Paper Making: Finding the Scaffold

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Paper Making: Finding the Scaffold

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Paper-making: Finding the Scaffold
Tino Ward

Abstract

Paper making combines a proclivity towards using found materials and a need to produce my own painting supports. This first of this thesis chronicles the reasons I arrived at paper as my chosen medium, the objects I began to produce, and the projects that stemmed from those early experiments. The second half outlines my final work, a 1:4 scale model in paper of the 1966 exhibition 10, held in New York at the Dwan Gallery, which showcased the early minimal works of Carl Andre, Jo Baer, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, Robert Morris, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Smithson, and Michael Steiner.

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Paper was invented almost a thousand years ago in China in the same spirit of recycling as I have been conducting my work for the past ten years in painting, sculpture, and now, paper. Ts’ai Lun, a eunuch working in what is now the Hunan province, legendarily beat “the bark of trees, hemp waste, old rags, and fishnets” into a pulpy mass, diluted it in water, strained it through a screen, and finally dried it to make the flexible fibrous mat now known as paper. I’ve habitually collected items such as wood, styrofoam, rocks, leaves, rags, old paintings, and other fragments as supports and mark-making devices (fig. 1). At first this compulsion was economic, eschewing store-bought canvases and nice paint for free materials found in the streets, like scrap plywood and cans of house paint. My pragmatism quickly grew into a passion for finding new and unusual objects for the hybrid of painting and sculpture I was starting to develop. Entering graduate school, my dilemma was to find a way to be less reliant on scavenging for supports and instead, using recycled materials, produce the supports to make my paintings. I tried using pieces of cloth as supports (fig. 2), but they were too easily purchased to feel meaningfully obtained. I worked in clay, which was alluring as a malleable, receptive surface for mark making (fig. 3), but a somewhat readymade material subjected to extreme, energy-intensive processes I found lacking in approachability. I also worked with a lot of found paper, mostly old blotters from the printshop and stray sheets of drawing paper.

At the same time, I was researching the French painting group Supports/Surfaces. I was attracted to the way they used everyday bric-a-brac like dishcloths and fishing nets as painting supports, and simply folded, dipped, or stamped the pieces to make a kind of loose, vernacular abstraction. In the studio, along with pieces of cloth, I was playing with procedures of folding and dyeing sheets of paper (fig. 4). As these studies piled up into stacks, it became apparent that paper was a fairly important material for me. Around November 2018, I tore up some paintings on paper, soaked the scraps, and formed them into a lump which I covered with clay and painted (fig. 5). Shredding the paintings sent me back to 2015 when I was making rough, homemade paper from old Art in America magazines and junk mail (fig. 6). Back then, I used a drill to pulp the paper and poured it onto a screen to make the sheets.
Fig. 1

*Arcadian Thrift*, 2012-2018

Dyed cloth, burlap, various painted objects

Temporary installation in Meadows display case, Fall 2018

Dimensions variable
Fig. 2

*Untitled*, Fall 2018

Dyed and painted cloth, terracotta, twine

Dimensions variable
Fig. 3
Bowls, pots and objects in stoneware, Fall 2018.
Dimensions variable
Fig. 4

*Untitled*, Fall 2018

Folded and dyed found paper

Two sheets, 24” x 18” each
Fig. 5

*Brain Case, Fall 2018-Spring 2019*

Paper, clay, ink and acrylic paint

6" x 6" x 10"
Fig. 6

*Art in America Paper, 2015*

Paper mounted on wood

36” x 24”
I thought if I made some improvements in my process, I could make a more durable and usable support. My research showed that I was missing a few key components in 2015: a vat to dilute the pulp and dip the mould into, felts to transfer (couch) the sheets onto, and a press to remove water and strengthen the sheet. I studied as many methods and designs as I could find and drew up plans for a mould and deckle, a press, a vat, and a couching table to lay the fresh sheets upon the felts. After weeks of building and sourcing the tools and materials, I made my first sheet from recycled photo studio backdrops pulped with a drill (fig. 7).

Soon I learned that strong, durable paper is made from rags—old worn out textiles—a cheap and plentiful resource. I became obsessed with finding a Hollander beater that could process cotton and linen cloth into paper pulp. Through a series of connections, I found out about an unused, 35 year-old beater for sale and after six months of emails and calls, I bought it and traileried it to the studio.

Since June 2019 I have dedicated the studio to paper production. While making sheets is something I am working to master, it isn’t my only objective. The process of soaking, shredding and macerating an endless variety of materials into a state of complete liquid entropy fascinates me. Previously, found objects were kept intact as a working surface, and those objects were an integral part of the meaning of the work. Now, pieces of clothing and paper are broken down into an unrecognizable slop and formed into something new. Between each step in the paper making process, I find there is plenty of room for experimentation. Once strained, cast, or handled in any number of ways and dried into a desired or accidental form, the chaotic pulpy mass is stilled with time to become a surface, standalone object or something in between.

Making paper is also a great way to condense a lot of unwanted stuff. Before leaving last June for a two-week trip to work with the book-artist Helen Hiebert at her paper studio in Colorado, I had about 40 gallons of foul-smelling recycled paper pulp to address. I built a 36” x 60” screened wood frame, poured the pulp in, pressed it down, and placed it in front of a fan. In two weeks it cured into a 3” thick slab of dry odorless paper (fig. 8). By Fall, the studio was filling up with sheets of colored paper and painted lumps of leftover pulp (fig. 9-10).
Fig. 7

First sheet of paper, June 2019. 13” x 21” recycled paper.
Fig. 8

*Waste Slab #1, 2019-20*

Paper, latex enamel

60" x 36"
Fig. 9

51 sheets of linen/cotton paper drying on the studio wall, Fall 2019.
Fig. 10

*Lump with dots*, Fall 2019

Paper pulp, wax, latex enamel

4” x 6” x 3/4”
During a visit in October, Professor Michael Corris pointed out that the simple, rectangular, “axiomatic” forms like the slab and the sheets were reminiscent of Minimal art, a charge I couldn’t deny. He suggested that instead of hinting at the Minimalists, I try remaking several works in paper. The idea was both amusing—to tackle such brawny, looming work in a flimsy, humble material—and exciting—to liberate myself from the quest for originality and instead exercise what Robert Morris called “agency reduction.” This was at a moment when I was producing a lot of material, but didn’t what to do with it. Remakes provided something like a scaffold to put the paper on, helping to give it form and push it into new territory.

I used grey paper pulp in the studio to remake Splashing (1966)—Richard Serra’s swaggering work of molten lead ladled into the base of a wall (fig. 11). I poured buckets of pulp onto a makeshift burlap strainer, scooped spoonfuls out and flung them across the room. Little blobs of paper ricocheted from the baseboard around the room and onto my body. Even though the intense physicality involved in making paper attracted me early on, using pulp in this way highlighted the performative potential of the material. The performance showed how pulp, like Serra’s lead, could be used to cast various elements of architectural space. As a result, the question shifted from what to put on the paper to what to put it on.

I was looking at Niele Toroni—not a Minimalist, but definitely an enigmatic painter with a minimal approach. In March 2020, I made 305 2” x 2” sheets of red linen paper and installed them on a wall to mimic Toroni’s way of painting: individual brush imprints made with a #50 brush in any color spaced 30cm apart and staggered in horizontal rows on any surface. The paper in this work did not function as a support: the paper became the paint, and the wall acted as the support. Each sheet functioned as a brush stroke, even convincing some viewers that the paper was in fact paint. In reality, the paper was several degrees removed from an actual brushstroke. But the way each sheet, uniquely formed, was applied to the wall with a stick echoed the act of painting. Making the work brought me back to the idea of the scaffold. The sheets were supported on Toroni’s scaffold—his measurements, method, and specifications—without which the work would be unrecognizable.
Fig. 11

*Splashing*, Fall 2019

Paper pulp, plastic

Dimensions variable
Fig. 12

*Tino or Toroni? Spring 2020*

Red linen paper, 2” x 2” each

10’ x 31’
As I thought about the meaning of remaking certain artworks, I started thinking about them simply as scaffolds that the paper, the thing I was so busy making, could be put on. For me, a scaffold functions as both a physical and conceptual support for the work. The scaffold can be the mechanism that supports the work, like a stretcher, armature, or object, or a tool which produces the work, like a mould and deckle forming a sheet. Scaffolds are used throughout the paper making process which involves transferring materials from vat to mould to felts to drying box. The scaffold is also the idea the work is built on, whether it’s throwing pulp in a corner or arranging little sheets in a grid. The scaffold guides the work into form and delivers the content as well.

*After 10* is my final project, and uses as its scaffold *10*, Virginia Dwan’s 1966 exhibition of Minimal painting and sculpture. The idea to remake the entire exhibition manifested with Professor Corris last October. Although I was familiar with the ten artists in the show, I didn’t know much about the show itself. As I studied the catalog images, I found that all of the works were easy to imagine in paper, but this is not to say that coming to a decision about how to do it was simple. The Dwan Gallery catalog was spare and provided only a checklist with the titles, materials, date and dimensions. There were two photographs of the installation and one photograph for each of the works. Since the artists couldn’t agree on a text that fairly represented the diverse approaches and ideas of the group, no essay was included. The fuzzy black and white photographs, and lack of any indication of color in the titles, revealed little about what some of the works actually looked like.

The nearly blank paintings by Ad Reinhardt, Jo Baer, and Agnes Martin suggested large, cast sheets (figs. 13-15), and the geometric sculptures by Michael Steiner and Robert Smithson could be cast solid using simple wooden forms, much like the first slab (figs. 16-17). The titles revealed surprising resonances with the language and composition of paper, like Agnes Martin’s *Leaves* (1966) and Sol LeWitt’s *A5* (1966) (fig. 18). I misread Smithson’s title *Alogon* (1966)
Fig. 13

*Ultimate Painting* #39, 2020

Recycled paper mounted on wood

30” x 30”
Fig. 14

*Horizontal Flanking, 1/4 scale, 2020*

Recycled paper, latex enamel

Two parts, 30" x 42" each
Fig. 15

*Leaves*, 2020

Linen and cotton paper, graphite

36” x 36”
Fig. 16

*Untitled (Steiner)*, 2020

Recycled paper and aluminum enamel paint

14” x 41” x 6”
Fig. 17

*Algodon*, 2020

Cotton, ink

7 units: square surfaces 1 1/2", 1 3/4", 2", 2 1/4", 2 3/4", 3"
Fig. 18
A7, 2020
Cotton paper, mesh, wood
42” x 42” x 14’’
(Greek, meaning the irrational soul of man) as *Algodon* (Spanish, meaning cotton), and thought the work should be cast in cotton, even after realizing my mistake.

To gain a better understanding of certain pieces, I looked into some artists’ wider bodies of work. Upon learning about Robert Morris’ sprawling sculpture (1968) made mostly of textile waste, it led me to cover his untitled plywood cube in sheets of grey rag paper (fig. 19). During our seminar trip to the Chinati Foundation, I noticed how Judd almost exclusively worked with sheet material. For his six identical boxes, I covered wooden frames with the same rag paper as the Morris, darkened to achieve the look of galvanized sheet metal (fig. 20).

Tracking down recent color photographs of the work was difficult and in some cases impossible. I had to rely on primary sources to work out certain details. For example, I found out that the thin band of color separating the black border from the white field in Baer’s *Horizontal Flanking, large scale* (1966) was “blue-green and green-blue” from a small detail in Lucy Lippard’s contemporary review of the show. I found several color reproductions of *Leaves*: one tan, one blue, another grey. Since Martin’s strikingly similar *Leaf* (1965) at the Fort Worth Modern is a warm tan color, I decided on a tan mixture of linen and cotton rags. With no other information to go on, I counted the lines on the Martin and Carl Andre’s slab of ceramic magnets (fig. 21) and determined the proportions by measuring closely.

Early on in the project, I decided to make all of the work at 1:2 scale (which ended up at 1:4 due to an oversight in simple math) mostly for space constraints. However, paper shrinks as it dries, so the decision to scale down happened to produce some fitting associations. I like to believe they were made full size but drastically shrunk as they dried. At a smaller scale, and in a lighter material, the works aren’t nearly as imposing, bulky, large, or weighty as the originals. Modern paper production is just as industrial as steel, aluminum, or plywood. But my cottage-industry operation, and insistence on making everything myself, de-emphasizes the industrial quality of the original sculptures and the artists’ reliance on fabricators to make the work. Where Judd and others sought to diminish the evidence of the hand, I want mine to be evident.
Fig. 19

*Untitled (Morris)*, 2020

Linen and cotton paper and latex enamel on wood

4’ x 4’ x 2’
Fig. 20

*Untitled (Judd)*, 2020

Linen and cotton rag paper, latex enamel, wood

6 paper boxes, 20” x 20” x 20” or 12’ 8” total
Fig. 21

Field, 2020

Recycled paper

21 3/4” x 21 5/8” x 1/4”
The task of remaking an entire exhibition motivated me because each work presented its own set of problems concerning structure, materials, and technique. The works pushed me to improve my skills in casting and sheet production. Instead of expecting everything to fall into place easily, I gave myself time to think, sketch, read, and make many failed experiments over the last five months. *After 10* forced me to engage with and try to understand art that has beguiled and challenged me ever since visiting the Dia Center in Beacon, NY 17 years ago. The works there, like Smithson’s piles of glass, Martin’s spare canvases, LeWitt and Judd’s volumetric permutations, and Dan Flavin’s fluorescent compositions (fig. 22) haunt me to this day. Most of the work there doesn’t lend itself to easy explanations. I’ve seen the work of these ten artists countless times, and even studied some of them closely, but it’s taken me many years to build an appreciation for their ideas about space, materials, and process and site. The results of remaking these works are startling and invigorating in their pared-down simplicity—a far cry from my colorful, pattern-driven paintings. I needed a good deal of restraint to not cover everything in polka dots, and to this end the work has revealed new possibilities for paper to act not only as a support for work but as the work itself. Monochromatic paper; unadorned surfaces; material as material; scale in relation to the body. Even though these ideas were put forward 50 years ago, this project has pushed me to consider them in relation to my work as it progresses along its own trajectory. Is a blank sheet of paper enough to make an artwork? Maybe now it is.
Fig. 22

*Daylight and Cool Light*, 2020

Paper, wood, fluorescent

24” x 4” x 4”
Notes

1 Hunter, Dard. *Papermaking: The History and Technique of an Ancient Craft*

2 Supports/Surfaces was a short-lived group of French artists that formed in 1968 in the South of France. The members, stoked by the revolutionary foment of the times, sought to question and destroy certain values and assumptions historically embedded in painting, resulting in works like Daniel Dezeuze’s bare stretchers, Claude Viallat’s unstretched stamped cloths, Noel Dolla’s use of everyday materials for supports, and Patrick Saytour’s preoccupation with kitsch, base materials and procedures of folding and assemblage. See *Support/Surfaces* published by Ceysson Editions d’Art 2014.


4 Helen Hiebert worked as education coordinator at Dieu Donne paper mill in New York City. She is a paper artist and bookmaker in Colorado. While in Colorado Helen arranged a visit with Ray Tomasso, another noted papermaker, in Englewood, Colorado. Ray showed me his studio, tools, books, gave some interesting insights and a sink and garbage disposal to make a makeshift beater. I made the beater and used it until I got the Hollander.

5 Likewise, in art practices that utilize chance operations like John Cage’s, or existing forms, like artists who appropriate, they are engaging in what Robert Morris called “agency reduction.” I take this to mean that the artist is consciously diminishing their power over the work’s development. From a talk given by Morris at the University of Chicago, 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9SEZtFsLIU&list=PLIQjkHf-g1TO2e_jA-f-VKGPyooVshAOon](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9SEZtFsLIU&list=PLIQjkHf-g1TO2e_jA-f-VKGPyooVshAOon)

6 Niele Toroni (Swiss, b. 1937) was a founding member of the French painting collective BMPT, formed in 1966. Along with Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, and Michel Parmentier, Toroni decided in 1966 to make paintings in the same way no matter the support or site, and has held to this practice since then. I identify with Toroni’s belief that he is not an artist but a painter/worker. See *Painting Zero Degree*.

7 Dwan Gallery, 10. New York 1966. Curated by Ad Reinhardt, Robert Morris, and Robert Smithson, 10 included one work each by Reinhardt, Morris, Smithson, Carl Andre, Jo Baer, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, and Michael Steiner. Though none of the artists identified as Minimalists, the show was an early iteration of what became known by name and style as Minimal Art.

8 There are only two copies of the catalog in the WorldCat system, and one of them, conveniently, was at the TCU library in Fort Worth, TX.


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