

COMMENTARY

Papermaking and Social Action

By Jessica Cochran and Melissa Potter

“Social Paper,” our exhibition at the Center for Book and Paper Arts in Chicago, seeks to document what we see as a fundamental relationship between hand papermaking and social engagement through the work of 16 artists. These sculptures, installations, prints, books and ephemera, have been produced through a variety of paper-based strategies that link the act of making to social change.

Crafts such as papermaking have been embedded in the history of progressive social programs since the early 20th century, when the Arts and Crafts movement led to the establishment of craft communities as alternatives to the “alienation” of industrial labor. Jane Addams, who won a Nobel Prize for her work with low-income urban dwellers at Hull House in Chicago, believed that handicraft could restore the psychological well-being eroded by the hardships of overwork. Lucy Morgan’s Penland School of Craft in North Carolina was founded as what we would now call a micro-industry initiative to enable local women to sell their weavings to a national audience. Subsequently, Penland has trained generations of papermakers to consider hand papermaking as a medium of both community involvement and artistic production. Across the world and over many decades, papermakers worked in locations from the Venezuelan rainforest to the rice terraces of the Philippines.

In the 1960s and 70s, papermaking was further promoted as a medium of artistic expression through certain academic art departments, such as Cranbrook in Michigan, the founding of workshops such as Dieu Donn  Papermill and the Women’s Studio Workshop in New York, and initiatives at Columbia College Chicago, Pyramid Atlantic in Maryland, and elsewhere. Further energized by the postwar American Studio Craft movement and the more recent DIY movement, papermaking is now pursued by a broad range of artists.

The collaborative nature of the papermaking process, however, makes it a particularly effective medium for group engagement: Nick DuBois’ *Fabric of War*, for example, brought together 20 Palestinian and Israeli women bereaved by



Julia Goodman, *Guissipina Calagari* (2012). Image courtesy the artist.

conflict to make paper, working through one another’s narratives in a sometimes difficult space of understanding and difference. Meanwhile, the physical materials out of which paper can be made allow for visceral representations of time, place and experience, as when the Combat Paper Collective in the United States works with veterans to make paper from pulped combat fatigues. Kiff Slemmons has spent two decades working with the papermakers of Arte Papel in Oaxaca, establishing an art-based micro-industry.

Projects such as these raise critical questions about the role of specific media in the realm of socially engaged art. It is our hope that “Social Paper” will spark further discussion of this movement, which has never been properly researched and documented, and of the ways in which work, art and works of art interact. ■

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On the Cover: Annu Vertanen, detail of *Breathing Touch* (2012–13), woodcut on multiple sheets of machine-made Kozo papers, Unique image. Printed and published by the artist, Imatra, Finland. Photo: Jussi Tiainen.

This Page: Nomi Silverman, detail from *Living Rough* (2013), a portfolio of five lithographs and a title page in a hand-made paper portfolio. Printed by James Reed/Milestone Graphics, Bridgeport, CT. Co-published by Milestone Graphics and the artist, Glenville, CT.

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