

What's new in paper

There's a story about Melbourne author Helen Garner writing a novel with the help of individual index cards. Divided into cards, she is able to lay out the entire novel on the floor of her living room. Just as she is making sense of the whole, a sudden gust of wind collects the cards and throws them about the room. Her initial despair eventually leads to revelation as she tries to reconfigure her story. New narrative links began to emerge from the random combinations.

This couldn't happen with a word processor. While we can marvel at the omnipotence of the screen as an efficient medium for organising our lives, the material world retains its own kind of creative disorder that cannot be replaced. We still need paper.

Films like *Bladerunner* and *The Matrix* have encouraged us to visualise information as a river of zeroes and ones, streaming through the ether. While certainly more of our life is floating on a river of digital streams, the vessels on which we navigate this flow remain very much that of the material world, in particular paper.

Paper is always there. The jetsam of post-it notes and backs of envelopes keep us afloat, ensuring that our daily obligations are met. Rather than superseded, paper has become more important. Now that it is not solely responsible for keeping facts, the psychological role of paper comes to the fore. The concrete feel of paper reassures us of control. Today's information worker is a connoisseur of paper as a source of tactile pleasure. The Moleskine notebook has now replaced the Filofax as a natural companion to the morning latté.

The resilience of paper returns us to an old question: is the idea independent of the material on which it is stored? Since Plato, we have tended to believe that ideas can be abstracted freely across media without affecting their meaning. Words should be able to move freely from speech to books to electronic databases and still mean the same. Such a view complements the rise of conceptualism in art, which privileges meaning above material.

Recent sociology contests this view. The French sociologist Bruno Latour has developed a perspective which is particularly relevant to the visual arts. In the provocative book *We Have Never Been Modern*, he addresses the process of modernisation and its goal of unmediated reality. For Latour, this goal remains a fiction: '[the] world ceased to be modern when we replaced all essences with the mediators, delegates and translators that gave them meaning.'¹ There is no such thing as raw truth – we only ever understand the world through the agency of mediators from spokespersons to scientific inscription devices. Latour's perspective reawakens our appreciation of art as a space of mediation.

The basis for Latour's position was established in his pioneering study *Laboratory Life*, where he followed scientists around as though they were an African tribe. Without any illusions of pre-ordained authority, Latour observed the material construction of scientific truth, particularly in the various processes for translating forces of nature into marks on paper. He followed the trail from post-it notes in the laboratory to the final academic paper in the refereed journal. Rather than truth emerging naked from the pure process of scientific logic, it appeared instead elaborately clothed in paper. For Latour, information is only worth the paper it is written on.

This 'materialism' has particular relevance in our century. In the previous century, the digital revolution was heralded by a Darwinist tale of information evolving from the slime of atoms to the ethereal realm of bytes. Evangelists like Nicholas Negroponte in *Being Digital* (1995) proclaimed a future when newspapers would no longer be printed by 'squeezing ink onto dead trees'.² We looked forward to a 21st century that would leave the messy world of matter behind and embrace the virtual capacities of the internet 'superhighway'.

We came back to earth with a thud in the 21st century. With September 11, visions of a 'new world order' confronted the reality of a divided planet. And despite the promise of a paperless office, our consumption of paper has only been increasing; it doubled with the introduction of the personal computer in the mid-1980s and has increased 15% since 1990.

Since 1 January 2000, we witness a growing political and cultural realism about the inevitability of limits. As there's a limit to how far the world can be united, so there's a limit to how far information can be abstracted from its material base. Paper has demonstrated enduring qualities that pixels or crystals do not replace. But this realism is not a simple nostalgia. It is not about returning to the comfort of the past, suffused with the familiar smell of leather-bound books. We can't step into the same river twice. Paper has a new meaning now, which we are still discovering.

Something similar happened towards the end of the 19th century. It's useful to consider a parallel period of artistic advance prompted by technological obsolescence. The invention of photography as an alternative imaging system enabled artists to appreciate the material qualities of paint through impressionism. As Umberto Eco writes, 'After the invention of Daguerre painters no longer felt obliged to serve as mere craftsmen charged with reproducing reality as we believe we see it.'³ So we might see that the development of an alternative means of archiving information has freed us to consider more carefully the material qualities of paper.

It's a challenging question. Consider the growing sea of devices with glowing screens and sleek silver buttons – digital cameras, mobile phones, iPods, and Blackberries. How could a delicate and dumb medium like paper compete against this army of smart gadgets? Thinking of what paper offers today is a useful framework for looking at the works on paper in this exhibition.

Dream catcher

The sharp realism of paper is a perfect medium for abstracting a line from the phenomenological soup of everyday life. Four works show the subtlety of paper as a surface for line and colour. [Kurt Schranzer's](#) ink and collage work introduces a surreal sexual theme into the mechanics of a skateboard, evoking William Burrough's *Soft Machine*. [Vito Manfredi's](#) uncanny thumb-form uses the softness of paper to create a precious albedo edge to hybrid organisms. [Leonard Brown's](#) more abstract work enjoys the absorbent quality of paper to enact a series reflecting its gradual depletion of ink. [eX de Medici](#) transfers elaborate tattoo-like designs from skin to the clean contrast of paper. The clarity of paper provides a transparent medium for deep fantasy.

Paper takes as well as gives. The cellulose nature of paper can create an osmotic bleed that produces a velvet edge. Through the medium of watercolour, works by [Patrick Hartigan](#) and [Nell](#) reveal the subtle blur of paper. The vibrancy of paper as a platform for colour is luxuriously evoked by the acrylic work of [Gloria Petyarre](#). We are made aware of the way paper itself controls the flow of colour across a page.

While the technical qualities of paper enable strong graphic effects, it is the accessibility of paper which is conducive to spontaneous forms of expression. Paper is like a park where you can follow private fantasy by taking a line on a walk around the page. [Scott Redford's](#) *Nevermind* uses this freedom for an almost ecstatic revelation of adolescence. In a more self-conscious manner, [Arlene TextaQueen's](#) *Where will we go when the world implodes?* uses paper as a foundation for an artful application of felt-tip pen. Always at hand, paper is a convenient receptacle for the chance daydream.

The continuing evolution of paper as an inscription device is evident in the use of inkjet printing. While [Tony Coleing](#) shows the capacity of watercolour paper to create vivid form and colour, [Lindsay Stepanow](#) demonstrates its contrary power to convey the fluid qualities of a swimming pool. Lucidity and fluidity is combined in [Belinda Mason's](#) *Four Generations*, which interleaves the lifecycle of a woman. And [Geoff Parr's](#) *Timeless Matters* shows an almost alchemic capacity of paper as a medium for conveying a pellucid experience of reality.

Unlike other inscription materials, such as stone or wood, paper is relatively flexible. While this can be of practical use when dog-earing a book, it can also make a paper document look tired with repeated use. The memory of paper is used in [Stephen Eastaugh's *Rooted Clouds*](#) to create a hierarchy between folds and creases, enhanced by smudges of wax pencil. The image of a cloud with roots is a fitting emblem for the status of paper, as a product of the earth that binds the ethereal thoughts and dreams.

The crispness of paper is not only evident in the sharp lines, but also the ways in which it can be cut. This is evident in [Sangeeta Sandrasegar's *Theatre of the Oppressed*](#), which creates a floating world that emphasises the precarious position of the figure hanging on. [Farrell and Parkin's *Chinese Year of the Dog*](#) uses paper as a grill through which to present a portrait. (The mask resonates in the exhibition with [Deborah Klein's *Attacus Atlas Moth mask pastel*](#).)

The more three-dimensional potential of paper is the subject of [Nicholas Jones's](#) work. In *Blue Wave*, Jones approaches the book not as a text to be read but as a physical form to be revealed. With the use of a scalpel, he carves a ripple shape that contradicts the dry quality of paper. Stabilised by bookbinding, the individual pages come together to create a marble-like solidity. As an artist, Jones helps realise the destiny of the book as a handheld sculpture.

Paper's combination of lightness and precision is evident also in the collage works. [Elizabeth Gower's *Paper Quilt*](#) puts the ubiquity of packaging to use as a medium for complex decoration. In his endearing *An unsettled vision (the predicament)*, [Danie Mellor](#) juxtaposes planes of reality to express an enchanted cross-cultural landscape. And [Louise Paramor](#) utilises the elemental nature of collage to explore combinations of form and colour in *Doraemon*. Paper turns out to be a gregarious medium.

Diagram

The artists in this exhibition demonstrate the complex language of paper as a form of material expression. The combination of accuracy and accessibility make paper a useful medium for creating models of the world. In the diagram, it is possible to abstract forms of objects and processes for the purpose of better understanding their interrelations.

The diagram is a dominant paradigm in this exhibition. It is particularly evident in the works by Aboriginal artists from Central Australia. The *Honey Ant Story* by [Mick Wikilyiri](#) etches a design with rhythmical persistence which gives the form a dance-like quality. This is an effect produced in the subtle work by [Ray Ken](#) *Karu-Creek*. In the case of [Hector Tjupuru Burton's *Anumara Tjukurpa*](#) the pilose texture pulses with rhythmical lines. Paper provides testament to the physical act of outlining the world.

Cultures of the Torres Strait Islands have placed much importance in stories about the constellations, such as the Morning Star. [Billy Missi's *Kulba Yadail \(Old Lyrics\)*](#) makes the most of sharp lines to evoke the scene of the heavens above. From a more urban perspective, [Gordon Bennett's *Number Twenty*](#) is by contrast a far more painterly work reflecting a modernist approach to traditional design. Paper complements the interest in many Aboriginal artists to model the world through the rhythm of line.

Among the Balander (non-indigenous) artists, the Western practice of nature drawing is strongly evident. [G.W. Bot's](#) graphite *Ocean Glyphs* explore the playful forms of the sea. [Andrew Seward's](#) aptonymically⁴ devised *Seaweed Studies* provide a more classical format for the appreciation of natural texture and form. [Jodi Heffernan's *Walking Tree Fragment*](#) is an extraordinary relief print which expresses the structure and texture of the landscape in a vertical Chinese scroll format. The wonder of nature is sharply evoked by the red tree of [Vin Ryan](#) – the inversion of the normal green colour more sharply contrasts the outlines of the natural world. As a platform for visual contrast, paper can be a mobile shrine to the appreciation of nature.

[Michelle Ussher](#) combines various planes of meaning together, including nature and urban spaces. *Growing apart* can be read as a critical response to the collision of life forms in the contemporary urban environment. [Rosie Weiss's *Thought*](#) is a more elegiac statement, reflecting Hegel's thought that 'the spirit of being is a bone'. The sepia tones and stained

treatment in [Christine Willcocks's](#) *Bird Skins* conveys the sombre message of flight's termination.

Two works deal directly with paper's role as a mirror to the world. In *Binocular: a selective Focus*, [Jenny Kitchener](#) provides us with a mysterious view into northern New South Wales, inviting our gaze with a combination of lens and linocut. [Trinh Vu](#) employs computer-modelled graphics to assume a three-dimensional shape, reconstituting the arboreal form from which paper has evolved. She subtly subverts the story of paper as a transcendent medium for information.

The use of paper as a diagram for action is evident particularly in [Gosia Wlodarczak's](#) work. *Desire 4: Glem* overlays the plan of a kitchen appliance with the free-wheeling sketches of the surrounding world. In a more orderly fashion, [Prudence Flint's](#) *Ten Drawings* are diagrams for living, outlining a heroic life in simple lines.

This relation of paper to the everyday is tellingly evoked by [Tamara Marwood's](#) *To Do*. Stretching paper on an embroidery hoop, Marwood brings together the universal 'to do list' with the nostalgic craft of hand-stitching. With elegant economy, Marwood reflects the twin themes emerging from this exhibition: the physical quality of paper and its relation to the way we manage our world.

End papers

Finally, with the world-building properties of paper comes the capacity for destruction as well. [Christian Capurro's](#) *Gorgonia 5* erases a magazine to re-constitute a totally different visual form. And [Mandy Gunn's](#) *White Bureaucracy* weaves documents shredded from an Aboriginal community. These artists transform the material detritus of paper into the stuff of monument.

Through the course of this exhibition, we witness the spectrum of paper's material qualities. Through skill and invention, we see artists utilise the capacity of paper to convey a world with both certainty and nuance. This exhibition helps us understand why paper endures as a medium for us to navigate the flow of information and images that flood our lives.

That, after all, is why we physically transport ourselves to see the exhibition in a gallery. We become pilgrims of paper.

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¹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (trans. Catherine Porter), New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 129

² Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1995, p. 65

³ Umberto Eco, 'Afterword to *The Future of the Book*', in (ed. G. Nunberg) *The Future of the Book*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 304

⁴ 'Aptonym' is the condition when a person's name reflects their actual status, such as the late ceramicist David Potter.