

# Paper Cuts/Social Fabric



Written By Elisa Turner, BT Contributor  
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## DONNA RUFF BURNS, SLICES, AND SHREDS TO ILLUSTRATE REFUGEE, IMMIGRATION TURMOIL

**P**aper has always had a presence in the life of artist Donna Ruff. Speaking in her studio at Laundromat Art Space in Little Haiti, she says, "It's kind of in my DNA, this whole thing of paper." Surrounding her are two new series of works, each reflecting the historic legacy of paper. They are vigorous, exquisite testaments to Ruff's talent. They bear witness to today's impassioned debates regarding the status of immigrants and challenges to our democratic institutions by the Trump administration.

One series, "La Prensa," adapts and enlarges newspaper photographs published in Mexico and Central America, showing migrant children and parents on their long journey to the United States. The photos have been transferred to large pieces of hanging fabric. Cuts and slices in the fabric intensify the photos' troubling impact, magnifying these records of the dislocating plight the families experience.

There's also her series "The Federalist Papers Undone." It re-creates individual pages, complete with archaic late-1700s typeface, from the Federalist Papers, a pivotal set of documents in U.S. history. Using a replica of the documents from the Library of Congress, Ruff employed a laser cutter to burn the text clear through a sheet of white paper. This process precisely outlined each obliterated letter with the brownish residue of singed paper. Then she placed this paper over black paper so that the intricate shapes of the text are visible as dark shadows.

Written by Alexander Hamilton, James



2.21.18, 2018. Courtesy of  
Rick Wester Fine Art

Madison, and John Jay, the Federalist Papers were essays written to persuade voters to ratify the U.S. Constitution. Reflecting on the historic papers, Ruff says, "When I start reading these things, I think we are in a crisis now like they were in a crisis back then."

Permeating Ruff's art is a passion for social justice. She's active in the social justice network of her Miami Beach synagogue, Temple Beth Shalom. With network members, she demonstrated against the detaining of immigrant children at the Homestead Detention Center.

Ruff was born in Chicago, moving to Miami Beach when she was eight years old. She's indelibly marked by those years in Chicago, where her grandparents owned a scrap-paper business. "When I was very small, I used to go to the warehouse and see these gigantic bales of shredded paper," she recalls. "My parents were always bringing paper home for us to draw on." Family lore has it that her great-grandfather was a bookbinder in Russia. On the bulletin board over her desk is a newspaper clipping with this boldface headline: "Veneration of Objects." Pausing to look at it, she says, "That idea of the veneration of objects just reminded me of when I was a kid and my grandmother used to save the books from the shredder and tape them together and give them to us." No wonder her art is included in the exhibit "CONstitutionX: Our Human Rights," opening September 28 at the Box Gallery, 811 Belvedere Rd., in West Palm Beach. "Box Gallery concentrates on socially conscious art," says gallery owner and curator Rolando Chang Barrero. Ruff uses "new forms and traditional material, as well as imagery which is extremely powerful," he adds. Her art "is one of the more perfect examples of work that should be seen today."

At the University of Miami, Ruff studied art, then received a master's degree in art history from Florida State University. In 1980 she moved to New York to forge a career in graphic design and illustration. Then in the late 1990s, she decided to pursue an MFA at Mason



Untitled (caravana1), 2019.  
Photo by Alain Fleitas

Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, where she made her own paper and studied printmaking. Once in grad school, Ruff says, she thought about how those early years had affected her, and why she was so attracted to paper as a material for her art. Soon she was making artists' books, that unique genre combining the form of books with visual arts traditions.

Since 1997, more than 60 venues have exhibited her art in cities that include New York, London, Madrid, Miami, Philadelphia, and Santa Fe, according to her website; among institutions that have collected her art are the Morgan Library, the Library of Congress, the Victoria & Albert Museum, and the Yale Art Gallery's Chasanoff Collection of Artists' Books.

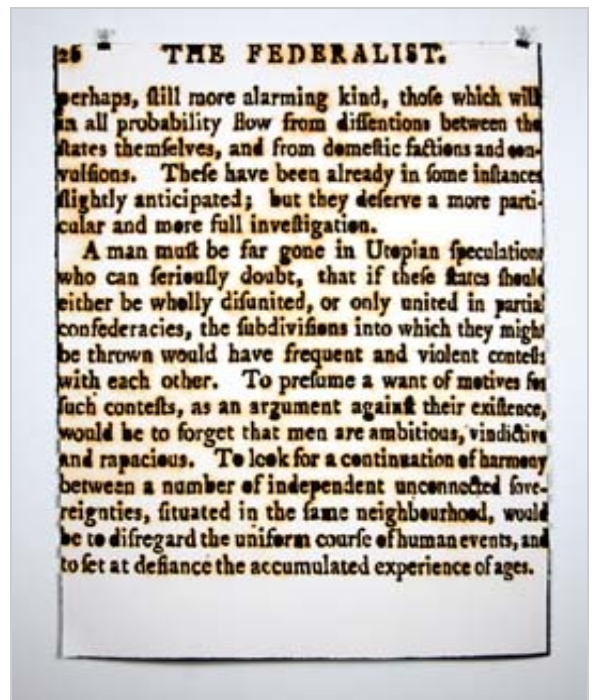
Around 2010, she moved to Santa Fe, where she did two residencies at the Santa Fe Art Institute. "I was tired of the New York City grind and decided to make a big change," she explains. Still, she adds, "I get the *New York Times* print edition every day, no matter where I live."

In a few years, it would provide urgent inspiration. As a mother and artist disturbed by newspaper photos of families fleeing their Syrian homes for Europe because of escalating violence, she used an X-Acto knife to cut intricate patterns into *New York Times* pages with photos of migrant families, both obscuring and spotlighting anew their fate. Thus she created "The Migrant Series," exhibited at Rick Wester Fine Art in New York in 2014.

Did she worry that it would appear she was trying to profit from others' misfortune? "I had my own thoughts about that," she admits. "What I decided to do was to send a certain percentage of what I was making to the International



La Prensa 5 (purple), 2019. Photo by Alain Fleitas



Federalist.26, 2019. Courtesy of the artist

Rescue Fund, which I did.”

She hopes her art keeps migrants’ ongoing challenges in front of people, as if to say, “No, this is not gone. Even though the news cycle has moved on, this is still an issue. This is something that happened.”

Having returned to Miami Beach in 2015, Ruff keeps documenting history. Recently she began the series inspired by migrant families. By Googling “la caravana,” she searched online for newspapers from migrants’ native countries, looking for press coverage in Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico.

She decided to work with fabric instead of paper. “I liked the softness of it, the fact that it was less fragile,” she says. A North Miami business printed fabric to her liking. After altering the color and composition of the original photograph for transferring it to fabric, Ruff took the printed fabric to a professional laser cutter, who cut it according her specifications.

Ruff explains that *La Prensa 5 (purple)* shows a smiling young woman running up an incline separating Mexico and the U.S., waving an American flag and glowing with determination. The photo captures her before she succeeds or experiences bitter disappointment. Scribbled laser cuts in the fabric convey the moment’s manic energy.

By contrast, *Untitled (caravana1)* is forlorn. A relentless network of laser cuts partially veils children and adults from sight. “It’s the breakdown of the image reflecting the breakdown of our ethics and morality,” says Ruff. “It’s in shreds.”



Donna Ruff: “When I was very small, I used to go to the warehouse and see these gigantic bales of shredded paper.”  
Photo by Gabriella Marks

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