



Sara Garden Armstrong, detail of Landscape Dialogue, installed 1994. Sprayed abaca pulp and acrylic paint. Seven forms approximately 5 x 8 feet each in a 27 x 25 x 85 foot atrium. Commissioned by Peat Marwick in Radnor, Pennsylvania. All photos courtesy of the artists unless otherwise noted.

***Paper in Public:
Handmade Paper in Public Art Installations***
TATIANA GINSBERG

Public art and handmade paper rarely appear in the same sentence. Despite its growing acceptance as a medium, is this one area in which handmade paper is simply not suitable? A small number of artists have investigated this unlikely combination, with inspiring results. I asked six of them about the practical and conceptual considerations of using handmade paper in public art and long-term installations.

"Paper is extremely interesting," suggests artist Harry Reese, "but it is so ephemeral and momentarily delicate that it isn't a candidate for public art unless you can do something to it."¹ For many artists, the key issue is finding ways to make their paper more durable without sacrificing the qualities that attracted them to the medium in the first place. Some, such as New York-based sculptor Ming Fay, find that satisfying themselves artistically means not using paper in their public art pieces. Fay notes: "I have experimented with coatings and binders for paper and have left pieces outside for years — and some of them survived. But they get old like a piece of wood would. I have works in corporate collections that are semi-public, but I have never gotten a public art commission with paper as the final material. The reality is that the client is always interested in permanent materials that have a record of longevity. Once paper reaches that level, it is probably not paper as we know it anymore."²

Coatings, however, can sometimes be used effectively. Indeed, altering the paper's surface can become a means to achieving a piece's conceptual aims. For her installation *Landscape Dialogue* (1994), Sara Garden Armstrong, an artist who works extensively in paper, painted a group of paper sculptures so that "it changes color as you move around and past the forms; their pivots allow constant change in the forms' aspect and relationship to each other. This flux is symbolic of the constant state of change in life itself human emotions and sensations that are in constant transition as well as the rhythms of nature and the earth itself. " ³

To achieve this effect Armstrong explains: "I worked with Golden Paint to devise a procedure — they were great! After the acrylic paint...[I used] GAC 700 with airbrush medium to coat them. This dried over 24 hours. Next I used four coats of a MSA varnish, which was supposed to be better for UV protection. This also went through a buildup/drying time. I built a plastic spray booth in the studio to spray the forms with this MSA varnish." Using this series of products designed as a system clearly worked: the piece has been installed in a glass atrium since 1994 and, despite being flooded with sunlight, has not faded or deteriorated in anyway.

Another artist who has successfully married coating with concept is Nancy Cohen. Working together with Dieu Donne Papermill in New York, she created the site-specific installation *Only Connect* (1996) at Staten Island's Snug Harbor Cultural Center. It was important to her that the papers allow the underlying armatures to show through. Cohen describes, "The piece was about the relationship of the formal garden in one space and the greenhouse where everything was grown. So in the formal garden the armatures were made out of vines, and in the other place they were made out of gardening equipment...it was about that duality, I wanted you to be able to see what the armatures were made out of, so it was important that the paper be translucent." ⁴

Cohen also had to consider how to protect the abaca forms from the greenhouse's sprinklers, which would water them every day. Wax, she was pleased to discover, both increased the translucency and provided water resistance. "The piece was already dry and then I painted on hot beeswax," Cohen explains. "Then [I] wiped it right then, and then heated it up with a hairdryer and wiped it again with a paper towel. It took forever, like everything does in paper ... but it worked great." The labor-intensive process paid off—the pieces showed almost no wear after being watered daily for eight months. Twelve years later, Cohen still has one of the forms hanging in her studio, which she says shows no change in color and remains tight as a drum.

But Cohen has had her share of technical difficulties with coatings. *Inside-Out* (2003), a public art installation for the lobby of a corporate building in Patterson, New Jersey, was a tremendous undertaking, involving hundreds of handmade paper forms. Unfortunately, after about three and a half years Cohen noticed that the piece had yellowed considerably. The culprit appears to be the fire retardant that she was required by the developer to use. While she acknowledges "it doesn't look terrible, it looks different," she is left feeling dissatisfied and now says, "I don't know that I would do another piece where I was asked to coat it."

Before *Inside-Out* had displayed any signs of damage, Cohen had already completed another public art commission, *Going Places: Skyway to Wow!* (2005), at a school in New Haven, Connecticut. The piece was coated with a different fire retardant and so far has not exhibited any discoloration. The material used on *Inside-Out* was obtained

through a theatrical supplier, while *Going Places* was coated with the flame retardant stocked by Carriage House. Her most recent project, *Estuary: Moods BZ Modes* (2007), was inspired by New Jersey's Mullica River and coastal wetlands. Installed at the Noyes Museum for four months, the piece filled the gallery with cascading forms shifting in color from golden yellow to rich indigo. Cohen says, "It was really refreshing not to have to care if it would last—and anyway I think it would do just fine."

Cohen's experience is a good reminder that most paper installations involve other materials, which may, through their own deterioration or their interactions with paper, impact the longevity of the piece. Karen Stahlecker's room-sized installation *Vortices and Reveries* (1993) had traveled extensively and been displayed for years cumulatively before it was acquired by Jane Milosch for the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery. Although the paper needed some mending, other materials were causing the real problems. The steel hoops had rusted, the soft silver wire was failing, and the hot glue needed to be replaced with something more lasting. The project was taken on by conservator Samantha Sheesley, who gave a detailed presentation about her treatment procedure for the piece at the Friends of Dard Hunter conference in October 2007. It took nine months, but each of the eighteen-foot-high forms has now been conserved and restored, with a new storage and installation system. Without this care, the piece's lifespan would undoubtedly have been greatly reduced.

In Japan, large-scale public and corporate art installations in handmade paper are more common than in the West, and the vast majority of them are the work of the Kyoto-based designer Horiki Eriko and her associates. She is the force behind an impressive number of large-scale commissions for a wide range of spaces—from Narita International Airport, Japan to the interior of an abbey in Osaka. The work is highly visible, with pieces dating back eighteen years still on display. Unlike the individuals discussed above, Horiki & Associates always works in handmade paper. She states, "Washi is a traditional material, but there is always something new to see in it. All the works are made only for specific spaces by request."⁵ Horiki holds patents on processes for both large and three-dimensional sheet forming and employs fire-retardant coating, acrylic resin bonding, and glass encasing to make the papers suitable for long-term display.

In the United States, "percent for art" programs have generated a number of the projects referred to in this article. Many municipalities have a "percent for art" requirement that calls for a certain amount (commonly one percent) of the total budget of new construction to go toward art. Nancy Cohen and Sara Garden Armstrong were both hired by art consultants to create many of the pieces described above as part of such programs. And Broward County, Florida, commissioned Harry Reese to create a work for a new library as part of its "2 percent for art" program.

Working together with artist Joel Sherman, as well as the project's architects and a glass subcontractor, Reese designed a series of pieces to be placed, not on the walls, but in them. He points out that "We are used to seeing paper framed-behind glass. We are not normally used to seeing it between glass." This idea intrigued Reese enough to keep him working on the project despite construction delays that caused it to drag on for six and a half years.

Reese used the services of glass laminator Bernard Lax at Pulp Studio (no relation to paper) in Los Angeles. Pulp Studio employs a patented process that permanently fuses paper between two panes of glass, using a polyvinyl butyrate (PVB) laminate under high

heat and pressure. This process increases the translucency of the paper, making it appear almost wet. The panes of glass can be designed to any size, as specified by artist and architect.

Reese's project, *Crus pacifica* (2006), uses the motif of the folded origami crane (which Reese termed *Crus pacifica*) in conjunction with Florida's endangered whooping cranes (*Crus americana*). One of the lobby's glass windows is embedded with 999 handmade paper cranes at various stages of folding, while another series of windows depicts silhouettes of cranes alongside names of extinct birds. The well-known ritual of folding a thousand cranes to effect a miracle is thus paired with the successful conservation effort that has brought the local whooping crane back from the verge of extinction. In another area of the library, which can be entered through three different-sized doors (embedded with an image of a small, medium, and large crane, respectively) children can fold cranes of their own—each one becoming the thousandth crane.

What, speaking of extinction, constitutes permanence in public art? Reese relates: "I was told that it was considered to be permanent if it lasted for 25 years. In an art context it is somewhat unthinkable to value anything as permanent that lasts only 25 years .. It's very interesting—the books would be inside the library, on shelves, where they would be supposed to last for hundreds of years, whereas something out in public-protected much better than on the shelves—that's considered permanent if it lasts for 25 years."

Such a low threshold of "permanence" may seem disheartening, but may also open the way for more widespread use of paper. Perhaps as a medium for long-term installation, handmade paper calls for an acceptance of the temporary—of paper's ability to respond to the elements and even its inevitable wear. Karen Stahlecker says, I've worked to exploit these visual qualities of fragility and ephemerality, both because it's 'expected' of papers and because it's often very important to the concepts I'm dealing with."⁶ Stahlecker doesn't use coatings but notes that "internal sizings can be helpful to prevent a form from beginning to warp when the humidity becomes too high." When one of her pieces is sold to a collector who intends to keep it on permanent display, she offers the following guidelines:

- Choose a wall out of direct sunlight, and then chose a lighting system if needed that doesn't include UV spectrum.
- Do not allow smoking in the area of the work, and do not select a room that also includes a fireplace, candles, etc.
- Pay attention to the humidity in the area-either use a humidifier OR de-humidifier as needed for human comfort, and if extremes are expected, take the piece down until the humidity situation improves.
- Do not allow anyone to touch or handle the work UNLESS they have scrubbed with soap and water OR are wearing gloves.
- Periodically, dust the work by gently blowing air across the planes of the piece; generally done while the piece is down on a worktable so that dust cannot accumulate on the papers.

These excellent suggestions remind us that as an artwork becomes part of day-to-day life, the risk of damage increases, but so do the opportunities for enjoyment. After all, art in public seeks to enliven spaces and is designed to be viewed and interacted with. Perhaps the pleasure of the experience is more important than the preservation of the piece. Besides, as my father likes to say, "Nothing lasts like the temporary." I installed a

couple of handmade paper pieces in the office of an arts organization for an open house a year and a half ago and promptly forgot about them. The other day I happened to go back, and the pieces were still there and still looked good, without anyone fussing over them.

Notes

1. *All quotations by Harry Reese from an interview by the author, November '5, 2007, Isla Vista, California*
 2. *Ming Fay, e-mail message to the author, August 29, 2007.*
 3. *All quotations by Sara Garden Armstrong from an e-mail message to the author, November '9, 2007.*
 4. *All quotations by Nancy Cohen from an interview by the author, September '7, 2007, New York City.*
 5. *Horiki Eriko of Associates, fax message to the author, November 11, 2007.*
 6. *Karen Stahlecker, e-mail message to the author, December 3, 2007.*
-