

# EXPANDING PAPER PRACTICE: STORYTELLING ON PAPER FROM TWO DIMENSIONS TO THREE

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## INTRODUCTION

Storytelling through a group of pictures is called sequential art. Children’s picture books and comic books quickly spring to mind as examples, but Scott McCloud (1993) reminds us of the huge variety of sequential imagery: from stained glass windows to the Bayeaux tapestry, he enumerates the depth of how images are used to communicate.

This paper presents work on paper through the broadest lens of sequential imagery. An examination of works on paper that are connected through their use of paper rather than their style, purpose, or surface, this paper looks at how the storytelling in the pictures is benefitted by the way paper is used in each.

My interest in how paper affects visual storytelling comes from my work illustrating and designing wallpaper. When you have wallpaper on your walls, you look at it every day, and sometimes you look at it without ‘seeing’ it at all. We absorb the pictures this way. Those pictures that are seeping in our brains seemed to me to begin to form stories in our minds. When I ran a wallpaper studio, I was interested in trying to capture and communicate stories in the designs I made and investigate this process of communication between maker and viewer.

Over the last three years, my work has evolved into creating three-dimensional paper forms using papier-mâché. I paint and draw onto these objects and have discovered new ways to communicate stories. Recognizing what paper as a medium brings to the process of sequential art has been an exciting development in my investigation of visual communication.

This paper will begin by exploring some of the theory about how to communicate visually, particularly through illustration and sequential art. Then it will examine three case studies of visual storytelling on flat surfaces: wallpaper, collage and

cut paper. It will also trace story telling techniques on three-dimensional paper forms in my work and the work of two other papier-mache artists to examine the way that storytelling practices on paper evolve in a three-dimensional space.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Looking to illustration and comics to investigate how pictures communicate stories, and how artists create them, we might start with Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud (1993). He explains that ‘pictures are received information. We need no formal education to ‘get the message.’ The message is instantaneous’ (McCloud 1993, p49). This might sound as if there is nothing we need to do to



Figure 1

### Figure Titles and Information

Fig 1. The Sheila print from the RAIR collection of wallpapers, in situ (2018), screenprint on paper, variable size. Image courtesy of the artist.

understand pictures, but what I think McCloud is getting at is that there is an openness to looking at pictures that leaves room for the viewer to participate.

Michael Taussig is an anthropologist who makes drawings in his fieldwork notebooks and explores the power of the drawings in his 2011 book *I swear I saw This: Drawings in fieldwork notebooks*, namely my own. He questions his own interest in the drawings from his research and asks why they feel so important even though they are not the final output. He explains Roland Barthes theory of 'third meaning' as the part of storytelling that is not found explicitly but exists outside of the information of the story itself. Taussig makes us aware of the work of interpretation when we look at images; the gaps or places in a story that the audience or reader must reckon with. He also discusses the process of making images and the translation that the artist must engage in when they make the leap from reality to image. He cites Barthes's third meaning again here, noting that meaning is made in these moments (Taussig 2011).

While McCloud and Taussig discuss the mechanics of understanding pictures, illustrator Mouni Feddag (2017) investigates the ornamental side of picture-making. She says, 'Beautiful things can attract attention in a noble and effective way' (n.p.) and that decoration is often viewed as surface only, but it is actually additive (Feddag 2017). Illustration as decoration contributes to the meaning-making and can transform space, ideas, and meaning.

Like Feddag, illustrator Molly Bang understands that when we see shapes in images they work in context to what is around and our reaction or interpretation of them is formed by our experience of the context they are in. She further emphasizes that viewers see pictures as 'extensions of the real world' (Bang 2016). Bang discusses the concept of context as association: that viewers understand that pictures are not real, but that they associate the shapes, colours and placements of the picture elements to what we have experienced in the real world. She says this is their power, in the suspension of disbelief even in the face of knowing they are not real (Bang 2016).

Matt Madden's 2006 book, *99 ways to tell a story* (2006) tests the huge variety of ways that a story can be told pictorially (and sequentially). Based on Raymond Queneau's 1947 book *Exercises in Style*, which retells the same storyline in ninety-nine different literary styles, Madden attempts the same with pictures and thus is a practical enactment of the mechanics and tools enumerated by McCloud, Feddag and Bang. It's particularly clear from this work that the concept of 'closure' from McCloud (1993) allows for the creation of narrative meaning (Madden 2006). Closure refers to that gap between pictures that the viewer draws a connection between. This book, which is an exercise and an experiment rather than a story of its own, flexes the power of pictures as conduits to meanings, feelings and understanding and sets us up to explore the case studies here.

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## CASE STUDIES IN 2D: WALLPAPER, COLLAGE AND PAPER CUT

### Nottene

Nottene was a textile studio that I ran with my partner Justin Hardison from 2015 until 2023, where we developed our own line of wallpaper, using historical references and community projects as inspiration. When we brought our work to the market, we found audiences reacted strongly to the idea of wallpaper and its return to popularity. This made us question why wallpaper resonates with so many people. In 2017 we had a residency at Recycling Artist in Residency/RAIR in Philadelphia where we spent six weeks digging in the trash and drawing found objects. We drew items from the recycling stream to discover what kinds of things people throw away and then brought them back into the home through our wallpaper. Not only did we hope to influence people decorating their homes about what they throw away, but we also wanted to show the beauty of discarded items in a way that makes them desirable again. (Figure 1 and Figure 2)

We became interested in the stories we found in the trash at the recycling yard. The items we found there were often recognizably from one person and seemed to represent strange and sometimes deeply personal artifacts of a life, but the objects selected weren't really meant to communicate who that particular person was, but rather to give us a glimpse into who each of us might be based on the things we leave behind.

The idea of storytelling through drawing formed the conceptual basis of our practice, and this kind of storytelling was also crucial to our research processes. Lynda Barry (2015) says sketchbooks contain experiences that don't have to be processed through thinking, and we used the tool of the sketchbook to investigate and re-imagine what storytelling on a wall or in a pattern could be. Sketchbooking as research is a powerful kind of creative development that enables the processing of information as well as transforming ideas into new authorial forms.

The wallpaper we made used proximity of pictures to create context and begin to explore the story of someone's life based on the objects they left behind. McCloud (1993) specifies several techniques that artists use to communicate stories and themes through sequential images in what he calls panel to panel transitions, and the wallpapers we designed for this project used the idea of placement and context to build meaning. We put together collections of drawings from each person's found objects to create a story within the pattern.

Bang explores image-based storytelling in sequential artworks with respect to pattern and examines the power of regularity and repetition in picture components and how they are relevant to the way the human eye searches for repetitive patterns to make sense of what we see. As we compiled the sketches and drawings from the studio to



Figure 2

Fig 2. Digital photograph of Nottene sketches at the RAIR studios (2017). Image courtesy of the artist.

create the wallpaper patterns, we tried to utilize the movement of the eye through the pattern to communicate to the viewer.

## Scott Ramsay Kyle

Collaging has a similarity to making patterns, where the composition of small pieces come together or move apart to create a pleasing whole. The choices of arrangement made by the artist will lead the viewer throughout the image, similarly to a sequential artwork. Overlapping, touching, connecting across edges or without regard to borders, space is layered and bypasses usual linear progress.

Scott Ramsay Kyle's piece *Pink Loo* (2021) uses layered images to explore of stories of men's gay experience. This image juxtaposes male bodies, bathroom tiles, and floral wallpaper overlapped with stitching and curly edges in such a way that it forces the viewers eyes to move over the surface of the image looking for a place to rest. Bang recognizes how certain elements in pictures affect our feelings and asks, 'How does the structure of a picture—or any visual art form—affect our emotional response?' (Bang 2016, p8) The nature of collage allows for a myriad of connections to be formed through context and placement of motifs and their proximity or distance from each other to create meaning or to invite the viewer to make connections and create the closure that McCloud and Madden suggest. (Figure 3)

## Rob Ryan

Artist Rob Ryan's most well-known pieces are papercuts and he has written about how he came to them from screen printing and painting where he would apply colour to the surface of the paper, but in an effort to simplify his message and make more clear the stories he wanted to tell, he began to strip out everything he could. He explains, 'So I removed all other things, like colour and tone, shade, even perspective. Just to reduce it all to this silhouette. It was like you took everything and put it into a press and just squashed it down to the simplest ingredient' (Arctic Paper, 2016).

This simplification is directly related to Bang's explanation of simple geometric shapes and their effect on the reader. Psychologist Rudolf Arnheim describes Bang's approach to geometrical shapes 'not as geometry but as dynamic expression' (Bang 2016, p7), which is what Ryan's papercuts aim to achieve in their simplicity. (Figure 4)



Figure 3



Figure 4

Fig 3. *Pink Loo* (2021) by Scott Ramsay Kyle. Collage, 297 x 420mm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Fig 4. *Believe in Goodness* (2010) by Rob Ryan. Handcut paper, 390 x 257 mm. Image courtesy of the artist.

## CASE STUDIES IN 3D: PAPIER-MÂCHÉ & PAPER CUT

### Kimberly Ellen Hall

*To tell a good story, you must reveal a surprise; otherwise it is just a report*

(Kelly 2024).

Towards the close of our wallpaper studio, my work began to shift off the wall and onto objects within the home. I began making papier-mâché objects and I found that working three-dimensionally, with shape, volume, and scale, offered new developments in narrative from working flat. No longer was I limited to the picture plane itself, but my illustrations, my pictures could be hidden or revealed when looking at an object in space.

Using the fronts, backs, and insides of my objects, I discovered a level of complexity that was unavailable in my two-dimensional work. In the piece *Secret Clock*, I could extend the world of the clock by using the front, back and interior. The icons on the clock itself suggest a face, while the decorative elements of the stripes and diamond pattern have a playful quality, particularly with the bold colours. The rear of the object has doors and a clasp. Upon opening the back of the clock there is a hidden snake and plants with eyes that are more ominous and imply a depth to the simple act of checking the time.

### Lydia Ricci

Lydia Ricci's work is a sort of assemblage that takes the spirit of collage into a three-dimensional space. Her pieces are staunchly representational, but the engagement with paper and materials offers a richer connection to the object they portray. Her work leverages the physicality of the paper and materials that make up the final sculpture not only as space (as in my work above) but as a library of textures that add to the story being told. Feddag (2017) explains that the decorative quality of the materials is not merely ornamental but adds to our understanding of the picture or object.

In *Button Pusher* from 2018, this single object, an old cash register/till is rendered in collected scrap materials (papers with old handwriting and typewritten digits, plus foam and cardboard). These papers bring additional information to the object that transcends the straightforward depiction of the object, helping us to imagine the way this machine was used and the possible stories of items bought and sold in the distant past.

### Bernie Kaminski

Bernie Kaminski's paper sculptures work similarly, evoking retro American vibes in his wobbly renditions of twentieth century daily life. His life-size medicine cabinet piece from 2024 doesn't display repurposed materials for storytelling in the same way as Ricci but uses



Figure 5



Figure 6

Fig 5. *Secret Clock* (2025) by Kimberly Ellen Hall. Papier-mâché, 305 x 160 x 80mm. Image courtesy of the artist.  
 Fig 6. *Button Pusher* (2018) by Lydia Ricci. Collected scrap materials, 110 x 110 x 100mm. Image courtesy of the artist.  
 Figure 7: Paper mache medicine cabinet (2024) by Bernie Kominski. Papier-mâché, 686 x 495 x 102mm. Image courtesy of the artist.

the wobble between realism and the handmade to help the audience squint and see back in time.

Feddag (2017) discusses the power of the hand drawn to the viewer, and this can be applied to the textures of the handmade here. McCloud (1993) too reminds us that we are rarely in touch with the real thing in contemporary culture: we are usually handling a print of a drawing of a thing. Kaminski's use of texture makes the viewer feel the objects through looking because of the visible quality of the surface of the objects portrayed.

The collections of objects in the medicine cabinet also work to create connections between various objects and develop sequences of meaning that don't work linearly but instead depend on the viewer to determine the most meaningful connections. In this case, using nostalgia to draw in the viewer through memory and self-identification.

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting on these case studies, it's clear that paper forms offer space for deeper engagement with the tools and processes artists use to tell visual stories. McCloud and Barry's emphases on image-making and visual storytelling practices are leveraged by these artists and go well beyond the traditional sequential art edges.

The creation of context in Nottene's wallpaper uses the structure of a roomful of wallpaper to allow viewers to make the associations that become story. Kyle's collages use the placement of printed papers to develop nonlinear short narratives. Rob Ryan uses paper right on the line of two-dimensions and three, cutting into it and discarding everything but the shape.

In examining more three-dimensional works, whether they used surface imagery or material surfaces, Feddag's (2017) emphasis on decoration as additive was clear. The decorative elements of my papier-mâché work is an example, but Ricci's materials also carried meaning in their make-up. The concept of third meaning is evident across the work, but perhaps most accessibly in Kaminski's. The collection of reproduced objects is available for the viewer to 'read' on several levels making space for that openness that allows the audience to participate in the work after all.

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Figure 7

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Hall is a maker interested in the narrative possibilities of homemade objects and the way that pattern and illustration can play a role in that function. Currently she leads the BA (Hons) Illustration course at the University of Gloucestershire in the UK. Her work has been recognised by American Illustration and the Society of Publication Designers, and in profiles in Cool Hunting, Design Milk, and Dwell magazine. Hall has been in residence at John Hopkins Extreme Materials Institute (2018) and Winterthur Museum and Garden (2020) and have public murals in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and the UK.

IMAGE GALLERY



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