

ON: COLLABORATION - FINDING THE RHYTHM

First to the table are collaborator Catherine Cox and Brooklyn-based artist E.V. Day, who have begun a twelve day lab grant collaboration at Dieu Donne that seems to be going quite well. Halfway through the conversation, EV is called off to hang the installation 'Chanel/Shazam', and Catherine and I get stuck into shoptalk and a little contemplation.

Maybe you could start talking about what you had been up to that fateful day a week or so back where things started going right, and how it ended up turning out...?

E.V. I think you are talking about the day we did the "Black and Blue" piece...in a way it seems like months ago, I just can't wait to get back in there now that we have a recipe we like!

That's right - there seemed to be a turning point that day...

C.C. We had been trying, unsuccessfully, to print the fishnet bodysuit. We kept getting different results with each piece because there are so many different variables it took about four full days on the wet floor just to work it all out.

How did you finally arrive at what you wanted?

C.C. It has to do with the different pigments and how much pressure you use in the hydraulic press... and E.V. was so patient!

How did the decision making work at first - did you have in mind exactly what you were after, or did you go in trying to discover where paper would lead you?

E.V. Cat 's understanding of the pigments was really the key. I really had fun trying out different things with wet pressed paper and then pulp. I wanted to have an active surface and use the potential of the pulp, so wet with dimension.

Have you used paper before for any of your pieces? Did anything attract you to working in the medium of paper?

E.V. No. I have made blue prints and etchings but this process is a whole different animal, not even a species...

Well, we are here to talk a little about what kind of animal the paper process really is...

C.C. We kind of talked initially about what you were trying to do with your sculptures and cyanotypes, and what effects we might be able to achieve in the handpapermaking process.

E.V. When I had the tour of the Dieu Donne facility I just got so turned on by all the potential and possibilities with this new material. its this great discovery about how to make the process do something different, something very specific to your work.

I think I would imagine that I would use the paper like the way I have manipulated fabric in the past, but that has not happened yet. It is more about recording a moment of action, a burst of energy. I think that energy really resonates with the pressure of the press on the water, pulp and pigment...not only cat's expertise with the pigments chemical behaviors but also her music selection in the studio has been fantastic!

C.C. I am so glad that E.V is into ghetto rap!

Well, every project you do, in one way or another informs future work. In school I made these thick sheets and cast them onto really chunky knitted objects, but I haven't ever had this much fun with pigment! The stretched fishnet and the fishing line, coating those with pigment, and *smushing* them in the press. The way the water pushes out and creates these lines of motion - like an explosion.

E.V. Totally inspiring!

C.C. That there is a good vibe in the studio - that is really an important part of collaboration.

Were you trained as a collaborator or as something else?

C.C. I went to the Kansas City Art Institute. I didn't really learn about how to collaborate. It was more of learning techniques, and critiques. Fiber was my major, so that is how I was introduced to the papermaking process. I decided to study fiber, because it was this whole world I knew nothing about, yet it is something that is around us 24/7. I thought there were so many undiscovered possibilities.

The other collaborators in the studio come from different backgrounds into paper - Steve a printmaker, Paul studied book arts and has been a professional papermaker since the mill started. Do you think this gives the studio somewhat of a more holistic approach?

C.C. I definitely think so. We all bring something different to the table. You never know where a project might take you, and it is good to have people with different experience and contacts, who might be able to help you push a project into something you didn't think was possible.

With EV you are kind of making a print - experimenting with pigments in the wet process... a 'waterprint'...

C.C. I like that name, a 'waterprint' - we had started to call it "fishnet bodysuit pigment embossing".

It is a pigment embossing in one sense, but an important part is the response of water to pressure and how it sends the pigment across the paper...

C.C. ...yes, because that thick sheet of cotton is embossed by the fabric of the fishnet, and the pigment, depending on whether it is a powder pigment, or a disperse pigment, either settles into the grooves of the embossment, or spreads out across the surface of the paper. It was really important for EV, that action of the water creating that sense of motion - it really complements her sculpture.

I was introducing you to someone once and you rather humbly put it that your job is to have fun with artists...can you describe some of the challenges of the job? What kind of pressures and balances are involved in collaborating in this kind of medium?

C.C. It is challenging, because you are constantly learning. I have been working with paper for 6 years now, and I still am learning new things in the studio. It is difficult when you are working with an artist and the thing you are trying to make might not be working out, you feel like you are letting them down in a way - and they are standing right next to you, while you are failing. But then, once you work the problem out, it is so rewarding.

There was something special in the air the day with E.V. where the corner was turned...

C.C. Yeah, that was a great day. We had tried for four or five days to get the right balance of pigment, pressure, color bleed... the only way to make new discoveries is to experiment.

The need to experiment must be challenging when there are time constraints involved.

Time constraints are challenging, indeed.

Before things got started, did you know what you wanted?

No, not at first. Usually the artists have an orientation where we show them past projects, so they can mull it over and we can see what processes/effects peek their interest. E.V. told me about some fishnet shooting stars she wanted to make. I think it is more challenging for the artist, to have to feel as if, "Ok I only have 12 days to figure out what I want to make!" But the days are spread out over the course of a year, so there is plenty of time to digest what is happening and decide what direction to take.

Her work is usually three dimensional - what prompted the two dimensional approach?

E.V. already had the idea of working two dimensionally - we talked about paper sculpture, and showed her some examples, but I think she really wanted to take the opportunity to use the same material she used in the sculpture and make something flat with it. It was really important for her that the print be made with the actual object, the fishnet, and not with a stencil or silkscreen made from the fishnet image.

That's interesting. And it's interesting how the work has come to articulate 3D space and has a sense of movement... I am not sure if a print would have been able to achieve the same ...sensation.

Yeah, the dimension (or relief) from the fishnet is so detailed, and the areas where the fishnet folds over itself, its so rich and sensual. And the way the pigment shoots out from the image, it really feels as if this fishnet is jumping out at you. Its very architectural, and Italian futuristic, the way those fishing lines create different planes.

The planar qualities seem enhanced by working within the substrate - somehow it gives one a different sense of space when one goes *inside* the substrate like that.

C.C. Yes, I agree.

To get back to collaboration - does paper particularly lend itself to collaboration?

C.C. I think that paper lends itself to collaboration, because there are so many possibilities with paper.

How so?

C.C. Well, the artists who come in have usually never worked in the medium before.

So their creativity is stimulated?

C.C. They may suggest something, that a trained papermaker may think would not work "traditionally" they had been taught to do things a certain way but when someone is standing next to you, throwing out these ideas, you have to just go for it..

...and then you have to make that leap somehow.

C.C. Exactly. Like with E.V.'s piece. The pigment is on the surface of the paper, we inked the netting up with pure pigment and then cranked up the press. The pigment is on the surface, it isn't retained to any pulp, we have to spray fix them when they are dry, to prevent smudging - but I think some papermakers would cringe to set pigment onto the surface of nice thick juicy 40x60 inch sheet of cotton paper.

It seems like you and EV are in a rhythm...

C.C. Yeah, it took awhile to work out the exact "formula" to achieve the look we wanted

...that the internal logic of the piece has possessed you both.

C.C. Collaboration is a relationship that you cultivate over time.

Collaboration is a relationship you cultivate over time and a five disc turntable.

Collaboration is fairly common in the print world, but as a profession it began only really in the 60s... at Tamarind and then spread from there - so its still being defined by those involved in it. It's kind of difficult to define. Can you compare it to anything as a profession or a process?

C.C. Hmm, it's difficult to compare to other professions because you are working side by side with the artist.

How is it different from two artists collaborating on a shared piece?

C.C. It is not just production - but I think with two artists they are both bringing conceptual, aesthetic goals to the table. For me as a collaborator, it's the artist's work, not mine, that I am trying to make. My goal is to make the artist happy, and to help them create something different.

At the EFA discussion about collaboration – Luther Davis and Phil Sanders also talked about how for the collaborator – it's about bringing the artist something they didn't know they were looking for...yet.

Do you agree?

C.C Yeah, I would agree with that statement - you never want to feel like you are repeating yourself. We always try to push paper in a new direction, through experimentation.

Have your ideas about collaboration changed from when you started?

C.C. Yes, I think so, when I was first observing the process of printing (the production side) it seemed like just making the work for the artist. That sounds really awful to me now, because it is so much more than that. The artist and the collaborator are both bringing different skill sets, and are working side by side for this common goal, I have a lot of respect for collaborators. Collaboration is a very intimate thing.

What kind of skills are being put to work by a collaborator?

C.C. It is a lot about personality too. Some artists are not used to having anyone else around when they are working in their studio. Besides technical/process knowledge, multitasking, problem solving, you have to be able to gauge how involved the artist wants you to be, some want a lot of input and feedback about the things you are creating together, others prefer to be the only decision maker, and you are the hands.

To push at the idea a little more - why collaboration - what do you think it adds to the creative process? Why not just give an artist a studio and a health and safety demo and say see you in two weeks...?

C.C. Because, it forces you to think about your work in a different way. And, the artists would not be able to accomplish as complex projects on their own even physically - it takes two people to make a 40x60 inch sheet for example. The artist probably wouldn't understand (in two weeks) why something they were trying to do wasn't working out.

If it forces you to think about your work in a different way - how does it do this?

C.C. Well, working with a new medium, and a new person, they might suggest something, and you give it a try, and something amazing comes out.

It's sounds performative too - can collaboration be likened to making music?

C.C. Making music? I think so. When you are working, like you said, you get into a rhythm, and you feed off each other's energy and things start to fall into place.

It sounds somewhat like improvised music...

C.C. It's hard to describe...

...the musicians start noodling around...

C.C. ...exactly...

....and it sounds kind of unintelligible at first... and then what they are doing starts entangling... and there is a weird kind of music that ends up coming out... and if the energy is really good the whole audience feels kind of plugged into it too.

C.C. Yes. In the studio, usually the work from an artist's first day, maybe it doesn't even look like what you think "their work" should look like. Usually we try a couple of different processes at first like we tried some blow outs with the fishnet and embedding the fishnet but the pieces looked dead, trapped...

...lots of 'visual listening' involved on day one.

Visual listening is a good way to describe it!

...and maybe artist's also come to feel understood somehow?

Yes, that is important. If your collaborator doesn't get what the artist is trying to make, I think that can be a bad combination. I think the best collaborations happen, when the collaborator is psyched about the project - they give the artist everything they've got and they want to be able to pull out all the stops for the project.