‘Social Paper’ has ambition, doesn’t engage

How best to exhibit socially engaged art is a problem that has plagued the genre.

The stories are many and moving in “Social Paper,” an exhibit at Columbia College. In many cases, however, the message may not come across for the average patron viewing the finished work.

The stories of the women who used to sort rags for paper in San Francisco. The tributes are as tasteful as they are conceptually tight. The women’s remains, which continued to tour after her death in 1860, were most recently stored in a university basement in Oslo, Norway. For more fitting is the Catholic burial Barbara arranged for her, complete with funeral Mass, ceremonial garments, flowers from around the world, and a 1-meter-tall tomb as resting place. The tombstone rubbings tell some of this story, while an uncommon startlingly empathetic double self-portrait — the artist poses as the mirror image of Pastrana — hints at Barbara’s motivation. But finally it’s paper — or rather, a delicate two-minute animated video made from bits of cut, folded and twisted paper — that offers Pastrana the beautiful heartfelt send-off she never got.


Lori Waxman is special contributor to the Chicago Tribune, and an instructor at the School of the Art Institute.

Lori Waxman is Art at Large

Paper is mostly made from trees, but it can be formed from just about any fibrous material. Prayer shawls, mourning clothes, newspaper obituaries, army uniforms, old rags, used underwear, discarded books, sunflower stalks — all of these objects can be pulped into thick, textured sheets of handmade paper using simple, traditional techniques. Why someone would want to transform this stuff into paper is another story; many stories, some deeply moving, others inspiring, perplexing or just plain miffy.

“Social Paper,” a crowded, ambitious exhibition at the Columbia College Center for Book and Paper Arts, tries to tell them all. This is not an easy task, and many of the modest, intimate artworks in the show speak in a whisper or not at all. That doesn’t mean their narratives aren’t worth hearing; it just means the listening can be hard. To help, co-curators Jessica Cochran and Melissa Potter provide a timeline, wall texts and didactic videos, but imagination and empathy are needed to take the viewer further in the direction of understanding and, better yet, open engagement.

The thesis behind “Social Paper” — and it is unquestionably a thesis, unexpected but thoroughly researched and well-proven — proposes handmade paper as a medium inherently well-suited to socially engaged art practices. Through a broad selection of paper projects ranging from jewelry to books to posters and even an animation, the curators track various instances of artists, designers and activists who use paper to achieve civic ends.

These include every kind of goal that could plausibly fall under the heading: developing microeconomies; using sustainable local materials; recycling discarded items into new ones; revitalizing traditional practices; creating do-it-yourself mini-ventures; organizing participatory and community endeavors; fostering political and ecological awareness.

Because its very process is about transforming old materials into new ones — and not just any new ones but paper, the original medium of communication — hand papERMaking seems to hold great promise for reparative endeavors, providing a kind of material therapy. “Fabric of War,” a workshop led by artist Nick Dublin, gathered together 20 Palestinian and Israeli women who had lost family members during the past decades of conflict. Each brought objects connected to their bereavement then cathartically pulped them into thick, textured sheets of paper. Some look more like collages, with entire pictures floating amid their fibers, images the maker couldn’t bear to throw.

“The Peace Paper” and “Combat Paper,” both co-founded by Drew Mayott, proceed via similar principles. The latter teaches veterans how to make paper art from their old, Army uniforms.

These deep, risky projects move the viewer, but they are far more affecting and crucial for the communities they serve. And herein lies the challenge: The artistic products of complex, restorative undertakings are not always equal to the processes themselves. This is in part because the processes are more important, but also because participants may be lay people rather than trained artists. The particular emotional quality of participation is no guarantee of greater aesthetic merit. But in a gallery, and results are mostly what we see.

This situation begets “The People’s Library,” a charming collaborative that pulps deaccessioned books into blank volumes. Patrons of the Richmond Va. Public Library can check them out, fill them up with their own histories and return them for cataloging. It isn’t easy to write a book worth reading, however, an irony that surely isn’t lost on the People’s Librarian, given the raw materials with which they work. The three best volumes in the People’s Library, in fact, are clever offshoots: a collection of discarded title pages, last pages and dedications.

How best to exhibit socially engaged art is a problem that has plagued the genre. (You wouldn’t necessarily know it from “RISK: Empathy, Art and Social Practice,” a party of a show downstairs from “Social Paper,” the quiet upstairs neighbor.) In any case, it isn’t always the social nature of the works here that makes them so tough to display. An elegant series of placards by Julia Goodman memorializes the women who used to sort rags for paper in San Francisco. The tributes are as tasteful as they are conceptually tight. The women's names are molded in fabulous, vintage fonts, into paper made from rags. They’re also white-on-white, and they just about disappear on the pale walls of the gallery above which they’re tucked — a forgotten history nearly forgotten again.

There isn’t the only long-lost history remembered here with dignity, and with the help of paper. Laura Anderson Barbata, an artist who hails from Sinaloa, Mexico, worked for the past 10 years to repatrify the body of her countrywoman, Julia Pastrana, an entertainer who traveled Europe as “the Ugliest Woman in the World.” Pastrana’s embalmed remains, which continued to tour after her death in 1860, were most recently stored in a university basement in Oslo, Norway. For more fitting is the Catholic burial Barbara arranged for her, complete with funeral Mass, ceremonial garments, flowers from around the world, and a 1-meter-tall tomb as resting place. Tombstone rubbings tell some of this story, while an uncommon startlingly empathetic double self-portrait — the artist poses as the mirror image of Pastrana — hints at Barbara’s motivation. But finally it’s paper — or rather, a delicate two-minute animated video made from bits of cut, folded and twisted paper — that offers Pastrana the beautiful heartfelt send-off she never got.


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