paper necklaces produced by the American jewelry designer Kiff Slemmons and the artisans of Arte Papel in Oaxaca, Mexico, between 2000 and 2011 clearly emphasized the social interactions of artists and artisans. Made by folding, cutting, rolling and shaping the pulp of indigenous plant fibers, the objects have the sturdy, porcelain-white appearance of ceramics. The wall texts and large photographs of the artisans acknowledged the atelier's material expertise.

The Combat Paper project is similarly predicated on the belief that the com-



Art Papel Oaxaca and Kiff Slemmons, installation view of *Jewelry* (2000-11), cotton agave handmade paper, dimensions variable.

munal process of art making is at least as important as the final object. Founders Drew Matott and Drew Cameron work with U.S. Army veterans to make paper from their uniforms, transforming old materials and memories into new ones. Frequently the resulting paper is screen-printed with representations of war.

Julia Goodman and Laura Anderson Barbata unearthed forgotten histories of women. In *Rag Sorters* (2013) Goodman took the names of San Francisco women who sorted rags for paper in Depression-era factories and embossed them on rag paper. In a projected animation, Barbata used colorful handmade papers and the Mexican tradition of paper-cutting to chronicle her mission to return the remains of "the Ugliest Woman in the World"—a 19th-century sideshow performer named Julia Pastrana—to Mexico. After her death in 1860, Pastrana's mummified body had been toured around the world and displayed in a Norwegian

museum before Barbata arranged to have it returned to her birthplace in Sinaloa.

New York author and artist Pablo Helguera argues that social practice creates a "collective art that affects the public sphere in a deep and meaningful way."<sup>1</sup> "Social Paper" led the viewer to consider paper not just as a substrate for art or the product of refined craftsmanship, but as an instrument for engaging the world. ■

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#### Notes:

1. Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Material and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2001), 5.