

kolaj

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Something In the Water

A survey of recent collage exhibition in Maine, USA by Daniel Kany

Dan Mills, director of the Bates College Museum of Art, recently noted in an email: "It seems something collage was in the water this year in Maine."

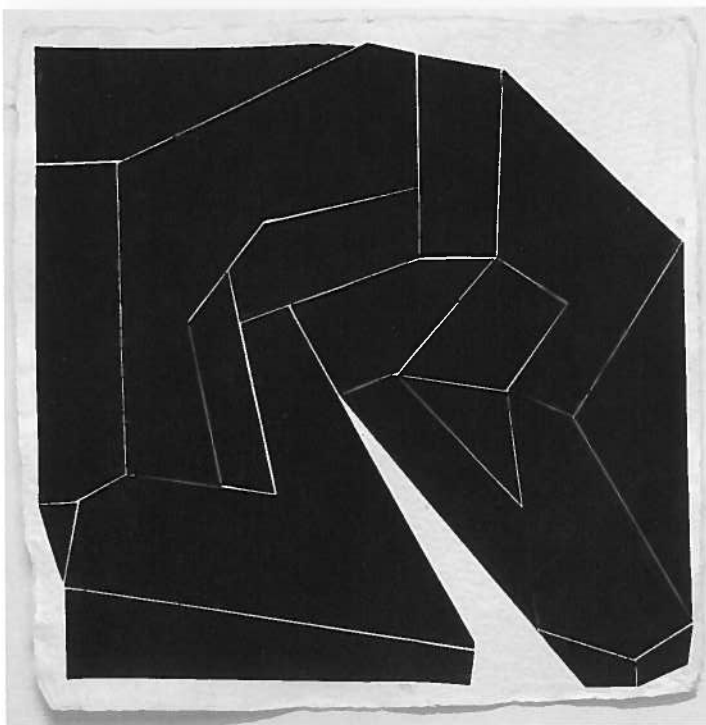
I am weekly art critic for Maine's largest circulation newspaper; the significant art currents in the state are my bread and butter. And I couldn't agree more with Mills: This year, what has bubbled up beyond all else is collage.

There have been major shows specifically focused on collage, such as those mounted by the Bates College Museum of Art, the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (CMCA) and the University of New England. Collage played a huge role in the Portland Museum of Art's Biennial "Piece Work" and headlined its best shows, such as Andrea Sulzer's "throughoutsideways". And when I wrote about what was in the galleries across the state, week after week I found myself talking about collage.

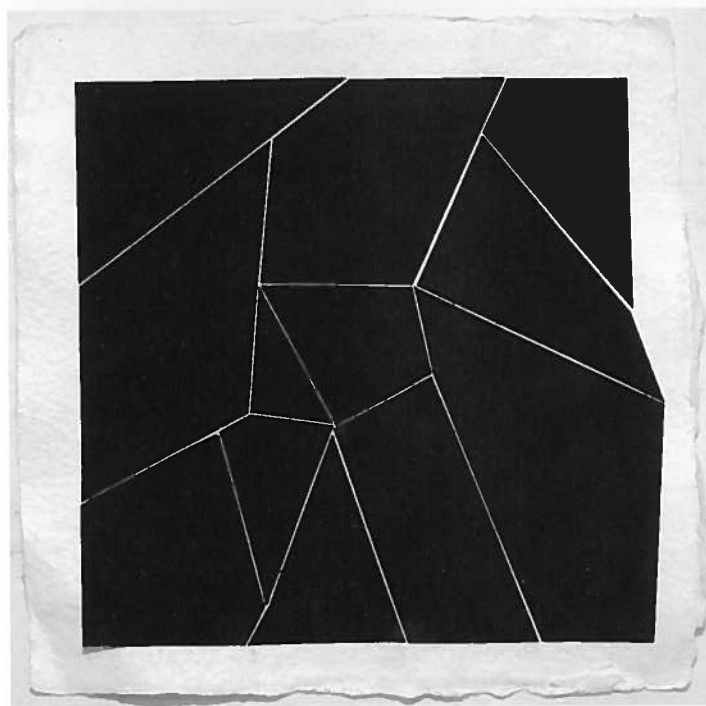
It is clear that collage is having its moment in the Down East sun. What is less clear is why.

Maine is an important fixed point for art in America, historically, but its idiom has always been painting. It makes sense to consider the centennial of Cubism, the painting movement that set many major strands of modern art into motion. Constructivism, Futurism, Dada, abstraction, assemblage and collage comprise an impressive (though incomplete) checklist of Cubism's legacy. Unlike the vague and diffuse appearance of abstraction, it's easy enough to credit Georges Braque, the lesser but enormously inventive member of the original Cubist duo, with inventing collage in 1912 as an element of painting. Cubism's role in Maine art is often forgotten, but few artists had more sophisticated responses to Cubism than Marsden Hartley and John Marin who are still revered by Maine artists. (We could discuss Louise Nevelson, the Zorachs and myriad others, but it's a vast subject that strays a bit off-topic.) Because of this, Cubism and its modernist moment have always been in the toolbox of Maine artists. But, Maine has been steeping its own version of a broader shift in contemporary art. The execution of old-school conceptual art was generally perfunctory in the state. What we are seeing more

Unleashed
by Justin Richel
24"x19"
cut and collaged gouache paintings
on paper
2012
Courtesy of the artist



Black Collage 10 by Ken Greenleaf
12"x12"; gouache on Fabriano, collaged to Shizen handmade watercolor paper; 2014. Courtesy of Berry Campbell, New York



Black Collage 10 by Ken Greenleaf
12"x12"; gouache on Fabriano, collaged to Shizen handmade watercolor paper; 2014. Courtesy of Berry Campbell, New York

and more is concept-driven art that values technique, process and craftsmanship. In its most complete forms, this work mobilizes the conceptual and technical content together to create a dynamic dialectic.

This concept-driven work deploys the object-status of the work of art as a critical aspect of the work's conceptual content. This creates a gravity towards abstraction since it eschews the work as illustration or metaphor in favor of a here-and-now experience of an artist-made object.

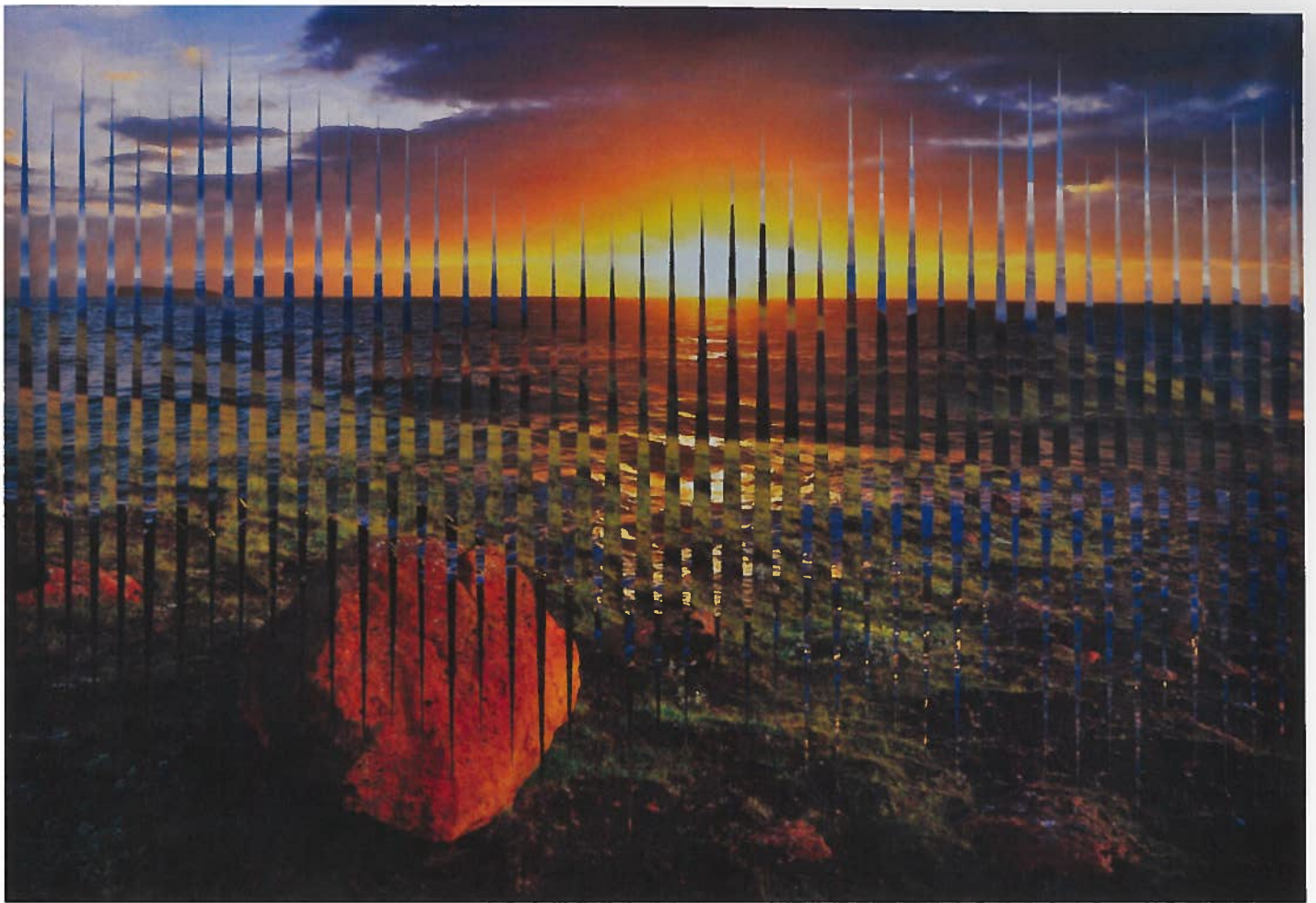
The craftsmanship issue has been a long-emerging quality across America since the market crash of the late 1980s. Through this time, we have seen the ascension of the American Craft Movement (to wit, Dale Chihuly is now possibly the most famous artist in America) as well as a groundswell in object-oriented paintings and painting media such as encaustic.

While this year's paroxysm of collage in Maine is clear enough to make one suspect a focused force behind it, a longer look and careful consideration leave us with the impression the 2014 collage tsunami is the result of the intersection of historical forces with contemporary currents.

The largest exhibition focused on collage in Maine was mounted by the Art Gallery of the University of New England (UNE). Featuring a roster of 25 artists, "Art of Collage" (the title is a witty echo of the Museum of Modern Art's seminal 1961 exhibition "Art of Assemblage") did not attempt to convey a focused polemic. Rather, it illustrated that collage is enjoying a robust moment. One of the few takeaways was that collage is now a common option for Maine artists (e.g., David Driskell, Alison Hildreth) who have achieved distinction in other media.

The works from the UNE show that had the most powerful impact on me were Ken Greenleaf's collages of cut geometrical forms in matte black gouache on thick, handmade paper. While his recent abstract painting tends to flutter and pulse with mechanical (but danceable) rhythms in vague space reminiscent of Kazimir Malevich's more complex Suprematist works, Greenleaf's black-form collages reach to the original gate-crashing moment of Malevich's *Black Square* and its solid first-generation contemporaries.

Greenleaf's collages don't merely reference Malevich, but they open a door to a critical understanding of Malevich's response to Cubism. After all, before they were ever shown in Paris, 54 of Pablo Picasso's and



Iceland/Makena Beach II (Stock Photography) by Aaron Williams
48"x72"; photo collage; 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

Braque's best Cubist works went to Russia where artists like Malevich could see them in person. Malevich's work soon began to incorporate collage elements and it was his explosive response to Cubism that led to his *Black Square*, arguably the most radical leap in the history of painting.

Compare, for example, Malevich's *Reservist of the First Division* (Museum of Modern Art, 1914) to Hartley's *Portrait of a German Officer* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1914) and what you find is that respect for Hartley is likely to lead to reverence of Malevich. If you follow the common division of Cubism into early (analytic) and late (synthetic) modes, the basic idea is that Picasso's and Braque's first Cubist work was seeking the liminal edge of legibility: that ultimate moment of economy when a head or a guitar (or whatever) was still discernible. Having reached that threshold, Picasso and Braque inverted Cubism's mission to examine as many possibilities of painterly conveyance as possible. It became a sort of semiotic encyclopedia. From this wildly creative

and inclusive moment, came – amongst other inventions – collage.

For Malevich, the friend of Roman Jakobson, the lure of unlimited semiotic options must have been intoxicating. His *Reservist* not only features bits of print, colours, abstract elements and partial words but, amongst other objects, a thermometer, which is a model for the semiotic concept of a "shifter" (now, here, etc.).

While it's sort of a glancing blow, CMCA director Suzette McAvoy recently connected the state of collage in Maine both to economy (in the sense of efficiency) and environment: "I've seen a spike in interest in collage over the past three to five years and more artists using it as their primary medium. Perhaps it is an outgrowth of increasing environmental awareness with its emphasis on scrap and recycled materials or a reflection of Maine's innate 'waste not, want not' frugality."

While our theories may seem opposed, my opinion that many Maine artists are turning to collage as a way to



untitled by Radcliffe Bailey

80"x69.5"; mixed media; 2009. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Schainman Gallery, New York

expand the semiotic possibilities of painting does not contradict McAvoy. After all, frugality is a path to increasing means and effective recycling is driven by creative resourcefulness.

A notable exhibition that supports McAvoy's assertions was Tom Paiement's "Ongoing Explorations" at Greenhut Galleries in Portland. Paiement's collage/painting work is always strong, but the starker the efficiency of its resolution, the more compelling it is.

Daniel Anselmi, on the other hand, was one of the collage artists featured in both in UNE's "Art of Collage" and the CMCA's "Collage X 10" mounted at the Portland Public Library's Lewis Gallery. But Anselmi's most impressive exhibition was a solo show at the Carver Hill Gallery

in Rockland. His works adopt a formal vocabulary reminiscent of Caio Fonseca, but their elegant forms are actual collage elements (instead of painted shapes that act like collage) and they achieve satisfying rhythms through impressive density rather than cool economy.

Anselmi's luscious indulgence seems typical of much of the work in the collage shows featuring Maine artists. Collage in the hands of Driskell (heavily hued painted fragments employed to bring him closer to his beloved mentor Romare Bearden) or Margaret Nomentana (cast paint elements laid as components of design-oriented abstract painting), for example, exudes a love of the material of painting. It's more like painting 2.0 than a subversive desire to shunt aside the old school.

Yet there is a subversive edge to a particular body of collage with sparky feminist content. In their two-person show at Elizabeth Moss Galleries in Falmouth, Lesia Sochor and Veronica Cross use collage to move away from the traditional male model of painting. Sochor's works depict sewing patterns with visual commentary about how general patterns are shifted to accommodate different shapes: It's a smart bit of commentary about the relationship between a general design (or idea) and how that relates to the specifics

of any individual. Cross's newest work, on the other hand, employs paper cutouts to deflate volume from the otherwise sexualized shapes of women: a nymph with mere hints of her satyr, two bikini babes in silhouette from a Roxy Music album cover and so on. Cross employs paper and cut shapes to deflate the oil-on-canvas assumption of a masculine gaze.

This tack of paper as a craft medium employed in criticism of an assumed masculinist perspective is also the driving force behind Lauren Fensterstock's giant black paper installation of a grass-topped bit of turf with a flower-lined trench that was the high water mark of the Portland Museum of Art's Biennial. (Another collage high point in the Biennial was Aaron Williams' hybrid scene combining a pair of slice-melded landscape posters.) Gabriella D'Italia, who is best known for her extraordinary OCD-textured "women's work" hand-made



Landscape 3 by Gabriella D'Italia
21"x43"; vellum, wheat-paste, ink, paint, shellac on board; 2013

fibre works, was represented in several collage shows by her smeary material "landscapes" that superficially seem to be at odds with the pro-craft feminist viewpoint of her fibre work. But when the landscapes begin to unravel into material indulgence (they are extremely abstract) the literalism of their processes returns them – prodigal – to the textured design sense of fabric with a handmade cast. In other words, D'Italia, uses collage to bring her painting full circle back to the meme of hand-crafted production by women.

But even this feminist mode of collage matches the revolutionary spirit of Cubist collage with all its promises of possibility and subversive hints. In the end, after all, even the strongest work in this vein (such as Sulzer's elegantly layered collage of "throughoutsideways") submits itself to the model of painting as its cultural vehicle.

A key exhibition of 2014 that helped position the collage work of Maine artists in dialogue with the broader historical practice of the medium was "Remix: Selections from the International Collage Center" that ran at the Bates College Museum of Art from January through March. With works by major artists such as Joseph Cornell, Miriam Schapiro and Nick Cave, "Remix" illustrated that no major content constellations of collage (repurposing, layering, fragmentation, hybridizing, synecdoche, metonymy, adumbration, etc.) were left uncovered

by collage in Maine. The fact that "Remix" was such a strong show only helped make the case for collage in Maine.

Another exhibition worth considering is the impressive Richard Tuttle print retrospective at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. Tuttle's prints raise myriad issues about paper media and "prints" that employ collage. And when we start to compare Maine collage artists to a major international star like Tuttle, we have to keep in mind that Tuttle is part of the Maine artist community.

So has collage come to Maine to stay?

If we are indeed now seeing a specific intersection of historical forces with contemporary currents instead of a completely new direction, then 2014 might have been the Maine moment of collage – the Down East's chapter of collage's 15 minutes of fame. On the other hand, if the emphasis on collage is primarily the splashed-over energies of the concept-driven art movement, then we might be witnessing a genuine (and permanent) transformation of painting in Maine. While I suspect the former, it's hard to dismiss this latter prospect.

But however collage's cultural vicissitudes ultimately ebb and flow, collage has proven itself capable of being a primary medium in Maine. It's in the toolbox now and those frugal Mainers never lose a tool.