

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Making Artifacts: What I Have To Work With

Alan Hines · Wednesday, June 5th, 2019

This is me trying to figure out Florida, like I was trying to figure out New York before I moved there, or England when Tommy and I began living in Exmoor. Different sorts of paper, stamped-on images, patterns, colors, random weights and textures, you don't have to have a reason to gather them. Maybe nothing about them suggests they would go together or clash, but you put them down in an arrangement anyway. You leave it that way or you live with it for a bit and then shuffle the pieces around. Or you make a little shift until all of a sudden the composition makes sense, and the picture feels right.

My first piece of art was a photo assemblage of nearly naked men that I cut out from *After Dark*, an arts and entertainment magazine that celebrated the goings on in the New York theater world. It was the 70s. I was seventeen and itching to leave Fort Worth, Texas. I read the interviews and articles in the magazine when it came in the mail every month, but mostly I was drawn to the black-and-white photo spreads. I may have imagined that this was how handsome young actors, models, or leaping dancers went about their day in New York, shirtless, wearing tights, or less. New York was where I wanted to be. I carefully cut photos around the contours of male bodies, arranged and glued them down on an inch-thick piece of 8×10 plywood. To finish it off, I painted the edges of the board white. I stood it up on a shelf in my bedroom, like a totem.

Art supplies get people aroused. They can't just look, they have to touch, get the feel of paper, flick the soft hairs of a watercolor brush. When Tommy ran our art supply store in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, regulars and newcomers came in to buy, but oftentimes they showed up just to roam the aisles. They browsed through the minutiae of inks, papers, and racks of oil paints and acrylics, watercolors and gouche. Little wooden faceless mannequins with bendable joints. Ed, who painted mermaids, showed up every Friday when he got off work to buy one tube of acrylic paint. His goal was to possess one of every color. Well-known Bucks County landscape artists came in the store, also the portrait artists, art teachers, students and professionals, the abstract expressionist painter from Los Angeles, bohemians and painters who moved out from New York to New Hope in the '60s. Some drove to Mixed Media from long distances away so they could see what they were buying and hold it in their hands. They could talk about products and how to use them with a staff who were professional artists themselves.

It was like going down the aisles at Home Depot. Raw materials were displayed and on all the shelves. It was just up to you to buy some of it and create something spectacular.

I jumped in, too. A lot of time had gone by since those arty black-and-white photos from *After*

Dark caught my eye and imagination, but I was making collages again. Being around art supplies and the people who used them was how I went about my day when I wasn't writing.

Work assignments from England came in for both of us and we started to spend more time there. Now I was preoccupied with different sorts of images. Stonehenge and the Glastonbury Tor. Stone stiles, standing stones on the Somerset moors not far from the village where we would eventually live. I was fascinated with rustic tools that blacksmiths, thatchers, wheelwrights, slate cutters and other craftsmen used for their work in the countryside. They were artifacts, man-made objects, like a photo collage of beautiful and vain men. The texture this time was of wood and iron, of stone, of natural fibers.

Movie and TV people on the other side of America read my scripts and gave me revision notes. Most of the screenplays were the TV "Based on a true story" kind. Moms in prison, women with multiple personalities, killer beauty queens. Olympic gold medal winners. I got to know hit men and fundamentalist preachers. I went to prisons, Congress, and spent time at boot camp at Parris Island. The people in the L.A. part of my life didn't know about the art I had started to make when I wasn't writing TV movies about people's triumphs and despair.

When we opened Mixed Media Gallery next door to the art supply, most of the exhibitions were group shows. At Christmas, Tommy mounted a show called Greetings: The Holiday Card Show!, in which 22 artists were invited to display a piece of art. On opening night, participants would vote for their favorite, and the artwork would be published as a holiday card the following year.

For my entry, I started off with an old *Playbill* cover that had a painting of a theater on it. I called the piece "Guild Theater, December 24, 1947," which was the day my parents were married. I used bits of music books in which my mother had written musical notation for her piano lessons when she was a girl. I had a strip of my father's gas rationing stamps from World War II, and pages from the playscript of *Tea and Sympathy*, the first play I was in. I used other bits of papers and acrylic paints and pencils, too, and when I finished, I was so amazed by it, and that I actually did it, that I took it to show Tommy. He looked up from the illustration he was working on and his face fell, and he said: Al, you cannot win this.

I didn't win but now I became driven to find materials for more art pieces. I found paper in junk shops and in dumpsters. I touched things that normally I would never touch but I picked them up anyway. Between one story meeting and a lunch meeting in L.A., I peeled an old Morrissey poster off a wall of the 101 Freeway overpass on Silver Lake Boulevard. I was writing screenplays and making collages—that were stories, too, but in a different kind of language.

Soon the pieces were in other exhibitions around Bucks County and in Philadelphia. I had a rough idea of what I was doing, but truthfully, I kept figuring it out because I was around artists and watching them make art so much of the time. I kept on to see what would happen. My collages and paintings won a few awards and people were buying them and how cool was that.

Now Florida, here we are. For three years, I've divided my time between Central Florida and England. It's taken this long to acclimate, and now I've decided that calling it The Sunshine State actually dumbs it down. Sometimes, I catch myself coming across particular details, like the shape of some types of tropical leaves, or sunlight, or cerulean blue, and I don't think twice about it because it's a part of my day-to-day. Sand cranes crossing the road in front of traffic, bare feet, the massive roots of a wateroak down the street upended from the last hurricane. The architecture is a

hodge-podge of mid-century, Spanish colonial, Mission, and wood-framed Florida Cracker style. I like the verticle panes of glass in the front doors of bungalows, the Spanish Renaissance Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine, and jalousie windows. Snakes, citrus groves, craft beer, I'd say all it is a part of being here.

We spend a Sunday with friends out on a pontoon on the St. John's River. Drinking Prosecco, spotting turtles, drifting along and ducking under Spanish moss that drapes from the trees. This is where the alligators live, their backs slick, the color of Payne's gray and hard like paving stones. Young ones are lined up in a queue on fallen tree trunks along the banks of the river. Big ones, are motionless like floating logs, their snouts and eyes barely on the surface of the murky water then sliding below. They will never become luggage.

Once again, I'm ready to jump into making pictures. I have those art supplies and boxes of paper scraps I moved with me from Pennsylvania. The storage unit is like a mausoleum, except with corrugated metal doors and padlocks. When I walk down the temperature-controlled corridor and unlock the door to my unit, the only art supplies I find is a measly little box of Japanese papers.

I begin to shift other boxes but I know it's useless; my papers and art supplies are not here. At some point, moving from one storage unit to another, some point when I was trying to simplify and downsize, I let it go. Why would I let it all go? Given bits of it away, tossed some of it in a storage unit facility dumpster? Now I can't remember the names, the brands of art supplies I liked the best or what I did with them, the little tricks I learned.

Art supplies are located in the same aisle in every Michaels craft store across America. I go to the closest store in Orange City to find that not much in that section looks familiar. I pick up some paints and charcoal pencils, and online, I buy a brayer and some matte medium.

I buy these materials and then realize that I don't know if I want to use any of them this time. That makes me eager to start a new piece, and in an unfamiliar way, because being here and in England feels like something different. Being here, stepping outside the church during bell ringing practice in England and hearing the sound of bells throughout the village, the feel of wooden and metal handcrafted tools, cypress knees in Florida swamps, and sink holes, and wily little lizards, on our front porch columns, little green statues you know are about to make a fast getaway.

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