

A Composite Portal: Tayo Heuser in the Studio

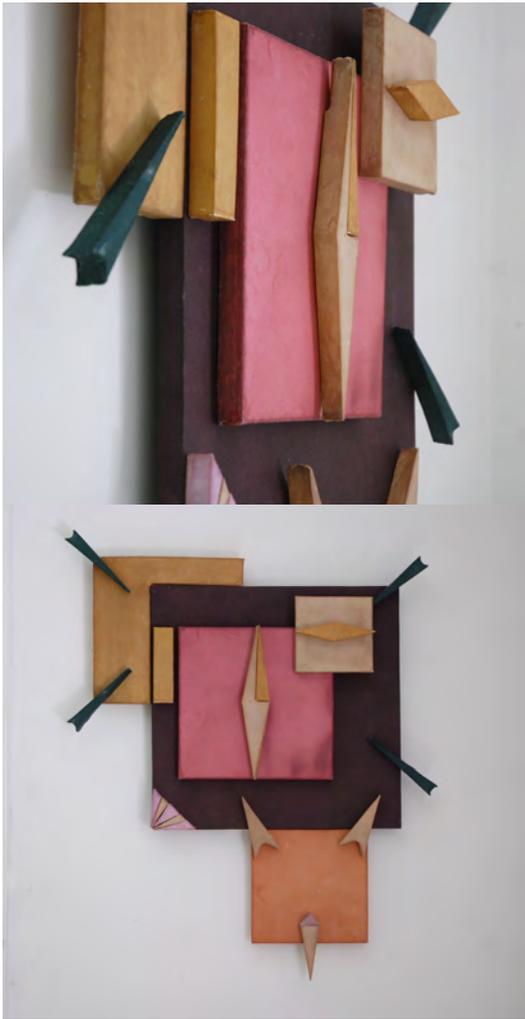
August 24, 2017 by Kathryn Scudier



When **Tayo Heuser** refers to her paper sculptures, you'll hear her say—more than once—“They're just different when they're hollow.” When looking at them, it's so simple to see what she means, but impossible to describe. Each complete work reaches at least thirty inches in height but is nearly weightless; they don't *hang* on the wall so much as visibly *rest*.

The individual elements of her sculptures, broad bases and oblique, tapered forms, are paper skins liberated from wooden armatures. They constitute three compositions, one of which she completely assembled during her Studio Workspace Residency in the papermaking studio.

The chevrons, triangles, and irregular shapes within these works fit together so precisely, it's surprising to learn that sculptural paper is not the central medium of Tayo's practice. In fact, much of her residency has been material research. Having begun working with handmade paper for a commissioned installation by the Phillips Collection in 2009, she's since continued adapting imagery from ink drawing and painting—her primary ways of art making—into pulp.



“I try to avoid narrative,” Tayo says, and instead opts for abstract geometric arrangements superimposed on loose, gestural washes of color. After participants of an artist critique at the BAU Institute suggested her newest body of sketches could exist in three dimensions, Tayo, who had continued working with handmade paper by creating an installation of windows, devised a way to construct polychromatic compositions like bas-relief.

Beginning with dyed and beaten abaca fibers, the sculptures start as freshly pulled sheets of paper that Tayo layers around waxed wooden forms. For the paper to exist later without an internal structure, even the smallest shape has to be wrapped several times to build strong, opaque walls. Once they’re dry, she carefully cuts out the support and reattaches the seams. Then, looking at the original sketches, she assembles the total work with adhesive.



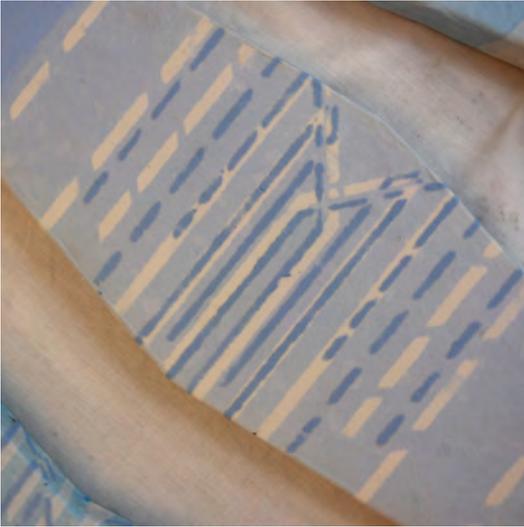


This arduous process requiring patient diligence and a careful hand is in good company with the rest of Tayo's practice. Paper has been more than a channel for imagery long before she began making her own; Tayo has stained, starched, treated, and hand-burnished paper for the perfect drawing surfaces. Her work is intentional and researched, her designs scaled up or down across media.

However, she prefers working large. "I like the bodily relationship of that scale. I look at my work as doorways, as openings," she continues. "I want the work to envelop the person and for them to feel that they could walk through it."

This new body of sculpture is nearly architectural, reminiscent of luminous stained glass—or another medium that captures and reveals the qualities of light and air—with red violet and golden hues. Tayo was raised surrounded by the tiled patterns and Roman ruins of Northern Africa and the textiles of West Africa. Color and space are rooted in her way of seeing the world, weighing heavily in the next steps moving forward. Toward the end of her residency, this meant stenciling saturated pulp paint onto fresh paper and wrapping sheets in different tints of blue around the form. When dried, cut, and reassembled, the depth of surface evokes another dimension in the work.





But where to go from here?

“I think about new projects all the time. In the morning, as I’m falling asleep...it’s always in the back of my mind: ‘Okay, what’s the next step? How’s this going to develop?’ Then, something happens on its own.” She laughs, “Wasn’t it Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec who said, ‘I have always been a pencil?’”

Check out her work in person in the Bristol Art Museum’s exhibition Perspectives from August 25 through October 15 in Bristol, RI!

Tayo Heuser holds her BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and her MFA from Vermont College. She’s exhibited work both nationally and internationally at institutions including the Phillips Collection Museum, Washington D.C., the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, the David Winton Bell Gallery at Brown University, the University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach, the Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin, the Weatherspoon Museum, University of North Carolina in Greensboro, the Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, NYC, and the Chateau de Fernelmont in Belgium.

