

# HAND PAPERMAKING

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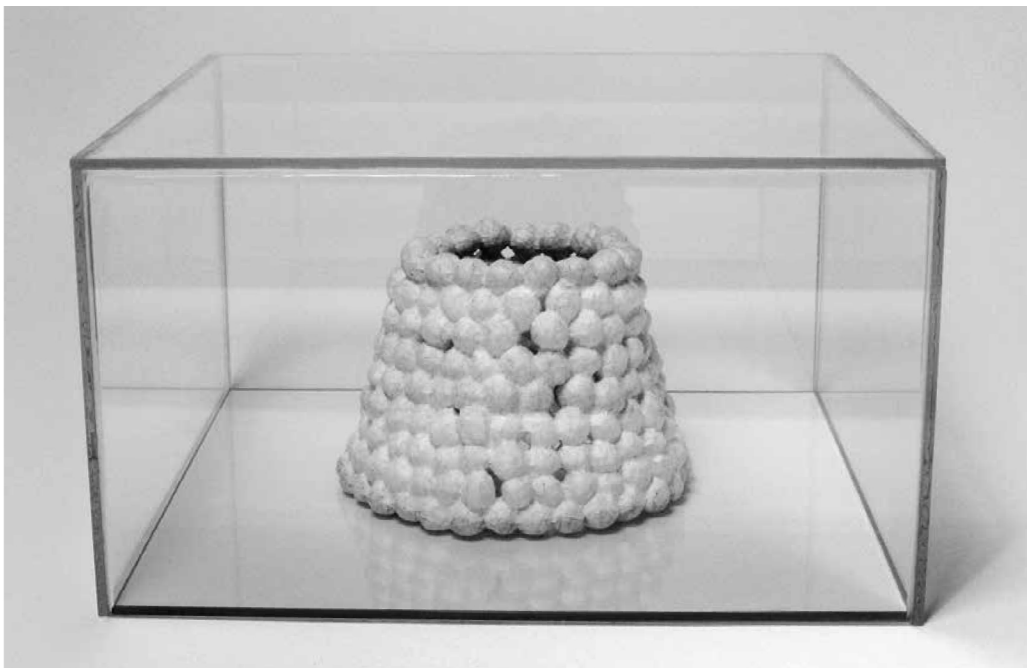
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FRONT COVER: Concept and design by Suzanne Oberholtzer.

BACK COVER: Michael G. LaFosse, Leatherback Sea Turtle, designed  
and folded in February 2013 using one uncut 19-inch square of O-Gami  
paper (two layers, laminated with methyl cellulose), 8½ x 9 x 2 inches.

Photo: Michael G. LaFosse, Origamido Studio.



## ON Working with Handmade Paper: A Conversation

CYRILLA MOZENTER &  
DREW SHIFLETT

ABOVE: Cyrilla Mozenter, *Fort Snowball*, 2011,  
10¼ x 18 x 17 inches, cut-and-pasted *Sekishu-*  
*kozo* handmade paper, hazelnuts, glass.  
OPPOSITE: Drew Shiflett, *Untitled #63*, 2011,  
12¾ x 20¾ x 1 inches, watercolor, ink, graphite,  
*Conté* crayon, handmade paper (abaca, linen,  
cotton, and cotton and abaca mix). Photo: D.  
James Dee.

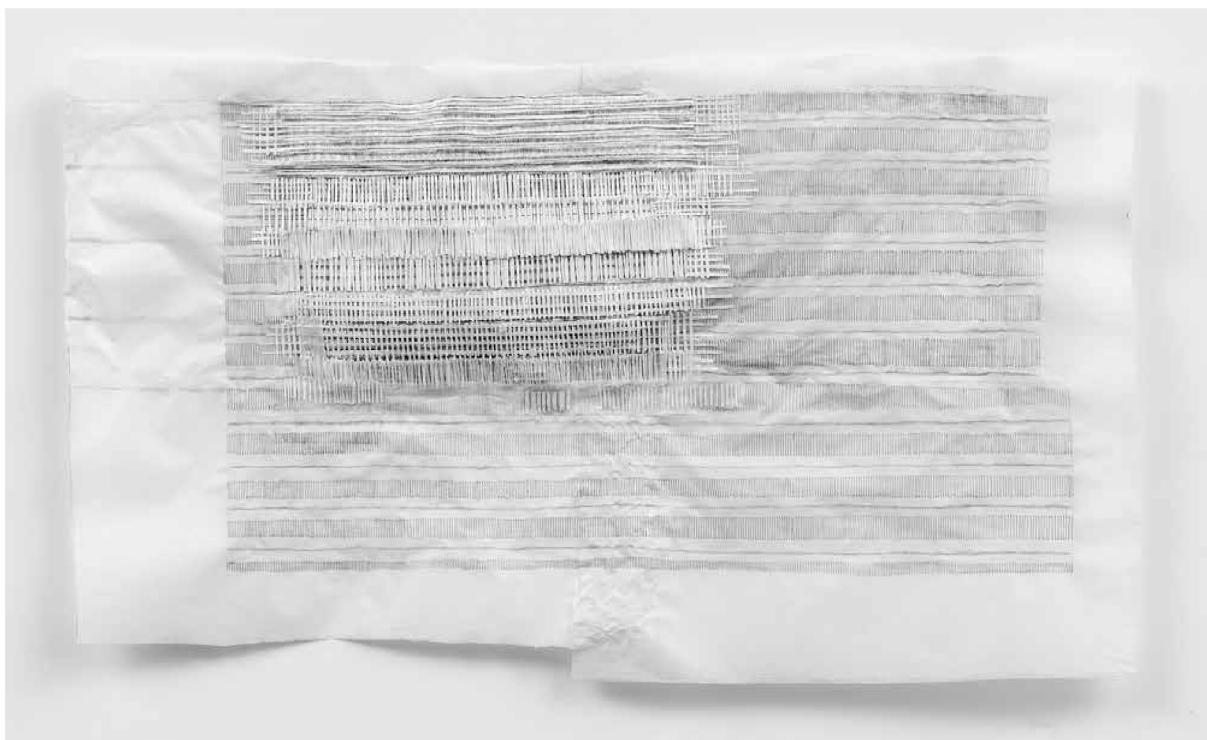
All photos courtesy of the artists.

**CYRILLA MOZENTER (CM):** Let's begin with how we first became engaged with handmade paper.

**DREW SHIFLETT (DS):** From 1979 through 2000, I cut strips of paper from paper bags, tracing paper, and toilet paper to build my reliefs and sculptures. Shortly after this, I began to look for ways to push the tactile, layered quality of my work further. Several artists recommended investigating handmade paper, because they thought I would like it. Your show at The Drawing Center also contributed to my curiosity regarding the possibilities of handmade paper, because of the textures and rich quality of your drawn lines on the paper. In 2002, I had to prepare for an exhibition at SmackMellon in Brooklyn, and I used this as an opportunity to explore handmade paper. I enrolled in a papermaking class at Dieu Donné to familiarize myself with the different papers available, after which I worked with the Dieu Donné staff in their studio for a few days. This is when I developed a serious interest in handmade paper. I consider all of my art as drawing or an extension of drawing, so handmade paper was particularly enticing as a material to incorporate into my work.

**CM:** The first handmade paper I used was Okawara, a chance find. We made an immediate connection. The "Very well saint" series shown at The Drawing Center in 2000 was the result. As I described this Japanese-kozo-and-sulphite paper in the exhibition catalog: "The paper chosen has a relationship to light, beautiful feathery edges, and is a color that hovers. It has the quality of refinement: thin, with a delicate porous surface. Sensitive, it bruises easily, but is surprisingly tough. (It can take abuse.) A worthy opponent/collaborator, it resists." Each drawing/relief/collage involved a double layer of Okawara, sewn together at the top edge. Cuts, punctures, and piercings functioned as pathways to the space inside. Marks were made with pencil, eraser, scissors, needles, or by the inclusion or removal of felt, paper, silk thread, Band-Aids, toothpicks, discarded popsicle sticks, and wooden ice cream spoons found on the street. The project was also my first "collaboration" with Gertrude Stein, and it was pivotal.

Beth Finch, who was curator at The Drawing Center, suggested I check out hand papermaking at Dieu Donné. This led to a residency in which I collaborated



with the Dieu Donné staff to make beautiful 40 x 60-inch paper, a linen and abaca combination, that I used in double layers and opposed with chance techniques involving peanuts and beans along with stitching and words and phrases from Stein's *Tender Buttons*.

Tell me about your process and the specific papers you are using now.

**DS:** I use several different papers—abaca; linen; cotton; flax; and abaca, linen, and cotton combinations. I don't always know exactly what pulps are in the papers I choose, but I select the sheets according to their surfaces, textures, and colors. The colors are usually natural, with no added pigments, whites, off whites, beige, brown, and maybe a hint of yellow. What I rely on the most for my work are thin, transparent sheets of abaca and linen, because I layer the paper and like to keep a translucent effect as the surfaces of the pieces become dense and woven. Sometimes, patches of cheesecloth are also interwoven with the paper. I cut and glue thin strips of paper in rows of grid-like lines moving horizontally across the reliefs. In between the layers of cut paper, I draw rows of lines on the surface of the papers with watercolor, pencil, ink, and Conté crayon. The lines are precise but not particularly uniform, contributing to unpredictable transitions as I'm working.

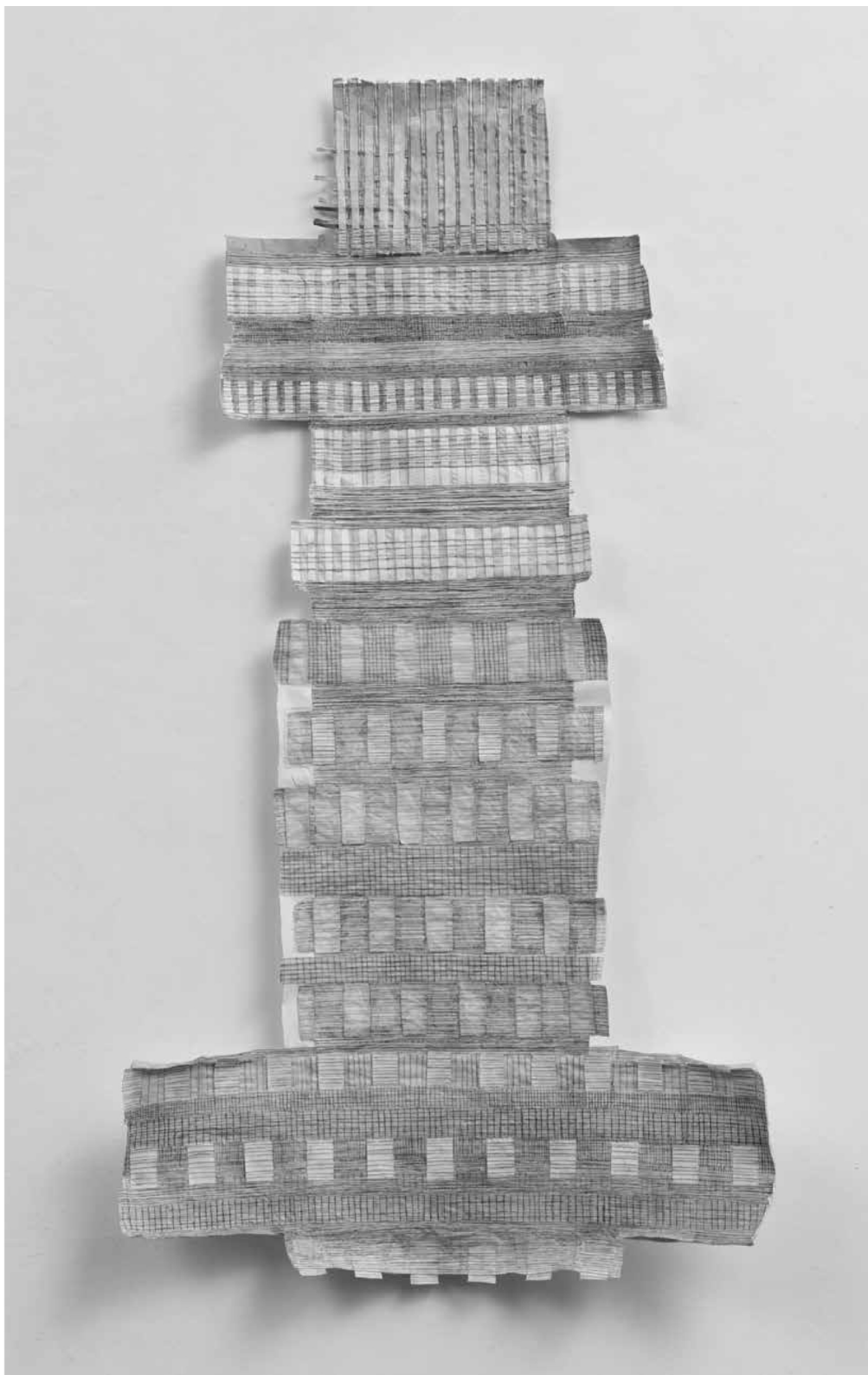
I do things, when making the pieces, that are at odds with the practical use of the materials, such as applying watercolor to thin paper that's not meant to absorb water. This causes the paper to buckle like crazy. The watercolor alters the original surface of the paper, making it more difficult to draw on. The first time I did this, it was an accident, and I was irritated by the result, but I continued to work on wet, thin paper. Eventually the buckling and drawn

lines over the cockled paper became a characteristic of my work. I'm attracted to the tension created by unlikely combinations. There are many instances of accidents that turn into deliberate practices, and there are also accidents that don't become habitual, but simply lead to new ideas in particular pieces. During most of the construction of my pieces, they look and feel disjointed, but through a circuitous route, as everything merges together and the pieces become more objectified, they flow and gain in continuity.

What I love about paper when I'm drawing on it, is the texture and the way the surface takes the mark; and what I love about paper when I'm cutting it, is also the texture and surface, the way the scissors slice into the paper, the dryness and brittleness of the paper, the translucency and delicacy, the flexibility, the thinness and thickness of it. The surfaces of certain cotton papers are buoyant, almost like cushions. A pencil or watercolor mark on this type of paper is quite different than it is on a thin piece of paper. I relish the tonal color, and the sensual and tactile qualities of each sheet of paper. Handmade paper has a life of its own before a mark is ever drawn on it—a transcendent warmth and vitality.

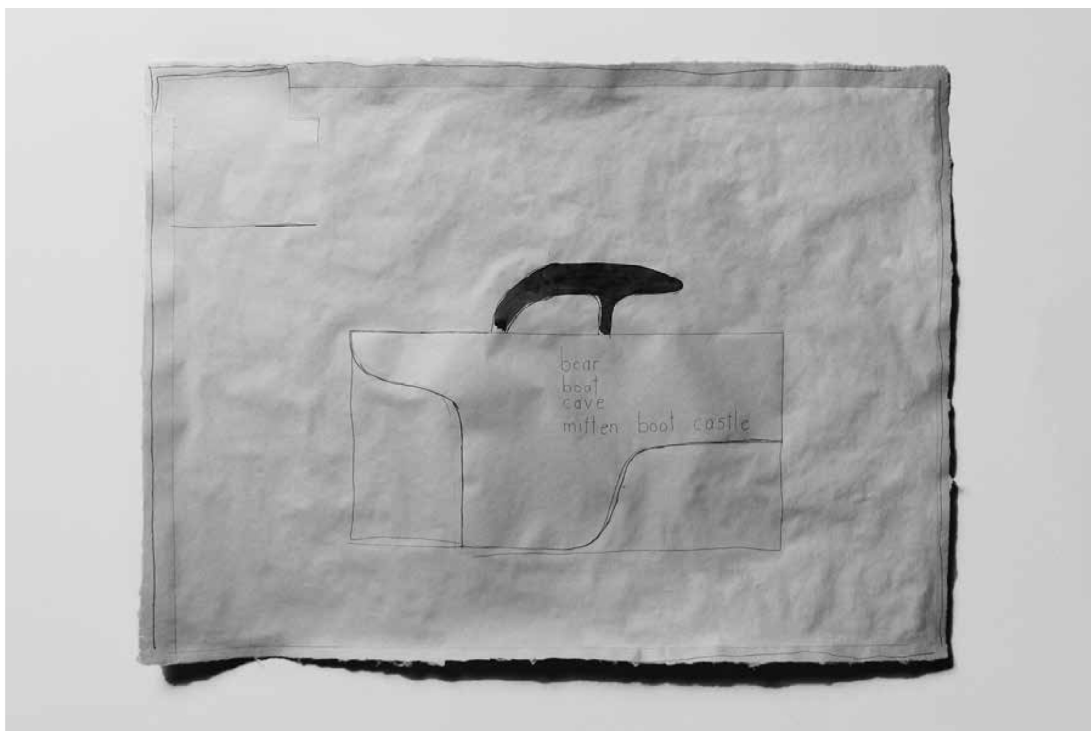
**CM:** For the last several years I have been working with three different handmade papers in three distinct bodies of work in which I flirt with narrative in different ways. As each sheet is unique and specific, it elicits a different response.

Letters, words, and some recognizable imagery having to do with the Arctic emerge from the first, a 22 x 30-inch beautiful, creamy-colored cotton and abaca combination that I assault with scissors, pencil, glue, toothpicks, gouache, and watercolor. Every move I make is a violation, and the paper buckles and bends in



*Drew Shiflett, Untitled #55, 2009, 47½ x 27 x 4 inches, watercolor, ink, graphite, handmade paper (abaca, linen, flax, and cotton and abaca mix). Photo: D. James Dee.*

OPPOSITE: *Cyrilla Mozenter, We had intended if it were a pleasant day to go to the country it was a very beautiful day and we carried out our intention #47 (poem), 2008, 22 x 30 inches, pencil, watercolor, gouache, toothpick, cut-and-pasted pigmented cotton and abaca handmade paper on pigmented, cotton and abaca handmade paper.*



reaction. Sometimes I start on one side of the paper, cut shapes out, turn it to the other, glue the shapes back in with skinny paper strips, and cut some more. I know a move or mark I've made is successful without even looking; it's the kinesthetic sensation: how much did I mean it? I continue in this ruthless manner until the seemingly impossible resolution occurs.

The second is an 18 x 24-inch soft gray cotton that is spectacularly receptive to pencil marking. I think of the soft gray as the atmosphere of hiddenness, of twilight, fog, and shadows. I use these papers to make drawings with pencil from observation. I draw Peruvian knitted finger puppets, which I've been collecting for a decade. I put one on my finger, one at a time, and draw without looking at the paper. I might draw the same finger-puppet creature or character several times or superimpose one over another. Images come and go until unexpected relationships occur and an image emerges that I can only describe as having the quality of a dream.

The third is Sekishu, a white, Japanese mending paper of kozo fiber, that I use primarily with hazelnuts, but also with wooden ice-cream spoons, toothpicks, archival corrugated cardboard, pumpkin seeds, and books. I cut it into  $\frac{1}{4}$ - and  $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch strips, then into short segments. Holding the pieces with tweezers in my right hand while applying Jade glue with a brush in my left, I adhere them to build forms and surfaces. White-paper-coated hazelnuts are like miniature, preserved snowballs. In fact, they are seeds. Each one requires a great deal of attention. When grouped they form patches of tundra, a fort, or a snowball that "packs heat"—playful and dangerous. In all instances there are many layers of paper. The more layers, the whiter the snow. The more snow, the longer the resulting forms will be preserved.

Unlike machine-made paper, which is neutral and predictable, each sheet of handmade paper has its own character; it is unique.

We are both drawn to this uniqueness—and we are both drawn to the sensual qualities of handmade paper as well. While I am in awe at the fineness of each sheet, I dare myself to mess them up, and delight in doing so. The puzzle of reconciling these opposing feelings engages me. My best work comes out of this struggle.

**DS:** Yes, I agree, and I can see this from the pieces you've shown me recently in your studio. Handmade paper is also wonderful to work with because of my relationship with the process of drawing. I like to work as directly as possible, with a minimal amount of materials and tools, as I tackle the complexities of line and form. Handmade paper, with its variety and tactile dimension, is perfect for this, and leads me to a particular place in my imagination I wouldn't have access to otherwise. This is the thrill of working with handmade paper.

**CM:** In closing, let's talk about time in relation to our work processes.

**DS:** Making art is a way for me to slow down time. With each stroke or line, I feel as though I'm marking off time, becoming more aware of it. It's as if, for a few seconds, I have the experience of existing and the memory of it.

**CM:** I am impatient, impulsive, and don't like to sit still, while my work is labor intensive and takes boatloads of time and concentration. I feel there is a demon in me that compels me to embark on adventures that require the very qualities I think I don't have, or with which I am uncomfortable. Contending with the demon mobilizes my survival skills. I feel that making decisions in my work process is a matter of life and death—and that's the way I want it.