

Pulp & Bind Artist Roundtable Discussion

This discussion took place on March 28, 2024. The panels were made up of Lela Arruza (LA), Georgia Deal (GD), and Rosa Dargan-Powers (RDP). The panel was moderated by BRAHM curatorial assistant Bella Sellosi, with the final question coming from BRAHM's curator of exhibition and collections Gabe Wilson(BRAHM).

BRAHM: Thank you for coming here, so I know that we're all here to talk about the current exhibition, Pulp and Bind, and how each of you relate to the subject. But I think we can start off with a bit more context. I'm curious if each of you could briefly describe your studio practice before we dive into paper.

RDP: Well, I guess my studio practice focuses on two different things. One is, handmade books that I make using, paste paper that I make, and some collage work, into journals and photo albums that are, really I consider it a craft item. I have that and also cut paperwork, which is usually based on my drawings, but other stories in my life as well.

And it's usually, when I work on those pieces, I work on it over a period of time. It takes a long time of designing it and cutting it. Whereas, the book making, the journal making, is something I can just walk in at any time and just start making, and, like the balance of those two things. So I'm doing a piece that is more, I guess has a more art base and one that is more rooted in craft.

LA: For my student practice, I just graduated from App State last May. So I'm just beginning my postgraduate art journey. Trying to find what studio space I can, living at home. In undergrad, I concentrated on ceramics, which has kind of transitioned into my paper craft work. I experienced college during the pandemic period. So with the lack of studio space for ceramics and access to kilns or firings, I ended up doing a lot more paperwork from my dorm room. So a lot of my paper craft is inspired by my identity and background as being an adopted, Asian American from China. So I'm really interested in looking at traditional Chinese porcelain vessel forms. And that's kind of, transitioned into my paper through the blue and white patterning that I do, using different origami techniques.

GD: You know, my practice came through being a printmaker, my MFA was in printmaking, and it started as kind of wanting more control over the entire work that I wanted, not only to work on the image, but, again, more interested in the surface and the ground. I wanted to make, originally, just use various, Asian papers in my work. But then I decided I wanted to kind of have a lot of control over the type of paper. So as a printmaker I got involved back when there were no paper making programs. Everybody was kind of self-taught, and we were like, using RIT dyes to pigment. Just anything, you know? And so we were kind of learning that way, teaching each other in universities, sometimes beaters would appear, but nobody really knew what they were doing. We put Elmer's glue in for sizing and then, you know, paper. And then and then the paper industry started informing artists about better practice.

But, so I have a paper studio just kind of taking a few notes. It's partially outdoors and it's covered. So in my personal practice, I make paper and teach workshops from early summer into the fall until it gets too cold. And I pack up the paper studio. And I do have a print studio with a

press, and I don't really teach from there, except on occasion for a very small group. And then I work on prints for the rest of the winter. And so it's a seasonal practice, but it suited me very well, you know, to work that way.

BS: So I want to dive deeper into why each of you chose paper as one of the main mediums. I know you use a variety of strategies, but can you talk about your relationship with it as a medium? What drew me to it initially and how it's evolved over time?

RDP: Well, I started my studio practice, as a weaver, and this was in the late 70s towards the late 80s. Then I went back to school to get my teaching certificate in MAT (Masters of Arts in Teaching), and, and during that coursework, I took a painting class and, just fell in love with painting, and the immediacy of painting. Whereas, you know, with weaving it is so labor intensive and, you know, wind off your warp, you dye them, thread the loom, you untangle the threads and all of this.

Whereas, when I started painting, it was just immediate, and I'm just right there and then if you didn't like something, you just covered up with something else. And so, I really loved the process. It was very joyful. I filled it up with a lot of texture, but, honestly, the paintings themselves were just barely okay. They weren't that interesting, and so I cut them into strips and started weaving them. And from there I just became more focused on paper and started collecting papers and, you know, making collage. And collage along with my paintings before I cut them up into strips. And somewhere along the way, well, for decades I've kept a dream journal. And I started making journals, and so, I noticed a class at Asheville Book Works, by Gwen Deihn on bookmaking and dream work. And so I signed up for that class in 2016 where we talked about and dialogued with our dreams for quite a while. And then, figured out ways to turn them into books. And everyone did their work in a different way. There were clay books and fabric books, and I just sort of tried a bunch of different things, including printmaking, to really tell my story effectively of my dreams. And just somehow landed, I don't even remember how, onto cut paper and these accordion books. And I've been doing that ever since.

LA: Guess for me, my paper journey started out when I was a kid. I was not raised culturally Asian, in my family. So, when I was in elementary school, I was kind of interested in exploring more and learning about Asian culture, whether that was through art, through media, anything I could find. So I found some origami books from my school library in elementary school. And, it was a craft that we would do it in art class in elementary school, something easy, something accessible to young children. I started learning more about the technique of Golden Venture Folding, which is a specific type of origami and I played around with this folding technique, creating little animals or little flowers, creating my own patterns as a kid.

I didn't like just sticking with the origami pattern that was handed to you. I really liked making my own patterns. So that was something I really enjoyed and had fun with, but I didn't take it very seriously, other than, like, a small craft hobby I could do as a kid. It wasn't until the pandemic, during college that I ended up getting back into Golden Venture Folding, which has led to the series of paper vessels that I've made.

I took my first clay class over zoom from my dorm room. It was an interesting experience. I laid a tarp on my dorm room floor that I shared with my roommate, and I set up my

laptop in front of me and had 100 pounds of clay stashed in the corner with all my clay tools. So it was interesting sharing that space with her and having to navigate how to do clay from a small, small room. But that led to my love for clay and has also again influenced the vessel forms that I really have come to enjoy, whether it's throwing on a wheel or hand building, or making them out of paper. So that transition back into paper was primarily just because of the accessibility of the material and the tools that I was made available to.

GD: I started paper, actually doing cast paper into plaster molds of images. They were images I made from clay, made a plastic mold, and then from there, cast paper into. So I was doing that for a while. And then I was just making flat sheets and it's like a lot of people trying to figure out what this material was capable of, and paint the paper cast that came out with it.

Early on, like in the late 80s, I was making dimensional, paper 3D forms, but, you know, I'm married to a sculptor. And it really dawned on me like I wasn't really addressing sculptural issues. It was like I had two dimensional images, wrapping forms. So I kind of decided this didn't really make real sense the way I was using paper. And so I just was making paper for prints and doing that for a number of years. And then I just kind of felt limited because I wanted to do less and less printmaking, but I couldn't get any specificity in the paper, I wasn't interested in pulp painting.

But I also was getting tired of how technical printmaking was, you know, I was an etcher and a lithographer. So I decided I kind of wanted to dive into the kind of looseness and the freedom that making paper gave me. And it was about this time there was a show at Rutgers University, at the Corcoran (Gallery of Art), and there were these new materials called formation aids, which allowed you to do very fine detail work or very controlled work. And so I kind of abandoned print altogether, just making images entirely with pulp. But they were specific images. It wasn't very painterly, it was much more controlled. Anyway, I did that, you know, five or so years and then kind of found this middle ground where it came back and incorporated print again with the handmade paper and you'll see that in my pieces down there. Maybe it appears that they're all printed, but there's a lot of those forms and parts of the drawings that are just handmade paper.

BRAHM: I know all three of you have your own subjects that you like to focus on dreams and identity and, and memory. But do you ever find that the medium itself, and how ripe it is for manipulation becomes part of the subject, has paper over grown into more than just the medium for you?

RDP: In my teaching practice, which I teach papermaking at ASU, I really encourage students to let the paper speak. And really focus on the expressive qualities you need to hand make paper. But honestly, in my personal practice, I love beautiful papers, and I try to use beautiful papers, but generally I think most of the content and expression comes from the images that I cut into it. Although I think the quality of the paper is definitely a contributor to, I guess, a good overall feeling of the work.

LA: I actually took paper making with Rosa when I was in my junior year, so it's an honor to be on the same panel with her right now. For my own work, I guess the paper I get is all recycled.

I'm really interested in how the paper kind of maintains and holds on to the history of where I got it from. So I've gotten a lot of paper, whether that's from classmates, in college or my family collects paper for me sometimes. I got a lot of paper from the recycling bins from the university library. I'm really interested in how whenever I fold my paper pieces, you can still usually see some of the text that's written on it or some of the pictures that were printed on the paper, because I'm interested in the recycled nature of reusing paper. Again, it was an accessibility thing for me. If I'm reusing that type of printer paper, I'm not spending a whole lot of money on materials. The focus of my work is primarily in the labor and time that it takes to make each of my pieces. All of the titles in my vessels are named after the number of individual modules that go into building it. So those tend to range from anywhere from 4 to 12,000 pieces, depending on how large that I'm building.

The history behind where I'm getting and sourcing my papers is an important part of my work, but also I am drawing upon the history of the Golden Venture Folding itself. I think some of it's written in my artist statement, but, for a brief history, the Golden Venture Folding technique that I utilize in my work, comes from, when a freighter ship called the Golden Venture crashed outside of New York. It was back in 1993. It held over 250 Chinese migrants that were coming over illegally to the U.S. to find work or for other reasons. And when the ship ran aground, the migrants were rescued from the waters and then put into prisons for a period of time. Some of those prisoners made these sculptural forms, whether it was images of the boat or images of freedom, such as the Eagle.

The Museum of Chinese America in 2017 had an exhibition where they collected some of the paper pieces that these prisoners had made during their time. They were highlighting just the community aspect of the pieces that were made there. Drawing notes on immigration and just Asian American history in that regard.

I was doing my thesis work, on researching that part of history and where the techniques and methods that I draw from that my work, where that comes from. And I was tying my own aspects of community and identity to create my own body of work in creating these paper vessels. So a lot of it has to do with the rich cultural history and ties back to my own personal identity. So I think it kind of expands outside of just the paper aspect.

GD: You know, when I first saw the question here, I thought, well, no, it doesn't really. It's not the subject of my work, the paper. But, because I work in a narrative format, and there's stories, there's dreams, there's memories that are the subject. Then I realized that what I've written before, that I've lied. I thought, you know, one thing that I really like, the juxtaposition of print and paper. Paper I can make. Images are soft and diffuse, just like memory is. And then I use printmaking for more specificity. It's just like memory is, some things are clear and sharp and some things are vague. And I've kind of played on that more in recent years. Or those hidden ideas or subliminal things are the parts that I make with the paper component. So it is part of the subject. It dawned on me. It was good to kind of see that question, make myself think about it.

BRAHM: Rosa mentioned that she's taught paper and Lela had the opportunity to take that. But my next question is for Georgia and Rosa, you've both taught extensively in the field. And I'm wondering if you can share a little bit about the experience of teaching the

really rich technical aspects of a very common medium that students probably have a lot of familiarity with, but probably don't know all of the opportunities it gives for art.

RDP: Well, in the beginning of the class, we sort of had two different processes going on. One, learning different variables and possibilities in handmade paper. But when students aren't pulling paper, they are making paper structures out of all sorts of paper, recycled paper. And, Leah did some of her amazing work on modules in that class. I encourage them, as they're learning, the potential of handmade paper and how and the expressive qualities of handmade paper, how to manipulate it and how to form. What kind of different inclusions work best and can really speak, the paper itself can really speak and express. They're also taking sort of non-precious papers and forming them into structures that, hopefully you wouldn't normally think of as paper. They're not using paper as just a simple substrate for applying drawing material or writing to.

And as we go forward in the semester and are working exclusively with handmade paper, we talk a lot about the potential of that paper and how to communicate your content through the paper itself and not just entirely rely on imagery to do that.

GD: I've taught, I think, 38 years in institutions, universities, art schools and I'm retired now. But I still do workshops because I really love teaching. And I think one of the things I love so much is, as a teacher, you have to stay open or you should be staying open to what the students, the artist, their ideas and what they bring to the table.

And so I'm constantly surprised and challenged by things that people come to my workshops today. But for all the years, you know, I would have sculpture students or graphic designers who all had a different agenda, what they wanted from it. And being challenged myself to learn how to help them and continually surprised at things. That I would say, 'I don't think this is going to work.' Any of you who teach have seen this repeatedly, that there's so much, so many different ideas people bring to the table. It's the most exciting part to me about teaching and, have just seen things over the years that have been really exciting and changed my practice. You know, I see something and go, '*oh, that was clever.*' You know? So, that's the part I've really enjoyed, and why I continue to (teach) workshops now that I don't have to deal with the bureaucracy, the grading or anything like that. I just have the people who want to be there, and it's kind of more fun than ever for me, you know? No committee meetings (laughs).

BRAHM: I'm curious if you can expand on what you learned from students that changed your practice

GD: People who wanted to incorporate things or a lot of sculptural stuff because I really don't do sculpture work. They wanted to build forms, and had to kind of see. And I know recipes for certain papers that do what their shrinkage is and how they are more likely to have sculptural applications.

I had a painter who was taking workshops with me all last summer. A teacher at UNC-A, who was pregnant, wanted to kind of get away from all the chemicals of painting and wanted to try and translate. And so she showed me these paintings that were gorgeous. And I really had to kind of think about this a lot, about how pigment, how you translate paper is glazing. How you

get transparent layering on paper the way you would with paint. The only one I was really stumped on, I was at Penland one year, and I had this young student who said, 'I want to find the intersection of hand-blown glass and paper.' She had the whole shebang, 'And I want to incorporate this, and I won't incorporate that.' We used to have a joke at the Corcoran they'd say, 'my dream is to do this.' And we'd say, 'take your dream and cut it in half.' Let's start at this level, and then you build, you know. I said, 'Take another glass class, we're doing paper in this course. You can keep going up and talking to the people in glass. But this is, this is like a whole ball of wax that a professional artist with many years experience has to kind of address. You don't do this fresh out of the gate. I'm sure there's a way.' But anyway, it's always been really interesting to me to get, you know, those kinds of challenges, with whatever people are coming into a workshop wanting to do.

BS: Lela, I have a question for you. So unlike many of the artists in the exhibition, your work is not pictorially oriented. How do you understand paper as a sculpture medium? You kind of covered it a little bit. But if you can dive in deeper, then can you talk about your vessels and why it matters that they're made with paper rather than the other materials that we normally associate with the forms?

LA: For me, I'll answer the last question first. I think it's important to me that they're made out of paper. I really like the aspect of you see it once and it interests you when you see it in the gallery, but when you look at it again, you have to go closer to see more of the detail to really be able to tell what it's made out of.

I think it's kind of fun fooling people sometimes when they don't really notice my work is made out of paper. A lot of people, when they see images of my work, think it's just automatically ceramics. But when you do look closer, you can see all of the individual modules that make up the total vessel piece. And I really love that aspect of working, modularly. I think working in the 3D form of sculpture has always been something that I've been more drawn to. Most of my work has not been focused on two dimensional stuff. I really am interested in how taking a 2D sketch from my sketchbook can come to life in the sculptural. I really like thinking of how large I'm going to build, how the paper's going to bend to form the walls of the vessel that I want to make. It's something that really drew me to clay throwing in the first place. I was really interested in the functionality of ceramics and throwing on the wheel, being able to use the art pieces that are making. It doesn't quite translate to my paperwork now. The paper vessels I make are not quite as functional in the same way that ceramics might be. You can't quite put water and flowers into them.

The other part of building sculpturally that I like and modularly, is that I don't tend to use adhesives or glue in my pieces. The tension between the paper pieces themselves, holds them together. I build it in multiple parts that stack on each other. So if I start building a piece, I'm not happy with the way that the walls are forming or that the shape is curving in or bending out, I can just take it apart. I always end up not quite satisfied with how a piece is going, and I'm able to just go back like you would, if you are knitting or crocheting a piece, you kind of just unravel it. I have seen a lot of people comment about how my work is so similar to knitting or weaving in creating the patterning on the vessels, as well as the, how it's built.

BS: And then more specifically, I'm curious, you mentioned earlier that your work is inspired by porcelain and the blue specifically, and you have a very specific shade of blue that is in all of your pieces. And I know that they are recycled paper so I'm curious, how do you find the blue pieces that shade?

LA: Most of the blue that's currently in the downstairs exhibition I actually got from a friend in college. They gave me a huge stack of leftover blue paper from voter registration one year. So that's where a lot of that light blue color comes from. Personally, for my own color palette, I am naturally drawn to warm pastels. So while I still wanted to maintain that connection to the typical and dark royal blue that's associated with the blue and white porcelain pieces. I added a little bit of my own color into the work by making it a little bit lighter and more pastel. I do experiment with some other colors of blue. Like right now I'm working, with this more aqua shade. It's kind of just whatever paper I have accessible to me in large quantities. I've been folding, I hope it hasn't been too distracting for people up here.

BRAHM: I don't want to give short shrift to the other sort of element of this exhibition, which is the book. And I actually think there's a strong, you know, we've been focusing on paper, but there's something to be said about the book as a form and approach to paper that I kind of can see in all of your work. I think, at its simplest, in some ways, when you think of a book you're thinking of paper translated into a structural medium, how do we organize paper? How do we structure paper?

Rosa, your cutouts are so seemingly simple, but structurally, to make them sound, I think, is perhaps one of your biggest challenges. I spent a lot of time in the gallery working to make them stand out just so and they do somehow.

And then, I think the structural nature of your work Lela is clear to anyone who looks at it and in some ways, you know, a book is not necessarily, a narrative form it most often is. But I think there is a way to read your vessels, as a series of pages that's sort of this larger structure that, you know, like any vessel is, is holding some sort of content. Yours may not be liquid, but it's certainly meaning and it relates to identity and the history of these technical approaches and form.

And then, Georgia, I think, you know, you were layering two sort of parallel techniques, the sort of approach to printing and handmade paper. But you were literally imbuing narrative into it.

GD: I make artist books as well. So yeah. And it always goes hand in.

BRAHM: But even I think your two dimensional work, this whole narrative literally embedded in the paper itself, which I think is fascinating. So I wonder if, if each of you wouldn't mind talking briefly about beyond, the specificity of paper, your relationship to that, the idea of the book, you know, the book form. And how do you see this for translate across your practice? I think it's emerging in a variety of ways with each of you.

RDP: I'll go back to the woven paper that I did, you know, with the paintings, the not so successful paintings that I cut up and started weaving. There was content in the painting. And sometimes there was writing, a lot of collage work as well as paint, but, forms that I chose to weave them in were all based, traditional forms like, Maori plate baskets or Victorian handkerchief baskets or Philippine six-footed baskets.

But altered them in a way that they could be wall pieces and not functional. They were nonfunctional, but I felt like they were, paying tribute to these craft forms, which were really beautiful and sort of co-mingling that craft with a more expressive art form. In that way to me, it told the story of the time and the people that those traditions emerged from. To me that held more content than my previous weavings, which were all very functional.

Then, as I started, working in cut work and handmade books, it just expanded the narrative. And I really love the opportunity of having a medium where I'm really telling a story and even a personal story, not just someone else's, honoring another person's story and time and history, but my own. I feel like all of my work is based in craft and a lot of it, traditional craft. The cut works that I do in my books. I was inspired by the Scherenschnitte of Switzerland and Eastern Europe. Those, traditional craft forms. And of course, there's beautiful cut paper in Mexico. I've always been drawn to that cut paper work, which is why I probably landed on it in the first place when I was trying to tell my own stories. But I still feel like I'm drawing on a cultural tradition and a craft. And of course, the journals that I make are certainly using very old techniques and traditions, but I'm using my paste papers, which I feel are very contemporary and personal, to my work.

LA: This is my first time thinking of my work as a book. But I do think that a lot of the importance of my work is from the content that it's holding. So I can see how it can be connected. I am using a lot of pages. so I guess that it's another tie back to books. A lot of content is written on those pages. I haven't read all of the paper that I have been gifted, but I have read a few and it's quite funny sometimes seeing, like, biology notes or other, like, study notes that people have written on, even if it's not printed. Sometimes people write handwritten messages on their notes. All the paper that I've been given has that history attached, whether or not I'm aware of exactly where it came from or, some pieces I know exactly where it came from or who gifted it to me and I know the context. But it's more taking all those memories that those pages had from their past life and then creating something new out of those. And tying the history of the Golden Venture folding technique itself is also something that's integral to my practice overall.

GD: What Rosa said kind of rang true for me, about cutting up pieces and using those and weaving them. I didn't really consider myself a book artist. Though I like to make books, you know, it's not really the focus of my practice, but I do make books all the time, and I've cut up prints that I felt were not successful. But I like parts of them, you know? And so, I was always the saying as an instructor, 'save your work, it tells you about your visual thinking. Hold on to it. Unless it's a total disaster, because this might be something you liked about it later,' So as long as the space permits you to keep things.

But I do that with my prints. I find components of them and make them into accordion books, because again, it's just reformatting things and like I said, it tells you something about

your visual thinking when you see things in a new format. I always liked books, I taught book arts for many years while I was teaching and, and kind of make them as a side practice. And my work is narrative. For a while, I was making work, these big rectangular pieces that were, you know, divided in half like the spread of a book, you know, the spread of two pages and the relationship of the images. I kind of think about books a lot.